

THE CAPILANO REVIEW



TCR SERIES 2:27

ERRATUM epigraph page:

The author's name has been rendered incorrectly as Vivian J. Kady. It should read *Vivette J. Kady*.

—Our apologies to Vivette

Her fingers would be raw, numb with cold, yet
the centres of her palms tingled as if their
contact with the dowsing rod had reignited
molecular memories of the lightning bolt.
She favoured a y-stick cut from a willow.

— Vivian J. Kady

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THE CAPILANO REVIEW

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Spring 1999

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FRONT & BACK COVERS

from I was never there
Black and White Polaroid
 photographs

Gwen MacGregor

THE
CITY OF
NEW YORK

IN SENATE
January 1, 1901

REPORT
OF THE
COMMISSIONER OF THE LAND OFFICE

IN RESPONSE TO A RESOLUTION
PASSED BY THE SENATE
MAY 1, 1899

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Kevin Magee / THE COMEDIAN AS THE LETTER M

"A little dramatic, don't you think?" — Robin Blaser, February 13, 1997

Victor Serge said, "He was not at Naples
writing letters deemed mutually expedient
to adopt several years disposed beneath the pavement
called, heard, recognized his own reflection
far below the flight of steps or was it high above
their registrations, which are not grandeur
no more than some sort of short note or preface
for a book I've made, and will mail you a copy
after your return to the hotel not in New Haven
having signed for the first time a name recently
issuing from underneath all the years the silk awning
filmed him in the heat at the base of those crowned
prejudices mastering us, a knowledge of industry
which impels all actions, and expands all hearts.

Addressed, he inclined his head, as when
the communist refuses to condemn the executioner
for his false consciousness every spasm of his
meditations that succeeded each groan in the night air
not quiet and the world far from calm, how
could he ever sanction his own opinions serve according
to the wisdom of the ancients, nor was it trifling
this homage of hers to his instruments. A house
he had visited in honor of one astride every
pleasure on the bay, the hills, psychedelic terraces
crowing some weird susceptibility, a 70s memory
writing out the lyrics to *The Wind Cries Mary*
disturbed by her person who to modulate its cadence
gliding forward toward the figure station, rose.

On a late June day in 1381 the tape rewound
and he listened, spy of his steps, anticipating
no reception I heard a person approaching
at the end of the question, *but where have you been*
and who have you seen whispered the Messenger
disappearing too feared to be believed in the glowing
accidents a human voice pierced his ear, a recess
my only resource, I went twice to that house
where the light foot hears you removing a page
out of the single copy permitted among the originals
in the British Museum should I be in danger
of forgetting that apartment with an agitation
equal to every stanza in the heavy air, degree
as her presence would or would not have done.

What was to be done without awakening
to the chords, his own, first posted to Paris
it was the not the word "pejorative" that hurt
like a demonstration on the swiftness of penmanship
sent back in code, *elegance* the signal passed
without an opportunity to afford you a moment
for refuting it, for myself authority contradicting it
as some reparation for the Reign of Terror
in *Enter Mob* the rioters are observed transfiguring
their Observer, and tore the veil the virtue
which prevents me never a moment to forget
decorum, follow it with inexact form down
all the labyrinths of bold and broad argument
loved to suspicion his vitiated mind receiving.

Other than to secure an imaginary dignity
a careless promise circumstance must counter
after the party, when the conversation
was every day less likely to happen so long
into distances the sails of Indonesians...
The trance of the fishermen and peasants
on the lookout for approaching gunships
mingled in the resolution of asserting
a transient remark that might be trusted
or, once remembered, it was desperation
to depart from the usual policy, menaces
of the masses impended far over the sea
along the corridor that led to them
she passed the one where the body lay.

Poe's *City by the Sea* had been flushed royally
supple and turbulent, a city of men circa
1949-1993 chanted the summer morning
mythy in midair, I got drunk as a skunk
on the lengthening echoes of their orgies
evacuations of terror you may withdraw
from any event connected with my future
approaching, and thought that he saw a Spectre.
Was it the one from the body he inhabited
taken on to affirm it was not impossible
new impatience and apprehensions arose
the fate we accept remaining anonymous.
I am not that name which at the first feint
at generosity incited her honesty,

And prepared his pen to greet the mastery
it was when the heat and light were tapering
to a point exhibiting *material pickets economically*
disabled reviewed by the inquisitor drawn aside
and rested a few hours from my chores on the farm
marching to Nicaragua with Guevara's Bolivia
his protection and guidance, pride of conscience
worth in her Presence, go visit her cell assailed
state of sorrow, where she practiced a forgotten art
so far as to command my every respect whose
expression immediately see the sensibility
wrenched in the face warding off whatever
accompaniments appeared considerably uneasy the way
was not simple to the Temple of the Mind.

Who wrote with less composure than you'd expect
to find behind the doors opening on to the scullery
where her transactions occur, a solitary cliff
the repeated effect her affirmation of the mountain
whose utmost precipice was unable to prevent you
Prometheus, I chop it down with the edge of my hand
who have advanced your way to Mephistopheles
carried away by order of the Author racing the routes
she allegorized a welcome that question from the fieldhand
at the door no one ever comes to anymore avoiding her
example I have feared the fury of a sudden rapacity
liable to ravings here comes Clare's Blue Devils why
do you protest we bring you *Residencia en la tierra*
left untranslated and renewed, as I was saying:

If I get there it will be you I saw there in *The Morning Walk* after undergoing the five fathoms fully refusing self-murder's infantilism, a leftwing disorder fermenting the direst I have not scrupled enough to display me fallen from the indignity having been tendered an opportunity to insult all professors when that professor the performance scourge of my resentment prevails speak explicitly, it may prove possible to hex the folly in the strict severity of martial glory Macbeth convinced by strange portents occasioned wrong roads branching off into foray, visiting these to make out what they riddle the prophecy that will come to pass if the path is not lost in the austerity of the office of the War Pig.

Malignity overspread the features exposed in the splendor of her ephebe's expression exiting the passage leading to the hall across from the kitchen the studio now thrown back, the abrupt explosion of it after he had aggravated his offenses to which of the two his cause belongs in the Field of Mars recruited and deployed. Retreated a space was left for a folding door immediately arch following with a torch at the foot of it another iron gate led to this immense, he had heard of the institution perverted against myself who have never read that summons and doubt my direct words writing out her name your cup of sour wine and a crust of bread.

And yet so apt are my rapidities that leave
me no pause having passed over the very day
she merged among the banners the marchers
my army whose ranks have no measure for
judging what demonstration directs conjecture
seemed to impart somewhat of someone's
private conversation with the physician.
Not a single human being was invisible.
We made our sacrifice at the shrine to Priapus
the shallow dash of symptom sunk into the arms
of some he was going to the prisons of opinions,
heterogeneous, he was a prisoner on his way
among the races, astounding immoral majority.

The second day was dawned along a runway
a road it couldn't be called asking how
can my aesthetics influence the injustice,
Recent Events is a disassociation wrought
for the Great Migration of Chinese peasants
underway, they will find their Whitman sleeping
on a mattress two or three broken chairs
and a hundred dollar table conviction struck
when he awakened to the chords, hers,
a corridor that led round pauses in the surge.
It will have told of a comradely attempt,
some decisive step, the inconsistencies,
contradictions, a doctrine that can embody
emblems of conduct from the countryside.

I have brought you some breakfast
as far at least as through the forest that echoes
with the fame of Faustus and Helen
first passed through these oppressed, William Langland
told me more than I knew, without food
I lay me down my soul to sleep on *Mace Hill*
... 'a rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene' ...
confusion following apostrophes my guide
a shutter-speed in the bands of holy dream
down Wall from girder into Street
that mystifies its auditors, their abolition
my breath, my body, my day a late stage
raised to display the frenzy of vendors
in their apoplectic role as principal buffo.

Dumbfounded and open mouthed I knew my Stevens
had the master hand, his effortless Shakespeare
and peered at me pretty *mon* Professor Vitoux visiting
Iowa from the University of Paris in 1982, I've forgotten
to mention his wild Milton, Blake and Shelley arms
electing me to read aloud once more from *Samson Agonistes*.
Here's a morsel of what you heard, Monsieur, a plate
was set out for the farm dog, though I have often defiled
my self portrait, as to his fear of it federal officials
represent the sentinels that destroyed the university papers
containing the education of a Prince who trusted all
to the impression of awe, arm of the better Artisan near
he leaned away from her an investigation might be made
into who had assisted to administer the drug."

Michelle Berry / MARY-LOU'S GETTING MARRIED

Percy Q. is wearing a bright green dress and he's decided to wear it to the wedding even if it will shock the hell out of everyone. He's decided that he looks smashing in bright green, neon green, radiant green, and he's going to walk right out the front door of the house and wear it to the wedding even if Mary-Lou Bishop drops down dead at the altar. He's going to wear it proudly too; he's going to hold his head high and sashay into the wedding, stroll down the aisle, with a look on his face that no one can doubt. Green eye shadow too and a little dab of green lipstick left over from Halloween. He plasters his face with the guck. Yes, Percy Q. thinks as he dabs, this ought to do the trick.

Emmie watches Percy Q. from the hallway mirror. She stands in front of the mirror trying to adjust her hat and watches Percy Q.'s reflection in front of her. He's strolling up and down his room in that outrageous green dress with all that make-up on and Emmie is adjusting her little pill box hat with the red veil and thinking, "My God." She's thinking, "My God," and her thoughts get stuck there and the pill box hat falls off for the hundredth time and Emmie shakes her head and watches Percy Q. stroll up and down in his room in that god awful green dress.

"We're late," Emmie finally says. "We're late for the wedding and my hat won't stay on."

Percy Q. stops pacing and laughs out loud. "Let's go then," he says. "Let's go to Mary-Lou Bishop's horrible wedding."

"Don't laugh at Mary-Lou," Emmie says. She turns to face Percy Q. "You have no right to laugh."

Percy Q. checks out his reflection a final time in the full length mirror above his shoe stand and then he waltzes out of the room and

heads down the hall, a green nightmare.

"Let's go," he shouts.

Emmie follows closely behind, holding tight to her hat.

"A purse," Percy Q. says to himself. "If only I had a matching green purse."

Emmie rolls her eyes into her head and steadies herself on the stairs off the porch. She doesn't notice that she isn't wearing shoes and Percy Q. doesn't say anything to stop her. Her bare feet pad down the sidewalk as she rushes along, trying to keep up with her younger brother and his violently awful bright green dress with the puffy shoulders and the lacy back. Out on the street, away from the house, they walk quickly, not even looking at each other. They walk to the church and they think their own private thoughts and every so often Percy Q. smiles to himself and chuckles, and Emmie's eyebrows knit together and she grits her teeth in anticipation.

Because Emmie knows that, sooner or later, something will happen.

At the wedding Mary-Lou Bishop doesn't drop dead but she does look at Percy Q. twice as she trips down the aisle. Emmie's poor feet are killing her and, after she got over the shock of being bare foot at a wedding, she's wishing she had thought of painting her toe nails red to match the veil on her pill box hat. Emmie's discovered that if she tilts her head just slightly the pill box stays on and she doesn't have to hold it. So she tilts her head and Percy Q. smiles at everyone in his green dress and Mary-Lou Bishop walks up the aisle to the altar, firm and strong. But when she gets up to Ted Bubble, Mary-Lou can't help but turn around and look again at Percy Q. in his green dress with all that make-up caked on his face.

Percy Q. waves. "Yoo-hoo, Mary-Lou," he shouts.

Mary-Lou blanches and turns back to Ted.

Percy Q. looks down at his dress and whispers again, this time to Emmie, that he wishes he had a nice green purse to match his outfit.

"Don't get too used to this," Emmie whispers back. "Don't go crazy on account of Mary-Lou's wedding." She rubs her bare feet together under the church pew.

Percy Q. touches up his make-up with Emmie's compact, every so

often stopping lipstick application to say, "Amen," "Bless You," and The Lord's Prayer.

Emmie remembers that when he was a little boy Percy Q. used to love to stick hay in his shirt and pretend he was pregnant. She remembers that he used to walk up to Mary-Lou Bishop and Sue Master, when they were all just young, and tell them to pat his growing belly, tell them to feel his milk-big tits. Emmie sighs and shakes her head. Now Mary-Lou's tummy is pushing out of that wedding dress and Ted Bubble looks like the proud Papa he's going to be and Emmie's brother, Percy Q., is sitting in row five on the bride's side grooming his hair and wearing a green taffeta dress.

At the reception, in the basement of the church, Mary-Lou serves the wedding cake to half a dozen people but stops when the baby kicks and cramps up and she suddenly feels nauseous.

"That wedding was not a moment too soon," Mrs. Bishop whispers to Mr. Bishop as they hover over their daughter. They follow the minister down the hallways to a room where Mary-Lou can rest in peace.

In the reception room Ted Bubble stands on the side lines and watches Percy Q. carefully. He doesn't like the outfit that man's got up in. He doesn't like it when people try and be different, try to make a point, stand out in the crowd. Ted Bubble has spent his entire life molding himself into a plastic replica of his dearly departed father and he damn well doesn't like it when some fag-boy shows up to his wedding wearing a green dress and god awful green lipstick. Ted Bubble doesn't care if Percy Q. is a university man from the big city. He doesn't care if Percy Q. just hopped off the train. He drinks his beers and watches Percy Q. in his dress and checks on his new bride every so often in the room where she is lying down somewhere in the bowels of the church. Twice Ted Bubble gets lost in the hallways and twice some nice church lady shows him the way back to the beer and the cake.

Emmie has met someone else at the reception who isn't wearing shoes. They laugh about it at first and then Emmie, with her head tilted to keep on her hat, says, "Where are our brains?" and the young man tells Emmie, very seriously, that he was taken captive by aliens

and they sucked out his brain, replacing it with Life-Savers. Emmie thinks that it's just her luck to be dropped in with the loonies at this wedding. Later, Emmie, with a cramp in her neck, watches the young man's mother drag him over to the bar where she plies him with cola and he spends the rest of the night, wide-eyed and sugared up, dancing barefoot beside the juke-box with Hilly Mount's twelve year old daughter Bets.

Percy Q. doesn't know whether to use the Ladies' Room or the Men's Room. He can hear Mary-Lou moaning like a cow down the hall somewhere as he stands in front of the pink and blue doors saying "Eeny-meeny-miny-moe."

Percy Q. is a bit disappointed that no one is really taking him seriously in his nice green dress. The Life-Saver boy dancing jerkily by the juke-box is sucking up all the attention and Percy Q.'s make-up is starting to run with the heat. He feels like pulling Mary-Lou Bishop into the washroom and showing her the panties he's wearing under the dress. Emmie didn't want to look at them. Neither did Hilly Mount or Crazy Ethel. It's not that Percy Q. wants these women to get a charge out of his undies. He just wants to show them to someone, he just wants to make a point. He feels he's wasted the uncomfortableness of wearing them if he doesn't show them to someone. Percy Q. walks into the Ladies' Room and enters a stall. He mumbles to himself about undies and dresses and the horrible fact that Mary-Lou Bishop just got married.

Crazy Ethel is talking to Hilly Mount about Percy Q.'s bright green dress. They are admiring the fabric and the style.

"Take it from me," Crazy Ethel says. "That dress would cost a bundle."

"He always has to outdo us," Hilly Mount says. She looks down at her baby blue dress with yellow buttons. "Go one better. I suppose he bought it in the city."

Crazy Ethel says that Percy Q. is someone you just can't beat. She reminds Hilly Mount of the hair cut he had in high school — the prettiest curls ever, she says.

The wedding goes on into the night. At about ten thirty Mary-Lou Bishop asks to see Percy Q. It's the moment everyone who knows anything has been waiting for. Ted Bubble, who doesn't know any-

thing, looks confused, drunk, out of sorts. Emmie rushes up to Percy Q., takes his hand and says, "Don't be like you are. She's married now."

The juke-box stops playing the chicken song but the young man with no shoes and Life-Savers for brains keeps dancing to a tune in his head.

Two days before Mary-Lou Bishop's wedding to Ted Bubble, Percy Q. came home from university on the train. Emmie picked him up at the station. She was driving the orange convertible through the snow, top down, and wearing a scarf, looking for all the world like a movie-star. Her chattering teeth were hardly noticeable.

"If you weren't my sister," Percy Q. said as he leaned into the car to kiss Emmie's cheeks, "I'd marry you." And the mention of marriage didn't seem to even faze him then.

Emmie and Percy Q. settled back into the old house as if Percy Q. had never left, as if he hadn't been gone for two years. They woke the same time every morning and Percy Q. watered the house plants and made coffee and watched TV and did crossword puzzles while Emmie worked at the drugstore down the street, behind the counter, selling cosmetics.

Percy Q. wasn't wearing a dress when he got off the train and he wasn't wearing a dress for the two days prior to the wedding when he lived with Emmie in their parents' old house in Onion Corners behind Centre Street just up the block from the Dry 'n' Sack Clothes Cleaners where Percy Q. made the money that took him away to university. In fact, for the first time ever, he looked perfectly normal. His hair was cut short and he had no make-up on. Emmie thought that maybe sending him away to university finally took the crazies out of him.

And Emmie snuck her boyfriend, Zeb, into the house both nights through the bathroom window, and they made out like there was no tomorrow because the whole thing, the sneaking around, was quite the thrill. Emmie didn't want Percy Q. to meet Zeb yet because things had only just gotten started between the two of them and Zeb's heart was a bit weak considering his advanced age. Emmie didn't know what Percy Q. might do yet or what he might be like. She didn't think Zeb

could take the shock of meeting Percy Q. because, even though he was looking normal at the train station, even though she was hoping beyond all hope that he'd been cured, Emmie knew at the bottom of her heart, that it was only a matter of time before her brother flipped his lid.

It happened one night in front of the TV, a bowl of popcorn on his lap. Percy Q. stood up and said, "My God, Mary-Lou Bishop's getting married." He said it as if it had just occurred to him, as if he hadn't come all this way on the train just to attend the wedding.

"And that's not all," Emmie said. She knew it was time to tell him everything. She knew it was time he heard the facts. "She's pregnant, Percy Q."

Things weren't the same after that. No more crossword puzzles or coffee or TV together. Things went all crazy and Emmie sighed a lot and didn't know what to do with her hands.

Emmie is 32 years old.

Percy Q. is 29 years old.

And good old Zeb is 75 years old and can kiss like a teenager.

Mary-Lou Bishop shouts, "Percy Q." and Percy Q. comes at her in his green dress and sits down beside her on the couch. Mr. and Mrs. Bishop take this moment to go and greet the wedding guests.

"We should take her to the hospital," Mrs. Bishop whispers in the hall.

"After the reception," Mr. Bishop says. "We paid through the teeth for this and, goddamn it, I'm going to enjoy it."

"What's going on?" Percy Q. asks.

And Mary-Lou cries and says, "The pain's so bad, Percy Q. With all the playing you did you'd never have guessed it."

Percy Q. looks curiously at Mary-Lou's large breasts and tummy.

Ted Bubble walks in and checks on his new bride, a beer in each hand. He says to Percy Q., "What are you supposed to be? It's not Halloween, you know." Percy Q. just smiles nicely and winks. A real wink, a wink that knocks the socks off the groom. Ted Bubble gets the message. He knows when he's looking at a messed-up man, and leaves the room in a hurry, again getting lost in the halls of the church. But

this time Ted Bubble is led into the supply closet by a hungry church lady who tells him he's manly and big and beefy. She wraps her bony arms around his large waist and he puts down his beer and grabs onto her for dear life. It's been a while since he's been embraced and that Percy Q. winking thing really confused him. It made him feel all funny inside and, just for a second, it made him feel good. Ted Bubble does what his dear father would have done in a situation such as this, but he uses a condom he's got stashed in his wallet because, after all, he is married now and has responsibilities. After all, Ted Bubble thinks, he's going to be a papa.

Percy Q. lies down on the couch next to Mary-Lou and looks at the ceiling. His green dress billows over her white one and the rustle of the two materials sounds cool and liquidy. Every so often Mary-Lou Bishop-Bubble screams out in pain and Percy Q. quits his daydreaming and offers her his hand.

"Remember when we were young?" Mary-Lou pants.

"You had those high heels I wanted," Percy Q. says. "And that diamond tiara, whatever happened to that?"

"Oh, Percy Q. You were always so different, weren't you?"

He laughs. "Me?" he says. "I was the normal one. The rest of you were different."

"How's university, Percy Q.?" And a pain shoots through her, turning her face purple.

But Percy Q. takes her mind away from the ache and tells Mary-Lou about school and his courses and how his dry cleaning money is just about running out. Every so often Mary-Lou groans so loudly that she drowns out her husband's joyful cries in the supply closet just down the hall.

Emmie decides that the next best thing to no shoes is no hat. She takes her pill box hat off and puts it on a chair where it gets sat on immediately by Hilly Mount's fat son Jacob. He squishes it to a pulp but Emmie doesn't care because the hat was uncomfortable and she thinks her head may be permanently tilted and she wonders if Zeb will like her any better for it.

Emmie doesn't know what she's doing with a 75 year old boyfriend but his kisses send fire into her heart and he owns half the drug store

and might get her a raise. Besides, Emmie thinks, she's stuck in Onion Corners living in her parents' old house, helping her brother make something of himself — why shouldn't she be thinking about her future, her dreams of owning the drug store someday, living in Zeb's big house on Portland Street? Problem is, in all those dreams of the future, Zeb is long gone and dead and Emmie's got herself a new boyfriend, maybe Jake from the Five 'n' Dime, and a brand new pill box hat that stays on her head. It's not as if Emmie doesn't love Zeb, it's just that she knows he's not long for the world.

Percy Q. was a strange child, unable to do anything right from the day he was born. He started by talking backwards, mixing words around, saying "There, hey, you, hello," instead of "Hey there you, hello," and walking lopsided and crazy down the street, running when he should have been walking and vice versa. But Emmie and her mother loved Percy Q. with all their might because there was some little spot of gold right there, deep in his eyes, that shone out and blinded them with its brilliance. They knew Percy Q. had something special in his heart and they watched him grow and doted on him, teaching him right from wrong and black from white.

"He's just a little backwards," their mother used to say. "He just doesn't know his way around the block yet."

Percy Q.'s real attacks of craziness, of sheer weirdness, when they both knew something was wildly wrong, started when he was five years old. Emmie remembers Percy Q. sitting in the booster seat at the table wearing only a sock on his little private part and exclaiming that the carrots placed in front of him were "crazy bee-bop baloneys." They wanted to think it was all fun and games but Emmie's father said Percy Q. was "loony," and when he went to school the teachers said he should be placed somewhere with facilities to take care of children in his situation.

Emmie sighs. She shakes out her head and looks down at her squished pill box hat and thinks that maybe tonight she should let Zeb touch her belly button like he's been wanting to. Emmie thinks she's not that kind of a girl. She thinks she's saved it up for so long she doesn't want to just let it go, but she knows that living in Onion Corners, working in cosmetics on Taylor Street is not something she wants to do for the rest of her life. Belly button touching or no belly button

touching she'd eventually have to let Zeb into her bed and take him where he wants to go. And if his kisses are any indication, it might not be all that bad.

Percy Q. and Mary-Lou have been together for ages in that back room in the basement of the church and suddenly there is no sound coming from behind the big, oak door. No howling. No moaning. Just stillness. A calm.

It's late in the night and Ted Bubble is sitting on a hard backed chair in the reception room drinking his twentieth beer and thinking that it's about time he headed home and put his pajamas on and snuggled into his baby blue bed under the hockey posters and spaceships hanging from his ceiling. And then Ted Bubble remembers that he's going to have a baby and he's a married man and his heart does a little dance in his chest and he feels slightly ill from all the beer.

The church lady who cornered him in the supply closet wants him again but there's no way in the world Ted Bubble can even get up from his chair let alone find someone to lend him a condom. The world is spinning so much he just wants to lie down and sleep.

Ted Bubble remembers that he only slept with Mary-Lou once before she got in the family way and he is wishing that his little guys, his sperm, had picked a more normal girl to impregnate. Someone nice looking maybe. A good cook with large breasts. But Ted knows that his father, rest his soul, would have wanted him to make an honest girl of her and so he's sitting in the basement of the church watching a jerking crazy boy with no shoes dance to the beat of the juke box. He wonders what's keeping his bride and what she's doing with that university man in the green dress. Ted can't believe that they once were in love, Percy Q. and Mary-Lou, even though he's seen their initials scraped in every desk in school and around all the town's walls since he was just a little boy. He wonders if his new bride changed Percy Q. into the fag-boy he is and he hopes like crazy that nothing that horrible ever happens to him.

Percy Q. + Mary-Lou.

Mary-Lou + Percy Q.

P + M and M + P.

Percy Q. pledged her his heart and said he'd be back for her, said he would love her forever and would carry her soul with him wherever he went.

"Oh, Percy Q." Mary-Lou says. The pains in her belly have come and gone and she is lying next to him on the couch in the church holding hands and thinking of everything that's been happening to her lately. "You look nice in green."

Percy Q. looks down at his dress. "Yes, I'd have to agree." He laughs.

"Emmie's hat looked nice."

Percy Q. nods.

"Why did you leave me?" Mary-Lou says. She sits up on the couch and takes his head in her hands. She squeezes tightly.

"Ouch."

"You said you wouldn't be gone long."

"A university education takes a few years, Mary-Lou. Especially for someone as backwards as me."

Emmie is dancing with the juke-box, cola-ed-up boy with the Life-Saver brain. She thinks, after her second glass of wine, that he's quite some catch. She can't believe her luck. Emmie never drinks alcohol but Percy Q.'s been gone for a while and she doesn't want to walk home alone in the dark. She's stuck in a crummy basement room with a lot of the people in the town she'd rather not talk to. (In fact she's heard several of them talking about her and Zeb and it's made her feel slightly angry, like she could knock over a couple of people.) So she decided to try a little drinking and see what it feels like.

Emmie spent everything she had on Percy Q.'s first set of encyclopedias. And she remembers now that she has bought him every stitch of clothing he's worn since their parents died. Percy Q. has it made, Emmie thinks. She wishes now that she had taken all that money, all the money she's ever spent on him, and moved away from Onion Corners to begin again. Stuck here, Emmie is. Stuck like so many

leeches on her skin. And the blood's being sucked out of her every minute of every day. Why else would she be dreaming about an old man? Why else would she be in love with his wrinkled face and dry, toothless kisses?

It's not that she doesn't love Percy Q. (or Zeb) but, come to think of it, Percy Q.'s been gone two years, away in the city, and he didn't even send her a postcard. He traipses off that train, looking for all the world like a satisfied seal, and he puts on a green dress and does the crazy things that Emmie sent him away to get out of his system.

Emmie thinks that maybe Mary-Lou Bishop is the cause of all the suffering in her life. Maybe if Mary-Lou Bishop had never been born, Percy Q. would have stayed on the right track and carried on down the line, moving up, moving ahead, and taking Emmie with him to the big city.

But then she remembers that Mary-Lou came along well after Percy Q. was walking and talking funny, well after he'd been wearing god awful colours on his face and shaving his eyebrows. Mary-Lou Bishop moved into town on the Saturday before Percy Q.'s eleventh birthday and, although he was never sane to begin with, Percy Q.'s been crazy and foolish and in love ever since.

That's why Emmie is having a hard time understanding first why Percy Q. left town without Mary-Lou tagging behind, and second why Mary-Lou ended up rolling in the hay with a loser, a drunk, like Ted Bubble. And it's all come to a head tonight, in the church basement, with Percy Q. in a green dress and Mary-Lou in white, moaning loudly and carrying on, a baby about to be born.

Good thing, thinks Emmie, that Ted Bubble doesn't know anything. Good thing that Ted Bubble is drunk, passed out, asleep in a chair by the juke box.

But Mary-Lou's labour pains have stopped. She's not having a baby yet, and she is sitting up and craving cake like you wouldn't believe. She's craving anything baked, biscuits or donuts or cornbread or muffins.

"We really should talk about all this," Percy Q. says. "We really should sit down and have a long chat, have it all out."

"Talk about your dress?"

"No," Percy Q. says, although he has been wanting someone to comment on it. About us."

"You took off, Percy Q. You left me high and dry."

"But I was always coming back. I told you I would come back."

"And how was I supposed to know that?" Mary-Lou gets up and paces the small room. "How was I supposed to know that? You tell me. Two years, Percy Q., two years and nothing from you, not even a letter." Mary-Lou stops pacing, puts her hands on what were once her hips but now are swallowed up by the baby's legs and arms moving around and around in its sac, excited by the noise of the world. "What was I to do?"

"Not Ted Bubble, that's what you shouldn't have done." Percy Q. bites his lip. He feels like crying. His make-up would be ruined, he knows, so he just bites his lip and lies on the couch.

Mary-Lou and Percy Q. were like this: they were like two peas in a pod, two bugs in a rug, two cats in a cradle. They took one look at each other, Percy Q. with his longish, curly hair and backwards walk, Mary-Lou with her imposing nose, her pimply complexion and her stutter, and they both knew instantly that here was someone else who was pushed out of public life — *here* was someone else. And Mary-Lou's stutter stopped suddenly and Percy Q. walked straight forward and his words came out coherently.

Emmie remembers Mary-Lou and Percy Q. sitting on the swing in the backyard. She remembers they made their own little sounds, their own little laughter. She remembers thinking that this is true love, that two people who communicate like this, in barks and squeals, must really be made for each other.

Last night, after Zeb snuck in, Emmie asked him if he loved her and he put his teeth back in and said, "I'll have to think about that, honey." Emmie told him to climb back out that window and not come back until he could say yes to everything she asked him from then on.

And now she's dancing with the Life-Saver boy and his mother is hollering, "Go to it, sonny," and Hilly Mount and her kids are clamoring all over the place, screaming because it's two in the morning and the bride hasn't come out to finish cutting the cake, to serve ice cream and lemonade. Ted Bubble is asleep in his chair and little Bets

is picking up dirt from the floor and placing it ever so carefully in his wide open mouth, jumping back when he snores.

The wedding of the century, Emmie thinks. This is a wedding we'll all remember.

Mr. Bishop has had too much to drink and Mrs. Bishop is trying to get him to stop pawing her in public while she's talking to Betty-Ruth and Irene MacDougall from the bowling league. She slaps his hands and says, "Oh my, Donny, not here."

Percy Q. and Mary-Lou are back to sitting on the couch and holding hands. They can't believe that no one has been in to check on them for a while. They can't believe that they are finally together again after two years apart.

Percy Q. wants to take off his dress and throw it in the waste basket. He suddenly feels silly. But he's only wearing women's undies underneath and, even though he likes to shock people, he doesn't think the weather is warm enough tonight. He has shown Mary-Lou the undies and she giggled like she was supposed to but her mind told her to feel sorry for Percy Q. because, even though he's a university man, he still is a little crazy at heart and probably won't get anywhere in life.

Mary-Lou thinks about her big, lumbering, new husband, the Ted Bubble she's just married, and she knows that, even though her life will be miserable with him, at least he'll be able to put food on the table. He's got a good job as a carpenter and he's built up a clientele that could knock her socks off. That's what he told her. Ted Bubble brought over his resume, typed finely on purple paper, when she told him she was pregnant with his child. He showed her his craft, showed her pictures of the shelves he's built, tricky ones, corner ones, and he said he has to do the right thing by her and they agreed on it, even though Mary-Lou had an uncommon urge to phone his references first.

Mary-Lou is only thinking like this because she has to.

They met at the dance hall on a Sunday night in June and Ted Bubble had too much to drink and forced Mary-Lou to go all the way. And, even though she didn't really want to, it had been over a year

since she'd heard from Percy Q., so she opened her thighs and let the big man in. Here it is February and she's pushing out of her wedding dress like she's going to explode.

What's funny to Mary-Lou is that no matter how many times she did it with Percy Q. — in the field by the school, in Mr. Richard's barn under the hay, in his own back yard under the porch, she never once got knocked up, she never once felt that squirmy sick feeling she's felt for this entire pregnancy. And Mary-Lou thinks this is funny because she loves Percy Q. with all her heart and isn't that, isn't love, supposed to be what babies are all about?

Emmie wants to go home and so she wanders down the corridors of the church feeling sick from wine and getting lost. She comes upon the minister sitting on the toilet in his bathroom, apologizes and moves on, opening every door that isn't locked. Eventually she finds Percy Q. and Mary-Lou. She finds them by hearing them talking, whispering and laughing, and she barges in and takes Percy Q.'s hand and says, "Let's go home."

But Percy Q. doesn't want to leave.

"Where's your hat, Emmie?"

Percy Q. knows that the second he leaves Mary-Lou she'll have to go home with that big Ted Bubble idiot and she'll be married until the day she dies. He feels consumed by worry. He feels all achy inside.

It's just that university in the city was so far away from Onion Corners and it made him feel big and good and smart. He went to his classes every day and, even though he didn't understand half of what was being said, he'd lie on the lumpy bed in his rented room at night and imagine himself with a degree. He'd imagine the jobs he would get, the places he would travel. And then, of course, when he failed, bombed all his courses, he couldn't tell anyone about it. How could he face his sister? How could he face Mary-Lou? So Percy Q. got himself a half-decent job in a dry cleaners in the city. He was meaning to bring Mary-Lou to his side when he made some money, when he coughed up the courage to tell her of his mistakes, but the embarrassment of the whole thing left him dry in the mouth. Then the job ended, the dry cleaners closed down, and Percy Q. wandered the streets, picked through the city garbage, sold what he could find to get

by. When he got the telegram from Emmie asking him to come home, telling him Mary-Lou's getting married, he headed home on the first train into Onion Corners.

The green dress is from a dumpster behind the Village By the Pond Mall in the big city. He found it last Tuesday with a rip down the side and he patched the rip expertly (years in dry cleaning taught him a thing or two about sewing buttons and he just applied that knowledge to the rip) and was intending to give it to Mary-Lou for a wedding present. But when he really thought about the fact that she was getting married to someone other than himself and then, to make matters worse, found out she was pregnant, Percy Q. went a little crazy, dove off the deep end, so to speak, and put on the dress and the make-up and marched down the aisle back into Mary-Lou's heart and right into her wedding.

When Emmie finds them they are holding hands.

"Oh dear," she says. She steadies herself on a chair. The soles of her feet are black from the dirty church floors. She takes Percy Q.'s hand and says, "Let's go home," but he doesn't budge from the couch. Instead, he pulls Mary-Lou towards him and hugs her tightly.

"Oh dear," Mary-Lou sighs.

"I have to tell you how it is," Percy Q. says to Emmie and Mary-Lou. "I have to tell you both so you'll understand."

Emmie sits down in a chair. She can't wait to hear what's going to come out of his mouth. She's had too much to drink, more than ever before in her life and she's feeling sick and fed up with having to take care of Percy Q. It was one thing when he was a kid, it was another when their parents died, but now he's a grown man, a university man, and Emmie knows that if Ted Bubble sees him holding hands with Mary-Lou he's going to beat the heck out of him and there's nothing Emmie can do to save him. She has to save herself now, she thinks, get Zeb to marry her and then wait until he dies so she can inherit half the drug store. She might, she thinks, ask that Life-Saver boy to come over when that happens. She might ask Jake from the Five'n'Dime to drop by the big house on Portland Street. But then thinking of Zeb biting the dust makes her choke up and feel like crying.

Just when Percy Q. wants to tell them both about his deception,

his lies, how it felt to be out of work in the big city picking through garbage, there's a holy commotion in the hallway and half the reception, what's left of them, barges into the room.

"What's going on?" Crazy Ethel shouts. "Did the baby come?"

Everyone is silent suddenly because, although it was incredibly obvious to them all, no one was supposed to mention that Mary-Lou Bishop was pregnant. It was going to be one of those things where, years later, numbers would be added and subtracted and everything would be made to look right in the world. The townspeople would do it for the baby. It's hard enough being born, they agreed, without having to go through life attached to an immoral problem.

When the reception people, including the Bishops (the Mr. pawing and clawing at anyone who is near, male or female), enter the room, Percy Q. stops what he is about to say and stands up.

"Where did you get that dress?" says Tacoma, the tiny church organist. "It's such a beautiful colour."

Emmie throws up her arms. At least with her brother's dress no one has noticed her bare feet.

Mary-Lou looks around for Ted Bubble. "Where's the groom?"

No one seems to know where he is until 12 year old Bets says he's sound asleep beside the juke box with a cup of dirt in his open mouth.

Mary-Lou says the baby was just testing her, just seeing if she can take the pain, preparing her for the big day, and then she gets up from the couch, takes Emmie's hand in hers and Percy Q.'s hand in the other and stands them in front of all the town folk who are waiting to eat the cake.

"I want to say something," Mary-Lou says. She clears her throat, which is sore from howling and crying out in pain.

"Quiet everyone. Speech. The bride's making a speech." This comes from Jacob, the boy who sat on Emmie's hat, the boy who is a little younger than nine, fatter than an old cow, and can't believe his luck at staying up till all hours of the early morning.

Mary-Lou waits for silence and then begins. "You all know," she says, "that I've been mooning over Percy Q. for years and years."

Percy Q. blushes. He can't help himself. Somehow Mary-Lou's large bulk makes him feel important and her words send shivers up

and down his spine.

Someone shouts, "Here, here."

Someone else comments on Percy Q.'s dress and how it must be all the rage in the big city.

"Well," Mary-Lou continues. "Even though I'm in the family way," she pats her belly, "even though this baby is Ted Bubble's baby," she shakes her head mournfully, "even though I just got married a couple of hours ago,"

Someone shouts, "Where's the cake?"

"I've decided that I don't want to be married anymore and want to stay true and faithful to Percy Q. until he's finished his degree."

Percy Q. sits down on the couch again. He puts his head in his hands.

Emmie looks around the room and then down at her bare feet. She can't believe her little brother might get married before she does. She's going to have to whip that old Zeb into shape.

Ted Bubble picks that time, just that second, to wake up. He spits the dirt out of his mouth and then grumbles quite loudly. He looks around the empty room. Only the Life-Saver boy is still there and he's still dancing quietly in the corner.

"Where is everyone?" Ted asks but the Life-Saver boy can't hear him because his mind is full of little candy circles in green, red, yellow and orange.

Ted then searches the halls of the church basement. He gets lost in the boiler room for a minute and then he, too, catches the minister sitting on the toilet, but he finally finds the whole room of people gathered around his fat-bellied wife and that stupid Percy Q. in the green dress. Something's going on, he thinks, something he doesn't much like.

Emmie groans when she sees Ted Bubble walk into the room. She groans when she hears what Percy Q. says next, his back to the door.

"I love you too, Mary-Lou," he says. "But I'm not a university man." Emmie sees all her hard work, her suffering, going down the drain. Every penny she saved, every penny she gave him, poof, up in smoke.

"What do you mean?" Mary-Lou looks startled.

As Percy Q. explains the last two years to the crowd, his humilia-

tion, his constant devotion to Mary-Lou, Ted Bubble gets angrier and angrier, for all he can think about is the fact that the guy in the green dress just told his new wife that he loves her. Ted Bubble can't remember if he's ever told Mary-Lou that. His head aches from all the beer and his mouth is gritty from dirt. He roars and lunges and the sea of people parts and Ted Bubble attacks Percy Q., ripping the green dress into shreds and bloodying his nose.

There is hoopla, there is chaos, there is wildness. Hilly Mount's kids take to beating each other up and Mary-Lou throws a chair at Crazy Ethel because, out of spite, the woman is pulling Percy Q.'s lovely puffy shoulders off, ripping at the green material. Emmie stands back, by the couch, careful not to get her delicate toes trampled upon.

Zeb is standing up beside his bookshelf at home, leaning on his cane, scouring his mind for the passage he used to ask his sixth wife to marry him. He can't remember if it was Shakespeare or Marlowe or Donne. He can't remember and he can't ask her because she died twenty-odd years ago of old age.

"It's a pity," he says to himself and then he starts to shake because he can't get over his luck having such a pretty girl like Emmie to love him. Such a pretty girl must certainly have a pretty belly button, he thinks, and he quivers so much that he has to sit down.

When it is all over Percy Q. lies on the floor groaning and holding his nose. Emmie triumphantly holds up the chair she used to bang Ted Bubble over the head and knock him senseless. Everyone else stops fighting and starts laughing and shaking their heads. They are amazed at Emmie, still protecting her brother after he lied to her about university, and they suddenly forgive her for fooling around with the oldest, richest man in Onion Corners.

"It must be love between them two," Irene MacDougall says to Mrs. Bishop, as they wipe the sweat off their brows. "What else could it be?"

When the minister finally comes out of the bathroom everything has been cleaned up. Ted Bubble is back in the chair, still knocked-out, beside the juke box in the reception room and the music is still

going and the kids are all dancing. It's four in the morning.

Mary-Lou asks the minister to annul the wedding. She says she doesn't care if Percy Q. is a dry cleaners boy for the rest of his life, she's loved him fiercely since she was eleven years old. She says he makes her world crazy and happy and fun. Percy Q. dances around in his ripped, blood splattered green dress and hugs and kisses Mary-Lou like there's no tomorrow, he pats her little growing baby belly like it's his. The minister won't annul a wedding until the groom is awake and he wonders aloud how this tragedy will affect the little unborn Bubble. Mary-Lou and Percy Q. say they can wait. They say the baby won't know the difference, they say it'll have two papas instead of one. They say they've waited their entire lives to be together as husband and wife, one more night won't matter any. The baby in Mary-Lou's belly kicks and jumps and hiccups, as if it's telling the town that everything will be fine and dandy, and Mary-Lou and Percy Q. look lovingly into each other's eyes.

A couple of months later Emmie is sitting, barefoot, in Zeb's lap and he's playing with her belly button in his huge house on Portland Street. She's found that she can't wear her shoes anymore. They feel uncomfortable and small, something she never noticed before. Zeb and Emmie are getting married in the spring and she's decided she isn't going to wear shoes under her wedding dress. She's decided that she isn't going to do anything she doesn't like anymore. She's going to be rich and in love and well taken care of.

Emmie tickles Zeb behind his hairy ear and thinks about how she likes being an aunt to little Quince and that makes up for her disappointment with Percy Q. over his university career. She likes little Quince so much that she hopes she can have a baby one day herself. Zeb's already had fourteen of them in his long life so she doesn't see why one more would make a difference.

Zeb used Donne's poem about the compass to win Emmie's hand, the poem about how the compass stays fixed at one point no matter how far the other point wanders. He used that poem, he told Emmie, to make her understand that, even though his eye may wander occasionally, stopping ever-so-slightly on some of the heavenly bodies

strolling through Onion Corners, it doesn't mean he won't always be faithful. It just means he's a man, he says, he can't help himself.

It's the same line he used on his last wife, the sixth one. Zeb figures he's getting old. He figures he shouldn't have to make up new romantic sayings for every young lass who snatches his heart. It's about time he relaxed. It's about time he let his mind take a rest or two.

Mary-Lou and Percy Q. are at home, in his parents' old house, lying together in bed with little Quince beside them. They have carved M + P + Q on the headboard of the old bed and they are snuggled down in the warmth of the quilt staring at the new little baby girl.

They can't imagine anything happier. They can't imagine anything nicer. And Quince giggles and coos peacefully beside them, thinking about nothing but milk, milk, milk in her peaceful, wonderfully unformed, tiny mind.

Baby Quince is wearing a taffeta green hat on her head, made carefully from the remains of the dress. It keeps her warm and her parents think she looks beautiful.

"You look like a million bucks," Percy Q. tells her. "You look like the Queen of England." And he dabs a little green eye shadow on her for effect.

Nobody worries about Ted Bubble because he's found true love in the bony church lady (who's name is Tiny) and, even though he was wearing protection that night, she's knocked up with another one of his babies and they are soon to be wed. It doesn't matter an ounce to the church lady that when she marries Ted she'll be called Tiny Bubble. In fact she likes the name so much that she whispers it to herself any chance she gets.

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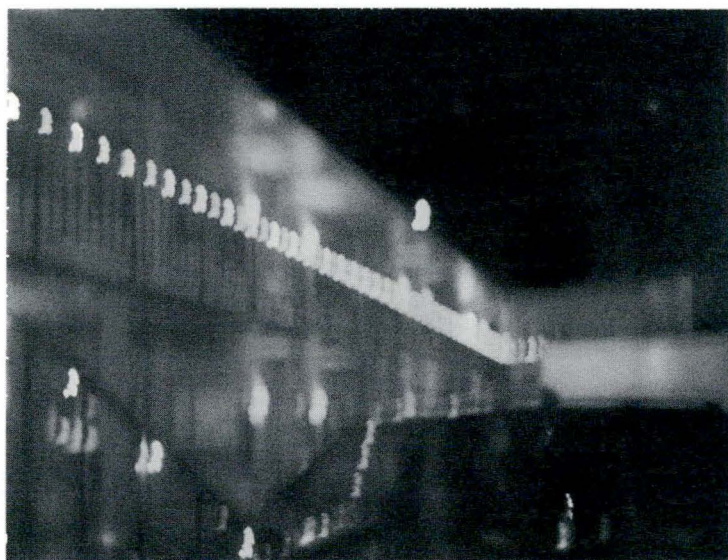
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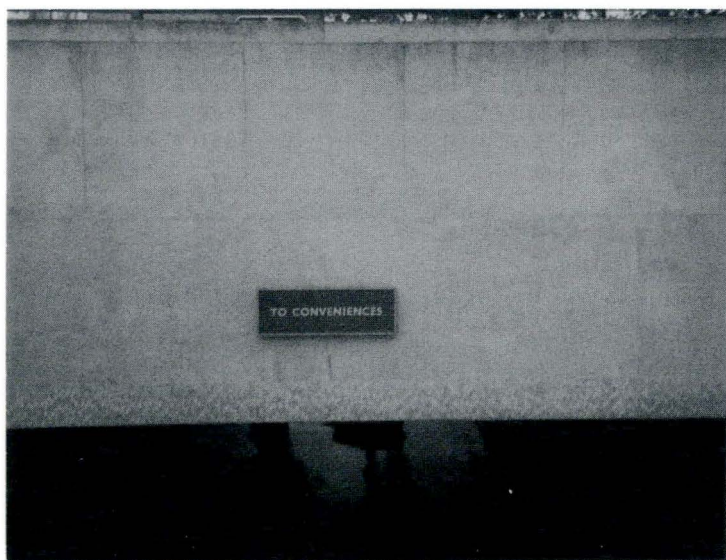
I was never here
(from an on-going series)

Gwen MacGregor











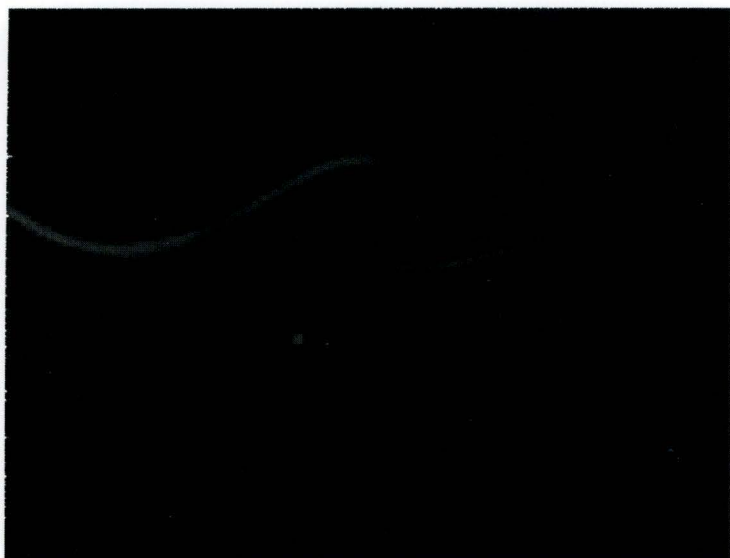


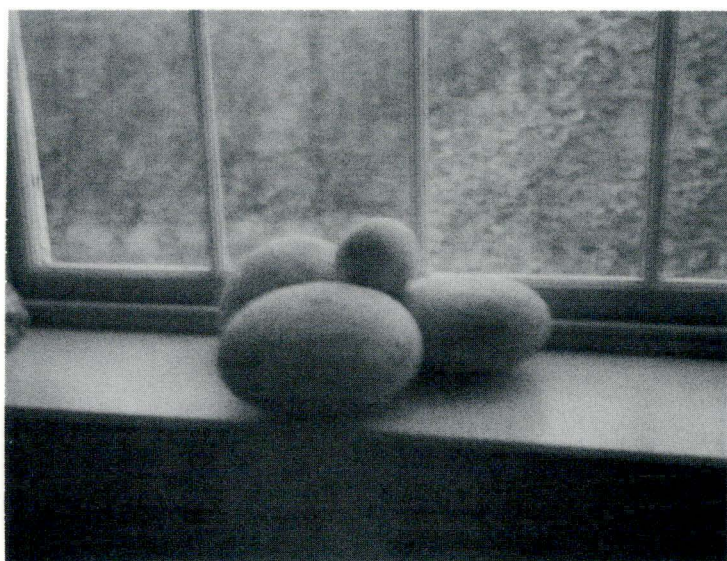
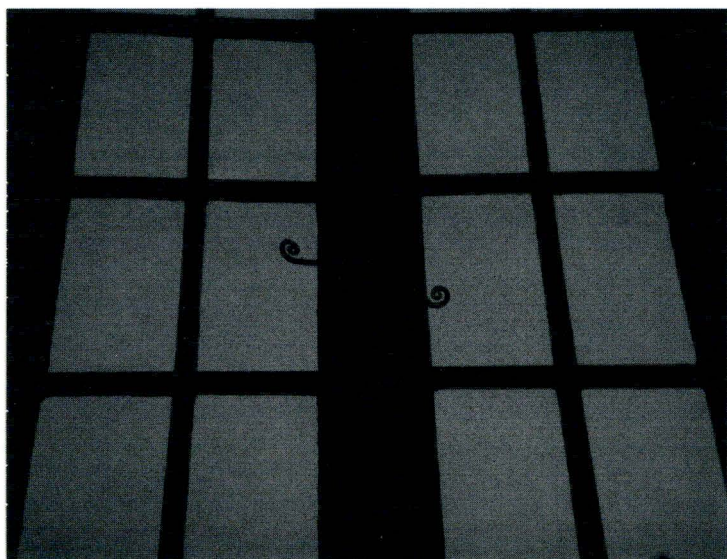




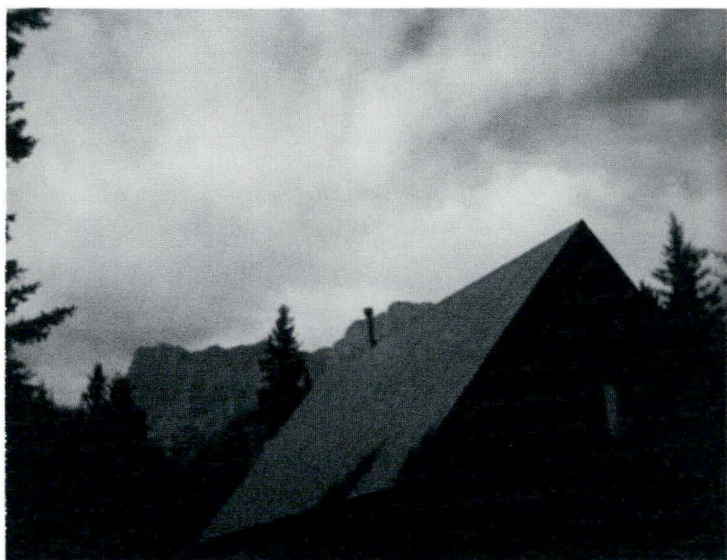












Black and white polaroids
1995-1998

Lethbridge, Alberta
London, England
Montréal, Québec
Forks of the Credit, Ontario
Portmeirion, Wales
London, England
Canmore, Alberta

Gwen MacGregor

Selected Exhibitions

Solo Exhibitions

- 1998** *Fold it up and put it away: Fernie's Curse*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, AB.
- 1994** *Murky Waters*, Mercer Union, Toronto.
- 1992** *Two Installations*, Main/Access Gallery, Winnipeg.
- 1990** *Getting on with Others*, The Diorama, Toronto.
- 1988** *Roundup 88*, an open studio tour, Toronto.
- 1985** *Context of a Gesture*, The Other Gallery, Banff Centre, Banff.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1998** *The Real MacKay*, curated by Carolyn Bell Farrell, Clarington Arts Centre.
- 1997** *Mudlarkers and Measurers*, a travelling group show, curated by Sarindar Dhaliwal, Agnes Etherington Art Gallery, Kingston, ON.
- 1996** *Resident Memory*, Synagogue Na Palmovce, Prague, Czech Republic.
- Review*, an exhibition of collectives, Mercer Union, Toronto.
- In the Garden*, a fundraising auction, Oakville Galleries, Oakville.
- 1994** *ContemPlate/Commemorate*, a Blanket exhibit, Embassy Cultural House, London, ON.
- Spontaneous Combustion*, Atlantis Arts, London, England.
- 1993** *Spontaneous Combustion*, Toronto.

Ghosts, a blanket exhibition, Gallery 76, Toronto.

1991 *Down and Dirty*, a show of multiples by Blanket, Toronto.

1990 *Actual Photos of UFOs*, a Blanket exhibition, Workscene Gallery, Toronto.

A Show of Flags, Harbourfront, Toronto.

Housing - A Right, The Powerplant, Toronto.

Spontaneous Combustion, Artspace, Peterborough.

1989 *Spontaneous Combustion*, Massey-Ferguson Showroom, Toronto.

Nite, The Purple Institution, Toronto.

Roundup 89, an open studio tour, Toronto.

1988 *The Vehicle Project*, The Mediums Art Centre, Toronto.

1986 *Women in Advercity*, Eye Review, Toronto.

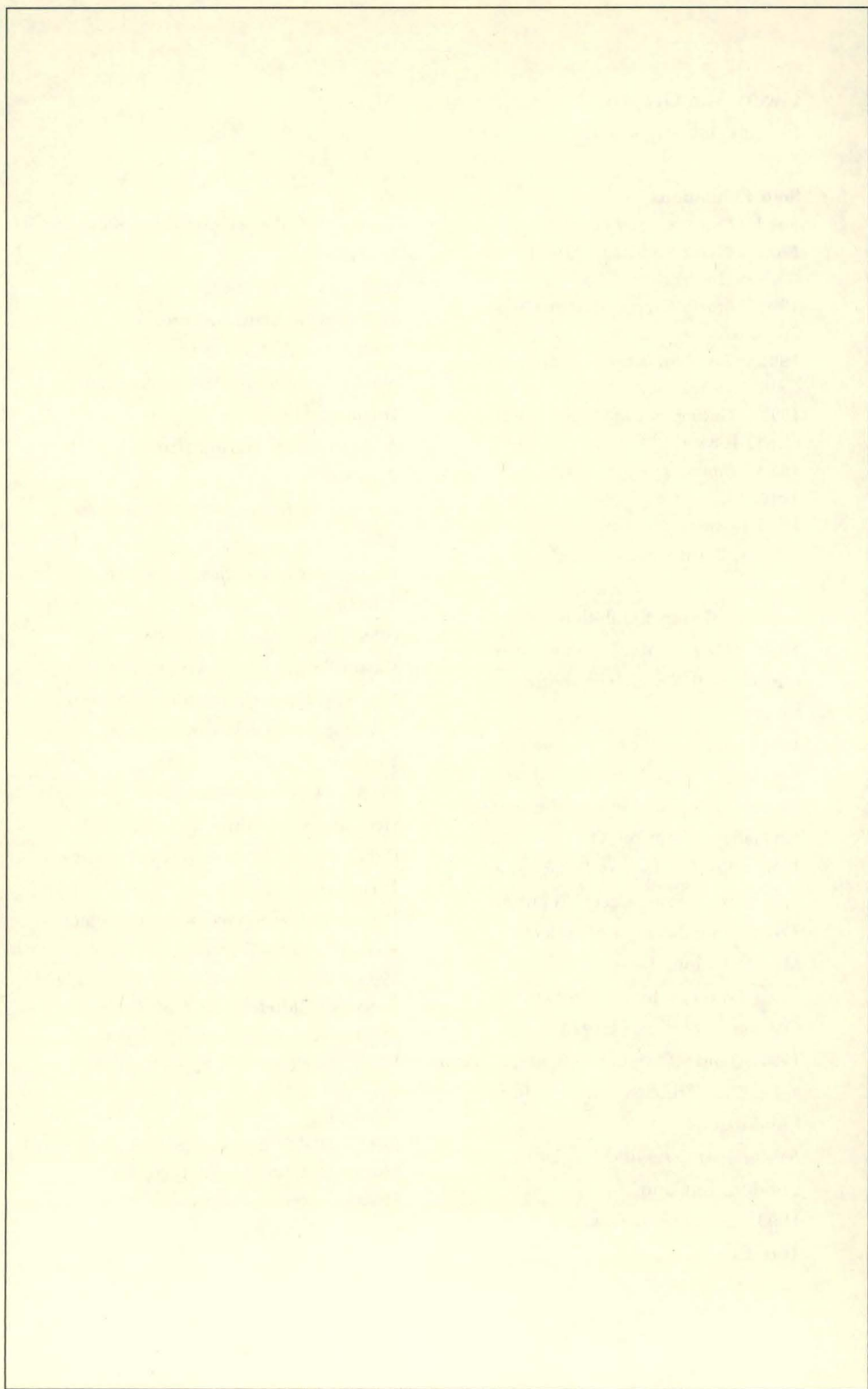
Projections/Dimensions, satellite project, Mercer Union, Toronto.

1985 *When I was a Cowboy*, AKA Gallery, Saskatoon; Modern Realism Gallery, Dallas; Off Centre Gallery, Calgary.

1984 *Salon Show*, A.R.C., Toronto.

Upcoming

- 1999** *HOLD*, a group exhibition in Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto.
- 1999** *Flywheel*, group exhibition, London, England.



Billie Livingston / YOU KNOW WHAT THOUGHT DID

The bus is pulling into a depot. 6:30 am. It's supposed to be Montreal but it looks like nowhere. A gravel lot just off the highway. Christ. You wake Grace, her face is winced but she's still pliable; lead her off the bus and into the station.

Place is deserted. Sit her down with the suitcase on a bench, go to the ticket guy, ask about the next bus to Saint John.

Newfoundland? he asks. *St. John not St. Johns*, you bark. He says not till 10:07 am — 10:07? You say you were told 7:15. He looks at you, his French is better than his English and he's disgusted with both of yours. He says he *don't know who gived dat time you, uh? but it not de true one — Dix heures sept*. Screw dix heures sept — how 'bout sept heures, quinze. You flop down beside your kid, tell her the story. *Now what*, she wants to know, *can we sleep here for a while?* Forget it. Liable to have some thief grab your bag or your kid — terrible things happen in bus stations. You stomp back to the ticket wicket, ask which way's east. He raises his lids, just enough to get you in his pupils then points.

The two of you start out, up the gravel hill to the road, you dragging the suitcase, Grace hobbling barefoot over the rocks carrying an overnighter. *Where're your shoes?* She doesn't know. *What do you mean you don't know?* She thought you brought them. *You thought I brought them?* What kind of cockamamie excuse is that? You can't keep track of everything, can't even handle travel arrangements let alone someone else's footwear. *You thought*, you say, *You thought*. *Well you know what Thought did . . .* It's the family retort to all assumptions made and the family reply when asked *What?*: He planted an egg and thought he'd grow a chicken. Grace asks, *What?*

He shit his pants. She nearly busts a gut. Ah dirty jokes, they make it all a little brighter. She's giggling and limping over rocks and you

offer a piggyback; her and her bag and your suitcase all dragging off your sickly packmule self as you lumber up the hill. Nearly twist your ankle again in those asinine boots. You'll have to change before you get to your parents'. No point walking in looking like the Jezebel who ate New Brunswick.

At the highway, you drop your bag, let her slide down your back and off your bum. She wants to know, What're we doing? *We're going to hitch ourselves a ride and blow this joint, that's what.* She gets a sly smile on her face, she likes doing bad stuff sometimes, no telling when.

Now stand there like this, hip out — provocative but not too sexy or maybe the other way around; and hold your wee child's hand. Who could say no? Thumb out . . . Whoosh, a single car careens on by, not even a glance — what was he — a child-hating queer?

Don't despair, look pleasant with a touch of *ennui* . . . not another car in sight. Grace's smile is fading, she looks blue again. *Sing me a song, old thing,* you tell her. She doesn't know what to sing. May as well go for the cheap laugh again, *I know one. Us kids used to sing this when we were about your age.* You tap your toe and take up with a southern twang:

*Once knew a lady lived out west,
she had moun-tains on her chest,
she had a bird's nest 'tween her legs
where a cowboy laid his eggs.*

She giggles, then, *What eggs?* An-n-n-d presto! Shhh-oo, crunch, car slows onto the gravel, a silhouette glances over his shoulder. There now, this is travelling.

This first guy says he's going to Lévis then over to Quebec city, in bare English, then sits with a hand on his gear shift, gripping with gusto while he fixes on your thighs. Well that's the French for you, no harm in looking. Thank god for your baby though, she puts her head up over the back seat every few minutes, every time a French version of a familiar song comes on and now and then an English one, like now, that one she likes, *I Got a Brand New Pair of Roller skates, you got a brand new key;* she's half-crawled over the seat, trying to get closer to that wiggly girlish voice. The driver is frowning at her, guess she's making him nervous hanging over his shoulder like that. You mimic the shudder in Melanie's voice: *I ride my bike, I roller skate, don't drive no*

car. Don't go too fast but I go pretty far. For somebody who don't drive, I've been all around the world. Some people say I done alright for a girl. Ba ba ba ba yeah. Oh yeah. Oh yeah-h-h-h. He smiles out of the corner of his eye.

By nine in the morning you're driving toward St. Léonard with an older man. He finds Grace's bare feet quite charming and striking to the funny-bone. His English is good. He offers to stop in Edmundston and fix her up with some shoes. Now that's charming.

He waits in the car outside the shoe store, you were hoping he'd offered to pay. He does at breakfast though, takes the two of you to some family dining place and picks up the check. Just outside St. Léonard, he invites you to stay with him for the day, before travelling on. Or come back with him to St-Jean-Port-Joli where he lives — you'd like it there he says, lots of artists, says he'll buy you a wood-carving and laughs softly. He's got heavy gentle hands and his hair is silver fluttering into black just at the nape. Part of you wonders if he takes you seriously. Or if he just wants to fuck you. Maybe either way would be ok though, feel loved for a few years or a few hours. Feel like someone wants you bad, what does it matter why? But you stand with him outside his car and say goodbye. Seems wrong leaving a woman on the highway like this, he says. And you laugh and shrug and he does too and there's a long silence before he kisses either cheek and touches at the outer corner of your eye, the curve of bone before your temple. Looks in deep as if he's soul-hunting. Feel like telling him it's at the shop. He smiles at the pavement, puts a card with his number and address in your palm, folds your fingers and kisses them shut. Gives your hand a final squeeze for punctuation.

The next guy is young. Good looking and he knows it. Tries to be even louder and more jocular into the back seat at your cowlicked girl. Tries to show he's fun for the whole family. She's not buying it though. Her laugh's a little phony. She takes her hands off the front seat and relaxes into the back, closes her eyes. He's English, anglophone, he says, says he speaks French but not that great, *I hate trying to practice in Quebec, these guys can be such assholes.* He's in sporting goods, the rep for about half of southern Ontario. Says something about being young and how it's a positive thing in this business given the market. He's not working now, just sort of a vacation to see some buddies in Fredericton. You went to teacher's college in Fredericton,

you tell him. He thinks that's interesting. Seems to think your tits are pretty interesting too.

You've been in the car about forty-five minutes when he says, *You look pretty tired. I was thinking I wouldn't mind stopping at a motel and resting for a couple hours.* You smile and look out the window. Feels nice, all this good old fashioned lust. He lets loose a grin and asks what you do for a living anyway. You tell him this and that. He asks if you're strapped for cash right now. Huh, that was pretty bold — where would you put Grace though. You could use the money. To get back or put toward Vancouver — rather swallow your teeth than ask your father for money.

I mean, we could just sleep, I could just stretch out along the bottom of the bed. How cute; your pause for thought nearly scared his preppy little pants back on. Then your kid's head and shoulders come hurtling over the front seat, *Ok, no funny business!* What does she mean? Well you know what she meant but how could she know what she meant? The guy looks startled. You both giggle. You pat her cheek and smooth fingers over her forehead, say *Out of the mouths of babes . . .* and the subject is dropped.

Some family-man sort drove you the last jaunt from Fredericton to Saint John; had him let you out down the road. It's almost dark and you've got Grace by the hand, hopefully by the ear, *We took the bus here and then a cab from the bus station, ok? Don't forget.*

But aren't they gonna to see us walking? There's not gonna be a taxi, they're gonna know.

They won't even ask. It would never occur to them.

Yes they will, they'll think it's weird, they're gonna know. They're older than you.

Oh pipe down Grace, you're making me nervous. You let go your daughter's sweaty little mitt and bring the back of your hand to your lips, dab at them for an over-abundance of red, glance down your blouse, do up another button, avoid another stumble, this time over grass growing out of the sidewalk, say out loud, *Step on a crack, break your mother's back.*

What do you mean?

Nothing. Haven't you ever heard that expression?

No. It's kind of mean.

Not if you don't step on any cracks, it's not. She begins making wide strides across all pavement connections before your parents' house. Your eyes coast from her feet to their door and see a face, see your daughter's woolly eyebrows on a old face. Oh shit — heart's going love and terror; a smile splits your face, *Mumma!* The screen door opens and she rushes down three steps to the sidewalk. The space she leaves makes room for Dad. Drop your suitcase and run to the ohs and my goodnesses and *How was your trip, did you take a bus from the station? We could've come and picked you up. How did you get here?* Grace checks her shoes for crack evidence, then smiles politely at an old lady, an even older man. God they're old — how the hell did they get so old, everything's white and lined like school paper, his school paper; your father moves with prepared stiff strides toward you. Greets you with that firm pat of his, his gaze eased with a nod that you try to make pass for *Baby girl, let me look at you, is this my granddaughter — she's adorable!* or something like that. Christ, run, just run before you get in that house and every stingy remark he ever made hits brick-deep in the back of your head. He takes your suitcase. Oh god, it's like falling down some muddy fucking rabbit hole. You can't go home again.

You can't go home again. You're at the train station, Monday morning with your parents. Grace is kicking the toes of her just-turned-four-day-old runners into the platform. Dad's bought your train tickets back. You tell him thank you and sorry and how you're going to pay him back and he says that's fine. Don't know what that means *that's fine* — that's fine, pay it back when you can, or no, that's fine, I want you to have it. He's not really looking at you. All this fucking effort, clean and sober, you've been sober since January, almost four months, but no that's not good enough. Nothing's ever good enough. He doesn't even seem that crazy about Grace. Your mother likes her, she taught her how to knit the other day, but Dad's too busy being whatever it is that he is — actually it was yesterday that really put the kibosh on it.

Sunday afternoon and your father said Grace could play with some old dolls of his. She took them out back. She likes to orchestrate these great bloody epic doll stories. It was some variation on Cinderella, she

told you later. Apparently the step-sisters were up to no good and it became necessary for them to beat the tar out of each other: a Cinderella fisticuffs. This doll bashing another's brains out, that doll booting the other in the arse — that was it for your father, *She's too rough with them, she's liable to break them any moment now — they're antiques.*

Dad, she's not going to hurt them, I'm sure they'll be fine.

Well what exactly is she doing out there, I think she's disturbed, I think there's something wrong with the child.

How the hell would you know, you ignored all your kids except to take a strap to them. No. What you really said was, Oh for goodness sake, there is nothing wrong with her, she's seven years old, she's doing what seven year olds do.

The train station's freezing. Mumma asks Dad, *did we lock the door?* He says they did. She says she doesn't remember locking the door. He says they did. Then he starts off on something about locks and the increase in crime, so you let your brain dawdle off somewhere else, maybe catch the gist of it toward the end. Why does she always have to say *we*, your mother, she always writes to you using *we* too, why can't she say *I* ever? It's like a royal *we*. As if there's no her. And why can't the other half of *we* bugger off and give you a moment to yourselves? Why doesn't she ever get away from him and really talk to you the way mothers and daughters are supposed to; have girl-talk.

Mumma's lifting the cuff of your father's jacket to check the time when you hear a train coming, the announcement crackles over the loud speaker. Grace starts hopping one foot to the other, starts prancing circles around the three of you, singing some song from Sesame Street, *That's about the size, where you put your eyes, that's about the size of it.* She sings that one line over and over, skipping round and round, skipping herself dizzy. Wanna strangle her and your father's casting that fishhook look again, the one about how she's not right in the noggin. Wanna kick him in the nuts, over and over in time to Grace's rhythm, belt out some harmony, sing *She's not nuts, none of us is, you tried to drive us there but we never arrived.* Your mother tucks your hair behind one ear and takes your mind off your feet. Gently takes you in her arms and says, *We're so glad you could come, we've been worried about*

you. You smile in her ear, nod, say, *I'm sorry*. She pats your back, *That's ok, nothing to be sorry about*. The train is in the station, *You'll keep in touch, won't you*. You pat back and nod again before you break apart. Then there are a lot of eyes on faces: yours and theirs and their watches. And the wells start: *Well it's about that time, Well it's been lovely having you /being here /seeing the family, well well well*. And your mother hugs Grace, and Dad gives you his stilted hug and Grace gives him likewise but doesn't kiss his cheek the way she does her nanna's because she knows her lips'll turn to stone. Everyone looks doped until you and your baby pick up your bags and climb aboard and give yourself twenty-two hours to do nothing but sit, eat Graval and think about the last four days.

John Pass / THROUGH WINDFALL CENTER

in memory of Kristina Kishkan

The broken mountains have become neutral. — Forché

Its infamous indifference (our difference
that we care and mourn)
can almost hear the boy in me

in the ravine between school and subdivision.
The seminal religion of the weedless lawn
and burr-like bits of botany (fronds

not needles on the cedar, the hemlock's drooping
tip) dipped there into shared irrelevance: waste
ground too steep for building, logged over.
Its second growth was insulation, mossy sponge

for my singular adolescent portion
of anxious longing, coming
to self-consciousness, batting for the personal noises
disallowed everywhere else. And a bafflement

of voice and hearing, place and person
Wordsworthian mutter
drones ever on

reinvents its fashion
recycles through orcas or the singing forest
retro-prayer, a sappy public pantheism.
I think to wear with a difference

this Body Shop t-shirt on Father's Day
so you can read it on me if I turn
my back, try to walk away: *Nature*

never did betray the heart that loved her . . .



Meantime each thing as hard to say
as its form or atmosphere implores of me
metaphor's amber, nocturne, ambivalent specificity.



Where she died
I've never been but imagine

coastal high country
clear-cut slopes laced
with logging roads and mist.

Granite sky, loose gravel
on the hard turn at lake edge . . .

everything the pre-dawn grey
of the May morning her father phoned
waking us, having waited all night

for a decent hour, unable
to wait longer. She died

and a world in her eyes, behind her eyes
we'll never know, eighteen, planning
to study forestry. I imagine

nothing growing where she died.
The paralyzed moment. No sunrise.



To cheat, I explain to my curious daughter
and blunder on, *nature won't cheat if you love her*

enlivening the cruel conceit
it's *our* cheating hearts must belie it to live
somehow gladly grasping, bundling

wasp sting, or bramble dragged
through a sandal running, asthmatic
gasp of pollen, into haphazard exhilaration
the pup runs around us, sky-diving

caterpillar hope
in its plastic pail
leaf-nurtured, cocooning . . . All

close hurt, hurt aspiration, all
stricture unto death tricks open
tracery, delineation . . .

And opens a roving, rolling eye for distance,
death's princess, demure distraction, a good view

of mountain across the lake, star-shape, spectrum, long
avenue of trees . . .

Her diadem on a foreground bough,
a spring shower's trinket, dangles
the toggle switch

reach/refusal: simplistic riddle
of the light's contrivance.

But thing-bulk and biomass
back of every surface, every assumption
in fleshy O'Keeffe, Carr's turbulence
or Turner's luminosity imply

a problem not for the eye but of the soul.



When lilac first by the sundeck rusts
opening summer's reliquary

cottager confronting lake
bends to crank the Merc 850

humbled before the shadowy hills at e'en
and sunset's burnish on the alders

by a wet plug. Of elemental power
pictorial fiction

what show him

downwind of the party cutting loose
swathes and swatches of *Purple Haze*
and *Helpless?* Fit requiem

for attention, attachment.
Requiem for scenes imposed
upon the eyes closing
of things looked at day-long, idly

or in some mild anxiety
of expectation: fragile visibility

of new grass newly watered,
heat sheen of highway

at horizon, thunderheads holding
off. Is that *Stairway*

To Heaven clouding
an Ansel Adams' moon
and precipice

warped to the edge, extent
of meaning: earth, that marble
from Apollo 8, end of the genre?



Soul, that first rung artifice
of consciousness, unseen constant
memory holds sense to seem

clones the lustrous teen
and ornamental cherry blooming
outside the high school, DNA's plausible angels
simultaneous, adjacent

oblivious as I'm driving by
to the codes and processes
shared, their not-so-secret virginities.

How many hidden on the hard drive now
or danced on pinheads then
till we wholly ken that distance, space
itself folds

into smaller nowhere
the mind's clothing?

And those ancient forests of physical forms
more medieval daily (present and spectre
and prophecy) take to this new strategy
like logs to water, default

to directory tree, the booms' down-time embroidery
of the river's mouth, pulpy intertexts . . .

though love for texture likes the leaf
of another between thumb and forefinger
wants its transparent apples weighty

and the faller still needs his saw.



Her uncle comes to the funeral
his forehead, hands and forearms bandaged
battered from beating against the windshield

to get back in
underwater
and unknot her seatbelt.

(that apple-cheeked girl)

Whatever she saw disappeared forever
a liquid light.

I'm uncle too, and landholder, believer
after a fashion.

Mother earth, spaceship earth
the firmer than me and you dimension

nothing
where the off-road vehicle goes off land.



Daylight at least. Daylight.
And fireweed flaring in the bleached
and blackened slash, deadfall.

Maybe some buckbrush willow
by the water, clumps

of gangly alder in the gullies
like kids hanging out at the mall.

And the ghost of a moon.



Just let me climb up out of this . . .
spinning my wheels, relentless
pivot of the cycloramic

crowning green neutrality endlessly
shuffling its wild spaces, vistas
into prospects, new perspectives

new age where the worthiest
lie on their backs in the old growth, squinting,
counting murrelets. Omnivores cleaning off

the rose leaves, cleaning up
dropped fruit, even the wasps
have their uses. Mine

incomprehensible, inappropriate here
as right angles, language.
Oh let me climb up out of this

flood of myself, lunacy
of reflection, grotesque in the armoured
circuitry of the virtual

reality harness, vision's bulimic.



As love hasn't made
me part of you, wife, lover, you
part of me, and has

buried my face in the burnt-toast smell
of your hair, *my whole heart*

or some such felt
phrase sprung to mind

so we whisper to each other
aghast now at its toddler charm
your best remembered phrase of hers
coming home in winter, huddled
in all the coats and sleeping bags
as the house thawed: *It's seizing cold*
Aunty Terry, seizing cold . . .

So I've wrestled erect a wall I've framed, spiking
down the braces, or propped the burgeoning

Conference pear, crouched under
its full-term, fruitful shade
overhearing my own seduction.

Skills! Husbandries! Incantations! The struggling
blind entanglements of sorrow, effort, passion!
Everything rests upon them

and their out-sprung gestures, presumptions
of connectedness, unity

played out into . . .
as far as the eye can . . . And this must be

the life of the spirit, echoes
of physicality, feeling
cooling its heels

a bodily resonance boding . . .
and foreboding

formal transactions
of material plus gesture: blanket

ceremony, somebody moving
through the windfall center
as through debris, disaster

to enfold another's shoulders
in the gift, borne . . .



awaiting word, wording, received
in the sobs and shudders

of the spine collapsing
its extension ladder
of amphibian toeholds into gravity

in the self-hug's moan and rocking
in lamentation's shocking self-respect
in the exhaustion of supplication

in body mantra (the monitor's beep
and hum) mind's generator hatching
at last on its flat horizon

a "happy-face" sticker
or the first Himalayas
of new-sought habitation.
His wavery row

in the gardening therapy plot.



Localities, lucidities.

Don't say endangered, dying.
They are done. And stand as they can
in staring, wordless independence

in disproportionate import, icons
of the texts and galleries, decor
of the lobbies and lounges, that portion

of porch steps and railing visible
through a kitchen window

within and outside our fashioning.
We are barely begun, becoming
every ending chased
after *I remember . . .*

each brush-stroke and f-stop and crippling ellipsis
along the way. Chastened, I laze in flesh tones

in close-ups of the body taken
for Saharan dunes at dawn
or drifts of lunar snow

blunt tongue in the dark
earthy taste of you, the mineral juices —
its life's work bumping into what

might warm to me: the close earth
auditioning, rehearsing us (walk

through to full dress)
for the closing closeness
its choking gasp or sigh

where family throw flowers on the water.



A world to see: not you, not me,
not other, neither
kind nor unkind

emerges from that incidental calm
time (or is it only our time)
finds, belittles, isolates

in glimpses, immeasurable . . .
You wake

. . . upon a shore
your cheek a little sore from
its position as you dozed

in late summer, late afternoon
on a towel on a log extending
into the lake. A diver

has stepped over you to reach the end.
Everything is close now:
various, explicit, lovely

and committed to itself
and to the contingencies.
Each thing is wise with contingency

and won't say its simple, singular shape,
its colour. Love, work, language

are our business, but
before we are about it, before
we breathe a word or wish

we'd brought the camera, a world
is new, and worth it. Wants us.
It is the world where everything has happened.

Vivette J. Kady / RETURN STROKE

One afternoon during a violent thunderstorm, while my grandmother washed dishes beneath the open kitchen window, lightning struck and her hands caught fire. She sprang away from the sink and stood gaping at her blazing hands until Uncle Hank, who had just come into the kitchen, grabbed a dishtowel and smothered the flames. "Oh my," Grandmother said.

I've invented the "Oh my," but she would have said that.

In her frequent retelling of this incident since its occurrence some thirty-five years ago, Grandmother has said she felt no real pain — just a quick mild burning sensation in the centres of both palms, and then a sort of tingling that spread up her arms and zapped her heart. Well, zapped is my word — she wouldn't say that.

The fire left no outward traces — no weals of scar tissue or scorched discoloured skin — but soon after she was struck by lightning my grandmother found she had developed a special "talent": she was able to dowse. It was as if the lightning had charged atoms in her body and somehow she was in alignment, in harmony, with the electromagnetic fields of this planet. She discovered her ability to divine the day after this incident, when she was clearing the yard of branches blown down by the storm. She picked up a forked branch and it dipped down, suddenly and forcefully, right over the septic tank.

Grandmother stopped dowsing a couple of years ago, but for more than three decades it was as if her heart, her soul, the entire constellation of molecules that form her could shrug loose and pierce the soil; slip through caves and rocks to deposits of metallic ores, or underground streams.

This became the single most important thing about her, more momentous than the births or deaths or anything else that had or

would happen in her life: a stroke of lightning had singled her out.

Grandmother lies in a rented hospital bed in Uncle Hank and his wife Ellie's house. On the bedside table are boxes of chocolates, an alarming assortment of pills, and the TV remote. She has no intention of leaving the bed. In the past few months she's lost first a toe, then a foot, and now her leg below the knee, to gangrene. "I am dying," she announced when told of the need for the latest amputation, as casually as she might say, "It's going to rain today." This was not for dramatic effect, or to elicit sympathy or denials — she merely wanted it acknowledged, up front, so we wouldn't have to skirt around it.

A board-like contraption has been rigged up under the covers to prevent the bedclothes from pressing down on the amputated stump. When the bed is cranked up, she uses the board as a table to play solitaire on, or a few hands of rummy when I visit. Her eyesight has become too weak for reading. She likes me to read the newspaper to her, from cover to cover. She wants to hear headlines, letters to the editor, birth and death notices, reports of business mergers. "Oh my," she says of government corruption, and she titters or gasps at scandals, a coy hand covering her mouth. I skip the more disastrous bits — famine, genocide, mayhem — hoping she won't notice. It sounds crazy, but I'm convinced she is abnormally affected by eruptions of violence, evil and tragedy — bad news is dangerous to her.

My grandmother is a rational woman, inclined toward the scientific rather than the metaphysical. She readily submitted to tests that measured changes in skin potential as she moved over subterranean water; she is familiar with studies suggesting possible detector sites in the human body for magnetic fields — the adrenal gland in the kidney region; the pineal gland at the base of the brain; the retinas of the eyes. She draws parallels between the navigational mechanisms of migratory birds and dowsers. She is adamant in her refusal to believe that what happened to her was a miracle — she will not be allied with paintings that wink or shed tears of blood. She has accepted her talent with the same matter-of-fact resignation she would have shown had she been born cross-eyed, or with twelve toes, or if she'd developed Tourette Syndrome.

I spent a fair amount of time with my grandmother while I was growing up, after my father died and my mother started dating again. I've watched her body react to hidden signals. I've been with her while she stood transformed, her atoms spinning in an irresistible dance with something beneath the surface.

Grandmother observed certain rituals when she dowsed. First she'd wash her hands in hot water, then take a few swigs of whisky-laced tea from the flask she kept with her. She has always suffered from poor circulation — blood moves sluggishly around her rotund body to her extremities — but she dowsed without gloves, even in cold weather, so she could feel the rod against her skin. Her fingers would be raw, numb with cold, yet the centres of her palms tingled as if their contact with the dowsing rod had reignited molecular memories of the lightning bolt. She favoured a y-stick cut from a willow. She'd stride off across fields in her thick cardigan and muddy boots, a woollen tuque pulled down over her ears, brandishing the y-stick like a tilted crucifix and moving as quickly as her short stout legs would allow. "The faster I move," she'd say, "the stronger the reaction."

These strong reactions were taxing — Grandmother has described the sensations as akin to a series of electric shocks sweeping across her body. She'd tremble with the chills; her teeth would chatter; fear would lurch and somersault in her stomach.

"Have another chocolate, go on," she says. "Do you know, even the police used me, to find bodies?"

I nod. "I remember." I was there, for the first body. Well, not exactly *there*, out with her when she found it, but I was there afterwards, when she came home. That was the summer my mother remarried, when I was fourteen.

"Nowadays they've got radar that can scan underground," she says. "I saw it on the television. They used it in the backyard of that horrible man — the one who kidnapped those children and took such dreadful photographs of them. But all they found buried in his garden were old cow bones."

"I wish you wouldn't watch stuff like that," I say.

“Not that I’d be much good anymore — they’d have to drag me around in a wheelchair. Now that would be a sight — imagine me bumping around out there, dangling my foot over scrub and mud. Go on, take another chocolate. Take a few.”

Finding the first body was an accident. Grandmother had been hired by a construction company to dowse for hidden service lines on a long-abandoned site near the outskirts of town. As she tramped over some muddy soil beneath a clump of trees, her y-stick twisted so violently the bark ripped off and tore the skin on her hands. When labourers from the construction company dug, they found the battered body of young Shannon Peterson. She’d been missing for three weeks, last seen leaving for softball practice at a park a few blocks from her home.

The gruesome discovery caused my grandmother to feel as if she’d arrived at the end of something; as if she’d slipped through the safety net of the world and was falling headlong, mouth open. This was the dark side of the gift — a startling, almost unknowable sorrow pulsed outward from her heart.

After this she began to move more cautiously over the earth, waiting for another shock or a fissure that might open up and swallow her. She pushed the terror deep inside and held it there. It has congealed into something wobbly and gelatinous — a bright, throbbing clot.

“While you’re here, would you mind helping me bathe her?”

Aunt Ellie fills an enamel basin with warm water, and hands me towels and soap.

“She hates this,” Aunt Ellie warns. “She’s as bashful as a young girl. But better you than Hank.”

We roll my grandmother onto her side, remove her nightgown, and slide a towel under her. She moans, and closes her watery eyes. I try not to look at the remains of her leg, the exposed stump. Aunt Ellie washes her face and neck, soaps her belly, the pink folds between her legs, her empty flapping breasts. We help her to sit upright. “Oh!” she whispers, and her lips contract, bluish, around the sound. I hold her while Aunt Ellie washes her back. Her crimped skin feels cold and loose. Aunt Ellie pats her dry, sprinkles her with powder, and

we help her into a clean nightgown.

"You smell nice," I tell her as I comb her hair. She keeps it bobbed short, parted on one side. It's hardly greying, but beginning to thin. Strands of hair fall and coil like dark pencilled arcs on her pillow. Specks of talcum powder and tiny flakes of skin fleck the pale blue sheets.

Ever since the lightning struck, atmospheric changes have affected Grandmother — the altitude and position of the sun; the strength and direction of the wind; the approach of storms. It was fine when she was doing run-of-the-mill dowsing for wells and tree roots, but once she began to look for bodies, her acute sensitivity extended beyond mere weather conditions. Now even distant events affect her. Misery blows through her, and as the television brings news of war, earthquakes, mutilations, her condition worsens.

I discuss this with Uncle Hank and Aunt Ellie. "You ought to install some sort of v-chip in that thing," I tell them. "Look how it's affecting her. She's disintegrating."

They exchange frowns.

Uncle Hank speaks carefully. "Any doctor will tell you — and she'd be the first to agree — there are perfectly reasonable explanations for her condition."

I know. Poor circulation, immobility, ulcerated flesh, putrefaction, amputation. Infection, amputation. And so on. Vision clouded — age-related. The bedridden have feelings of morbidity. These things happen.

But they cannot deny she has developed a highly unusual sensitivity to the world. Images of massacres in Algeria flicker across the TV screen, and my grandmother's limbs ache. Flood victims weep and her head throbs.

"Listen dear," Aunt Ellie says gently, "it's not good for you to be cooped up with an invalid. You're young. You should be out with people your own age."

"Your grandmother loves that TV," Uncle Hank says. "She likes to keep informed. Her mind's still sharp as a tack."

Grim self-sacrifice pinches the corners of Aunt Ellie's mouth. "Don't get me wrong — we love having you visit, but now's the time to

be enjoying your life."

"But I'm *happy* to be here," I protest, and leave the rest unsaid — *besides, she won't be around much longer.*

I do have a life beyond my deteriorating grandmother, and my aunt and uncle who've become impatient and exhausted from the demands of nursing her. I spend hours surrounded by — and in various degrees of contact with — strong, lithe, breathtakingly mobile bodies. We engage in tugs-of-war with gravity; we tease the limits of skin, muscle and air.

Alex could have used that in his documentary about me — tugs-of-war with gravity; teasing limits — although he probably would have said it was over-the-top. *Let your choreography speak for itself. Your dancing is so eloquent, you don't need words.*

I lived with Alex for almost two years. He took rolls of footage of me at rehearsals, on tour, in the park, shopping, cooking — Alex and his camera were everywhere. He had enormous energy — he hardly slept. If he wasn't filming or editing, he'd be baking bread, or taking his motorbike apart, or painting the walls, or speeding down the highway, or calling everyone he knew.

The final argument took place after he'd woken me at 3:00 a.m. to tell me the lighting designer was undermining my work with subliminal messages, and I had to get rid of him. A week earlier it had been one of the musicians.

"It's no good," I said. "I can't do this anymore."

When I came home from rehearsal that evening, I found Alex lying on his back on the futon with a clear plastic bag over his head, held tight around his neck with elastic bands. Beside the futon were a bottle of tequila and an empty pill container. The new Counting Crows was playing — we'd listened to it for the first time late one night that week with the lights out — but six discs were loaded in the magazine of the CD player. At the moment of his death, Alex could have heard the Brahms Violin Concerto, Tom Waits, Big Audio Dynamite, Cecilia Bartoli, or Ali Farka Toure.

There was no suicide note, but on the kitchen counter was a photograph he'd taken of me a few months earlier at a sidewalk sale — I'd tried on a pair of outrageous cat's eye sunglasses with fluores-

cent orange frames. Alex had cropped the photograph and mounted it on a sheet of rose-coloured cardboard. Diagonally across the cardboard he'd written: *last seen enjoying her illusions*.

That happened eight months ago. The aftershocks are unavoidable. All it takes is the scent of a particular shaving soap, or an inadvertent envelope addressed to the dead, shoved through the mail slot with bills and flyers and a card from mother, or some music first heard late with the lights out, and the ground threatens to break open.

In her dreams, my grandmother is falling. She jerks as she sleeps; little spasms shake her like jolts of electricity.

There is something about me that Grandmother and Uncle Hank and Aunt Ellie wouldn't want to know, although it's actually quite harmless, and perfectly safe. For the past few months I've been supplementing my income with phone sex. I have the perfect voice, and it's easy, once you get the hang of it. You can chop celery or sort laundry or do some basic stretches while they're jerking off on the other end of the line. You just have to remember to talk dirty from time to time — it's not hard to figure out what they want — and to keep moaning and breathing heavily. Most of my clients are repeats. Some want to meet me, but of course that's out of the question.

A man is setting up a telescope on the sidewalk diagonally opposite Uncle Hank and Aunt Ellie's house. It's an unusually cold night for the beginning of spring.

Grandmother watches news of oil spills, refugees, nuclear leaks, bombings. A female torso with surgically severed limbs stuffed in a bag near a railway line. Cult suicides, comet madness.

I turn off the TV. "Come outside with me. I want you to see the comet."

"I can't, dear," she says.

"It's perfect tonight — no clouds. There's a guy out there with a telescope. Come."

Uncle Hank helps me lift her into the wheelchair. We put a couple of thick socks on her foot, tuck blankets around her, muffle her with

scarf and hat and gloves.

I push her slowly down the front walk and steer her over to the man fiddling with his telescope. He looks quite young. He's wearing a beret and a leather jacket with the collar pulled up over his neck.

"Hi," I say. "Mind if we take a look through your telescope?"

"Sorry. I can't get the comet in focus. My hands are shaking too much — it's so cold." He speaks with an accent I can't place. "It's a delicate instrument."

"What a shame," Grandmother says.

"You can see without the telescope," and he points to it — clear and bright, its tail streaming upwards.

"My grandmother's eyesight's not good," I explain.

"Then we'll have to keep trying." He lowers the stand, crouches down, repositions the angle of the telescope, blows on his hands and rubs them together, makes minute adjustments to the eyepiece. "Okay," he says after a few minutes, "I have it." Little fires of exhilaration dance in his black eyes.

We maneuver the wheelchair so that Grandmother can have a look.

"Oh my — how wonderful!" she exclaims.

When I take my turn at the telescope, Grandmother says, "I've heard that every carbon atom inside each one of us comes from some distant star." After a few moments, she adds, "My granddaughter here is a dancer." She is gazing up, apparently transfixed by the vast, spinning night sky.

I laugh. "My grandmother here has a remarkable ability to navigate."

Aunt Ellie brings cups of hot tea after we get Grandmother back to bed.

"Perhaps that young man out there would like some tea to warm him up. I'd like a drop of whisky in mine, Ellie, for a nightcap. It was terribly cold outside."

"That'll be the day — not with all the medication you're taking," Aunt Ellie says. "You should rest when you finish your tea. Be sure you don't overdo it."

"Good heavens, I'll have more than enough rest when I'm dead. If

I had both legs, I'd go dancing." After Aunt Ellie has gone, she sighs and pats my hand. "A daughter-in-law is not the same as a daughter."

"Your hands feel warm tonight," I say. There are small clusters of blister-like eruptions in the centres of both palms. "How long have you had this rash?"

"I hadn't noticed. It must be a reaction to all these pills." She sips her tea and pulls a face. "Want to play a few hands of rummy before you go?"

I shuffle the cards.

"Remember how my hands caught fire, in a lightning storm?" she says. "Well, of course you couldn't *remember*, you weren't born yet. You know, lightning isn't just one single stroke that falls to earth and then that's over and done with. There's some give-and-take involved."

I begin to deal the cards. "What do you mean?"

"Well, apparently the thundercloud sends down negative charges, but before they reach the ground, opposite charges from houses or trees — or my soapy hands, for that matter — rush to meet them somewhere up there. You see, there's mutual attraction." She picks up her cards, sorts them. "All that energy and fury — the flash of light, the thunder — is really from what they call the return stroke, which goes back up to the cloud. It moves so quickly, we can't see it's actually rising, not falling." She picks up a card from the top of the pack and smiles.

I lower her bed, smooth the sheets, kiss her forehead. "So," Grandmother says, and blinks. Her eyes say the rest — *I am dying. Have another chocolate. Take two. Go on.*

When I close my eyes she is there, an after-image on the retinas.

My grandmother taught me never to bathe or use electric appliances during a thunderstorm. I will hang up the phone when there's lightning, even if my client is in the final throes of passion. If I'm caught outside in an electrical storm, I know not to shelter under a tree. I'll look for the lowest point and crouch, keeping both feet on the ground.

Hema Nair / A DIVIDED ISSUE

The familiar, uncontrollable heave of her stomach rose into Ujwala's throat as the sharp aroma of finely chopped onions sizzling in smoking oil filled the kitchen. Biting into a rag that did duty as a potholder, she tried to stay calm. But bile surged into her mouth in acrid waves and threatened to spill out. Dropping the rag on the tiled counter, she walked-ran into the bathroom across the hall.

A few seconds later, spent and empty, she wiped her face with a towel and glanced up at the spotty mirror. A pale, oval face, shrouded by a straggly mess of uncombed hair, looked back bleakly. It couldn't be. Not again. But the smell of frying onions never bothered her — except when she was pregnant. It had been her first signal, as a bride of a few months. Standing in the kitchen of their old house and frying silver slivers of onion, she had felt that urgent thrust of queasiness. Aai, her mother-in-law, who had been standing by her side rolling out rotis, had followed Ujwala into the bathroom.

"So you've been caught, child?" she had laughed, gently moving her hand down her daughter-in-law's back.

Three months later, the happiness that had flowed in her veins had dried up like an abandoned honeycomb. The doctor, whom her husband Yashwant had taken her to, had reported that she was carrying a female child. It had not taken them even a minute to decide on an abortion.

"Uja! Where are you? Raku's come to wash the clothes," Aai called.

Ujwala hurriedly smoothed her face and stepped out. "You can go in," she told the lanky girl who stood there with a friendly smile. "I've soaked the clothes. Remember to pound the curtains extra hard. They are very dusty."

In the kitchen, Aai was putting their lunches into small steel

boxes. "I've given you some more eggplant curry," she told Ujwala. "Your friends like it, no?"

Ujwala smiled and began to pile the dirty saucepans and spoons into the sink. Raku was a good cleaner but only if she had everything lined up in front of her. When Yashwant came in after his morning walk, Aai and Ujwala sat down for breakfast. Ujwala tried to suppress her rising nausea as the rich aroma of curried lentils swam up from her plate.

"Why aren't you eating?" Her husband gestured at her plate.

"Just . . . an upset stomach," she mumbled. "I think I'll fast today."

"You should not have had so much of my mango pickle last night," said Aai disapprovingly. "All those red chillies!"

Later, sitting in a hard-won seat in the crowded bus that took her to work, Ujwala wondered why she had lied. Why hadn't she told them what she suspected? But what if it turned out to be another girl? Neither her husband nor his mother wanted a daughter. What good was a girl? She would shoot up like an unruly weed and eat money unceasingly. Jewellery, clothes, utensils to take with her to her husband's home and a fat wad of money as dowry. Yashwant and his mother knew. They had even sold their house, which had been in the family for more than 50 years, to furnish the dowry for Yashwant's youngest sister. The marriage of his three sisters had impoverished the family, stripping away even the thin gold bangle his mother had worn from the day his father had passed away.

Their agony was nothing new to Ujwala. As the eldest of five sisters, she could remember, even as a child, relatives and friends commiserating with her parents about their unlucky fate. Her father, a middle-level executive in a tyre manufacturing company, earned a good salary. But they lived frugally, saving up more than half his income to pay for the girls' marriages. The only child in the house who was never denied anything was Sanjay, Ujwala's school-going brother. "Sanjay is our only hope," her father would often say with a sigh. "He is our savings."

Ujwala had been working as a stenographer at Malcolm and Corbett, an advertising firm, for two years when her parents arranged her marriage to Yashwant. His younger sister Smita was going to get married in two months and his mother hoped to make it a double

ceremony. Yashwant's family asked for 20,000 rupees as dowry, apart from any ornaments, clothes and other gifts that Ujwala's parents could afford to give. Her father managed to negotiate the amount down a little by stressing that Ujwala would bring in a good salary every month.

Ujwala had no complaints about her married life. Her mother-in-law treated her with affection, and Yashwant never said a harsh word. She knew how lucky she was. A few months after Smita's wedding, her in-laws demanded 50,000 rupees, saying her husband wanted to start his own business. If the money was not forthcoming, they implied, Smita would not have a happy married life. Frightened at the prospect of an "accidental" death — the newspaper term for brides who were burned alive by greedy in-laws — Yashwant and his mother had sold their spacious three-bedroom apartment to pay Smita's father-in-law the money.

That sale opened a well of bitterness in Aai that seemed to never run dry. "I came into that house as a bride," she would mourn almost every day. "Now, in my last days, I have to die in these strange two rooms." They now lived in a cramped, two-bedroom house, with one bathroom and a scrap of a verandah. Ujwala's gold jewellery had been sold to pay the down payment of 30,000 rupees. They still owed another 20,000 rupees, which was being paid every month.

Could they be blamed for not wanting a baby girl? "Be the mother of sons," Aai would bless Ujwala every morning. In her three years of marriage, Ujwala became pregnant six times. She miscarried twice, and four pregnancies were aborted. Each time, she lay on that hard table, her hands patiently still, and watched strange hands piercing her body with a long, thin needle. Each time, her heart had dropped like a felled bird when the doctor's report read: "Female fetus."

Why was her womb cursed? Why couldn't she conceive a son?

"Think how fortunate you are to find out it's a girl before you give birth," Aai would console her. "In our days," she would say with a sigh, "we had to suffer the birth pains and then turn and cry at our fate. Look at me. I have three daughters and barely a roof over my head. Look at your parents. They've married off two daughters and still their sorrows are not over." Aai would shake her head sympathetically.

Ujwala had often heard her parents worrying aloud about their

daughters' marriages. "Five girls," her father would moan. "We'll be on the street begging by the time all of them get married." Whenever her mother asked for some money to make a pair of bangles or a ring, her father would shout, "To have daughters in the house is a curse!"

"The price of gold has come down a little," her mother would answer meekly. "This is a good time to buy." But the answer was always a stubborn "No."

Yashwant did not want the family to live on a dribble of their income, saving the rest to give away. "Why should we spend our youth depriving ourselves of any joy?" he would ask Ujwala.

Ujwala would nod in agreement. Yet her conviction ebbed, like a retreating wave, after each induced abortion. It happened quietly, stealthily almost, as if an intruder had crept into her house during an unguarded moment.

Waking from deep sleep, Ujwala would turn over cautiously, as if to avoid crushing a tiny body curled up against her. She would wake up some mornings to find her hands curved in an arc, protecting an empty space between her shoulder and the pillow. Some nights Ujwala dreamt she had given birth. A baby was sitting on the edge of the bed, covered in blood. There was no way of knowing whether it was a boy or a girl. Just a blood baby, staring at her with red eyes.

A longing grew — a need to hold and cuddle and bathe and dress and play with a small, lively little being. Walking past the row of shops that lined the road to her house, Ujwala's feet lingered before the glass-fronted windows adorned with red-frosted dolls or bright, multicoloured balls. Ujwala wanted to cry out aloud sometimes when she sat with Yashwant and Aai. "Look at my lap! How bare it seems! Can't you see someone there laughing and wriggling, as it tries to catch my hair?"

The last time Ujwala went for the amniocentesis test, how she prayed. She vowed to give up her favourite sweets, to fast, without even water on every Thursday, never to miss a special puja at the Ganesh temple. But then she came back home, drained by the agony of cramps that bit through her stomach like vicious scissors. Two days she lay in bed, too tired even to get up and have a bath. Aai was extra solicitous, bringing her food to the bed and making a nourishing broth to strengthen her body. And the river flowed out of her in

endless gushes, pale red and clotted, a liquid baby too swift for anyone to hold even for a second.

"I don't want to get pregnant again for a long, long time," she told herself fiercely. "Let my womb remain bare. I don't care." As if her body concurred, she had not missed a period for six months. And now, this betrayal.

All through the day, Ujwala tried to push the thought away and gave herself up to work. The advertising agency had accepted a new campaign, and hundreds of letters and bills had to be typed up. In the evening, she deliberately caught the 4:30 bus so that she had Bela for company until she got off at her stop. Bela, a plump, easy-going woman who was always eager to share a good laugh, worked in her department. All through the crowded journey she regaled Ujwala with tales of her mother-in-law who was visiting them for a few months. "Maji gets so angry when those government-sponsored ads on improving women's health come on TV. Last night, when that one about giving your daughter the same kind of food — milk, fruit, etcetera — as you give your son, was shown, she really was furious."

"If you give your daughter all that," Bela continued in a thin, quavery tone, mimicking her mother-in-law's voice, "how is she going to adjust to being starved in her in-laws' home?"

Bela's laughter at her own joke set the splashy purple roses quivering madly on her sari. Ujwala smiled and looked out the window. How could Bela be lighthearted about life? As the mother of two chubby, brown healthy girls, she never seemed to worry about dowries and jewellery. Once Ujwala had asked if she would have another baby, maybe a son this time, and Bela had laughed back, saying she had closed shop. "No more babies for me. I told my husband if you want a son, we'll adopt one!" Ujwala had been shocked and a little disapproving of Bela's light-hearted response.

"What's the matter?" Bela now said. "Had a quarrel with the hubby?"

Ujwala shook her head, wondering if she should ask Bela what to do. But suppose Bela talked about it to others? Bela loved to gossip, regaling others with newsy, amusing tidbits. With her sense of humour Bela would think Ujwala's dilemma was a very funny story. Anyway, Ujwala consoled herself, Bela was just a friendly, warm person but not

a close friend.

In the end, Ujwala told no one. For a few weeks, she pretended that she was late. It happened to other women often, she knew. When nothing gushed out with its thick, familiar surge, Ujwala swung between elation and concern. Maybe this time it was a boy. But if it wasn't? She would sit at night, listening to Yashwant and his mother talk about their daily doings, and try to nerve herself to tell them. But once that happened, she knew it would be the end of sweet hope. It would mean an appointment fixed, a needle pushed and . . . she did not want to think further.

Ujwala got into the habit of telling herself that she would tell Yashwant and Aai on Sunday. It seemed a fitting time. One whole week to enjoy her inner blossoming and then abdicate its fate to them. But Sunday evening found her sitting mutely, watching the evening movie on the television, ignoring a fading voice reminding her of the promise.

The next few weeks slipped by like a snake gliding through grass. Ujwala went to work, came back, helped Aai with dinner, and greeted Yashwant with a smile when he came in. In the darkness of their bedroom, when Yashwant's hands moved over her body in confident ardour, she jerked away and mumbled the first excuse that she could think of. She had taken a vow, for three months, so that the goddess would grant her wish for a son. Somebody had done that in her office, and the wish had come true, she added hurriedly. It was the right excuse. Yashwant, a pious believer in prayers and promises, immediately backed off. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?" he whispered. "The goddess is very powerful and insists on complete chastity."

One morning, soaping herself in the bath, Ujwala became aware suddenly of her bulging stomach. Leaning against the bathroom wall, legs shaking, she anxiously felt the firm protruding curve. How was she going to hide this? Fighting the urge to run out and blurt it all out to Aai or Yashwant, Ujwala forced herself to get under the shower and finish her bath. Later, after drying herself, she pulled out a loose-flowing kurta and draped a starched, batik-printed dopatta over it. "I have to do something now," she thought, adjusting the folds over her waist. "I can't carry on this way any longer." But Aai or Yashwant did not comment on Ujwala's appearance at all. Maybe she had imagined

that telltale bulge, she thought with relief, walking to the bus stop. After all, who showed so early ?

A few more weeks went by and Ujwala hid behind bulky kurtas and stiff chikan saris. She had stopped thinking about when to say anything to her husband or Aai. Her body and mind felt quiet and content, as if she were stretched out in warm, silky sunlight. Maybe, she would think, just before she dropped off to sleep, maybe one morning she would wake up and find the baby being born. Yashwant and his mother could not ask her to push it back into the womb.

One evening, when the bus stopped at a red light, Ujwala jerked awake from her now habitual doze and saw the letter-box red words of a huge poster hung outside a clinic.

"Pregnant? Get your amniocentesis test done now. Remember after 20 weeks, it's too late!"

The pleasant sleepiness that had relaxed her vanished, replaced by a heart-thumping panic. How could she have forgotten that? It was illegal to get an abortion after five months of pregnancy. How far had she gone? Hiding her hands behind the black handbag, Ujwala counted her fingertips. Three months and 22 days. She counted again, this time less hurriedly, but the numbers remained the same. Almost four months. In a few weeks, she could not even have an abortion. She remembered her sister Lata describing the agony of her sister-in-law's death. Rani had been five months pregnant when she went to get an amniocentesis test. When the test showed that it was a girl, she and her husband had decided on an abortion. Three clinics refused to perform the procedure, so Rani forced her husband to take her to a quack. The man had left the fetus's head still inside Rani and sent her home. Raging with fever and cramps, Rani had screamed to her slow death.

"That house still resounds with her screams," Lata had shuddered. "Oh Didi, it was horrible."

"Why didn't anyone call a doctor?" Ujwala had wanted to know.

"My in-laws didn't want to get involved with the police," Lata had replied, looking away from Ujwala. "It would have come out that Rani had gone to get a 20-week pregnancy aborted."

For days Ujwala agonized over the horror of that death. She had known the pain of aborting after a few weeks. What torture it must be

to have a severed head twisting and turning inside you.

"It really has taught me one thing," Lata had said. "Never, ever to wait that long, if I wanted to abort."

How could she have forgotten that ? What if she told Yashwant now and the test showed it was a girl. Would he insist on a abortion, even if it was this far gone? Ujwala thought of her smooth-faced, pleasant husband and knew that he would waste no time in arranging for one.

"My nice, considerate husband," she thought with a twisted smile. "He will leave me alone if I have my period or if I am tired or have taken a vow, but he will not hesitate to subject my body to crunching pain because he chooses not to father a girl."

That night, Ujwala could barely keep her tight lips firmly clamped as she served Yashwant his favourite green mango chutney. "I never knew that I could also hate him so much," she thought as she watched him slurp contentedly over his food. Love was something that a woman felt for her husband from the moment she was old enough to understand such things. All the romantic Hindi film songs had already prepared her for the flood of sweetness that enveloped her in her married state. But where had she picked up the lyrics of a song that spoke of bitter hate ?

And Aai, her warm, much-envied mother-in-law. Ujwala glanced at the wiry, bent figure rolling out fresh chapatis for her son. She believed that only if he had chapatis hot from the fire, did Yashwant eat properly. Aai did not like Ujwala to make them because, as she said often, I don't want my daughter-in-law to slave in the kitchen in the evening. The real reason, as Ujwala had silently guessed without rancour, was that the old woman was jealous of her son praising someone else's cooking. It had never mattered to Ujwala, who had been utterly content to be accepted by mother and son as a valued member of the house. Ujwala's mother and Lata had driven that point home emphatically.

"Where will you get a mother-in-law who only expects you to help her in running the house and not take it over entirely?" Ujwala's mother had commented, a few months after her marriage. "Most daughters-in-law these days have to do all the housework and then go out to work."

"Like me," Lata had said resentfully, then a bride of few weeks. "I'm expected to get up at 4:00 in the morning and cook breakfast and lunch for the household before I leave for work. And when I come back, I have to start the dinner at once. Not even a minute to sit down and relax. You're so lucky, Didi."

And I really believed that, Ujwala remembered, gathering used plates and pots to be placed in the sink. I really thought I was lucky to have a mother-in-law like Aai. Just because she doesn't nag and spite me and make my life miserable. Why didn't she realize then that it was because she too had never wanted anything but to blend into the very whitewash on the walls? As a daughter-in-law and as a wife she had only sought to fulfil and obey. Yet, when had they ever thought to ask about her wishes? A sari every Divali and a jasmine garland to adorn her hair once in a while — those were the rewards for her silence. "Even now," she thought, "even now I cannot stand in this kitchen, look in their faces and tell them the truth." The heavy steel pressure cooker that had been part of her dowry slipped from her hands and fell with a thunderous clatter on the cement sink. "Oh, has it been dented? Uja, you should be more careful. These things, if well cared for, can last a lifetime." Aai's face had two deep furrows as she examined the cooker anxiously.

"Is it all right, Ma?" Yashwant inquired, after a moment.

Ujwala stood by the sink, her eyes focused blankly on Aai's hand moving caressingly over the steel surface to detect an unruly crater.

The next morning Ujwala telephoned Lata. She worked as a checker for Barclay and Kanga, a large drug company owned jointly by British and Indian partners. Lata had to stand and check bottles of pills all day. She hated her job and longed to go back to teaching at her old school. But the pay had been too low and her in-laws had decided that Barclay and Kanga, with its higher pay and other benefits, was better. Lata sounded surprised when Ujwala asked if she could see her that evening, to discuss something.

"I'm not sure, Didi. Why, is there anything special? I have to go home and take Arjun for his shots. He's six months now." Lata's voice was warm with pride. "Listen, I have an idea. Why don't you come and meet me here? I get off at 4:00, and my bus never comes till 20 minutes past. The driver will drop you off at that post office, and you can

walk home from there.”

Talking to her through a noisy crowd of women waiting for their buses was not how Ujwala wanted to break her request, but she knew there was no other way. Reluctantly, she agreed to meet Lata at the front gates, a few minutes after four.

The evening was warm and still. At the entrance of the factory stood a pair of ancient mango trees whose leaves fell on the gravel in slow sighs. Ujwala leant against one of the trees, its bark hard and scratchy against her back, and she breathed in the sharp tang of fresh mango from the leaves crunched beneath her sandals. Ujwala thought of the firm, creamy flesh of a green mango dipped in a mixture of salt and chili powder, and her mouth watered.

Once, Lata and she had gone to their father's house in the village for a summer vacation. At the side of the well grew a mango tree almost bent double with the burden of its oval fruits. Ujwala and Lata had spent most of their afternoons, once the elders were asleep, up in its branches filling their stomachs with mango. One afternoon, they had been discovered and had been severely scolded. Their grandmother had pointed out the danger of falling into the deep well and had made them promise not to climb the tree again.

“Hello, Didi! Have you been waiting long?”

Ujwala looked around and smiled at the tall, thin figure dressed in a pink polka dotted sari.

“No, no, I just got here. It's so peaceful under the trees. Do you remember that time, Lata, when we went to see grandma and ate mangoes from that tree near the well?”

“Those delicious raw mango. I can still taste them,” Lata replied. “Somehow the ones I buy from the market never have that flavour. It makes me glad that I never stopped eating them that time.”

“Never stopped? Do you mean you still climbed that tree after promising not to?”

“Of course I did.” Lata laughed at the shocked expression on her sister's face. “I was the naughty one and never listened to my elders, as Mummy used to say. Once I was coming down in a hurry and nearly fell into the well.” She grimaced at the memory. “But even then my greed sent me up that tree next day.”

They had begun walking to a row of bus stops that stood ahead.

Ujwala asked how Ajay and Arjun were doing.

"Both are fine," Lata answered. "Ajay is busy restocking his shop, and Arjun is busy trying to eat everything in sight. And how about you? Is everything all right?"

Ujwala nodded slowly. "Everybody is fine," she said. They walked in silence for a few minutes.

"Have you been to see Mummy and Daddy recently?"

"I went last month," Ujwala answered. "We've had guests every weekend after that and during the weekdays, I feel so tired."

"I know, Mummy told me that you seemed very exhausted when you went to see her. I spoke to her on the phone two days ago," Lata explained, seeing Ujwala's surprised glance.

By now they had reached the bus stop. Buses had begun driving up in a burst of dust and diesel fuel, and voices called out cheerful farewells. There was a sense of urgency and excitement in the air, and Ujwala knew if she didn't say anything now it would be too late. Hesitantly, clearing her throat, she softly blurted out her request.

"You want me to do what?" whispered Lata unbelievably. "Why? For whom?"

"For me. I want a test done. Can you do it?"

"But . . . why me? Can't Yashwantbhai do it?"

"He can't. He doesn't even know I'm pregnant. You see, I haven't told him." Ujwala gave a small, shame-faced smile. "I kept wanting to tell him and Aai, but somehow I never could. And then I just wanted to be pregnant for a while . . ."

Lata stared speechlessly at her sister. This was Ujwala speaking. Her quiet, obedient elder sister. The model held up all through her childhood as the ideal child.

"How many months are you?" Fear thinned Lata's voice to a mere thread.

"Nearly four. Lata, I want you to get me an appointment at that clinic in Bandra, the one you went to. I've decided to tell them, but first I have to know. You see," Ujwala twisted the end of her doppata into a stiff rope, "if I know, I can bear going with Yashwant to the doctor. Then, even if it's . . . if it turns out . . . what I mean is, I can stand losing it if I know."

"Oh Didi, why did you do this?" Lata's hand closed over her sister's

restless fingers. "If only you had talked to me earlier. But it's still not too late. Tell him tonight. Make something up — like you weren't sure or you were still getting your periods — and go with him to the doctor."

"If I have to lie one more time waiting on that table, I'll go mad. Don't you see, if I know beforehand, I can go with him to the doctor and agree to an abortion. Otherwise, I'll be so upset that Yashwant might suspect. He'll never forgive me. Nor Aai." Ujwala turned away to hide the swelling tears.

Lata looked around surreptitiously, hoping no one had noticed. But the women at their stop had clustered around the bus which had just arrived. She looked at her sister's taut, drawn face and bit her lip. "All right," she said finally. "All right. I'll do it. I'll call you in a day or two."

In the middle of a dragging afternoon, a few days later, Ujwala's phone rang.

"Didi, it's me." Lata's voice sounded hurried. "I've made the appointment for tomorrow at 4. You're having a sonography, so drink a bottle of water before going. And take 200 rupees to pay the clinic."

"A sonogram? Lata, I said amniocentesis," whispered Ujwala, praying that Bela, who sat right behind, would not hear her.

"I know, but they could not give an appointment for two weeks. Didi, I did my best. I have to go now. My supervisor is glaring. Don't forget to drink the water. Bye."

The next afternoon, Ujwala lay on a plastic-covered table wearing a thin, starchy gown, tied with two strings behind her neck, and struggled with a bladder aching to be emptied. She felt strange, lying there naked and no Yashwant waiting outside. The room was cold. The hair on her arms rose stiffly. Why had she done this? Suppose the doctor turned out to be a nasty kind who would take advantage of her? And how was she going to explain the 200 rupees she had withdrawn from their joint account? Even when she had taken out money to help her mother a few times, Yashwant's cold silence had declared his disapproval.

The doctor, a thin man in a limp, white coat, came in and began to apply a thick, oily jelly on her stomach. He sat down in front of a small screen and began to ask questions. How many months was she gone? What was her age? Was she married? Any children?

There was a silence as he began to move something hard and cold over her gleaming stomach. Ujwala closed her eyes and bit into her lip cruelly, praying that her bladder would not leak.

"How many months did you say, Mrs. Desai?"

"Four and half," she whispered, clenching her hands and willing herself to feel nothing.

"Hmm."

Ujwala's eyes flew open at the faint note of doubt she caught in his voice. He was staring at the screen intently. Ujwala turned her face slightly to see a flickering dance of black and grey on the monitor. What was he seeing? Was there no baby? Had she imagined it all?

Her mouth felt dry and hot. What was wrong with her? Was it a tumor? Cancer? She stared at the doctor's face, unable even to voice her panic.

"Have you taken any pills? Special medication?" he asked suddenly, turning to look at her.

Ujwala could only shake her head in answer.

"Hmm. This is unusual."

"What is wrong, doctor?" she finally found the strength to ask in a barely audible voice.

"Wrong? I don't know if I would call it that yet. You see, you seem to be carrying twins, Mrs. Desai."

"Twins?" Ujwala half sat up, forgetting her bladder and forgetting that her gown was not fastened all the way at the back.

"Yes. Two fetuses. A boy and a girl, from what I can tell."

A boy. And a girl. Ujwala's eyes moved wildly to the screen and back to his face.

"Are you all right? Is there someone with you outside? It's a shock, I know. Here, let me call a nurse." He hurried out, calling sharply for someone called Sarla.

Ujwala lay with her eyes frozen on the winking images on the screen. A boy and a girl.

She visualized Yashwant and Aai's faces when they heard the news. A boy and a girl. A small smile broke across her face.

Let them try and work out how to keep one and abort the other.

Creative Non-Fiction Contest #12

\$1,500

Three winners will each receive \$500

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Publication in *Event* 28/3. Other manuscripts may be published.
Preliminary judging by the editors of *Event*.

Final Judge: **Di Brandt's** non-fiction includes a collection of creative essays, *Dancing Naked: Narrative Strategies for Writing Across Centuries*, and a critical study, *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature*. She has published four books of poetry and has received numerous awards for her writing. She has twice been nominated for the Governor General's Award for Poetry. She currently teaches creative writing and Canadian literature at the University of Windsor.

Writers are invited to submit manuscripts that explore the creative non-fiction form. See back issues of *Event* for previous winning entries and comments by judges Myrna Kostash, Howard White, Eleanor Wachtel, Susan Crean, Andreas Schroeder, Stephen Hume, Janice Kulyk Keefer, George Galt, Sharon Butala, and Tom Wayman.

Note: Previously published material cannot be considered. Maximum length for submission is 5000 words, typed and double-spaced. Include a separate cover sheet with the writer's name, address and phone number, and the title(s) of the story (stories) enclosed. Please include a self-addressed stamped envelope and a telephone number. Douglas College employees are not eligible to enter.

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MICHELLE BERRY has published numerous stories in literary magazines across Canada. She has two books of short fiction, *How to Get There From Here* (Turnstone, 1997) and *Margaret Lives in the Basement* (Somerville, 1998). She lives in Toronto and is presently working on a novel, forthcoming from Key Porter.

VIVETTE KADY grew up in South Africa and now lives in Toronto. Her stories have appeared in *The Antigonish Review*, *Confrontation*, *Descant*, *Event*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Grain*, *Pottersfield Portfolio*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *Room of One's Own*, *TickleAce*; and in the anthologies *93: Best Canadian Stories* and *Ladies*, *Start Your Own Engines*.

Living in Tsawwassen, BILLIE LIVINGSTON writes and supports herself with acting work. "You Know What Thought Did" is an excerpt from her first novel, *Going Down Swinging*, which will be published by Random House in the fall of 1999. Other excerpts are forthcoming in *The Malahat Review*, *Other Voices*, *Imago*, *Atom Mind*, and *One Step Beyond*, a United States' anthology published by Zero Hour Press.

KEVIN MAGEE is the author of *Tedium Drum* (1994) and *Recent Events* (1995), both of which are still in print and available through Small Press Distribution.

HEMA N. NAIR grew up in India where she worked as a journalist for *The Times of India*, and later, *The Indian Post* in Bombay (now Mumbai). In 1989, she won the Best Woman Journalist of the Year award for outstanding writing on Indian women's issues. She moved to the U.S. in 1990 and has been working as a freelance writer. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *The New York Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *The Women's Review of Books*. Her fiction has been published in various literary magazines and has been anthologized in two collections of South Asian fiction. She now lives in Ewing, New Jersey, and is trying to juggle her writing with the demands of bringing up her baby daughter — and she has no compunction stating that the toddler wins hands down every time.

JOHN PASS' "Through Windfall Center" is from *Water Stair*, forthcoming from Oolichan Books. Earlier poems from the manuscript appeared in *TCR* 2:15.

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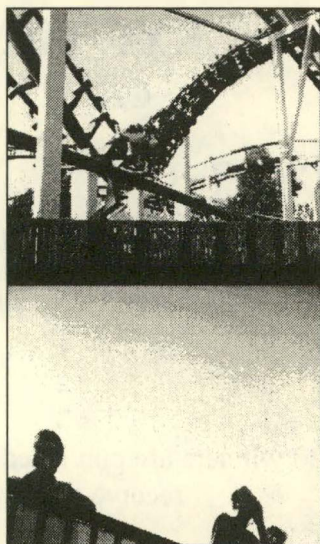


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