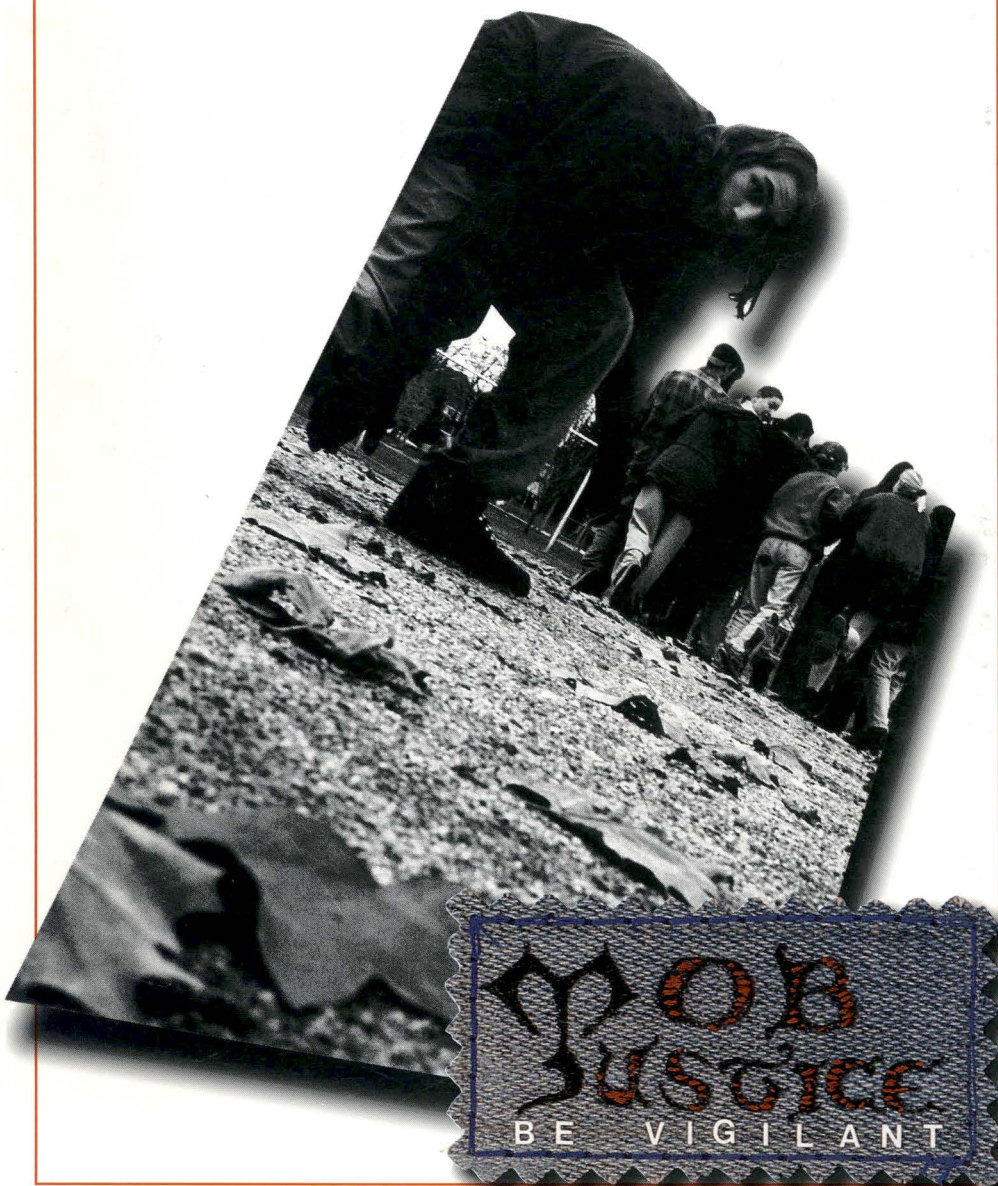


THE CAPILANO REVIEW



For my signature, your many inks.

— John Pass

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The Capilano Review is published by The Capilano Press Society. Subscription rates for one year are \$25 (\$30 for institutions), \$45 for two years. All prices include GST. Address correspondence to *The Capilano Review*, 2055 Purcell Way, North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada V7J 3H5. *The Capilano Review* does not accept simultaneous submissions or previously published work. U.S. submissions requiring a reply should be sent with international reply coupons, not U.S. postage stamps. *The Capilano Review* does not take responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Copyright remains the property of the author or artist. No portion of this publication may be reproduced without the permission of the author or artist.

The Capilano Review gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance of the Capilano College Humanities Division, The Canada Council, and the Government of British Columbia, through the Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture.

The Capilano Review is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association and the B.C. Association of Magazine Publishers. *TCR* is listed with the Canadian Periodical Index, available on-line through Info Globe, and with the American Humanities Index. Microfilm editions and reprints are available from the University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Printed in Vancouver, B.C. by Bowne Printers, Ltd.

Publications Mail Registration Number 151335

ISSN 0315-3754

(Published March 1995)

THE CAPILANO REVIEW

Series 2, No.15

Spring 1995

CONTENTS

Seven Poems	5	John Pass
<i>Seeing</i>	20	Barbara J. Sibbald
Five Poems	33	Patrick Friesen
<i>Bullies</i>	41	Sara Leydon
<i>The Total Eclipse of the Sun</i>	48	H. June Hutton
<i>The Friend</i>	61	Elizabeth Hay
<i>Angels</i>	74	Hilary Clark
<i>Mob Justice</i>		FRONT COVER Sara Leydon
<i>Miniature</i>		BACK COVER Sara Leydon



John Pass / SEVEN POEMS

INVOCATION TO THE CHARACTER OF WATER

As today, past fate or motive
it falls

first light in the air
then accumulating weight, authority

I implore
for thinking, and the writing hand

snow's impartial emphasis, expansive restraint.
What to do short of shovelling?

Though friends brave the driveway for my party
and arrive!

And the laden firs, masters
of what, in one place, is attainable, strain
in their resins and sinews, their elastic greenery

to reply: a limb sporadically unsprung, waving . . .

Just so come spring my clumsy paddle stirs, missing the J
stroke. Somehow afloat, dissolute as a Long Sloe Screw
in the sauna (ice-dregs over the coals)
I seek admission at the membrane, agency
in every cell. Let the roofs shed

what they must in my hearing and the molds
be under my nose. Let me through

with the native women in the first canoe
into the Stikine's hole into the glacier.

And let me carry what comes to me
with equanimity, easily

with as smooth a countenance the coffins
sucked by the North Sea from cliff-face graves near Cromer
from *The Garden Of Heavenly Sleep*

as the up-river biffys floods in the fifties delivered
to Winnipeg on the Assiniboine.

Permit me the ancient, relentless return
of what has been taken deep and hidden.

I won't deny it. Nor the brackish bouquet
habitually acquired, particular
to where one wallows. A sip

or two of essentials is sufficient.
Certainly cataracts, be they directly

grief or pleasure. And the jocular creek
to knock the fisherman off his feet.

That swimming moonlight the night she showed me
our bodies' phosphorescence where we woke the water.

For my signature, your many inks.

I want to work and shape my way, but partially
I ascend and adhere to particles. Forgive me.
The disembodied babbling.

The bank collapsing and the silted flume.
The emissions stain on the marble lip.
The clear-cut bruise on the Naiad's hip.
The harbour's sheen that is not just pretty.

And the bathtub ring.
And the angle askew to the eye to things

plunged into you. That seem not to stand
on certainty. That waver.

THE LOST RIVERS OF LONDON

Imperial pavements
and the hard tack to trackless passage and power
over water. The antique lust for it. Its instruments

rusting in the shallows, their shadows (irony, nostalgia)
reaching still. Each advance sequestered
in its romance (horse latitude or elfin grot)

the tortuous recourse upstream
to Paradise, New World.
Somewhere spilling forth, perpetual.

Somewhere divided and apportioned
directions, moral purpose . . .
improbable real geographies emerging

Serpentine. That duckpond somewhen
an arm of the Westbourne, a finger
of the Thames. Lamented, oh

too easily. Hugo's sewers and Love
Canal one backwater backwash in the flush

steam-whistled in
of freedom's sweet facility. Fair sailing
down West's labyrinthine one-note whine, scream

of the coin-op social turbine.
Deep fluencies spun off toward

excesses in the air, element
all space and signal, hugely static

sexless and invisible.

KLEANZA CREEK

How will we get up Kleanza Creek
who deserve it least, road-dozy, teeth afloat
on liters of coffee? We gotta stop somewhere

and this is it, exquisite twist
of water from the miniature gorge, a sheen
of pool behind the boulder, a riffle across

this pristine gravel
back-filled and levelled for picnic tables, grass —
the facilities operator even now sweeping
the parking area.

Its beauty is a pang, a duty
we get free. *Fish me*, it burbles.
Take the trail. But ours is a serious

recreation, the camping with kids denouement:
motel-hopping home. Re-load the camera
and back of that, let poetry do it.

Poetry goes where no-one follows anyway . . .

me and that utterly mythical beast, the reader
dreaming a way up Kleanza Creek
for our arcane two-step . . .

last-ditch landscape sleazes wheedling
Show us, you'll be famous, really.
Open the cliff's cleft, the spigot

in the bedrock. Let's taste the salt-
lick in the alpine meadow

from the highway, the *open road*
before that delusion swung off at every exit
shopping

the next (some chalk-blue pot-hole
of the disappearing pick-up, the cast-off
gear, some well-bucket for the soul)

scoops me weeks later on a lake on *lack of*
a cutthroat sudden on my line, a catch, a whine

in my voice at, *what grinds me*
down is the lack of

get the trout in the boat and come
back to it: gracious, humbling

in-your-face reflection . . . *attention.*

CATCH AND RELEASE

You're not supposed to watch a tree fall. You have to turn your back to allow the spirit to escape. Trees have spirits. Everything has a spirit. – Mary Hayes, Clayoquot Band

A calm attends October's drowsy creek
suspended in the alder canopy
over the pooled, residual water.

In the bird noise, the sporadic rattling
down of a brittle leaf, you can stand long enough
for crayfish to emerge and proceed, experiencing

every inch of the streambed beneath —
their progress so deliberate and complete

to seem always destination. A shift
of weight to the other foot and there

we are too, self-aware not a second too long
for a view just wide of the minnow. What is it

causes that imperceptible
break in rhythm on the stair, the precautionary
countermanded half-step/almost-stumble

in my mental gait?
Here is thinking gone under bewareness

that nonetheless confesses to intrusion
of its shadow, and a stick's probe

near the reflex. Speedy in retreat
those antennae for trout-rise, the protruding

snout of the turtle, dimple of rain,
exorcise the dry spell, swing back

to the snagged fir in the roped-off area, anticipate
the night of wind and rain it will crash

through our sleep, the morning of splash
and hustle beneath the bridge we wake

with relief in the next world, the only one
alive to itself and our longing.

OWL CLOVER

for Solveigh Harrison

First anecdotal evidence, and the taxidermist's
ratty specimen, an outstretched wing, the hooks
of claw-needle extended, unblinking eyes,

a wood. We make a wood of the alder bush
back of the Lions' park coming into it quiet
in the dark with school children
to call owls.

We convene a seance in a no-ghost world, listening
to the tape-deck looping aloft
the hoots and whistles of the likely species:
pygmy, barn, saw-whet, great-horned and barred.

Our mesmerizing beams criss-cross in the tree-tops.

I don't believe an owl will come. They are not
deer in headlights to be stunned by our clumsy attention
who can hear a mouse run on packed earth
at a hundred yards, who wing at astonishing speed
through the densest cover, who must disdain
their static likenesses on ear-rings, brass
miniatures, Greek money . . .

our pathetic mimicry. Only the barred has spoken to me
in February fog or August starlight.
I like to think he knows the pun

in his name, chooses for amusement
to get me hooting. *Who-who who-ooo*

Who-who who-who-ooo. Who indeed? To fancy beyond
the wood, a moon, a salt-marsh meadow upland,
fields of the fodder my field guide tacks owl to
but doesn't explain. One panic-free, talon-less eve
for the rodent? A vegetarian moment, owlets

and elders silly as cats with catnip, rolling
and fattening like foals, in clover?
Some mollifying foolishness

in the unsheathed, soundless swoop
of disappointment, predatory sentiment
prattling after the cruel enchantment:

*Well, we didn't see one but it was fun
walking around in the bush at night.
Spooky, sort of. Magical.*

NOZZLE

Directed force is pleasure in effect
or promises, promises . . .

such that men cast massive
iron and brass hydraulics in pieces
mule-carted arid distances into gold country.

Every inch of Williams' Creek streambed
already worked down by hand to bedrock
the townsite risen fourteen feet
over tilled gravel

they rode the nozzles like battleship gunners
to smash to rubble the Barkerville hillsides
for more bright fleck in the sluices.

Directed force is a primary pleasure
though tethered to myths of effort, profit
and leisure for exercise, and slave

to subtler energies and engines, buffalo clouds adrift
in herds of slow migration from the coast
overlooked valleys greening
under the rhythmic swivel and kick of sprinkler systems.
Reaches of mist and rainbow above the timothy.

*The human metabolic scale
from panic to despond
is earthy only in middle registers*

*in the hands-on company of things
in campaigns of physicality
or that companionable delusion*

*of a place among them, our feet
on the ground, or our backs
to the warm barn shingle*

*the clouds a spacious reverie, a consolation
of release, and not the shapeless terror
of wild dissociation, vertigo*

*letting go
its trap-door, floor shadow . . .*

Here, take this pressure-washer spatula
of sheeting spray to the mud-cake on your trailer.
In build-up, hold-back, manipulation
of the tip, willed water cuts

to, caresses, the finish.
Re-molds wild status-flow.

SEA BLUSH

No poem in May
so late in our love affair
with the earth, that battered marriage

can be entirely shameless, fearless
to do her justice, presuming to extol again
redundant beauty. Quickening even so

in the sudden names, seasonally
forgotten, spoken afresh, it whispers *speedwell*
to the miniscule blue-white sparks on the path

or leans in with a sliding touch
to the long cool muscle of arbutus
(a steadying hold, crouching lower)

to see up close the mauve-pink flower
awash in masses over the moss bluff
meadows near the water.

Tongue in her name for each sundering first time
at sundown her look caught the sea's deep colour

in a held breath recklessly lingers.

Barbara J. Sibbald / SEEING

Soft flakes of snow chase one another through the air. Some dangle tenuously from branches, cling to dead, dry leaves, then drift to the icy ground. Snow, finally. Three days' rain has eaten away the snow banks, made the lane-way slick and treacherous.

Anita knows she should wait until more snow has fallen before she goes for a ski. She should wait until the ice is covered. She should wait, but she has to get out of the house, away from him.

"Stubborn asshole," she mutters to the dormant oak. "He just can't stand being the bad guy."

Yesterday his daughter and a friend were caught stealing ice cream money out of another kid's desk. Her grade three teacher phoned Anita; they agreed it was out of character, an isolated incident. Bonnie was given a week's detention. Anita didn't say anything to Bonnie when she came home. She's his daughter after all, she thought. It's hard enough being the stepmother. It's hard enough being a friend-aunt-babysitter, not being the real mother but doing the real work. She asked Ron to speak to Bonnie but he refused. He said she'd been punished at school already. Anita let it go, too tired to argue, but this morning she's convinced he should say something.

"Just have a quiet word with her," she said. "I think it will mean more if you tell her it was wrong."

"There's no need to tell her twice," he said. "She knows now."

"But she needs to hear it from you too."

"Are we all out of chili sauce?" he asked, piercing his egg yolk with a fork.

Typical, she thinks. If it's unpleasant, he ignores it. She walks towards the ski trail. It's the little things that wear you down. The constant bickering. It's always the same half-dozen arguments. She has them categorized in the back of her address book: parenting, chores, sex, money, going out, in-laws. Each time they have a round she puts a check mark under the appropriate category. Parenting is a distant

second, sex (✓✓✓✓) is winning hands down these days.

Sometimes Ron clips out articles about sex — how many times a week most couples have it (2.1), what percentage of women have clitoral orgasms (55) — and he leaves these on her dresser. They never talk about them. After they do make love, far less often than the supposed norm, he's affectionate, generous, accommodating. Until the next time, until the next bout of his arousal, his cold hands on her thighs, her automatic refusal, their late-night argument ending with her giving him a hand-job — joyless for both of them. If only I could give in, she thinks. It would make things so much easier.

If we'd had sex last night he would have talked to Bonnie.

She slips her boots into the bindings and closes them. One ski slides forward as she sorts her poles, the metal tips rattle against the ice, then — WHAM! down she goes. Bum, back, flat. Rock ice. She pants, wheezes. Her breath comes out in small white puffs. She lies on the cold ground. The falling snow melts as it hits her warm face, her closed eyelids. She blinks at the stalks of dead grass sticking out of the ice. They waver in muted light. There's a flickering in her left eye, like poor reception on a television.

Her optometrist says she'll have to see a retina specialist in the city. He says he doesn't have the equipment or expertise to really know what's wrong.

"There's no use worrying," Ron says tersely. "It's probably nothing."

He rolls over and falls asleep. Anita lies in the dark, remembering a day in seventh grade when the teacher made them pretend they were disabled. The idea was to instill some empathy, some appreciation of the obstacles. Some kids had cotton stuffed in their ears, others had to use wheelchairs. She had to be blind for a whole day. The teacher took her glasses, put cotton pads over her eyes, and tied a scarf around her head. He gave her a retractable white stick. Her girlfriend had to guide her home at lunch hour.

In a half-sleep Anita remembers them crossing the boulevard when suddenly the friend is gone. Cars honk at Anita. Someone yells for her to get off the road. She tugs at the scarf but it won't come off.

Anita opens her eyes and stares at the familiar dark shapes in the

bedroom. She's sweating. She hears Ron's regular breathing and her heart pounding.

Anita's appointment is at ten but she knows it'll be a long wait; the place is packed with grey-haired men and women, squinting under the fluorescent lights. I'm too young to be here, she thinks. A chubby technician puts two sets of stinging drops in her eyes. Her pupils dilate, she can't focus, can't read. She puts on her sunglasses and sits there, watching everyone else in the room, listening to their conversations about gall bladders and gout, wondering what it's like to be old, to lose your sight.

Finally the receptionist calls her. Dr. MacDonald leans her way back in a chair and peers into her eyes with a blinding light. She tries not to blink, not to think. Then he gets out a piece of round glass and leans in for a closer look. She feels his warm breath, smelling of mints.

He tells her she has Presumed Ocular Histoplasmosis Syndrome in both eyes. He writes it down on a piece of pink paper. "It's a virus," he says, "carried in old, buried poultry excrement."

"I can't believe it," she says. "Chicken shit?"

Dr. MacDonald explains that the virus scars the retina. Later the scars weaken, a blow can break them open. That's why she sees the shining light. Holes in her left eye.

He says he's going to close the holes with a laser beam before they get bigger. More may develop, he says. He tells her not to worry, lots of people have it and they see just fine. He pats her arm. She's cold.

As she drives home all she can think about is what it would be like to be blind. She's crying before she crosses the bridge over the hydro bay.

Ron's working late and then he has hockey. Anita keeps hoping he'll call though she knows he won't. She's asleep by the time he gets in. The next morning she tells him what the doctor said. He says he'll try to help more with Bonnie. She's heard that before — she's heard almost everything in six years of marriage — but hugs him anyway.

She asks if he'll take the day off to drive her to the clinic. Dr. MacDonald said she shouldn't have any trouble driving home but she's sceptical. Ron says he's swamped at work.

"Ask Wanda," he says, trying to be helpful.

He is busy, Anita thinks. But this is important. Then he asks how she's feeling, but half-way through her third sentence he starts turning pages in his *Times Literary Supplement*. She tells him he better get going to work. Jerk, she thinks.

Wanda agrees to drive her. She has to pick up some things at the Indian food store anyway and is glad to help.

"It's just so terrible," Wanda says. "So unfair. Listen if there's anything I can do, you know, even if you just want to talk . . ."

Anita smiles vaguely. She cannot talk about it, even to Wanda, who has revealed that her husband bores her in bed, that she can't have orgasms with him any more. Anita cannot talk about it to anyone. It might become too real. It's better to keep it vague, blurred.

She sits in the waiting room. All the same people seem to be there. Finally she's called into the laser room. A coffin-shaped machine takes up most of the space. Dr. MacDonald points to a chair in front of it and shows her where to rest her chin and forehead in some straps. It looks like an instrument of torture, she thinks. Something out of *A Clockwork Orange*.

"I'm not ready for this," she tells him, her voice breaking.

He hands her a kleenex; she hadn't realized she was crying.

"Is your husband here?" he asks.

"No, I'm all alone."

He explains the whole thing, his low voice is soothing. He says she's lucky they found the holes so quickly. She doesn't feel lucky, but after a while she calms down. After all, she thinks, what choice do I have? He tells her to sit perfectly still.

He sits opposite her, peering through a lens. She hears loud clicks and sees the most amazing lights, purple-pink, magenta — vibrant, almost tactile colour. For a second her eye feels hot, then it is over. He tells her to make an appointment for the next week so he can see how it's healing.

She tries to get along with Ron, but she finds herself getting angry again and again. He dipped into their savings for hockey fees. (Money — ✓) She runs the house, always assumed she would because

he seemed so overwhelmed. She told Wanda that Ron is living impaired. She accepted this, but over the years he's grown even less capable. He baulks at the simplest tasks, refuses to take responsibility. He wouldn't help her take down the Christmas lights. (Chores – ✓) He'd promised. She only put them up for Bonnie anyway. She couldn't care less.

They only made love — had sex — once all month though he relentlessly badgered her for more. (Sex – ✓) She can't separate sex from the rest, from the daily routines, from the endless arguments. Marriage is a package deal, she thinks. It all works together. Or it doesn't work at all.

She asked Ron to help her sweep the basement. (Chores – ✓)

"It's a waste of time," he'd said. "It'll just get dirty again when I put in the next load of wood. Wait till spring."

"But it's filthy," she replied. "The dirt gets tracked through the whole house and then I have to clean it up. It's not fair."

He shrugged and opened his *Sunday New York Times*.

"Are you just lazy?" she asked, vying for a reaction.

He glared over the top of his paper: "Are you a ball-breaker?"

"What?"

He dropped the newspaper to his lap, stared at her over top of his glasses: "Is this what I have to do for sex?" he said in a low monotone.

"What the hell does it have to do with sex?" she asked.

The newspaper rustled in reply. He'd stopped talking. (Sex – ✓) Now he'll give her the silent treatment. He'll talk to her about what they're having for supper, or whose turn it is to take the dog to the vet. The necessities, that's all. I shouldn't have pushed him, she thinks.

Last fall they didn't speak for nearly two months. By the time they made up she'd forgotten what they were fighting about. Understanding him is like trying to read a closed book, she thinks.

Anita doesn't remember exactly when these fights started to happen. Doesn't remember when she began keeping the check list, trying to be objective and practical. She recalls frozen moments, never thawed, never resolved.

— "Please take off your boots," Anita asks. "It makes such a mess on the floor." She wets a rag and wipes the muddy boot-prints

tracked across the kitchen floor, up the stairs to his den. And it happens again and again and again. Wearing her down into a shrew so she shrieks at him: "Take off yer boots for gawd's sake!" (Chores – ✓)

- In from grocery shopping on a rainy spring day; water dripping onto the floor, damp paper bags ripping. "Hello," she calls out. "Can I get some help?" Muffled sounds come from the TV room. Grocery bags spill over the kitchen table. She returns to the car, sleet freezes on her glasses, she slips on the sidewalk, nearly falls. Again and again she trudges to get the week's groceries which she has bought and will now unpack and put away, which she will then prepare into nourishing dinners for them, the two of them, Ron and Bonnie, sitting there watching a re-run of *Star Trek*. (Chores – ✓)

- Ron, screaming at her in the late night: "You should have told me you were sexually burned-out before we married."
(Sex – ✓)

These moments accumulate exponentially.



Anita's eyes seem to be fine now — no flashes or anything. They're a bit tired sometimes, especially if she reads too much and she's reading everything she can get her hands on, ploughing through two or three books a week. She tries not to think about it but it's always there, growing in her mind. She calls the city CNIB and asks about services in Madawan. There aren't any.

She gets on with her work. She makes wooden coffee tables — sensuous tables she calls them. The legs are twisted, forked branches — useless for anything but firewood. The tops are beautifully-grained cross-sections from large trees. She's started to sell some at specialty furniture shops in Toronto. She finishes sanding a table and checks the cupboard for varnish — she uses a special kind, all-natural, made

from Chinese nuts. She reaches for some on the top shelf and a plastic bag filled with old brushes falls on her head. She sits down on the work bench. I have to be careful, she thinks. My eyes could develop more holes.

After supper she lies on their bed, reading Sherlock Holmes stories. She loves piecing the details together, figuring out which ones are important. Midway through "The Speckled Band" she notices a black spot on the page. She closes her left eye, the spot is gone. She closes her right eye, it's back again. It doesn't move, it's not a speck of dirt. She focuses on the sheets, the white wall. The black spot. She dials the after-hours number Dr. MacDonald gave her and his answering service says he'll call her back.

Anita sits on the edge of her bed, kneading the duvet with her strong fingers and then pounding the mattress in frustration. It's so damned unfair, she thinks. Why did this happen to me? Children play in the dirt — Christ, they do it every day — I didn't take any chances.

Dr. MacDonald calls. He says he'll see her in the clinic at eight the next morning. He says not to worry. That's like asking me not to breathe, she thinks.

When she tells Ron he asks who's going to look after Bonnie — it's a school holiday. It occurs to her that he just can't deal with anything this traumatic, this serious. It's not his fault really, she thinks. But then he comes to bed without his pajama bottoms, looking for some relief, he says. She is furious with him, his insensitivity. (Sex – ✓)

In the car she spills coffee all over her new Billie Holiday cassette. The clinic is deserted. Dr. MacDonald flashes the glass disk in her eye, prods her eyeball with his forefinger so he can see all the edges. She digs her nails into her palm, nearly piercing the flesh.

"There's a new development," he says.

Like it's a twist in the plot, she thinks. Another piece of evidence to consider.

He explains that a blood vessel is growing into her fovea. "Sometimes that happens in areas that are heavily scarred. It's trying to bring blood to the damaged area. We'll have to stop it or it will block your vision."

"Block?"

"If it keeps growing you'll lose the central vision."

He draws a picture for her. A blood vessel, tiny, seeking. Destroying in its attempt to nurture, she thinks.

He starts the laser up; its dull drone is powerful, serious. She sits and rests her chin in the cup, forehead against the straps. She stares at her twisted reflection in the chromed machine. He writes something on her chart.

"I'm going to cauterize the vessel," he finally says. "Then I'm going to build a ridge of scar tissue to protect the fovea. It's very delicate, you have to stay still."

"Yes," she says, surprised by the strength in her voice.

The light comes again and again. Magenta at first, then she loses the colour. All she feels are sharp jabs in the dark like a thousand needles, again and again.

"That should do it," he says at last.

She leans back, blinks. Her eye feels pierced. She glances down at her faded blue-jeans: the black spot is still there, it always will be, but maybe he has stopped it from growing.

"Thank you," she says.

He nods. "Now keep a look out for new black spots. The vessel could start growing again. You never know."

Her throat closes in, she cannot speak.

Bonnie watches TV downstairs while Anita rests in bed with a damp, musty-smelling washcloth over her eyes. She tries not to think or dream, just lies there. When she opens her eyes it's dark outside. Her alarm clock glows 5:42. She goes downstairs and begins peeling potatoes. For once, Ron comes home promptly at six. He doesn't ask how it went at the clinic and Anita doesn't say anything. Bonnie comes in and starts chattering about her TV program. Anita is distracted and burns the chops. Ron gives her one of his looks as she scrapes the char off. She stares back coldly. Pinpoint pupils.

Supper is a mournful affair. Bonnie pushes the food around her plate. Who could blame her? Anita thinks. The chops are burned, the potatoes overdone and mealy, the winter green beans tasteless. Anita excuses her and Bonnie runs upstairs. She scrapes her own dinner into the dog's bowl. She feels sick. Where did it go wrong? she wonders.

Ron sits, watching her.

"Are you really that miserable?" he asks.

"I just don't understand what you expect," she says. "You don't want to be part of my life. I mean you aren't even interested in what happened today at the clinic. I don't think you care."

"Of course I care," he says.

"Yeah, you care about how it will affect you."

She pauses for a moment and looks at her husband. "What do you expect from me anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what's your idea of the perfect wife?" She wonders why she didn't ask him this years ago.

He pauses for a moment, squashing his mashed potatoes with his fork.

"I guess she'd be self-sufficient and sexually willing. Those are the two main things."

"Self-sufficient! You mean like a room-mate? Only willing to have sex at your beck and call. I don't believe it! Is that all?"

"Those are just the main things, there are other things too. You know, a good mother and all that."

Her cheeks pulsate as she grinds her teeth.

"Now don't get all excited," he says. "You're just upset because of your appointment. Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Her face is hot, she knows it's flushed. Her voice quavers. "You want me to be self-sufficient? I'll do it. I'll handle this myself, but it works both ways. You better learn to be self-sufficient too, you better learn to take care of your own needs."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that if you won't give me the emotional support I need, then I won't give you the sex you need. Seems pretty equitable, don't you think?"

"Why don't you just leave if you're so damned unhappy?" he shouts, jabbing his index finger in the air between them.

Tears come to her eyes but she refuses to let them fall, brushing them roughly away. She starts stacking the dishes.

This is all I need, she thinks. Shit. Every time things get really rough he asks if I'm going to leave. I guess that's what happens to

people who have been divorced: They always think it'll happen again, they lose confidence. She tries to remember how many times he's asked her. Twenty, thirty? Each time she'd been overwhelmed and immediately tried to make things better. But this time she doesn't feel sad. She's angry, fed-up. She realizes it's just part of the game to get her to give in. She turns to him.

"Is that what you want, Ron? Do you want me to leave?"

He pauses a second. His face doesn't reveal a thing but she knows he's surprised.

"All I want is for us to get along," he says too loudly in the still house.

She begins running water into the sink. All she can think of is leaving her home, leaving Bonnie behind. I've invested so much in this, she thinks. My energy, my love, my youth. Is it all for nothing?

"Let's not quarrel," he says. "You're upset about your eyes."

He walks over and puts his hands on her shoulders. She shrugs him away and begins wiping the table. It's amazing the mess three people can make, she thinks.

And where does love enter into all of this? She remembers how she used to love him, how she used to be "sexually willing" as he so bluntly puts it. But the years of marriage have made things different. I like having him beside me in bed at night, she thinks, but I hate the constant sexual availability of marriage. I hate knowing that I am expected to have sex with this person no matter how I feel — no matter what unresolved differences linger between us, no matter the lack of passion. You lose control over your body, your personal boundaries blur and melt. You feel indistinct. When they make love she wills her body to cooperate, concentrates on closing her mind, succumbing to the purely physical pleasure. But the tension comes out and she hears her teeth grinding. She knows he hears too, but he doesn't say anything, just keeps on using her body.

It's odd, she thinks, I began by loving him for the ways he was different from me — his easy-going nature, his obsession with literature, his disdain for the mundane — and I ended up demanding that he be just like me. It's like we're all petty household gods, trying to re-create each other in our own image.

Ron's not talking to her again but she doesn't give a damn. She has nothing to say to him.

She has a lot of back orders to fill. She's busier than she was at Christmas. She advertises for an assistant and looks around for a bigger workshop. She often goes back to work in the evening to finish up sanding and varnishing. Her tables are getting bigger, more elaborate. She has started experimenting with paint. She mixes that magenta, paints jagged holes and squiggles on a black background. She tries different colours, textures, working late into the night, loving it, listening to the radio or old jazz tapes — Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington — avoiding Ron. She tiptoes to bed, carefully around the squeaky floorboard near the door. He's always asleep.

Her eyes seem to be doing fine. She doesn't even see the black spot. She thinks it's remarkable how her right eye has completely compensated for the spots of lost vision in her left. Her next appointment isn't for six months.

On Ron's hockey night she quits working early and goes to bed to read for an hour or two. Tonight she opens the window in her bedroom, brushing aside the dead cluster flies. There's a real smell of spring in the air: decaying leaves, dampness, melting dog shit. A breeze floats through the stale room, touches her face and bare forearms. She sits down on the edge of the bed, her face toward the window. She looks out at the half-moon and it's marred by a black spot. A new one? She closes her right eye. There are two spots now, the old one small in comparison. She begins to weep uncontrollably, gasping for breath like a small child.

Dr. MacDonald says to meet him at the clinic at eight again. She lies in bed, staring at the ceiling. Ron comes in after twelve. She pretends to be asleep, concentrates on breathing regularly. I'm in this alone, she thinks. She finally dozes for a few hours before dawn. She doesn't dream. She wakes up before his alarm goes off and slips out of the house quietly without leaving a note.

She waits at the clinic for the drops to make her pupils dilate, clutching the edges of her chair. Dr. MacDonald says it's the same thing, another blood vessel growing into the fovea. He says this time it's even

closer and her stomach lurches. He lasers again, but this time he's not so optimistic.

"I may not have stopped it. I was afraid to go too close. Keep an eye on it."

An eye, she wonders. Which eye? *Keep an eye out. See you later.* Sight platitudes race through her mind.

She sits in the waiting room for a while, looking out the window over the patches of snow clinging to the roof vents and elevator shaft. She waits for the vessel to grow. She knows she will lose the sight in that eye. Her nose tickles, lips purse. Tears sting the winter-dried skin on her cheeks.

But I still have the other eye, she thinks, the better one really, the stronger one. I still have that.

Patrick Friesen / FIVE POEMS

at the sill

august's heat
an 11 o'clock church bell
sirens and light
through the window
across 2 mugs
jammed with pens and brushes
an ancient fan's racket
a lamp and shards of stone

niko's still asleep
sprawled on the floor
the length of him and muscle
entangled with pillow and blanket
he doesn't know his power
dreaming of sky and home
here in new york city

I'm wondering
about how simple matters get
how there's nothing to find
nothing to look for
I'm wondering about earth's things
how I love to touch them
and let them go

this city is at your ears and eyes
like a commercial or a junkie
clawing at the window
always a foot in the door
this city hyperventilates all day and night
so eager for its fix
its pulse whispering like brushes on a snare

and I'm the silly one
savoring this moment
at the skyline window
thinking of tenderness
at the sill

and always there are these objects
the dusty sill itself
a weight of granite for the paper
there are things to touch or taste
and remind me of other things
a star falling in october
my son's tattooed feather

a small tenderness

and there
beneath ghetto talk
and cool movie talk
and street talk
beneath motherfucker
and pussy and fuck you
beneath whitey and nigger
and man and woman
at each other's throats
beneath junkies and cokeheads
and killers in their suits
blood spattered
across the kitchen
and dancefloor
the audience splitting a gut
there
hidden away
the last shock
a final insult
beneath greed
and car wrecks
and talk shows
beneath it all
beneath the floorboards
a small tenderness

the soul
sunken
into the dig
the soul
gone archaeological
pinning itself
into the grave
the bones
of a bird
barbarian of some middle way
going nowhere
underfoot
a man a woman primitives
with petroforms on the brain
the sadness of memory
and old ways
remembering the long stride
hands
the path

nomad gone to ground
without forests and grass
without mountains to cross
nomad without a way
gone to zero
in the city
nomad with his senses about him
a vacant mirror
and a desire to love

a dog at the door

these faulty days
like snorri
afraid of open doors
imagining one's self
in empty rooms
an actor
playing himself

no
that's too easy

a dog at the door
invisible
you can hear him
standing still
you can smell fear
an eternity of waiting
sparks shooting
through his skeleton

the temerity
of a horse
shying
with white rimming
its large brown eyes
the world
spinning

like an autistic child
unable to touch
watching black holes
eat up the sky

snorri drills his snout
beneath your idle hand
shovelling it up
to stroke his head
how can you not love
what needs you so much?

darkened doors
you already half-live there
your hands
reaching
remembering the terrain
of the wall
near the light switch

the dog
will go anywhere
with you

our hands

so
here we are
alone
all lovers gone
forgiving and forgiven

here we are
with the storm
in our hands
and our hands
on the table

it's quiet
in this room
two ladder-back chairs
dust
and a hatrack

it's quiet
with shadows
in the door
and lilacs
at the window

my hands reach
for yours
no more deals
nothing happens
inside this room

hands lose
their lines
their work
and play
perished

let me roll you

what's it like
to taste you
mouthed and tongued
to smell
your skin
and trace
your terrain
with my hands?

what's it like
at 48
lolling
in the doorway
forgetful
of the rooms
I've been in
and awake

what it's like
ready for you
at last
a dangerous life
of bare moments
and few words
let me roll you
in my arms



SARA LEYDON

Selected Exhibitions:

- 1986 *Wordworks*, Contemporary Art Centre, Seattle, Washington.
- 1988 *Behind the Sign*, (collaboration with Peter Culley),
Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver.
- 1989 *Beyond Surface*, Front Gallery, Western Front, Vancouver.
- 1990 *Conviction*, Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver.
- 1991 *Emergence*, Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B.C.
- 1992 *Rethinking History*, Mercer Union Gallery, Toronto.

Cold City Invitational, Cold City Gallery, Toronto.
- 1993 *Roadside Attr(actions)*, OR Gallery, Vancouver.
- 1994 *Bullies and Crime & Ornamentation*, Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver.

Special Projects:

- 1987 Book cover design *The Faerie Queene and The Park* by Robin
Blaser, Fissure Books, Vancouver.
- 1990 Artist's Project *West Coast Line #1*, Roy Miki, ed.,
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C.
- 1993 Artist's cover and feature *West Coast Line #9*, Roy Miki, ed.,
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C.
- 1994 Collage workshop and exhibition to accompany **HANNAH
HOCH: 1889 - 1978 Collages** at Presentation House, North
Vancouver, B.C.

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Public Collections:

Burnaby Art Gallery

Gov't of British Columbia, Provincial Collection

H. June Hutton / TOTAL ECLIPSE OF THE SUN

Of course, it's Mrs. Logan from Number 6 down the hall who finds me face-first in the laundry basket, crying over an old T-shirt of his that, being wedged into the far bottom corner, had escaped my purge. "Outside with ye," she says, her Manchester accent thick as cream, and snatches the basket from me, sliding it onto the counter. "This can wait. Go — do some gardenin'. Do ye good." Then she pulls a pack of Players from that cleavage of hers that runs right up to her chin, damn near. "Ah-h! Ye don't want any of these," she adds, thinking my plaintive look is at her cigarettes. But I'm looking at that bosom, at the solid body that women from her generation have, women who'd had one baby after another, like it was nothing. "Go — go," she urges again. "Do some thinkin'. Sort things out."

"Okay," I say. I do as I'm told these days. She's had two husbands, survived a world war, she knows what she's doing. "Go to a movie," she told me one night when she found me moping by the mail boxes, mine empty. I went, but I can't remember what the show was about. Lots of explosions and other gun noises, though, which suited me fine because I could snuffle my way through a box of Kleenex, undetected.

"Avoid the playgrounds," she advised one day, eyes darting at my pared profile, "they'll just make ye sad."

At the corner two blocks down I obediently pivot from the painful hee-haw of rusting chains swinging children into the sun, and turn my head sharply from their overalls, their ruffled skirts, their offensive freckled faces.

This garden, rustling with the stink of neglect because our landlord couldn't tell a daisy from a dandelion, choked and tangled by the haphazard plantings of incompatible neighbours, has become my refuge. Again, it's Mrs. Logan I can thank. ("Call me Ethel," she pleads, but she looks too much like somebody's great auntie.) Because of the landlord's black thumb and my mood and especially because, somehow, she has the power to do it, she shooed him from the garden

and made me resident landscaper. For therapy, Manchester-style. But I no sooner set the basket down and slip on the gardening gloves than the sun shunts westward, releasing from behind the wall a blade of brilliant light that smacks me full in the face and forces me to drop my gloves and cover my eyes. During this moment of darkness the thought first comes to me: I am the sort of woman men cheat on. That's why I did it.

Don't roll your eyes at me, Mrs. Logan, I know that's what you're doing. If we could hold my life up to that same slice of light, you'd see that it's shot through by the comings and goings of men — great gaping holes that flap like chanting mouths:

Now you see him Now you don't Now you see him . . .

and I teeter on the tips of endless ellipses, ever hopeful. For what? Answer me that.

I bend my head to the task in front of me, the pink flower bed that needs weeding. I still wonder, as I lay open a damp clod with the tip of my trowel and breathe in the fishy-shitty smell of fertilized dirt, what the rest of you would think if you knew how much I miss him. And him and him. That's right, it's happened three times — I said I am the kind — but this last was the worst. I'd barely adjusted to the collective noun fluttering in on party invitations and Christmas cards, when one day I opened my medicine cabinet and what do you think I found? Ear drops, *Preparation H*, and little scissors for clipping nose hairs.

That day left me completely unprepared for a swift return three months later to the singular. And get this: he left *me* to fill box after box with all his little jars and tubes and suppositories, as though the sight of them couldn't revolt me. No. Who would think a roll of *Tums* could make me cry? They were the last of his things I had exhumed from the place. Or so I thought, until I missed that T-shirt.

I don't know. Maybe three times is simply too much for anyone to handle. What do you think?

•

Thick, grey clouds roll in and out above me while I toil over the

weeds, but it's the final and total eclipse of the sun by the far wall that wrenches me from my Vancouver roots and sends me rolling like a tumbleweed southward. In the brief flashes afforded by my head meeting my ankles at regular intervals, I see the splendour of Mexico City: the Zocalo, stretching to the horizon in concrete squares, devoid of trees but dotted with plastic parachute men the children drop over the subway vents, to be shot upward on a gust of wind from a passing train; the views from a cab of glamorous women in heels, men in dark suits; the half-dozen little fists that punch the air before my face when we stop at a red light, the little voices begging, "Cheeklet, lady, cheeklet?" The final glimpse, as I slow down just outside the city, is of sticky squares of Chicklets embedded in small, brown palms.

I come to rest on the Avenue of the Dead, the grassy walkway leading to the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacan. In my guidebook I read that the Aztecs named the roadway, thinking that the Indians before them buried people in the stone walls that line the avenue. But it's the Aztecs who held sacrifices on top of the pyramids. They were the ones absorbed with death.

Graham is marching two steps ahead of me, the backs of his knees winking at me as we climb higher and higher in the hot sun. A ridiculous time of day to be climbing, but we had no idea the bus ride here would take so long. At the top, I crouch in deference to the hot sky bearing down on us and picture the rivers of blood that must have rolled down these steps.

"That's the Moon," Graham says after a while, pointing to the smaller pyramid. I raise my camera and snap. "Hungry?" he adds. Oh, how ominous certain words are when heard in retrospect.

"Yup," I say, snapping one more shot of the wide, green avenue and the stone walls stretching into the distance. We scramble down and head for the rickety shops that form a little walkway to the side. Running about two blocks deep, the stalls bristle with fake arrowheads, then further on, blankets, after that, postcards, and on down to a roped-off cafe. I know better than to order water or a glass of pop with ice cubes. I choose bottled beer instead. But no one has warned me about the lettuce. I point to what the American at the table next to me has: refried beans, rice, a taco shell, and a side of shredded lettuce. The waiter nods and after a brief exit, returns with my plate of food. I

roll up my lunch and eat heartily.

What is the vacation of a lifetime? Is it seeing strange and wondrous sights like the ancient pyramids, tasting foreign and delicious food, and buying silver bangles for the price of plastic ones back home? Is it arriving, hot and tired, to our cool room in Mexico City where Graham produces a bottle of tequila from his bag, rings the desk for limes, salt, and glasses while I run a bath, so that, moments later, we can lie naked on the bed, sipping tequila, biting limes, licking salt?

I thought so.

The next day the train rolls us northward to San Miguel. I sit by the window, content to stare out at passing villages, fields — even abandoned rail cars that spill thick white blossoms from the pots set out on the rusting steps leading down from the chequered blue doorways, all evidence the squatters are families. Graham can't sit still. He wanders up and down the aisles, shaking hands, trying out his Spanish, buying trinkets from the hawkers who board at each stop.

We are almost there, and I begin to feel . . . odd. I barely notice the cobbled streets that climb straight up the steep hills to our terraced yard with the little pink house. I hurry through the gate and struggle up the hill, yelling over my shoulder, "Where's the key? Where's the key?"

An American that Graham met on a previous trip recommends a doctor in the village. I gladly swallow the medicine he prescribes, remembering little of what he has said to me in his broken English, except, "No lettuce. Si?"

For two days I do not move from our little house and garden. Every day begins with the same early-morning ritual: a little bonfire to burn the nasty bundles of toilet paper that Mexican plumbing can't swallow. Absurdly, perhaps it was the medicine fogging my reasoning, I view this burning of nasties as an act of intimacy, as proof of commitment, as though we were toasting marshmallows around the family campfire. And so I think nothing of his solitary trips into town. Quite frankly, I don't want him around once breakfast has ignited my intestines.

"You okay?" he asks as I walk him down the path past the huge nodding heads of the orange and red flowers, incongruous combinations in the north, but so natural here in Mexico.

"Fine." I grimace under another wave of cramps, leaning on the branch of the orange tree until I catch my breath.

"What will you do?" he asks, tapping me under the chin.

"I'll watch the geckoes," I say and manage a grin as I point to the brick wall and the green-brown fetus fingers spreading from the limbs of each lizard as it settles into a hot spot.

•

Yes. I can picture all of it. The trowel slips from my grip and dirt spills through my fingers as my mind continues sliding, ever southward, far from the mossy bricks of a Vancouver garden, down the terraced slopes to a majestic Spanish wooden gate that clicks shut as he heads down the hill toward town to visit our American friends.

I rise from my chair, unaware that my future is stepping purposefully down the hill in sturdy Birkenstocks, and prepare to busy myself just as I had the day before: I fill the deep, tiled sink with water, add a few squirts from my bottle of traveller's soap, and plunge into the foam the few pieces of clothing I'd worn on the trip so far. We'll be here another month, there's no hurry, and I washed everything but two T-shirts yesterday. But I have nothing better to do and I am soothed by the motions of wringing and rinsing, am curiously satisfied by the snap as I lift each up and pin it to the clothes line just outside the kitchen door. Oh, God, I think now. I was turning into an earth mother.

Back then, utter contentment is what I feel. If it weren't for the cramps this would be perfect. I saunter along the paths, revelling in my solitude, picking several orange and red flowers, fat as babies' faces. I go back into the kitchen for the blue jug we used at breakfast, give it a quick rinse, then carry it outside where I slide it onto the tiled patio and drop the green stems in, jostling them slightly to arrange them, stepping back to enjoy the jolt of orange-red spilling from deep blue. I reach into my straw bag for my camera and snap pictures of the geckoes on the wall, the boughs groaning under the weight of green

oranges.

At 2:30 the daily rains arrive. Thunderous black clouds squeeze into the little sky framed by mountains, sending cool breezes tickling up my arms and giving me just enough time to scamper up the hill to the doorway, where I quickly spin so I won't miss the spectacle of rain pellets smacking into the dry dirt like bullets, sending up puffs of smoke that fade only when the ground turns to black muck. From the kitchen window I hear the roar of our own *rio negro*, an instant river of brown soup slurped up from leaky septic tanks and open garbage heaps from neighbouring terraces. I crawl onto the window seat to read and to eat slices of cheese and fruit and rolls that Graham brings back from the village shops. Finally the roar fades, the sky brightens and battered leaves spring up in the sudden warmth, releasing the burdensome liquid that drips like leaking taps.

The next day we have our first fight.

It's all my fault, he says, because I forgot to remind him to set back the time on our watches.

"But I was sick," I counter.

He gives me a look that says *boy are you ever*. I will never forgive my therapist for laughing at me several months later when I infer that *turista* led to our break-up.

"What about you?" I continue. "You were the one going into town. Why didn't you notice you were an hour off?"

"In Mexico?" he sneers. "Who notices time?"

"Well, then — ?"

But he stomps off into the house. I have no idea that his anger is fuelled by guilt, but I give him the finger anyway as I drop back into the patio chair and continue staring up at that fabulous sky.

Shortly after lunch when I was sitting in the same chair, tilting it back slightly, eyes closed, awaiting the familiar sensations of revolt below my abdomen, all sound ceased. I mean that. I'm half listening to distant singing, children shrieking, birds chirping, dogs barking, when suddenly a wall falls and not a single sound escapes. My chair tips forward and my eyes fly open. At first I think it's the daily rains but it's too early for that. No. The sky is growing dark as if this is the end of the world, as if a bomb is about to be dropped and everyone but me

has run for cover — when in a flash of remembrance, I scream. “The eclipse!” I run into the house for my camera and glasses. Graham reminded me about it yesterday but I wasn’t feeling well, I forgot. And he’s not here because one of us forgot to set our watches back. No, he forgot. I won’t take blame for that one. But he’ll be here in an hour when it’s all over, and since this is what we came here for and why we picked a house so high on the hill, he’ll be furious. Well, too bad. What could he be doing right now that he wouldn’t notice the excitement around him? People in town have been preparing for this event for months. This is the total eclipse of the sun and the best spot on the entire planet to see it. And that’s exactly what I’m going to do. I slip on the white, cardboard framed glasses with the red lenses and look up. The breath goes out of me. I was wrong before. *This* is what makes the vacation of a lifetime. I will never see a spectacle like this again. A wedge of light is all that’s left of the sun, and I know how the ancients must have felt, that the gods were stealing their light, as punishment, that nothing could ever live again, not in the cold, black air. I raise my camera and begin shooting, the sun almost covered, the sun completely covered, the sun emerging. It’s not death at all, I think as the warmth returns, but birth. The birds begin chirping again, only noisily this time, as though it were early morning and a new day has begun, the air grows light and I feel life around me and in me.

Miraculously, the next day, my intestinal infection is gone. But three weeks later when I feel light-headed and ill, I think my *turista* is coming back.

•

A lump blooms in my throat and tears scald my eyes. I rip at the dirt with my trowel, gouge and slash at the stubborn weeds, knife them to a pulp, over and over. Tell me the truth: wouldn’t you? Only when goose bumps sprout on my arms do I notice that the light has drained completely from the sky. The weeds are all gone, too, the dirt pulverised into coffee grounds. I knock the trowel and claw together to clean them, drop them into the Okanagan fruit basket unkindly shaped like a Kwakiutl bassinet, hang it over my arm and climb the steps to my door.

•

Somewhere above my head and to the left hovers the cliff side town of Guanajuato, the Americans tell us. I turn in my chair, as though I could see, and try to follow the pointing finger. Once again I find myself drawn to the macabre, to begin with, to this nation that celebrates The Day of the Dead, then the avenue, misnamed though it was, and now a town famous for its museum of miraculously preserved bodies. Some of them centuries-old, they were mummified by natural gases in the soil of the village graveyard, my new guidebook tells me. As soon as the families grow forgetful or too poor to pay the annual plot fee, up pop the bodies for display in the museum.

How like my family, I think, to go poking among the dead, unearthing just for a gawk the imperfect corpses of almost-forgotten loved ones. I recall the hoots of laughter over the story about one of the great grandfathers who sat bolt upright in his coffin, due to the effects of gases percolating in his dead body. I would tell them this story, but everyone is talking loudly about Guanajuato. Everyone thinks I should go to Guanajuato. Patsy, an older woman from Florida, says she'll go with me. She never tires of the bodies. I wait for Graham to say something. This is his chance to make up for not seeing the eclipse with me. But he says nothing.

Then a smoky-voiced woman from somewhere near Los Angeles leans over to warn me, "You can't take your camera. Pictures aren't allowed." She has sensed my love for photography, has a Pentax Spotmatic herself. That's why I remember her. We spend the next hour talking cameras on their courtyard patio down in the village. She also has long legs, perfectly tanned. I remember that, too. Quite clearly.

I hate to leave my camera capped tight in my bag. I would enjoy the shrieks of delighted horror from my mother and sister back home, but there are too many guards around. I will have to rely on memory and describe to them the sights that make Patsy and I gawk and guffaw: the mounded breasts studded with nipples below the half-rotted head, or the knee-high wool socks that are the sole survivors from one

cadaver's outfit, or the penis, perfectly preserved and curled neatly against a mound of hair. We can't tell if the testicles remain. Eyeballs, it seems, are body parts that can't survive death, not even in these special soils. Lips don't do much better. But teeth and hair, what knock-outs. I want to pull my lips back with my finger tips so I can grin back at the skulls like all the Mexican kids do, but I restrain myself.

A sudden hush pulls us over to a group of Mexicans who are crossing themselves and hanging their heads before the tiniest of the glass cases. The children are less reverent, pointing and laughing and running off to look at something else. Dead is dead. They don't see extinction as the realm of the aged, a place where babies don't belong. The tiny corpse, dark as tanned leather, makes us think of real death, not the clownish cadavers around us, but of people we once knew, people we miss.

•

I put the fruit basket and tools in the closet, kick off my shoes and head for the kitchen to rinse my hands. I must have known. What else has he been up to, all those times in town without me? But I am not suspicious. Not then. I am in love with the heat and the fruit and the grassy hills swollen and succulent as the belly beneath my white skirt. Mexican men whistle at my long, red hair, my skin that refuses to tan, my undulating walk as I return from the little store with four eggs cradled in a white plastic bag, the handles knotted carefully, as though I were carrying life itself. I am desirable, back then. I have no fears.

I dry my hands on one of the chequered blue towels I claimed as mine, then cross the floor to the opened doors where I stretch out on the thin mat in front of the fire place and smell the tingle of the wood floors rising through. Mrs. Logan is right. The laundry can wait. The boards are comforting because I cannot slip into sleep, and its dreams. Their hardness won't let me.

I dream too much, then, back home in this apartment. I climb a flight of stairs inside an old building: the stairs are wooden and the light around me soft, like the light that falls from the hay loft in a barn, or an old warehouse near the docks. As I climb higher the sense

of impending doom that I couldn't feel in Mexico is now overwhelming. My footsteps slow down because I don't want to reach the door at the top. I hear voices that are vaguely familiar, coming from behind the door, but even upon waking, as I always do at this point, I can't place them.

Several times I have this dream.

Yes, I must know. Graham avoids my eyes and his sudden trip out of town makes me uneasy. We've only been back a few weeks and it's his second trip away. I say *little* because nice girlfriends don't nag. But I recall that first trip, to Sacramento, and the husky-voiced woman who answered his phone.

"Hello?"

My heart began pounding, my palms sweating. "Is Graham there?" I tried to sound unconcerned, but I know I squawked like an old parrot. He came to the phone, and again my voice screeched, "Who was that? A colleague?"

But I had fed him the answer, so he said, simply, "Yes."

A few days later, I ask, laughingly, if he has ever had an affair. Ha, ha.

"Of course not!" he replies, looking hurt. "Why would you ask that?"

Why indeed? This is the man who burned nasties by my side, whose drips of urine at that very moment are speckled against the back of the toilet seat and whose snores filled the room all night. I feel so ridiculously unsophisticated and horribly suspicious that suddenly the tables turn and *I* become the monster, *I* am the one who has done something wrong. So I don't ask again.

This time he has been on a weekend trip to Los Angeles.

"Sure work a lot of weekends," I say, in way of a greeting. Safe enough. Again, all it requires is a "yes" or "no" answer.

"Yes," he replies and kisses me quickly on the lips.

He has left for work in a rush this morning. His unopened suitcase sits at the foot of the bed. I convince myself that this one time I can set feminism aside and do his unpacking and laundering for him. After all, he's been working hard while I have the day off. But I am not fooling myself when I snap open the twin latches like I am dismantling a bomb: slowly, eyes squinting, heart thumping.

I find dirty socks and underwear, crumpled shirts and creased pants. I must check the pockets for bills and Kleenexes that will explode like dandelion seeds of lint all over the dark clothes. I pull out ticket stubs, match books, a couple of unsent postcards — to me I guess since I never got any — and in his jacket pocket an envelope of photographs. Quickly, I fan the prints for a peek at the usual touristy shots, sunny weather, bright colors, and stuff them back into the envelope.

I stack my findings neatly on the nightstand, somewhat relieved at finding nothing and chagrined because now I must actually *do* his laundry. I head down to the basement with a bundle of whites and stuff them into the washer. Then I head back to gather up his pants and jacket for the dry cleaner's on the corner. I feel unsettled. Did I hope to find something? No. Then what? I can't put my finger on it until I am almost at the dry cleaner's. By then my mind is in such a whirl I give the lady the wrong phone number and have to turn back from the door to have her change it. Receipt in hand I almost run back to the apartment because something is wrong. He doesn't even *have* a camera.

I run up the first flight of steps, a sinking feeling of dread at the pit of my stomach. I slow down and trudge, step by step, pausing at the landing to steady my heart. I know now that I have climbed this route many times before, and that the voices I hear at the end are his and that woman's on the phone. My hands are shaking as I unlock the door and make my way, unsteadily, to the bedroom. I spread the tickets and the photographs before me.

They don't match. These shots were taken in Mexico.

I sink into the closest chair and begin studying the pictures, one-by-one. Some are identical to mine in setting, not in angle or exposure. None are of vases or pyramids or the eclipse, though. And some are new to me: donkeys, market stalls, old men in sombreros.

Smiling dimly, I try to take satisfaction in the crooked horizons, the thumb crowding a face, the out-of-focus shot of a cobbled street. I flip them over. Each one is stamped with *Kodak* and last week's date. I had mine developed the day after we returned.

What happened to rage, I wonder? The seeing of red, the calling of names, the urge to use knives in particularly painful ways and

places? I smash nothing, scream nothing. His body remains intact. But ever so carefully, I get up and go to work dividing my things from his things, packing up the jars, the tubes, those *Tums*. Slowly, quietly, I begin to shrink. I cry, yes, but I still can't quite believe it — despite my earlier suspicions — and I go back to the pictures, to be sure. But there it is, the final proof, a picture of him, smiling handsomely, and in the far corner, almost out of the picture, my feet and my bag, unmistakably my feet in my favourite sandals, and my straw bag.

Of course I didn't take these pictures. She did.

And that's why I did it. I couldn't stand the thought that I'd become the kind of woman men cheat on, and that people might feel sorry for me or despise me for my stupidity. So, in a manner of speaking, I had him surgically removed.

Okay, okay, there was also that sense of revenge, that metallic taste of *fuck you* staining my tongue like blood. Because I could have been talked out of it. Right up until the last moment before the nurse wheeled me away and I lost consciousness, I kept watching for his face to appear around the curtains. Maybe he would beg me to forgive him, or promise me it could all be worked out, or call after me, "Don't do it!"

Well, he didn't.

"Ye couldn't afford it, anyway," Mrs. Logan reminds me from time to time. And who knew that antibiotics could knock out The Pill in two swallows? One day, she says, I'll be laughing at all this.

For now, I tilt my chin so I can look through the panes of glass to the rows of pots bursting with oranges and reds, incongruous combinations on my northern balcony, I know, but penance for my lean belly, so flat against the oak floor that the hip bones pinch my skin, reminding me of Mexican cadavers, of that place where babies don't belong.

I'm hoping Mrs. Logan'll get rid of the T-shirt for me. Burn it. Toss it out. It has a blazing sun on the chest, in memory of that spectacular eclipse. If only we could be extinguished, then restored, just like that.

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Elizabeth Hay / THE FRIEND

She was thirty, a pale beautiful woman with long blonde hair and high cheekbones, small eyes, sensuous mouth, an air of serenity and loftiness — superiority — and under that, nervousness, insecurity, disappointment. She was tired. There was the young child who woke several times a night. There was Danny who painted till two in the morning then slid in beside her and coaxed her awake. There was her own passivity. She was always willing even though she had to get up early, and always resentful, but never resentful out loud. She complied. In conversation she was direct and Danny often took part in these conversations, but in bed, apparently, she said nothing. She felt him slide against her, felt his hand between her legs, its motion the reverse of a woman wiping herself, back to front instead of front to back. She smelled paint — the air of the poorly ventilated attic where he worked — and felt his energetic weariness and responded with a weary energy of her own.

He didn't speak. He didn't call her by any name (during the day he called her Moe more often than Maureen). He reached across her and with practised efficiency found the vaseline in the bedside drawer.

I met her one afternoon on the sidewalk outside the neighbourhood grocery store. It was sunny and it must have been warm — a Saturday in early June. Our section of New York was poor and Italian, and we looked very different from the dark women around us. The friendship began with that shorthand — shortcut to each other — an understanding that goes without saying. I had a small child too.

A week later, at her invitation, I walked the three blocks to her house and knocked on the front door. She opened a side door and called my name. "Beth," she said, "this way." She was dressed in a loose and colourful quilted top and linen pants. She looked composed and bohemian and from another class.

Inside there was very little furniture: a sofa, a chest, a rug, Danny's

paintings on the wall. He was there. A small man with Fred Astaire's face and an ingratiating smile. Once he started to talk, she splashed into the conversation. She commented on everything he said, changing it and making it convoluted out of what I supposed was a desire to be included. Only later did I realize how much she insisted on being the centre of attention, and how successfully she became the centre of mine.

We used to take our kids to the only playground within walking distance. It was part of a school yard, and marked the border between our neighbourhood and the next. The pavement shimmered with broken glass, the kids were wild and unattended. We pushed our two on the swings and kept each other company. She said she would be so mad if Danny got AIDS, and I thought about her choice of words — "so mad" — struck by the understatement.

I learned about sex from her the way girls learn about sex from each other. In this case the information came not in whispered conversations behind a hedge but more directly and personally than anything I might have imagined at the age of twelve.

In those days the hedge was high and green, and the soil below it dark — a setting that was at once private and natural and fenced off.

This time everything was in the open. I was the audience, the friend with stroller, a mild-mannered wide-eyed listener who learned that breastfeeding brought Maureen to the point of orgasm, that childbirth had made her vagina sloppy and loose, that anal sex hurt so much that she would sit on the toilet afterwards and brace herself against the stabs of pain.

We were in the playground (that sour, overused, wrongly used, hardly playful patch of pavement) and she said she was sore and told me why. When I protested on her behalf she said, "But I might have wanted it. I don't know. I think I did want it in some way."

I can't remember her hands, not here in this small cool room in another country and several years after the fact. I remember watching her do many things with her hands; yet I can't remember what they look like. They must be long, slender, pale unless tanned. But they don't come to mind the way a man's might and I suppose that's because she didn't touch me. Or is it because I became so adept at

keeping her at bay? I remember her lips, those dry thin Rock Hudson lips.

One evening we stood on the corner and she smiled her fleeting meaningful smiles and looked at me with what she called her northern eyes (they were blue and she cried easily) while her heartbreak of a husband put his arm around her. What will become of her I wondered, even after I found out.

She was standing next to the stove and I saw her go up in flames: the open gas jets, the tininess of the room, the proximity of the children — standing on chairs by the stove — and her hair. It slid down her front and fell down her back. She was making pancakes and they were obviously raw. She knew they were raw, predicted they would be, yet did nothing about it. Nor did I. I just poured on lots of syrup and said they were good.

I saw her go up in flames, or did I wish it?

In the beginning we saw each other almost every day and couldn't believe how much the friendship had improved our lives. A close, easy, intensity which lasted in that phase of its life for several months. My husband talked of moving — an apartment had come open in a building where we had friends — and I couldn't imagine moving away from Maureen.

It was a throwback to girlhood — the sort of miracle that occurs when you find a friend with whom you can talk about everything.

Maureen had grown up rich and poor. Her family was poor, but she was gifted and received scholarships to private schools. It was the private school look she'd fixed on me the first time we met, and the poor background she offered later. As a child she received nothing but praise, she said, from parents astonished by their good fortune: They had produced a beautiful and brilliant daughter in a larger context of everything going wrong: accidents, sudden deaths, mental illness.

Danny's private school adjoined hers. They met when they were twelve and he never tried to hide his various obsessions. She could never say that she had never known.

In the spring her mother came to visit. The street was torn up for

repairs, the weather prematurely hot, the air thick with dust. Maureen had spread a green cloth over the table and set a vase of cherry blossoms in the middle. I remember the shade of green and the lushness of the blossoms because everything about Maureen was usually scattered and in disarray.

Her mother was tall and more attractive in photographs than in person. In photographs she was still, in person she darted about, and there was something high-pitched and unrelenting about the way she moved. When she spoke she left the same impression — startling in her abnormality and yet apparently normal. She spoke in a rapid murmur as though after years of endless talking about the same thing she now made the sounds that people heard: they had stopped up their ears long ago.

She talked about Maureen. How precocious she had been as a child, reading by the age of four, and by the age of five memorizing whole books.

"I remember her reading a page, and I told her to go and read it to Daddy. And she said, 'with or without the paper?'"

Lots of children can read at five, even her brother was reading at five, but few have Maureen's stamina. She could read for hours, and adult books. I had to put Taylor Caldwell on the top shelf."

A photograph of the child was tacked to the wall in Danny's studio. She was seated in a chair and wearing one of those very short summer dresses we used to wear that ended well above bare round knees. Her face was unforgettable. It was more than beautiful. It had a direct, knowing, almost luminous look produced by astonishingly clear eyes and fair, fair skin. Already she knew enough not to smile.

"That's her," said Danny. "There she is."

The beautiful kernel of the beautiful woman.

She had always imagined bodies firmer than hers, but not substantially different. She had always imagined Danny with a boy.

I met the lover without realizing it. It was June again, and we were at their house in the country. A shaded house beside a stream — cool, green, quiet — the physical manifestation of the serenity I once thought she possessed. A phrase in a movie review: her wealth so old it had a patina. Maureen's tension so polished it had a veneer.

All weekend I picked her long hairs off my daughter's sweater and off my own. I picked them off the sheet on the bed. I picked blackberries and they left hair-like scratches on my hands.

My hands felt like hers. I looked down at my stained fingers and they seemed longer. I felt the places where her hands had been: changing diapers, buttoning shirts, deep in tofu and tahini, closing in on frogs which she caught with gusto. Swimming, no matter how cold.

I washed my hands and lost that feeling of being in contact with many things. Yet the landscape continued — the scratches if not the smells, the sight of her hands and hair.

An old painter came to visit. He parked his station wagon next to the house and followed Danny into his studio in the barn. Maureen and I went off with the kids to pick berries.

The day was hot and humid. There would be rain in the night and again in the morning. We followed a path through the woods and came to a stream. The kids splashed around, Maureen and I hung our legs over the bank. Her feet were long and slender, mine were wide and short. We sent ripples of water towards the kids.

She told me that Henry — the painter's name was Henry — was Danny's mentor, they had known each other for years and he was a terrible alcoholic. Then she leaned close and her shoulder touched mine. One night last summer Danny had come back from Henry's studio and confessed — confided — that he had let the old man blow him off. Can you believe it? And she laughed. Giddy — flushed — breathless — excited. A warm breeze blew a strand of her hair into my face. I brushed it away and it came back — ticklish, intimate, warm and animal-like. I didn't find it unpleasant, not at the time.

We brought the berries back to the house, and late in the afternoon the two men emerged and sat with us on the verandah. Henry was whiskery, gallant, shy. Maureen talked a great deal and laughed even more. Before dark, Henry drove away.

She knew. It all came out the next spring and she pretended to be horrified, but she knew.

That night sounds woke me: Danny's low murmur, Maureen's uninhibited cries. I listened for a long time. It must have occurred to me then that the more gay he was, the more she was aroused.

•

I thought it was someone come to visit. But the second time I realized it was ice falling. At midday, icicles fall from the eavestrough into the deep snow below.

And the floor which I keep sweeping for crumbs? There are no crumbs. The sound comes from the old linoleum itself. It crackles in the cold.

Often I wake at one or two in the morning, overheated from the hot water bottle, the three blankets, the open sleeping bag spread on top. In my dreams I am taking an exam over and over again.

In the morning I go down in the socks I've worn all night to turn up the heat and raise the thin bamboo blind through which everyone can see us anyway. I make coffee, then scald milk in a hand-beaten copper pot with a long handle. In Quebec there is an expression for beating up egg whites: *monter en neige*. Milk foams up and snow rises.

Under the old linoleum old newspapers advertize an "equipped one bedroom at Lorne near Albert" for \$175. Beside the porch door the linoleum has broken away, and you can read mildew, dust, grit, *Ottawa Citizen*, 1979. The floor is a pattern of squares inset with triangles and curlicues in wheat shades of immature to ripe. Upstairs the colours are similar but faded; and flowers, petals.

During the eclipse I saw Maureen when I saw the moon. I saw my thumb inch across her pale white face.

I have no regrets about this. But I have many thoughts.

We pushed swings in the playground while late afternoon light licked at the broken glass on the pavement. New York's dangers were all around us, and so was Maureen's fake laugh. She pushed William high in the swing, and when he came back she let out a little trill.

It was the time of Hedda Nussbaum. We cut out the stories in the newspaper and passed them back and forth — photographs of Hedda's beaten face, robust husband, abused and dead daughter. It had been going on for so long. Hedda had been beaten for thirteen years, the child was seven years old.

In the playground, light licked at the broken glass and then the light died and we headed home, sometimes stopping first for tea at

her house. Her house always had a loose and welcoming atmosphere which hid the sharp edge of need against which I rubbed.

She began to call before breakfast. She dressed me with her voice, her worries, her anger, her malleability. Usually she was angry with Danny for staying up so late that he was useless all day, of no help in looking after William, while she continued to work to support them, to look after the little boy in the morning and evening, to have no time for herself. But when I expressed anger on her behalf she defended him

Similarly with the stomach pains. An ulcer, she suggested, then made light of the possibility when I took it seriously.

She often asked, "Is this all? Is this going to be my contribution?" She was referring to her brilliant past and her sorry present. She didn't like her job, didn't like the neighbourhood, kept talking about the men she could have married. Motherhood gave her something to excel at. She did everything for her son — dressed him, fed him, directed every moment of play. "Is this all right, sweetie? Is this? What about this? Then sweetie pie what do you want?"

Sweetie pie wanted what he got. His mother all to himself for a passionately abusive hour, then peace, affection. During his tantrums she embraced him and tried to distract him, the two of them behind a closed door. She would emerge and smile and shake her head. "That was short. You should see what they're like sometimes."

Even when Danny offered to look after him, even when he urged her to take a long walk, she refused. Walked, but briefly, back and forth on the same sidewalk, or up and down the same driveway. Then she returned out of a sense of responsibility to the child. But the child was fine.

At two years he still nursed four or five times a night, and her nipples were covered with scabs. "But the skin there heals so quickly," she said.

We moved to the other side of the city and the full force of it hit me. I remember bending down under the sink of our new apartment, still swallowing a mouthful of peanut butter, to cram SOS pads into the hole — against the mouse, taste of it, peanut butter in the trap. Feel of it, dry and coarse under my fingers. Look of it, out of the

corner of my eye a small dark slipper. Her hair always in her face, and the way I was ratting on her.

It got to the point where I knew the phone was going to ring before it rang. Instead of answering, I stood there counting. Thirty rings. Forty. Once I said to her, I think you called earlier, I was in the bathroom and the phone rang forever. Oh, she said, I'm sorry, I wasn't even paying attention. Then I saw the two of us: Maureen mesmerized by the act of picking up a phone and holding it for a time; and me, frantic with resentment about which I did nothing.

"Why is she so exhausting?" I asked my husband, then answered my own question. "She never stops talking and she always talks about the same thing."

But I wasn't satisfied with my answer. "She doesn't want solutions to her problems. That's what's so exhausting."

And yet that old wish — a real wish — to get along. I went to bed thinking about her, woke up thinking about her and something different yet related. The two mixed together in a single emotion. I had taken my daughter to play with a friend: Another girl was already there and they didn't want Annie to join them. I woke up thinking of my daughter's rejection, my own various rejections, and Maureen.

It seemed inevitable that he would leave her — clear that he was gay and inevitable that he would leave her. He was an artist. To further his art he would pursue his sexuality. But I was wrong. He didn't leave her, and nor did I.

Every six months he had another gay attack and talked, thought, drew penises. Every six months she reacted predictably and never tired of her reactions. Her persistence took on huge, saintly proportions.

I never initiated a visit or a call, but I didn't make a break. As yielding as she was — and she seemed to be all give — I was even more so, apparently.

Tensions accumulated — the panic as she continued to call and I continued to come when called, though each visit became more abrasive, more insulting, as though staged to show who cared least: You haven't called me, you never call me, you think you can make up for your inattention with this visit but I'll show you that I don't care either: the only reason I'm here is so that my son can play with your

daughter.

We walked along the river near her country place. William was on the good tricycle, my daughter was on the one that didn't work. Maureen said, "I don't think children should be forced to share. Do you? I think kids should share when they want to share."

Her son wouldn't give my daughter a turn the whole long two-hour walk beside the river — with me pointing out what? Honeysuckle. Yes, honeysuckle. Swathes of it among the rocks. And fishermen with strings of perch. I stared out over the river, unable to look at Maureen and not arguing; I couldn't find the words.

With each visit there was the memory of an earlier intimacy, and no interest in resurrecting it.

Better than nothing. Better than too much. And so it continued, until it spun lower.

The visit to the country marked my swing from blind acceptance to blind criticism, the natural conclusion of an unnaturally warm friendship. We were sitting on the mattress in Danny's studio in front of a wall-size mirror. Around us were his small successful paintings and his huge failures. He insisted on painting big, she said, because he was so small. "I really think so. It's just machismo."

How clear-eyed she was.

I rested my back against the mirror, Maureen faced it. She glanced at me, then the mirror, and each time she looked in the mirror she smiled slightly. Her son was there. He wandered off, and then it became clear that she was watching herself.

She told me she was pregnant again. It took two years to persuade Danny, "and now he's even more eager than I am," and she smiled at herself.

Danny got sick. I suppose he'd been sick for months, but I heard about it the next spring. Maureen called in tears. "The shoe has dropped," she said.

He was so sick that he had confessed to the doctors that he and Henry — old dissipated Henry whose cock had slipped into who knows what — had been screwing for the last five years. Maureen talked and wept for thirty minutes before I realized that she had no intention of leaving him, or he of leaving her. They would go on. The

only change, and this wasn't certain, was that they wouldn't sleep together. They would go to their country place in June and stay all summer.

I felt cheated, set up, used. "Look, you should do something," I said. "Make some change."

She said, "I know. But I don't want to precipitate anything. Now isn't the time."

She said it wasn't AIDS.

Her lips dried out like tangerine sections separated in the morning and left out all day. She nursed her children so long that her breasts turned into small apricots, and now I cannot hold an apricot in my hand and feel its soft loose skin, its soft non-weight, without thinking of small spent breasts — little dugs.

She caught hold of me, a silk scarf against an uneven wall, and clung.

Two years later I snuck away. In the weeks leading up to the move, I thought I might write to her afterwards, but in the days right before I knew I would not. In late August when the weather was cool and the evenings still long, we finished packing at nine and pulled away in the dark.

We turned right on Broadway and rode the traffic in dark slow motion out of the city, north along the Hudson, and home.

In Canada I thought about old friends who were new friends because I hadn't seen them for such a long time. And newer friends who were old friends because I'd left them behind in the other place. I noticed I had no landscape in which to set them. They were portraits in my mind (not satisfying portraits either because I couldn't remember parts of their bodies; their hands, for instance, wouldn't come to mind). They were emotion and episode divorced from time and place. Yet there was a time — the recent past, and a place — a big city across the border.

And here was I, where I had wanted to be for as long as I had left it — home — and it didn't register either. In other words, I discovered that I wasn't in a place. I was the place. I felt populated by old friends. They lived in my head amid my various broodings. Here they met

again and went through the same motions and different ones. Here they coupled in ways that hadn't occurred really. And here was I, disloyal but faithful, occupied by people I didn't want to see and didn't want to lose.

August came and went, September came and went, winter didn't come. It rained in November and it rained in December. In January a little snow fell, then more rain.

Winter came when I was asleep. One morning I looked out at frozen puddles and a small dusting of snow. It was very cold. I stepped carefully into the street and this is what I saw. I saw the landscape of friendship. I saw Sunday at four in the afternoon. I saw childhood panic. People looked familiar to me, yet they didn't say hello. I saw two people I hadn't seen in fifteen years — one was seated in a restaurant, the other skated by. I looked at them keenly and waited for recognition to burst upon them, but it didn't.

On the other hand, strangers claimed to recognize me. They said they had seen me before, some said precisely where. "It was at a conference two years ago." Or, "I saw you walk by every day with your husband last summer. You were walking quickly."

But last summer I had been somewhere else.

The connections were wistful, intangible, maddening. Memory tantalized and finally failed. Yet as much as memory failed, those odd unhinged conjunctures helped. Strange glimmerings and intense looks were better than nothing.

The last time I saw Maureen, she was wearing a black and white summer dress and her teeth were chattering. "Look at me," she said as she tried to talk, her mouth barely able to form the words, her lower jaw shaking. "It's not that cold."

We were in the old neighbourhood. The street was dark and narrow with shops on either side, and many people. I was asking my usual questions and she was doing her best to answer them.

"Look," she said again, and pointed to her lips which were shaking uncontrollably.

I nodded, drew my jacket tight, mentioned how much warmer it had been on the way to the cafe, my voice friendly enough but without the intonations of affection and interest, the rhythms of sympathy, the animation of friendship.

We entered the subway and felt warm again. She waited for my train to come, and tried to redeem herself and distance herself simultaneously. I asked about Danny and she answered. She went on and on. She talked about his job, her job, how little time each of them had for themselves. Almost before she finished, I asked about her children. Again she talked.

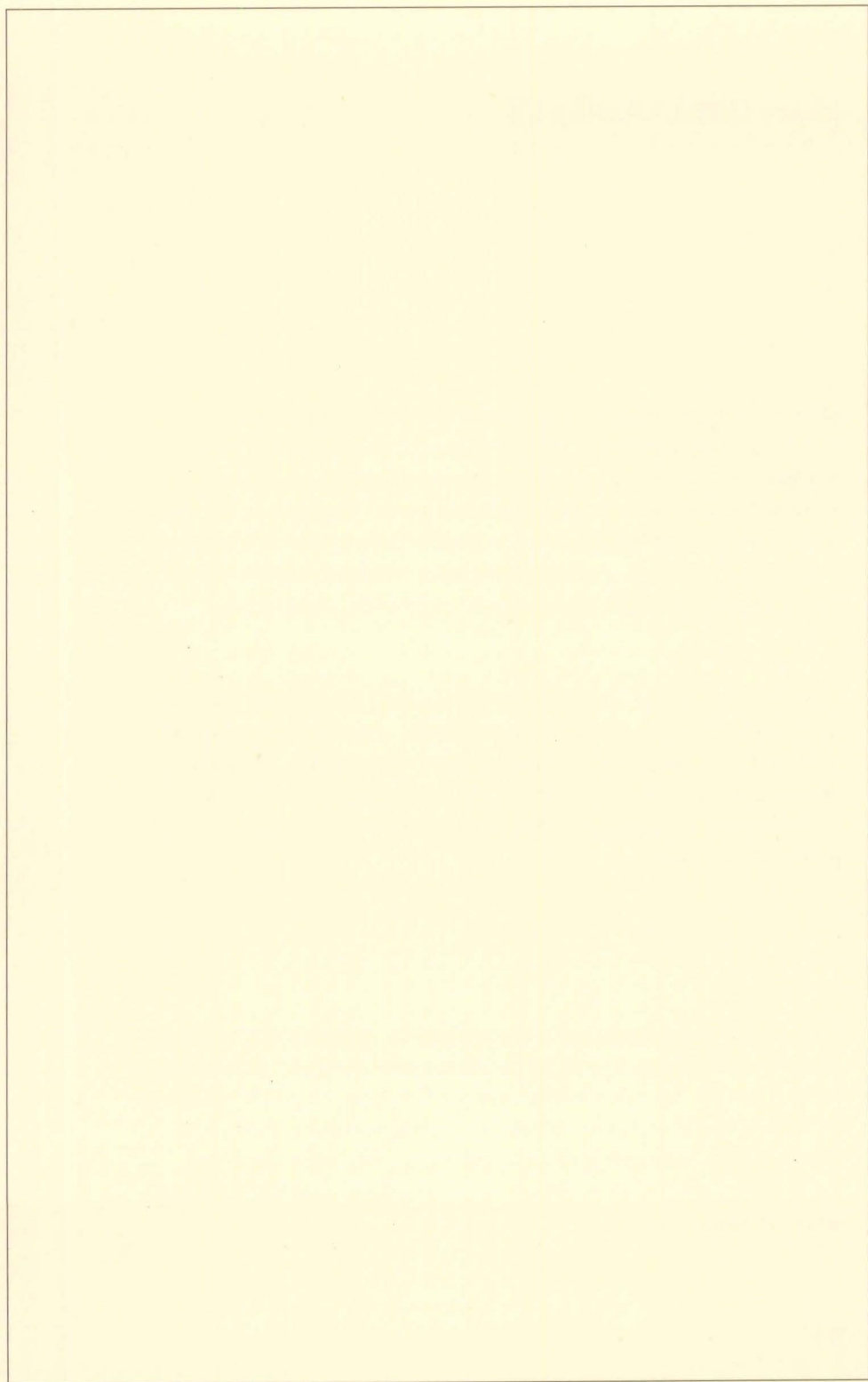
"I don't mean to brag," she said, helpless against the desire to brag, "but Victoria is so verbal."

Doing to her children and for herself what her mother had done to her and for herself.

"So verbal, so precocious. I don't say this to everyone." And she listed the words that Victoria already knew.

She still shivered occasionally. She must have known why I didn't call anymore, aware of the reasons while inventing others in a self-defence that was both pathetic and dignified. She never asked what went wrong. Never begged for explanations (dignified even in her begging: her persistence as she continued to call and extend invitations).

We stood in the subway station — one in a black and white dress, the other in a warm jacket — one hurt and pale, the other triumphant in the indifference which had taken so long to acquire. We appeared to be friends. But a close observer would have seen how static we were, rooted in a determination not to have a scene, not to allow the other to cause hurt. Standing, waiting for my train to come in.



Hilary Clark / ANGELS

1

Most invisible body, the past hovers over our daily gestures.
Tar soap, running water, wet hand on the door. In the third
season, autumnal, we are visited by angels as light as leaves,
their faces pocked and blackened by decay. We assume the past
like an armour of light, our glass bodies licked by fire. And
turn to our reading, marking the pages, finding familiar spirits
where the lines break, and we raise our heads, wondering

Most invisible body, angel of shame bathes in kerosene and fire,
draws her sari round her blackened face. Leaves turn to smoke
and earth, curling in the burning wind. We assume the past,
drawing its blue flame about us. And this is the key: that we
may find spidery messages where the lines hinge, a few tea
leaves, flakes of ash

•

Late in the white night, we are touched by fingers softer than a
breath. Something not dead but unformed, a space, a brief pause
before words. We turn in our sleep. The moon and its hologram
float over the frozen city. In the morning a sudden thaw, and
icicles in the eaves grow cloudy and weep. We shut the front
door, kiss, and go our separate ways, treading carefully, walking
into the unspoken

you turn on the computer, spectral letters float up from
invisible rooms. quiet murmur, speech turned inward. its memory
has always anticipated you, you are a minor disturbance of its
perfection, nothing more

troubled, wanting to write about angels, you think of that hawk
earlier, worrying the air overhead. you walked awkwardly through
the long grass, waving your arms, fearing the bird might not
distinguish between fieldmouse and you. nervous, you plunged on,
the hawk joining others screaming above

“there may be as many varieties of angels as of birds.” this is
how you want to begin, a clever natural history (field angels,
sea angels) but something begins to break in, your true familiar,
memory. sullen angel who visits you late at night before
sleeping, in the interval between waking at dawn and the last,
exhausted dream. who visits in the slough of the afternoon, as
you doze over a book. you come up behind her as you write,
dogging her key by key, word by word, until she turns

but you cannot see her face, or not clearly, and you digress,
doodling through the dictionary. white angel of distraction,
black angel of spleen. green angel stinking of over-ripe cheese.
red angel flicking a fox’s tail. blue angel leaning on a

doorway, smoking

tiny bird-bellied angels swoop from the eaves,
others creak in the grass as you lift your eyes and see her
watching you, your twin angel gazing at you as you gaze, writing
as you write, her poems unfolding like children's paper
snowflakes

and you remember her hands pulling you into the light, a presence
unspeakably familiar, hands stroking your skin, feeding you.
angel of sugar, angel of milk blue as melting ice. something
shivers and cracks, you're on dangerous ground, she grows pale
and vanishes among her snowflakes

white letters, darkened rooms. you press save,
turn off the machine and in the sudden silence hear crickets,
their broken song

3

First lesson

Wishing himself dead, Elijah said, "It is enough," and slept. But the angel wasn't having any of it, hauled him up and barked, "Eat," pointing to a cake baked on hot stones, a jar of water. Elijah ate and drank reluctantly, curled up with a great sigh to sleep. But the angel slapped him out of it, ordered him to eat again. His gorge rising, Elijah forced down another cake, more water, and stumbled off on his journey (forty long days and nights) to Horeb, mountain of God. The angel absentmindedly pointing the way

Homily

Now why do angels so often appear in sleep, or on the feathered edge of sleep? Silvered, iridescent, they might seem to be mere creatures of the dreaming brain, delicious disturbances of the electric aura, subtle emanations (rose, honeysuckle) of the erotic lobes. But no, oh no they are *real* — fireflies, ardent spirits pursuing us, weaving their luminous envelope around us. Angels stand glowing at the crossroads of life, beckoning to each of us: in our lesson, the angel draws the prophet inward, into the most intimate recesses of the soul; and so does the "still small voice" of God whisper to us when, deep in the night, we reach Horeb, and surrender to the mighty wind, the earthquake, and the fire. As well, Yahweh's lovely messengers bring us

spiritual food, which we refuse to our great loss. Elijah's angel offers him a simple cake, but this cake, too, is spiritual nourishment. "Take, eat, this is my body": can we not hear our Lord's tempting words when the angel invites Elijah to eat not one but two sweet cakes baked on hot stones? Is there not, then, a foreshadowing of "Drink this, all of you," the chalice of precious blood still, here, a jar of pure water that quenches the prophet's thirst, cools his swollen tongue? Like Elijah, we need this divine sustenance, this manna, if we are to walk forth, day by weary day, on our own journeys, our forty days and forty nights in the bleak desert, watching, waiting for messengers, those dark raptors, oh! coming after

Silent reflection

eat me drink me mmmm alice's little seed cake bottle of cordial
tasting of toffee, turkey and hot buttered toast falling asleep
she fell down a rabbit hole a bossy white angel with pink eyes
waistcoat and a pocket watch was her undoing

"angel at the
crossroads" who or what *was* that by my bed the other night as I
lay half-asleep he's right about the erotic lobes faint scent of
rose skin like silk or is it milk I dreamed of eating at a table
laden with fruit biting into kumquats figs the apricots had a
slight tang or was it a first whiff of rot I ate and ate till I
was ready to burst woke up feeling sick and that scent, stale,
still in the air

and on to our journey in the wilderness
etcetera Elijah's jar of cool water didn't Christ say I thirst
I remember as a child dipping my paintbrush into a jar of fresh

water turning it pink or blue or green after a while a brown
sludge but before that in the newness of the colours I would
paint angels their hems and wings wet touched with light

white morning sheer curtains gust out
 writing, you are drawn to devotions
 contemplation hungry for form, its spacious rooms
 angels floating, rapt, in the corridors

this is the poem, thinking her face indistinct
 stippled with half-shadow, sun
 as one, waking from the dead, said
 to the woman do not touch me, I am not yet
 home the poem is only half-born
 emerging from the tomb, blue light of desire

on the other side of music
 on the other side of sleep a fine rain falls
 wetting eyelash, pale cheek you move to touch
 her face, it is your face new
 yet utterly familiar

milk, breath skin brushing skin
 a pause slow love, its wet caress
 the child smiles in the loveliness
 and her face bends closer, wondering

as he said to the woman go, tell the others
so you kiss her face turn
and enter the form that house
you have been building, always, within you
preparing a place for the others

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

HILARY CLARK, formerly from Vancouver, now lives and writes in Saskatoon. She teaches English and Women's Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, and is the mother of three children. Her work has appeared most recently in *The New Quarterly* (Winter 1995), and poems are forthcoming in *The Malahat Review*.

PATRICK FRIESEN is a Winnipeg poet and playwright. His most recent book of poetry is *Blasphemer's Wheel, Selected and New Poems* (Turnstone Press, 1994).

ELIZABETH HAY has published *Crossing the Snow Line* (1989), *The Only Snow in Havana* (1992), and *Captivity Tales* (1993). "The Friend" is part of a manuscript-in-progress entitled *The Small Change of Friendship*. She lives in Ottawa.

JUNE HUTTON is a writer with a background in journalism who is currently teaching in an alternative high school. She lives in Vancouver with her husband and son. "Total Eclipse of the Sun" is her first published work of fiction.

JOHN PASS's most recent book is *Radical Innocence* (Harbour, 1994). He teaches at Capilano College, and the poems in this issue are from a work-in-progress evolving from research he made into rivers and estuaries while on educational leave last year. He lives on the Sunshine Coast where he and his wife Theresa Kishkan run High Ground Press.

BARBARA J. SIBBALD, author of the best-seller, *The Back Forty: Farm Life in the Ottawa Valley*, is writing a collection of linked short stories about love and relationships under a grant from the Regional Municipality of Ottawa Carleton.

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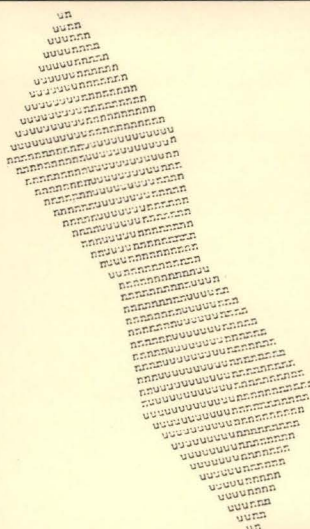
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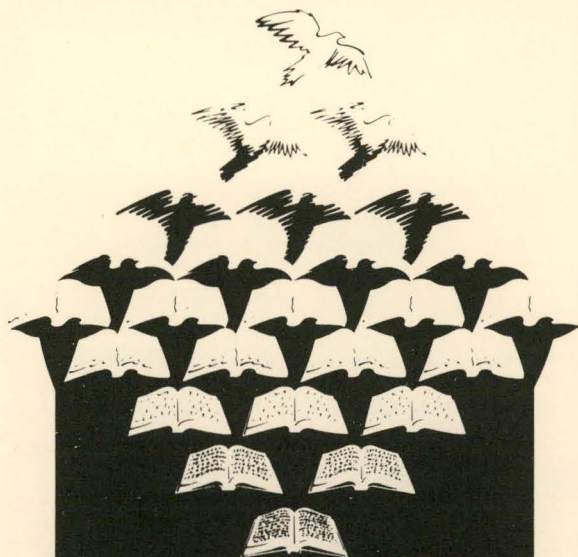
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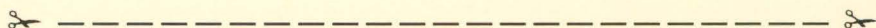
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