

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI[®]

The Modesty Wrap
A Collection of Short Stories

Barry Webster

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of English at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September 2002

©Barry Webster, 2002



**National Library
of Canada**

**Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services**

**395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada**

**Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada**

**Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques**

**395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada**

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-72848-X

Canada

ABSTRACT

The Modesty Wrap

Barry Webster

The Modesty Wrap is a collection of short stories that explores the tensions between self-constructed male identity and the limits/demands of the human body. Each story makes use of a first person narrator whose identity, created through language and societal interpellation, is undercut, challenged or transformed through the inescapable presence of the physical body. Illness, physical accidents, and death pose challenges to the characters' conceptions of themselves and their place in the world. The tension inherent in the body versus identity conflict is paralleled in the characters' (often failed) attempts to negotiate a space between the seemingly inescapable biological composition of the body, and a somewhat body-less, more queer, fluid construction of sexuality.

Table of Contents

The Modesty Wrap.....	1
The Innocence of Water	18
Believing in Paris	27
Capturing Varanasi.....	51
Gotta Have Nick.....	71
Laughing Non-Stop.....	80
The Royal Conservatory.....	99

The Modesty Wrap

Sharp-toothed gravel dug into the soles of my feet, as ahead, boys and men bounded through water. In my ears, blaring Turkish pop music. A wave crashed and the men's white ribbed briefs and t-shirts glowed translucent in the lake.

I did not want to take off my clothes. Though it was sweltering, if I removed my sweatshirt, I'd start to shiver. My arm skin felt over-sensitive, as if it'd bruise when touched. It was an hour after eating and, in my stomach, I could feel a fist opening and closing.

After two months on the arid Anatolian plains, I thought I'd never seen so much water.

In ten minutes it'd be 5 p.m. and the swimmers would be spirited away, vanishing like mist evaporating in the rays of the falling sun. Then the village will let mango rinds, overripe olives, the day's excrement flow down Pidin stream into this lake where my guidebook assures me 'the alkaline content is the highest in the world. Lake Van is self-cleaning and harmful bacteria disappear instantly. Delighted tourists can create suds in the water without any soap.' The men's movements accelerated, urgently outpacing the normal rhythm of my life. I took one step forward and a wave smelling of dew-flower petals washed up and around my foot.

Then on the breeze a voice calling. I turned and gazed across the scorched plain littered with bulbous rocks like pulled teeth. On a distant hill stood two figures waving; their hair billowed in the wind. Women? I began moving towards them. No woman had spoken to me in three months; they'd disappeared into an unseen

netherworld where they polished kayak-rock or embroidered kilims. As I neared, I thought the women were Germans who'd failed to cross the rifled border into Iran and now were left to linger and perish here in the uncharted backwaters of Kurdistan or Eastern Turkey; no two people agreed on where you were exactly.

One said in English, "Nice to meet you," stuttering the t's, definitely Turkish. Oddly, they wore trousers and cotton shirts.

The other said, "Come."

I followed them past collapsing wood shacks and gleaming orange stucco buildings covered with interlocking, geometric designs. Chickens scattered, dust rose as our feet beat on parched rock-solid earth. We passed a man crouched praying on a chequered mat, barefoot children in gutters shouting "Where you from?", an ebony-shawled old woman on a donkey, a man balancing a huge platter of stacked bread-rings on his head. Nothing in this country seemed real. I had to keep reminding myself people lived frustrated, fulfilled or indifferent lives here, like everywhere else.

We reached the top of a cliff and sat looking over the water. Though small, from here the lake looked as if it stretched from one side of the world to the other. They were delighted to hear I came from Canada and when they asked me why I'd come to Turkey, I said, "I'm going to Mt. Ararat." A song in my head:

I'm going to Mt. Ararat

Mt. Ararat, Mt. Ararat

I'm going to Mt. Ararat

Where the earth will touch the moon.

They told me they came from Izmir.

"That's far from here," I said. "Why have you come to Van?"

"Our father has died," said one. "We have come to pay our respects." And with that they turned and looked out over the water once again.

My body had taken on a life of its own and refused to listen to me. For weeks I'd wandered smugly through throngs of Westerners who vomited into open-pit toilets or moaned in hostel beds as they waved bottles of *PeptoBismol* or *Pexdryal* like magic amulets that refused to work. Restaurants were battlefields where only I survived. My body was an invincible iron tank firing on armies of toxins seen approaching on distant plains. But somewhere on the imaginary line separating modern Western Turkey from the wild East, there had been a salad of unwashed vegetables or perhaps uncooked sis-kebab from a sidewalk vendor. In Van I awoke vomiting. Now I subsisted on a monk's diet of yogurt, bread crumbs and tea. At times there was a pressure in my bowels, and as I crouched balancing on the raised, metal footholds of pit toilets, I imagined an evil force rushing from my body.

Only one hundred kilometres away, Mt. Ararat rises unexpectedly from the arid plain like a hallucination. There, five worlds collide: Turkey, Iran, the U.S.S.R., the sky and the cosmos. It has one of the highest ground-to-summit distances of any place on earth. In my mind it is inextricably enmeshed in webs of fantasy and layered over with five thousand years of history and legend. In its brooding, twilight forests are perilous shrouded caves of knife-glint-eyed terrorists; escaping Soviet refugees forever

run through its woods but never escape; above, blinding-white razor-edged glaciers hold the battered ribs of Noah's Ark, and in the mountain's centre simmers a torrid molten heart that will one day explode. I structured my trip so it would be the last place I visited. At night I dream about it; sometimes I think I see it on the horizon. Yet each morning pulling my body out of bed is like dragging an anvil up from the bottom of the ocean. I can only hobble to the beach and am not well enough for any bus trip. I am disappointed with this body that was once my friend but has become such a nuisance to cart around. If I could escape through my nostrils at night, flee through the hotel window, cross plains to the mountainside leading up to the galaxy...

In the bazaar of Istanbul unending streams of people in head-veils, *sapkus*, and baseball caps flow past walls of mounted kaleidoscope-patterned rugs and gleaming pyramids of moisture-beaded mangoes and kumquats; square stacks of neon gelatin cubes coated in sugar stand beside sudden mountains of mismatched sandals and hanging posters of Madonna, Frank Sinatra and the Ayatollah Khomeini. There, in an air smelling of damp brick, cattle excrement and frying garlic, I met Selami. He was a man embarrassed by his name. "I know in English it means 'Italian sausage' but in Turkish it means 'charity'."

Did I know of any good hotels with rooms available? I pointed up to mine, the Itska Lodge.

"Can you show me it?"

In an alleyway, the shout of "Baklava, 1,000 lire," and the screeching of caged

chickens were all suddenly obliterated beneath the ululating, plaintive wail of the muezzin. Above, a grey turreted tower stood ringed with loudspeakers.

Selami pointed. "For Muslims. You are Christian?" He made a sign of the cross with one finger.

At the hotel, only one vacant bed in a room that happened to be mine. Selami's forehead creasing. "Is it O.K.?"

"Fine." He was young, cheerful, friendly and I'd just arrived in Turkey and wanted to meet some new people.

He said, "It will be quite an experience for me, rooming with a Canadian boy."

Lunch. Glistening roasted mutton on steaming rice, chopped vegetables that looked shellacked. Selami and I ate on outdoor stools as men clutching beads and miniature Korans passed.

"I'm not really Muslim," said Selami. "My father taught me how to do all that bowing but I don't like it. Of course in your country, everything's different. Men and women can even kiss on the street."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess there's more open talk of sex and stuff." I stopped. Was he offended? I asked.

He was offended that I'd think he was so conservative. "A lot of Western girls come here for sex with us."

"What?"

"Girls that are white want us cause we're dark. Most Americans, all Europeans. We call them pawn-girls."

When I said I thought he was wrong, he laughed as if I simply didn't understand the power of Turkish men.

He was in Istanbul to persuade his uncle, a government official, to exempt him from military service. "I know it's not fair that I not do it but I don't want to spend two years in the army."

In the late afternoon we went back to our hotel and lay relaxing on our beds.

"Do you like your new room?"

"I like my new friend," he said.

At bedtime an awkward moment. The Middle East. Bodies hidden in fabric. Even men keep arms, chests and legs covered. Social interaction is like putting your mouth against a hole in a wall and saying "who are you" to someone unseen on the other side. But now I'm face to face with a near-stranger. If I drop my pants, will it traumatize him? My back to him, I undid my belt. The next morning I noticed him changing under the covers, so I took my cue and did the same.

The two women were named Nihal and Ottet. We strolled the banks of the stream of orange rinds and excrement. Together we crossed a field of sparse weeds resembling bent, frazzle-tipped electric wires. Their village was four parallel dust-filled streets of flat-roofed brick houses. That they'd boldly invited me, a male Westerner, to accompany them astonished me. I gazed at Nihal's bare exposed forearms. She looked back tentatively and smiled. My body felt strangely alert, my skin surface suddenly warm.

A gaggle of women stood by the lone fruit stand and, as in much of Eastern Turkey, they were completely shawled. Two women passed draped in black.

I think the covering of the body draws attention to it. Brief glimpses of exposed skin, a finger curved around a purse-handle, toes peeking from beneath a sandal strap seem lit-up, garishly self-important. I often found myself fixating with microscopic intensity on a slight bone protruding from the side of a wrist, the flash of exposed heel-flesh. The miniscule expanded, filled my brain and at night I dreamt of hands the size of mountains, gigantic toes descending from the sky. My own body so carefully concealed beneath loose cotton shirts and baggy Kurdish trousers with a drawstring waist, suddenly ballooned outward beneath me, became as massive and far-reaching as the Anatolian plains.

I had never really noticed my body before. Like everyone else I have pared my fingernails and cleaned out the secret space between toes, but spirit-like I drift in and out of rooms without being noticed. However, suddenly here in Kurdistan my body has moral weight. Take off your shirt in the marketplace and there are cries of outrage; drop your drawers, you'll topple an empire. The outside world is a gigantic eye. Is this what other people feel all the time? Is this what some women feel all the time? Women passed in purdah, even their eyes hidden behind black fabric, walking pieces of night drifting about wind-torn streets. I always kept checking to make sure my sweatshirt zipper was pulled to the top.

Nihal, Ottet and I sat on a log behind her house. Leaning back she ran her fingers through her red-brown hair and I noticed sweat-stains on her t-shirt's armpits.

"This is where I live," she said sighing.

Somewhere again Turkish pop music, but shrunken, contained, a mosquito whining in a box.

We talked of Turkey, the beautiful countryside, the friendly people...and Canada is so cold, Van so dreary, but everybody loves Istanbul. Nihal interspersed comments about her father. He died in a bus crash on the road to Trabzon and his body was never recovered. The authorities were only interested in digging out the European tourists who'd been on board.

Occasionally Nihal pouted. She said, "A very good man."

Finally Ottet stood up and said "Goodbye" leaving us alone. I could smell Nihal's hair, sweet like cedar. Her tan neck-skin sloped under a silver chain, her collar bone made a slight dint in her orange cotton t-shirt, her breasts barely visible. You're a pervert, I thought, she's in mourning.

She sighed more than seemed necessary. "A very good man." Her knee was a finger-width away from my right hand which rested on my thigh. I could easily point my index-finger up like an insect antennae, turn it and touch her. It'd look like an accident. I gazed at my finger, willing it not to do it. If I did something, who or what's responsible? Would it be my body acting in spite of me, or rather my brain making my body do something? Or both? Or neither?

Suddenly in my stomach, the fist opening and closing.

Finally a bell rang in the distance and Nihal slowly stood. "I must pray all evening. But we can meet tomorrow again. In the morning at the beach?"

The collar of her t-shirt was dark with sweat.

Of course I would come. I walked home carefully. My legs carried my torso as if it were a carton of eggs that would break if I shook it too much.

At dusk Turkish streets have more shadow than light. People stand, trapped unmoving figures on a never-changing chessboard. Yet I know we all live in bodies; hormones pump through our bloodstreams. Heads down, men herd together and begin to roam the womanless streets. They mill outside movie theatres, throw lit cigarette stubs to the ground. Every man I meet asks me what I think of Turkish women, then stands kicking at embedded stones in the pavement.

At the Turkish Bath in Izmir the attendant said, "This is a Modesty Wrap." He flicked the plaid towel twice in the air. "It must not be removed." The Turkish men wore them around the waist snugly, folded twice at the top. I tried but could only tie the corners together in a sailor's knot I'd learned in Boy Scouts. I stepped carefully down slippery, echo-filled, tiled corridors. Never had I felt so exposed. The place was nearly empty and the rows of pillars and the huge domed ceiling made me feel like I'd accidentally wandered half-naked into a cathedral. Turkey is Muslim, not Christian and I resented this other-culture intrusion in my mind. Opaque, ceiling-high windows gleamed in stone walls and the vertical cement cylinders with running water looked suspiciously like baptismal fonts. I kept thinking I'd round a corner, suddenly stand before an awe-struck congregation holding communion wafers in their mouths. The priest would slowly turn toward me, my sailor's knot unraveling.

"I don't want to meet my uncle but I must. Will you accompany me to Beyoglu?"

So I followed Selami onto the boat that goes from West to East Istanbul, crossing the imaginary line that separates Europe from Asia.

Selami stood on deck wearing the white dress shirt I'd lent him and the tie we found in the bazaar. Again he asked if he looked O.K. and I said, "You should've bought the crocodile-faced tie. You'd really make an impression."

And then suddenly--smell of salt water, seagulls screeching overhead, the deck bobbing in the middle of the strait, on both sides of us rose hills of stacked rectangular buildings with jutting poles, wires, satellite dishes; KODAK, SIEMENS signs flashed, abrupt highrises thrust skyward; on hill summits squat domed mosques, their pointy-tipped towers like rockets ready for take-off--it seemed the world had been ripped in two and we stood in the centre. Everything there was to have could be touched with your fingertips.

It was then I told Selami about Mt. Ararat. "It's the end of my trip and the end of everything. Only one road goes there and it's the one I'm taking." Words continued in my head--the bus will climb half-way into the clouds and then I'll step out, run-bolt-hurtle straight up its near vertical slopes past forests, lakes, up mile-high glaciers, leave earth, finally pierce the sun and explode.

My raised arms were touching the bottom of the hanging lifeboat. Selami said to lower them because people could see my armpit hair. Later, on the bus I crossed my

legs and Selami said my foot sole was too visible.

"But I'm bending it down."

"Not enough."

My body was becoming divided into little subunits, each assigned its own value.

Finally I made a huge mistake.

When he said, "You're not waiting for me at the port; there are a lot of bad people there," I snapped, "Selami, I'm not a child. I can take care of myself!"

My guidebook: 'In Turkey anger is only rarely expressed in a direct fashion, especially among friends.'

Selami looked at me and said, "Things are no longer good between us. I can feel it."

Every day with Nihal, my skin burned as she leaned back and ran her fingers through her hair. We never looked each other in the eye but her hand always seemed to be a hair-breadth away from mine. I wondered what I was doing there.

At night I thought of Mt. Ararat, closed my eyes and willed my body to heal itself.

Desire is not expressed directly anywhere in this country. As the hills pressed in on all sides, so did the eclipsing of passion everywhere push in and oppress. There were layers of longing coiled round inside me like interlocking snakes that could not be unravelled. Never had Mt. Ararat seemed so far away.

On our second last day Nihal surprised me. She said, "It has been nice to know you. Some day I will marry a Turkish man and have children. I will give you my address. My sisters and I will be happy to receive postcards."

"I am happy to hear that." At that moment I believed her.

Below us the lake glistened.

Someday I will swim in the Lake of Van. Streams of glimmering suds will rush round my body and I will be cleansed, simplified, made pure.

"If I lived in the West, I wouldn't be lazy like you," said Selami. I'd started to pretend not to hear him. "I bet you I could immigrate there, no problem. The officials would love me."

I became exasperated whenever he refused to go into a restaurant not displaying Pepsi signs. He talked of McDonald's the way I talked of Mt. Ararat.

Then suddenly everything changed. Perhaps we became tired of bickering. On a park bench by the Bosphorus, he started to run his fingers through my hair. It's socially acceptable for men to show affection for each other; you see them walking hand in hand all the time. Selami asked me to put my head in his lap. The folds of his cotton khaki pants felt soft against the back of my head; beneath were his hard, thin thighs. He stroked my cheeks, jawline.

He spoke sadly. "I think I will probably live all my life in Izmir. After the military I will be a tobacco exporter like my father. You can come visit me."

"That would be nice."

"Yes," said Selami. And with that he looked up and out over the water.

My last day in Van, I awoke, took a deep breath and noticed my body didn't shiver. I removed an article of clothing.

As I waited at the beach, a squat carbuncled man in his underwear ran up, "Come, come," he cried, his hand beat in my face like a bird's little wing. I always follow those who beckon. But the man's pushiness was irritating.

Still, I let myself be pulled along and followed him up the beige stone outcropping that rose from the beach, a series of irregular steps full of pocky holes and protruding globules, as if the entire mount were once molten rock that had bubbled and popped in the sun, then solidified. In the top a crater opening into a sheltered cove and below, the water. The sun beamed down; here everything was lit up.

I sat on a lopsided ledge, peeked over the crater lip, saw the whole beach. The little man sat opposite, smiling back. Sparse black hairs made diagonal stripes on his bulbous forehead and like all Turkish men, he had a mustache. Peculiar, red, wart-like growths sprouted on his chest and arms.

"I live Van," he said. "And you?"

"Canada."

"Ah yes, yes," and then, "you *güzel*." I'd always used this word when people asked my opinion of Turkey. It meant 'beautiful.' I shifted on the bumpy ledge that suddenly felt uncomfortable.

He stared at my bare forearms and I wished I'd kept my sweater on. I looked at

my skin, disturbingly white and bright as if lit up within by thousand tiny lightbulbs I couldn't turn off. The body betrayed. Muslims were wise to keep it covered.

I picked up a stone and flung it towards the lake.

"Ah!" said the man, his eyes followed its trajectory. "*Kulte, kulte,*" he said.

"*Kulte.*" He wanted me to repeat it.

"*Kulte,*" I said politely.

Kulte was Turkish for 'stone.'

He touched a patch of dirt in a hole. "*Hosi.*"

"*Hosi.*"

He pointed and moved his finger and said, "*Parmak.*" Turkish for 'finger'?

"*Parmak.*"

I relaxed. He taught me "eye," "nose," "mouth," "chin." I repeated the parts of his body to him. "Elbow," "chest" and then he said "*kamis,*" Turkish for penis and pulled his out.

I sat stunned. This was the first sexual organ I'd seen in Turkey. Evidently he did not believe in modesty wraps. With two fingers he made scissor-like motions at its head, implying, I suppose, he was circumcised. "And you?"

I pretended not to understand.

Again he repeated, "*kamis.*" He gestured; he wanted to see mine.

I felt like a fool. Should I have realized this was going on when he asked me up here? I felt the heavy, protective weight of my double-knit shirt, my heavy wool pants on my still-weak body. I said, "No thank you, I've had food poisoning."

He stared, statue-still. Had he understood? He pointed once at my trousers and said firmly, "Yes. Yes."

Turning my head I saw, below on the beach, Nihal running along the edge of the water.

"Well, it's time for me to go." I stood up.

"Go?" he said. "Go?" Then, "Not go!" He began motioning furiously towards his swollen penis and pointing at my hand. I pretended not to notice what was happening.

"It was nice meeting you," I said. I reached forward to shake his hand and when his sweating fingers pressed into mine, his whole body convulsed and started trembling.

I'd read homosexuality was illegal in Kurdistan, punishable by 100 lashes or death, whichever came first. This man had probably never left Van, was surely married, maybe had never been with a man but had waited for one. On the beach suddenly he sees a rare Westerner who would surely disappear the next day and not say a word to anyone, a white man from a permissive land where people will do anything. His only chance?

I looked into his creasing face, gaping agony-flecked eyes, need emanated from him like heat. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry." His hand still urgently grasped mine, his penis glowed poker-red, he could hardly speak.

I abruptly jerked my hand from his and, as I neared the top of the ridge, heard a choked cry, half-longing, half-pain.

I left him there, one hand outstretched, his body shaking, an embodiment of pure, untrammelled, exposed desire on the edge of the clear, faultless waters of Lake Van and in my imagination he stands there still.

As I ran down the stone hill, I felt I was swooping down from the sky to Nihal who was crouched extracting a rock from the earth. I felt suddenly stronger, full of a strange courage.

"Nihal" I said happily. "I'm going to Mt. Ararat tomorrow. I'm positive I can go there." And when I looked up, I was sure I could see its peaks in the distance. Its perfectly straight, glacier-frozen tip touched the sky.

"Thank you for speaking to me the first day in the bazaar," I said to Selami. "It has been a fun time."

Selami said it's a Turkish custom that when two friends part, they exchange an article of clothing so whenever they wear them, they think of the other person. He wanted the shirt I was wearing. "I like the collar, it's so American."

I removed my shirt and gave it to him.

When we said good-bye, we did the Muslim kiss. Of course I did it wrong. The lips are just supposed to graze the side of the cheek but I turned and pressed mine right into his hot skin.

When I said goodbye to Nihal, I made sure my sweatshirt zipper was done up. Already she had left me and had the unfocussed gaze she got in the late afternoon, re-

entering her fog of mourning.

We both half-smiled and said "goodbye" at the same time.

Then I turned and jumped over the river of excrement. Halfway across, a flash of panic as I thought I was falling, but my foot touched a hard, concrete bank and I made it. Just barely.

The Innocence of Water

I was confused when the lawyer said we'd sue for emotional suffering. Wasn't some suffering unavoidable? And when he said \$15,000 could be divided into allotments of \$1,700 for swimmers still having nightmares, \$1,800 if on medication, the amount higher for those in the deep end, and steadily increasing towards the pool's centre, where I'd been, it was as if a wave washed over me and again I was in a sudden darkness, watching plaster-specks whirl about my body, in a silent space where nothing is measured.

The lawyer cleared his throat. "Those having near-death experiences should receive most."

I put my hand on the table's varnished, mahogany top, an oblong rectangle shaped very much like a swimming-pool and supported by four cylindrical iron legs, each one a metre long and two centimetres in diameter. Trivial details, but I've learned banalities determine everything. For example, the streetcar had been late that day, but not late enough for me to turn around and just go home. Also, when I arrived, everybody was already in the water. What would've happened, we wondered later, if the on-deck push-ups and sit-ups had gone on longer? Would there have been mayhem, a frenzied jostling to get into the pool, or would people have run along the deck?

I'd approached our lane as Christopher was swimming up.

"Hi Tim," he called.

"Hi." Fixing my goggles, I put one foot in the pool. "It's frigging soup, today."

"I know." He treaded water, red-faced. "It's a sauna. And the air's so humid, you can hardly breathe."

Humid air, the triviality that caused everything. Later, at municipal meetings and on *CityPulse News* the city architect explained. "We estimate the air humidity was 90%, abnormally high due partly to the above-average water temperature that had been raised to 24° for the senior-swim that took place earlier that afternoon. The porous chip-rock in the ceiling, which normally absorbed some humidity, became saturated and, over the years, the moisture eventually penetrated and eroded the glue-base holding the inner ceiling to the building's outer shell. Though only two years old, the ceiling was already slightly damaged. Some swimmers said that a week prior to the incident, they'd noticed discoloured spots and slight bulges in the panelling.

When the ceiling began to fall, most of us were at the end of the deep half, waiting for instructions from the coach. Diana, his assistant, was doing paperwork on deck. We've never been able to agree on who saw it first. The ceiling creased slightly in the middle, as the northern part began to curve down above our heads. I was saying to Christopher, "I couldn't find my bike wheel...", heard a shout, turned, Diana jumped up, cried "Holy shit," ran, the ceiling touched the wall clock as she dived into the pool with her clothes on. This was the action that marked before and after. As if a stopwatch had been pressed, everyone pushed from the pool edge, started swimming quickly forward. I didn't understand what was happening but instinctively followed. Breathing to the side, I saw the entire, white-tiled ceiling sloped at a perfect 30° to the

pool; a thundering bang as one end struck the deck behind; next breath it sloped 25°, then 15°. It first covered the deck, then the pool's deep end, the shallow part last. I was halfway across the deep end and the ceiling hung just a few feet above my back as John passed, arms pummeling furiously. I thought what was happening might be funny; when the ceiling struck us, it'd break into bits of styrofoam and laughing we'd swim about floating debris, throwing pieces at each other.

The ceiling struck my back with surprising force and was like a great hand pushing me underwater. If I'd known what was to follow, I would've taken a big breath of air before going under. Suddenly, an underwater darkness, something hard above the head that blocked out the light. A loud thud somewhere, were pillars falling into the pool too? I moved my legs, scissor-kicking, lifted my arms and tried to push upwards, but the object above was immovable as a wall. I felt along what I imagined was a square ceiling panel, searching for an edge, some opening, but at the end another panel seemed to be attached. Frenzied I felt quickly along the second panel and at its end was a third, and then at the end of this panel, an edge I could reach around, but there was something hard above. Were there pieces stacked on top of each other? My lungs screamed for oxygen, and I imagined briefly I was at the pool bottom with a million layers of solid debris above me.

I then felt along to a fourth panel, a fifth, a sixth, water and plaster-flecks filling my goggles, my forehead being cut on ceiling nails, and at the seventh panel, I started inhaling water.

"The ceiling blocks were held together with water-resistant tape and sepien

glue," the architect said, "which unfortunately held together too well. The fallen ceiling blanketed the entire pool except for the top eighth of the shallow end. The only opening left was a narrow space around the pool's inside edge where the ceiling on deck broke from the water-bound section, plus a few small holes in the centre where light fixtures had been. Luckily the lane-ropes stretched but didn't snap, preventing the ceiling from sinking to the pool bottom."

Days later I found myself wandering the streets of my city, gazing up at office buildings, the brutal straight lines of their walls and roofs, rows of identical square windows placed equidistant to each other, floors a series of stacked parallel lines. If one collapsed onto another, it'd fall onto the next and so on. If you remove just one small piece of a wall, the whole high-rise topples sideways; I imagined desks falling through the air, filing cabinets, steel beams, 10-storey iron pipes hurtling into the pavement amidst a soft splatter of bodies and rising spray of shattered glass. Pushing a cart down the supermarket aisle, I noticed the ceiling measured about 20 times larger than the short walls. In the Eaton's Centre, I watched thousands of people on stairways, bridges, moving in and out of labyrinthine tunnels, and thought, it's an act of faith that helps people to get through the day safely.

In my apartment, there were footsteps on the ceiling above and I wondered where my upstairs neighbour would land if he fell into my living-room. My hardwood floor shines; if it collapsed and my body hit a sofa in the flat below, would I be badly hurt? If I landed on a T.V., would I get glass in my skin? Where's the best place to land?

I went to the library and read that walls and ceilings joined at perfect 90° angles are more secure than those at 89° or 91°. Later, my roommate entered, saw me on a ladder and said, "What're you doing?"

In the subway, mere metre-thick tunnel walls hold back tons of inpushing earth. On board, I practised holding my breath between stations. I could go one stop with no trouble; two was harder; I tried to go three, not letting myself breath until the doors opened, then emerged gasping on the subway platform.

I finally went into Union Station where the ceiling is one of the highest in the city, a grey stone arch. Touching the scabs on my forehead, I thought, if it had been this ceiling, the grittiness would have left linear scratches rather than dots.

The metal escalator steps banged beneath my climbing feet as I entered my bank's stone-walled lobby. I live in a world of hard substances. Sitting in the bathtub, I squeezed a facecloth of water over my scratched arms. Never had my body seemed so fragile.

I only felt soothed when I saw things through Constantine's eyes. The coach was the only person who hadn't gone into the water. He stood safely on the shallow-end deck and watched the ceiling descend from the sky like a massive, down-floating projectile from another world. One moment, there were cries and the roar of water, then silence, all his swimmers vanishing beneath a landscape of grey stucco dunes, squat crater-lipped volcanoes and wire-like plants. All so beautiful, simple and still. Only a faint plaster-dust drifting in the air.

A week later the ground opened and again the roaring of water, my world

imploding, an iron slab as wide as the ocean beating up and down on the top of my head.

A special post-trauma workshop paid for by the city government. We sat in a square-like formation that I thought very much resembled a swimming-pool and, one by one, described what we'd experienced. We were encouraged to be as graphic as possible. But as people spoke, I couldn't take my eyes from a black wire dangerously stapled to the wall and running up to the ceiling juncture that I was sure wasn't a right angle.

I heard things I never knew could happen. Some people in the shallow end who could touch bottom tried banging their heads against the barrier, broke through yet emerged with bloodied, swollen skulls. Tom, safely at the side and untouched by the fallen ceiling, dived under to rescue others, got lost in the dark and was trapped himself. A woman's goggles fell off, plaster filled her eyes and at the pool bottom she lost all sense of direction. Then the last-minute-of-life stories. Julia: "I wanted to cry out, 'I don't want it to happen like this, it's dark, nobody can see me.'" The doctor in lane 3: "I thought of all the ways I'd ever considered going. This wasn't one of them." John: "I thought I had a choice and honestly wasn't sure I wanted to go on but decided, yes I would, and then started bashing my head against the ceiling. I didn't care what happened to my body; I just wanted to get out." Voices rose in a chorus of wails, people sobbed, faces in hands as, terrified, I watched a part of the cord where I was sure a live wire was exposed, a spark only had to touch the wallpaper and all our bruised bodies would be devoured by flames.

Then the doctor asked me what my name was and told me to tell my story. I shifted on the couch. Everyone seemed to be leaning forward. Was there no choice but to speak? Plaster-specks whirled before my eyes.

"I got stuck," I said, head lowered. "I just got stuck." The room was still, expectant. "And there was a hole just off to my right. I didn't know it was there. There was no light coming through it." I suddenly wondered why not and looking up, asked, "Why was there no light?" My friends gazed, listening. No light? A technical detail I now placed in my brain to ponder later. "And there in the dark just briefly—" I squeezed my fingers and said it because I had to—"I thought I was dying." I looked off to one side. "That's what I thought." Before my eyes again a murky darkness, somewhere rhythmic thuds echoed. "And my last thoughts were—" It's easy to say, this is funny,— "Now I'm dying and all because I joined a stupid swim team." Banalities. Banalities decide everything. Then some swimmers thankfully tried to laugh. "Then my parents who I never see--suddenly they popped into my mind and I thought, they'll never get over this. Their lives are ruined." The rushing streams had pulled the goggles from my eyes as my hands beat upwards like little wings while, below, my legs thrashed in empty space. Why had water always seemed so innocent? I bathed in it, washed my face in the morning, kept a glass of it beside my bed as a child, but in the trapped darkness it'd become hostile, an enemy pushing into my eye-sockets, filling my mouth, sliding its fingers down my throat, descending slowly into my lungs. When my panic escalated to blind terror, every sentence in my head exploded into incomprehensible fragments and my brain dissolved and became like water whipping

against the inside of my skull. "And then suddenly I was above the water," I said exhaling. "I'd come up through a hole in the barrier." All around there'd been a moonscape of grey stucco dunes, piles of jagged rocks on shore, above, a black sky of dangling wires. "I can't recall any moment of transition though I guess there was one. I was just down and then I was up."

The doctor finally said, "Thank you," and his words were like two iron doors closing. There was a ringing in my ears. From the end table I lifted my glass of Coke, took a drink.

One year later I received a cheque in the mail, and it was as if a wave washed over me, then receded. Safely on dry land for twelve months, I now stood statue-still in my metal-bright kitchen where drawers rose in perfect rows all around me. I lowered myself to a chair that squeaked when I sat on it.

I studied the crisp, clean piece of paper. The banal becomes significant becomes banal. I flicked its sharp edge between my fingers. When I turned it around in the air, nothing happened, no dams exploded, no floods were unleashed. I stared at the number composed of fixed, precise zeros, each as hard as nuts that can be cracked between your teeth.

I am now in love with mathematics. $1+1=2$, $2+2=4$...is the simple refrain I use to get through the day. All the troubles of this world can be written on a piece of paper you carry in your pocket. I took mine to the bank and gave it to a man who stamped out a perfect rectangle full of parallel lines.

All around, water flows from taps, runs down pipes into sewers that lead into

streams and into pipes and back again. When I try to hold something definite in my hands, it flows through my fingers and is gone. To say I don't swim anymore is a lie. I do the back stroke from one lane end to the other, studying the arches, cross-beams and lights of the pool's new ceiling. I know it as an astronomer knows the sky, or a botanist his plants, or I my own name. I look at the ceiling. I look at the sky. I look at my skin; I marvel at the thinness of this layer separating inside from outside.

Come walk the streets of my city of imperfect angles. Each year the change of seasons cracks the pavement and the ground trembles when a subway train passes below. Buildings are playing-card fortresses that will collapse if we exhale too suddenly. But I know this is nothing to get upset about. Some things fall down but some things stay up. Besides, we live in houses and there's no other choice. Perhaps, if we take it on faith that the wall you hang a picture on will stay standing, it will. For a while anyway.

Believing in Paris

When I took Claude with me to Paris, I had no idea it'd be his last trip. Would I have invited him if I'd known the truth? I like to think so but am not sure. This is not a morality tale meant to showcase ethically right and wrong behaviour and their effects on the larger world. Claude was too complex to put in one slot and I no longer feel I know how to judge anything. The fact is that when we boarded the Air France plane in Toronto, he'd already contracted HIV and was well into the final stages of full-blown AIDS; already his kidneys had stopped functioning and there were multiple tumours on his liver and spleen; yet, as is the terrible irony of his disease, he looked perfectly healthy. To me anyway. No one knew the secret that Claude carried about and carefully guarded except for an anonymous clinic doctor who'd said, "Take these pills and your shingles will go away; by the way you've got HIV," seven years ago, in the early days of the disease when people didn't know if compassion was permitted.

Why Claude never confided in me, his friend, is a question I can never answer. Did he think I'd be appalled? That I'd judge and reject him? Was he that ashamed? Why would he feel shame with me, and why does every question about Claude lead to another question and why do they all unleash such a torrent of anger in me?

A week after his death I sat stiffly at my parents' kitchen table as my mother said grace over the casserole. My parents feel that homosexuality is, if not sinful,

undesirable and AIDS a punishment if not for evil, foolhardiness. As I moved my fork in circles through the mix of hamburger, carrots, mashed potatoes and peas, I kept thinking, should I tell them what happened to the quiet, young man my father had so kindly driven to the airport? Should I throw this boulder on the table?

Unfortunately, when all the details of Claude's life finally became public, even people who loved him concluded he should've died sooner. Sometimes I wonder why I had him as a friend in the first place. Why did our friendship last so long, and why did I invite him, of all people, to come with me to Paris?

Already in the airport lounge he'd started complaining.

"You probably didn't book the right plane; you always screw things up."

"Air France is late; airlines are often late."

"You should've booked another one."

I'd had to do all the bookings as Claude was dyslexic and couldn't read--another one of his secrets, but this one he'd told me about. Is that why I assumed he'd tell me everything else?

When the loudspeaker announced the boarding, Claude quieted down, and later, as we walked through the wind-rattled aircraft tunnel, he moved silently, his head lowered, saying nothing. His sudden meekness assured me. He wasn't afraid of flying but was often nervous about to unfamiliar places. Paris would intimidate him and make him easy to get along with.

He carried a large shopping bag full of bottles of Italian cologne he'd just bought at the duty-free, not for Paris, "But later," he'd said, "Delorial at \$70 is a good

deal.”

Once seated in the plane's stiff orange seats, I reached ahead into the bulging pocket full of shining in-flight magazines. We were going to Paris, actually going to Paris. I realized that if I'd been alone, I might have felt more stressed. I'd invited Claude partly to soothe the transition between home and hotel. I played with the plastic tray supported by two aluminium bars, clicked it shut, let it fall open, repeatedly collapsing and uncollapsing it. In just eight hours we'd be having croissants and *café au lait* at a sidewalk café as a street musician serenaded us with Edith Piaf tunes on his accordion.

A tall, thin flight attendant with a mustache and a blond streak in his hair stood before us and pretended to pull a life-saver cord as a bilingual voice-over explained evacuation procedures.

I said to Claude, "The steward's really cute."

Claude grinned at him and said slyly, "I know."

Between my legs I clutched my dictionary and exercise book. I'd taken a month-long French course in preparation for my trip. I loved speaking a language that wasn't my own. The words seemed to lack the weight they had in English and I felt as if I were speaking in code, as if what I was saying wasn't real and I couldn't be held responsible for anything. The Parisiens, unlike the Québécois, who annoyingly switch into English as soon as they hear my accent, would respond in their own language, thus keeping me safely enmeshed in what seemed a dream-world.

I think I'd invited Claude along because he was the only francophone I knew.

Still, he usually refused to speak French with me because I had such trouble deciphering his northern Ontario accent. "I'd have to use baby-talk for you to understand."

The flight-lights flashed.

"Put on your seatbelt, Claude."

And then it happened: a rumbling throughout the plane as, outside, the pavement stripes blurred together, the entire cabin slanted skyward, the sudden thud of the retracting landing-gear like the slam of a door locking out the past forever--we were in the air, heading towards Paris, the City of Dreams. I felt I'd burst through an invisible yet very real barrier that had surrounded me on all sides, imprisoning me in Toronto, where I lived in a match-box-sized apartment and worked at a job I disliked. I taught English to rich, spoiled tourists with whom I had to be ever servile and ingratiating. I was embarrassingly underpaid, yet the recession had created an employer's market and I couldn't find another job; so I spent much of my free time in coffee shops and bars searching for a boyfriend who'd make me forget my frustrations. Months passed, years passed and I was perennially single without knowing why. Could people sense my desperation? In France none of this would matter. It was my turn to be in an unknown place where I could now revel in the unbridgeable differences between myself and the world around me.

Claude gazed out over the passing fields, the white-blue coast of Lake Ontario. It was his first time in a plane and I'd thought the trip would be a treat for him; I really was curious to see how he'd react to everything: flights, landings, Europe. It was hard

to even imagine him there. How would his ability to charm strangers play itself out in France? He knew nothing about Europe and so could only go where I'd take him, which suited me. There's nothing worse than having a travelling companion who's got a competing itinerary.

Claude turned back from the window, his face expressionless.

When dinner was served, as expected, he flirted with our flight attendant. This was his special skill. "I guess you've been slicing up vegetables all day," he said smiling. Claude's banter was innocent, inoffensive and frivolous, something I can't mimic. Whenever I meet someone, I get too intense and knotted-up inside as if my every sentence were deathly important and the world will come crashing down if I put one word in the wrong place. Numerous times in bars, at parties, Claude came and carelessly swooped away the person I was talking with.

After dinner, coming back from the washroom, Claude discovered the fridge where they stored the paid-for drinks and chips. Of course he stole several. He arrived at my seat, laughing. His face was lit-up, one of his eyebrows raised comically.

"Oh Claude," I said annoyed as he stuffed his booty in his backpack.

"You should go get some. They're free." He looked at me and smiled.

Soon I found an Air France comment card in the pocket in front of me. I took out a pen and said, "How about we write, 'Nice flight attendant'? Here where it asks about uniforms--'Our guy would be better naked.'" We both laughed out loud, trying to cover our mouths so people wouldn't hear.

Then Claude grinned and said in his lightly-accented voice, "You should just

draw a dirty picture in the comment box." I again burst into laughter, covering my mouth. Claude turned away smirking, glanced bemused up at the ceiling.

Was this why I had Claude as a friend? For these occasional moments of fun?

I can picture the exterior of the plane: the straight, red stripes running along the sides, the symmetrical nose-tip and wings perfectly equidistant to each other, the plane balanced hovering in the empty void between cloud and outer atmosphere. I see myself sitting beside Claude, teaching him to play cards, no more aware of him than of the fathomless expanse outside our pin-prick windows. "The ace is worth more than the numbered cards," I said staring at the pinched-lipped face of the Queen of Spades, the somber frown of the King, each surrounded by a red, round-cornered rectangle that seemed to contain the beginning and end of everything.

I only realized how little I knew of this man sitting next to me, later, much later --at his funeral in fact, where I heard many things for the first time: how Claude had left an abusive family when he was fourteen and lived for some years as a vagabond, surviving by forging cheques; before he was twenty he'd fathered two children who are now living in Kapuskasing. At the funeral parlour there were dozens of people I'd never seen before or even heard of. Where did he get so many friends and what had made him so popular? I only knew him as a highly-strung nursing assistant who'd accompany me to bars where he'd complain about being single and how hard it was to get sex, though he seemed to get plenty. I can't find any connection between his troubled past and the man I knew, with his over-refined love of perfume and jewellery, his collection of elaborate, bulging amethysts, his apartment where I sat tensely on a

stiff-backed, chiffon-rimmed chair before a kidney, glass coffee-table as he yelled at me, "Don't touch anything. You're like a little kid always moving things out of place." Why did he keep so many secrets and why can't I accept that I wasn't privy to everything?

On our first day in Paris, not surprisingly Claude had never seemed so lost. He gazed wide-eyed down crowded, stone-walled streets, stared blankly at flashing signs he couldn't understand, though they were in his mother tongue. He breathed deeply as we walked through labyrinthine subway tunnels whose twists and turns were too irregular to memorize.

I could barely contain my happiness. I practically ran from one cobbled road to another, past intricately spired, domed cathedrals that rose suddenly from around corners like hallucinations, down twisting, serpentine alleys that opened miraculously into tree-rimmed squares containing giant basins where water showered over half-naked, stone mermaids. Further we went along sidewalks bustling with women in shin-length trousers, handkerchiefs worn round their necks with precise carelessness, men clothed in horizontal-striped shirts beneath Italian suit jackets, people I could never dress like, could never be like; on and on we continued past storefronts that changed abruptly from windows full of beaded mangoes and kumquats, to sober rows of baguettes lined up like artillery, to patisserie displays of rippling, tusk-shaped meringues, choco-cubes glittering like unsolidified tar arranged in precise, geometric patterns. Two shopkeepers stood shouting at each other, a mustached woman wearing a top hat sang, "*Je ne regrette rien*", a fire-breather in psychedelic headband spit a

flame above our heads. Nothing in this city seemed real. We skipped over the famous, clear water flowing beneath Peugeots parked akimbo along the sidewalk curb and then--alleys full of cafés where ladies in comma-shaped sunglasses, and old men in wonderfully stereotypical berets sat reading books or holding cigarettes above disk-top tables with striped, wood-post legs; a silent sea of mannequins making the vague gestures of the barely human, as bow-tied waiters flew back and forth like frenzied, paper marionettes caught in turbulent winds that would never stop blowing.

I spoke constantly to Claude, explaining everything, but I was really speaking to release my new energy.

We continued down lanes, across squares, through parkettes, in and out of bazaars, through clouds smelling of cologne, diesel fumes, baked bread. It seemed you could never get to the very centre of the city, as its maze-like streets led to worlds within worlds, and I thought if I were here a lifetime I would never know every crack and crevice but could insatiably devour newness every day. I spoke French as much as I could, asking people for directions when I didn't care where I was going, requesting menu suggestions from maitre d's when the last thing I wanted to do was sit. When people tossed back snide, curt comments, I didn't care; their language wasn't real, it was all play, a wonderful game and nothing could hurt me.

At noon I realized I hadn't thought of my Toronto life for five hours and was proud of myself.

We had lunch in a *brassière*. Claude ordered sausages. I wanted ham or chicken or cheese in a croissant, anything in a croissant. And an espresso for dessert.

Claude sat silently across from me, gazing over my shoulder. Occasionally he'd glance timidly to one side. He'd hardly spoken all morning. He ate his sausage in very slow, deliberate bites. Leaning forward he quietly asked me how much it all cost. When I said, "About 12 dollars", he just closed his eyes.

I loved watching the overweight waiter running about and making change from the money in his apron, peremptorily charging behind the back booth for no apparent reason. The sunlight reflecting on the silver-rimmed table hurt my eyes and I needed sleep. I read the foods on the chalkboard, trying to see how many I could translate.

"Claude, what's *espadon* mean?"

In a daze, not looking at me, he said quietly, "I don't know." He folded his hands carefully on the table before him.

If I'd looked closely, I would have noticed that an HIV-induced rash had started up on his forehead, destroying the hair follicles, causing his hairline to recede. Much later I read of these and other effects AIDS has on the body. As Claude sat in the restaurant, was he thinking about his illness? How conscious of it was he, and how did his awareness or lack thereof affect his last week?

He stared ahead in a stunned torpor induced by fatigue, jet-lag, culture shock, and what else? His characteristic smile wouldn't light. He was too tired to joke with the waiter. I'd thought that since Claude was francophone, he'd be a bridge between me and France. He could strike up conversations with Parisians and then introduce me. That clearly wasn't going to happen.

He came to when we had to pay the bill.

"It's very expensive," he said. His eyebrows remained flat, level.

"I told you the exchange rate is bad for us. You just have to accept it."

Though Claude spent tons of money on things like jewellery, he hated paying for food or transportation, transitory things that left you with nothing concrete.

I used his own argument to make amends for our less-than luxurious hotel room. When I first saw the room with its sagging beds, cracked wall mirror, the shower on another floor, I was afraid Claude would have a fit, but when I told him it was the cheapest and why waste money on accommodation, he seemed satisfied.

The next morning after having slept 14 hours, we both rose refreshed and energized. I soon discovered that Claude's aggressive cockiness, which fear had tamed and subdued the day before, had returned with force and fury.

It all started at breakfast when he thought the restaurant menu prices were too high. After wandering for an hour and looking at dozens of sidewalk boards, we finally had to go to a *supermarché* to buy bread, cheese and orange juice we'd eat on a bench somewhere. I'd been looking forward to having a *café au lait* on a *terrasse*. We couldn't find any parks and were forced to sit and eat on the edge of a fountain like, I thought, tacky American tourists. Embarrassed I drank from a tin can, crumbs falling down my shirt.

Then I took Claude to *la cathédrale* Notre Dame.

He said, "What are you doing walking so fast; this isn't a race."

We stood in a square crowded with pointing tourists, screeching pigeons and vendors shouting, "*Sandwiches au jambon, coca.*" I was happy to see that Claude was

impressed by the cathedral. He said he'd never seen such a large church. He gazed into its beige rectangular, stone face bordered by two towers standing like immense, upended dominoes. I studied the whirling, circular, stained-glass windows below the row of stern-faced, gesturing apostles. In my guide-book there were photos of goblin-gargoyles that crouched on all fours, their tongues flickering like little knives, but I searched the cathedral's front and couldn't see them anywhere.

Claude asked me to take a picture of him. I remember his face in the frame: eyes half-slitted, his large, broad smile backdropped against the colossal, somber, stone tower on one half of the photo and a cloudless, insanely blue sky on the other.

Soon we passed beneath the red, flapping banner, *L'Année de la Conception* and were in the dark, dank interior. Though pink and blue light flooded the huge room, the fetid, cement walls and wide, obstructing pillars made me feel I was in a subterranean cavern far underground. The swollen shadows of candle-flames flickered hauntingly on walls, the incense-laden air full of vague, echoing voices; somewhere the sound of water trickled. We sat in a pew, the rectangular, wood back jutting into our shoulder blades.

After a few minutes Claude and I got into an argument. He wanted to go the front where people crouched before what he thought a very campy statue of a crowned Mary with hooker-red lipstick and holding a silver box that looked like a toaster.

I said, "It's disrespectful. Look, there are signs saying, 'No photos,'"

"They can't see me. And if they do, who cares? They don't know who I am."

He smiled his contagious smile, but I refused to smile back.

I quickly launched into an impassioned, condescending speech full of historical references and cultural analysis, intimidating him through his implied lack of knowledge until he reluctantly agreed to accompany me out of the cathedral.

Back on the street I said we'd go to Sacre-Coeur.

"What's that?"

"Another church."

Then Claude exploded. "We were just in one. Why do you want to go to another? You're not even Catholic."

I began to realize that before now I'd only ever dealt with Claude in small doses, short evenings where any sudden irateness could be easily contained and controlled. Paris did not seem to cow him; it stimulated him

I finally persuaded him to go to Sacre-Coeur by saying that we'd see some interesting things on the way, streets with paintings on display, a statue in a square, "and Pigalle, the sex area."

Claude's face brightened. "Wow." Then he laughed. "That'd be fun." Then he made a little playful leap in the air, turned on the sidewalk and smiling looked back at me.

Together we started up the hill leading to Montparnasse and the Red-Light District.

Though dying and infected with sexually-transmitted disease, Claude's favourite form of recreation was still sex.

Does it sound as if I'm judging him? I don't want to. I would rather Claude

existed in a special realm outside the Judeo-Christian categories my religious upbringing has carved into my brain. But it's so hard to resist the desire to judge, pigeon-hole, categorize. Of course I would never blame him for having AIDS; safe sex didn't exist when he contracted HIV and small yet catastrophic mistakes do not make people evil. But it is difficult to recount what I later learned of Claude without coming down firmly on one side or the other. I know my parents would judge him instantaneously.

Later at their kitchen table I sat staring into the hamburger meat, peas, broccoli heads, carrot slices swirling up and over one another, in and out of an ochre sauce that steamed incessantly as my mother talked of Uncle Jim's operation, the new pastor at the church... Sometimes it seems my life has always taken place on a silent, merciless, moral grid, a right-wrong checkerboard whose intersecting lines are relentless, steel-solid and sharp as knives. I can not lift my eyes from the ground and if I could, I'm sure the air would be full of lines too. In my mother's glossy magazines there are articles about people with AIDS who indiscriminately infect others, and I have read such articles myself in *The Toronto Sun* and *The National Post*. Didn't Preston Manning once call for a ban on people with HIV entering Canada? As I write these words, I want to say, look, Claude is not typical, and I don't know why I am publicizing his case. Should I shut up now? Am I being bad?

At Claude's funeral during the eulogy the Priest said, "It is tragic that so many young folk have died because of HIV." Afterwards some mourners approached and accused him of making false statements. Confused he turned to the older, bearded man

he'd consulted with about the funeral and who'd been one of Claude's secret boyfriends. When the man said, "Yes, Claude died of AIDS-related illness. Dr. Finstein has confirmed this," it was as if an electric shock went through the crowd. Some people there had been Claude's lovers for extended periods of time; I know of three who were regular "fuck-buddies". Apparently Claude had always refused to have sex safely because "I'm clean, so if the other person isn't, it's his job to rubber himself." My friend Bill once said, "Claude always chose the nicest, the most innocent, inexperienced boys." Sometimes Claude would point someone out in a crowd and cruelly say, "He's got AIDS; you can tell by how he walks," and he once told me he dumped a guy because he heard the guy was infected. How could he lie so unselfconsciously and keep up such a polished act? Or did Claude not feel he was lying? Was the truth simply too troublesome? Can I find some unintersecting line outside the moral grid?

We never got to Sacre-Coeur as Claude got waylaid on the way, and we spent the afternoon in sleazy porno shops. He laughed as he flipped through magazines showing women having sex with pigs, a man sucking a horse-dick, people eating shit, photos of gay sex more graphic than we were allowed to see in Canada. He wanted to go into the live-sex clubs until I told him they were expensive. He looked at me and smiling, pretended to sigh dramatically. I can't say I disliked our afternoon. My conception of Paris as an unreal, liberating city again surfaced as I realized I was having an experience not possible in Toronto.

Exiting onto rue Marbeuf I finally saw, in the distance, unbelievably, *L'Arc de*

Triomphe.

I began walking quickly; Claude followed me. The best thing of all: we had to walk along the most famous street in the world, the Champs-Élysées. All round were flashing lights, posh, luxury shops displaying designer suits, fur coats, gold-jewelled watches, and sprawling outdoor restaurants bustling beneath expansive, fringed canopies. We passed windows of impeccably dressed, slit-eyed mannequins frozen in the most affected poses of snobbery imaginable, their heads held high, wrists bent elegantly. We squeezed by block-long line-ups of people outside cinemas; I saw a billboard that showed a woman clubbing a man in the head with the Eiffel Tower. The streams of people thickened, flowed at a faster pace; as we ascended the hill, cars honked louder, lights flashed brighter as Claude grew weaker by the second. The adrenalin that the shock of arrival in France had caused to surge through his system could no longer energize his dying body. His head drooped, his feet shuffled along the sidewalk. I glanced at his pale face and assumed he was still jet-lagged.

Straight ahead, at the summit of the hill stood the magnificent stone arch that each second grew larger. I could soon make out the black, rearing stallions pulling the carts on the top. Finally we stood on the edge of an 8-lane-wide stream of traffic that roared round the island containing the Arc. I turned to Claude and said, "We'll run across. Be careful you don't get hit." I leapt into the first lane, dodged a car, Claude stumbled drunkenly behind me, I crossed lane 2, 3, 4, and amidst the honking cars and overpowering smell of diesel fuel, I sprinted 5, 6, 7, 8, and was suddenly at the base of the Arc. I turned, Claude hobbled onto the island panting; from this height I could see

the whole city that spun round on all sides, as just above my head, the night-black stallions galloped on towards victory.

Claude was standing still with his eyes closed. Then he opened them. He breathed in and out slowly, very slowly.

Then he turned to me and said something. I didn't understand.

"What?" I said.

"I shit myself." I stared at his smiling face, not understanding. "I got shit in my pants."

He shit himself. On the Champs-Élysées. I repeated the words in my head, not believing. Claude shit his pants on the Champs-Élysées? Claude shit himself on the Champs-Élysées. How could he do such a thing? Suddenly the stallions, the Arc, the entire whirling, glorious, wonder-filled city collapsed, and my mind shrank to accommodate this humiliating banality.

Now we had a practical problem: what were we going to do with Claude's shit?

We discovered a pedestrian walkway on the north side of the circle.

Finally on avenue Carnot, Claude pointed at a café. "I'll use their washroom."

"They'll make you buy something."

"I won't."

I refused to go in with him and stood waiting on the street. An old man in a kimono was playing a saxophone in front of a swimsuit-boutique.

Ten minutes later Claude returned. He said, "When I was cleaning myself, some guy started banging on the door and shouting. By his voice I could tell he was a

stupid Paki so I told him to fuck off."

We followed the downward-sloping street to our hotel. I didn't speak to Claude all the way. For the first time I consciously regretted bringing him here. I could've managed Paris on my own. It's not as stressful as I imagine to travel alone.

Claude bought a bottle of water, drank some, wanted to store the container in my backpack.

"No, it'll rip the seams," I said peevishly.

"Oh c'mon, you're just being difficult."

Back in the hotel room I lay on my bed, silent. Claude was changing his clothes. I turned, saw his now-scrawny, ribbed chest, his tendon-like thighs and swelling knees. Of course nothing looked out of the ordinary to me. I'd just assumed Claude had stopped going to the gym.

A week after he died, I became obsessed with my own body. I stood before the mirror fondling my neck, the skin below my jaw, my chest-muscles, testes, searching for swelling or discolouration. Did I have a sore throat? Though I knew the disease couldn't be transmitted through casual contact, I was ashamed to find I kept thinking about the water glass we'd shared in the hotel room, the toilet seat we'd both sat on, and then years ago, so far in the past, the memory is a mere pencil-sketch with the important details missing, we'd had sex. Just once.

It was a few months after I'd "come out". I'd just recently started going to bars when he saw me, approached and began talking. He was so friendly and fun. He cried incredulously, "You think people wait for the third date for sex?" He was delighted by

my naivety. I openly asked him questions about the gay world, the best places to go, how to meet guys and even how to avoid AIDS. Rock Hudson had just died and I was terrified of the disease—one of the reasons I'd come out so late. I don't know if Claude was infected at the time; perhaps he didn't know himself. He started phoning me afterwards; his conversation was light but laced with innuendo. Unlike other people I didn't find him attractive. He was stocky and short, too short, and though his eyes were an attractive pale blue, a unique colour, he had an unusually wide mouth. Once he kissed me on the cheek and it was as if a wide, slippery, stretched rubber-band had been pressed against my face. Yet his flirting was harmless and charming. I liked the way he was never angry or offended when I spurned his advances. I think he probably liked the challenge. Finally he won out. One night at his place, I was depressed and tired, and he started touching me and my body responded and I thought, well, maybe this is inevitable, perhaps he can teach me something; I was so conscious of the effects of my religious upbringing and so afraid of being a prude. So I made myself do it. The fact that I'd only ever viewed him as a platonic friend made the sex seem incestuous and embarrassing. I had to forget who he was and concentrate on his any-man's body.

Afterwards I feared he wouldn't phone me again as he'd finally gotten what he'd wanted. But he did call, just never talked of sex again and I thought, well I guess it was good we got that out of the way.

When I search my mind for the physical details of that night, I only find the occasional flash of a limb in darkness, the crucial whereabouts of sperm, blood and saliva are lost. Am I right to be so concerned about my body in light of the loss of

Claude's?

The day after the Paris vacation he was hospitalized, yet I was still engulfed in naivety, assumed he'd be released a few days later. When I spoke with Claude on the phone, he said, "I really enjoyed the trip. If you go on another one, I'd like to go again."

Did illness seem unreal to me because I'd always been too unaware of the body in general? Am I not sensual enough?

The evening of the *L'Arc de Triomphe* fiasco was Claude's last as an active man. The next day he became sick and couldn't leave his bed. What did we do for his last active night? I fulfilled his biggest request, made his greatest dream come true.

"I took him to a bathhouse," I said to Bill weeks later. "When he was sick, dying and full of the virus, I took him to a bathhouse so he could have unsafe sex and infect half of Europe."

Claude so wanted to go to a gay sauna. "Theirs are probably different from ours." He said he wanted to have sex with a Frenchman, thought it'd be different than with a Canadian.

"All right," I said. I looked up 'Sauna' in the Gay Guide, found an address and checked it on my Carte de Paris. There was a bathhouse not far from where we were staying. You only had to take two streets to get there, so he could find his way back to the hotel himself. I wouldn't go inside but would accompany him there, let him have his fun. I was looking forward to finally having him out of my hair for the evening.

Claude napped until 9 pm. Then we both headed out onto the quiet, shadow-

striped street for what was to be Claude's last night on the town. His face looked drawn and he limped slowly from one foot to the other.

A block from the sauna we entered a café, sat at a table. Claude carefully ate half of a ham baguette; he'd hardly eaten all day. He drank two coffees and the caffeine had a stimulating effect as he livened up considerably. "I can't wait to see what it's like in their saunas," he said.

"You can give me all the gory details tomorrow."

Claude's breathing was laboured. He seemed to have some kind of phlegm in his throat and went to the washroom a few times to cough it up. We sat quietly for half an hour. Then when he tried to stand, he couldn't get up. I helped him to his feet. He swayed a little bit.

"Are you sure you want to go?" I said.

"Oh, I'm fine." On the street he came alive, walking with great strides and laughing. Then we stood in front of the sauna.

"O.K., Claude. You remember how to get home. Go to those traffic lights, turn right and walk five blocks and you'll come to our hotel area."

"I know it."

"It probably costs less than 30F. Give them one of the blue bills."

"See you tomorrow," Claude said. "And thanks." Then he turned towards the main entrance.

He stepped forward, approached, entered; the door closed behind him. I stood there staring for a minute at the dark, shut door. The light above flashed, *Sauna pour*

Hommes 18-. Then I walked away. I wanted to see what Napoleon's Tomb looked like lit-up.

...staring into the casserole, vegetables, sauce, meat spinning over and under each other, round and round...

The next day Claude told me, "They have small rooms and you just have sex with whoever you want." His eyes sparkled as he talked. "I did three guys at one time. Was it ever fun. They liked my accent. This one old guy kept following me until I told him to get lost. Then there was a larger room and all these really nice guys in it."

...corn tumbled over beans over carrots over broccoli... Suddenly I said it, "That guy you drove to the airport. He died last week."

Both my parents stopped chewing.

I said the truth. "There was finally some cancerous thing in his brain, caused by AIDS. He died of HIV-related illness. Nobody knew he was sick."

My parents put down their forks and stared.

I lifted the spoon from the plate, shovelled a heap of steaming, dripping casserole into my mouth...

I will never go back to Paris.

Claude lay in bed the last five days as I freely wandered the streets of the Left Bank, visited the ornate cemetery in Montparnasse, lingered by my favourite fountain at St. Michel where a brooding bearded Poseidon gazes from a wall of sea-shells that clatter and tremble as water roars about them.

What was Claude thinking about as he lay staring at the grey walls, the cracked

mirror? Did he realize what was happening to him? Each evening I returned to the hotel with some fruit and a baguette that Claude tried to eat. We talked about going to a hospital but I assumed he just had the flu and Claude agreed. Besides, we'd be home in a few days and if Claude was still sick, it'd be easier to see his own doctor there than to try to navigate the hospital system here.

On the plane home Claude was relaxed. As expected he'd forgotten our quarrels, our petty disagreements. He never accumulated resentment. I think now that's why there were so many mourners at his funeral. He clung to people regardless of what they did. You could speak insensitively, not return his calls, stand him up at the cinema, even leave him dying in some dingy Paris hotel room and the next week he'd phone you up and say, "That was fun; let's do it again." I said goodbye to Claude at Spadina subway station. He said, "Thanks for the trip" and got on the escalator.

Two months later when Bill phoned me and said Claude had died, it was as if someone had slapped me in the face with a steel-buckled belt, then slapped me again, then slapped me again.

I have no photos of Claude at all. I did not take pictures and have nothing concrete to remind me of him. I wanted to ask for the photo I took in front of Notre Dame, but after his death there was a huge fight between his family and his two lovers (yes, two lovers, I didn't even know he had one) as everyone wanted his very expensive possessions. So I didn't bother getting involved.

It is his silence that I cannot accept.

Claude, you could've told me. I would've understood.

Or would I? Perhaps all illness is attended by feelings of weakness and weakness engenders shame and the shame is worse for people with AIDS because there are all those pundits shaking their fingers on TV screens and trying to close borders. Perhaps he saw the world as contaminated by the need to judge; everyone, even close friends were sick with the disease. I'd thought difficulties were magnified by silence but perhaps speaking makes them more real. And it's clear now that Claude did not want that. He experienced much change in his short life--transforming himself from Temiscaming street-person to small-town father to gay, urban bar-boy--but the change announced to him by a callous clinic doctor could not be incorporated into his life without upsetting everything else. So perhaps he simply chose not to believe it. That was the secret to his seamlessly perfect act. And surely that was why he liked to have me as a friend, because of my stupidity, my towering, colossal blindness to the flesh that may have seemed to him like optimism, even faith, something which he fed off and felt sustained by.

Claude denied his disease in the same way that people go to Paris.

So if I say that Claude tried to believe HIV was a fantasy, does that excuse him? Can I remove him from the moral grid and place him in a space beyond judgement, or does that mean blindness and an attempt to live on the Champs-Élysées forever?

On our last morning in France, Claude was feeling better. Perhaps the promise of a return home energized him.

Together we went to the Eiffel Tower. I'd already been and Claude had no

interest in going up it as that was expensive; so we relaxed on a bench at its base beside the famous row of fountains. I like to remember us at that moment. We weren't arguing and for once our differing desires complemented each other, Claude happily anticipating his return to a familiar place, as I brimmed full of a satisfaction gleaned from a brief yet thrilling immersion in an other world. We both gazed ahead into the arching streams of sputtering water as above us rose the quintessential symbol of Paris. The steel, support rods and latticed cross-beams joined seamlessly together above our heads, as the gleaming, silver tower rose with peaceful grace into the empty, blue sky.

Capturing Varanasi

"The bodies are burned in a roaring fire that restores, heals and liberates." My voice trembles as I read the pages I'd written before arriving here. I don't like to say my words out loud but Guy is so persistent and if I refuse he'll eventually grab my notes and recite in an unintentional parody that's infuriating. "Flames like lapping tongues of snakes flicker round the body's outer edges, crack through the shell-hard skin of ego, penetrate the inner recesses and obliterate everything." Guy glares, statue-still, sweat droplets congealing in rows on his forehead. "Consumed are muscles stretched and torn through years of toil, sinews taut with longing and unrequited desire, the intestines twisted into knots of anxiety and unending grief, the clenched fist of the heart. As the body blackens, the soul withdraws its tentacles from the body,"—again Guy turns away, starts picking his fingernails—"and is transformed from earth-bound and sullied." My voice becomes husky, this is why I've come here, isn't it? "The physical body finally achieves a state of pure, untarnished bliss, the essence that gave birth to the world but is not of the world. The exact moment of that ecstatic release and transformation is not known. Spectators can only pray silently as the ashes drift skyward, eventually vanishing into the crystalline, sun-drenched light of the glorious Heavens."

Guy grabs and pulls me to the bed, presses his saliva-hot mouth against mine and I'm driven down into the inescapable realness of my body, where my heart pummels against my ribcage, and sweat runs along the hot surface of my skin. His sweat is cedar-sweet on me; I want to taste it, drink, bathe, would swim in an ocean of it, of him.

I scream at myself: You must forget this guy! You hardly know him, this isn't what you came here for—but my arms snake round his plank-hard back, press him closer.

He growls, "You fucking know how to tell a story, Will."

Sitting back I see his quadrangle jaw, large pupils, pale and luminous as ghosts' eyes.

Through the window the rising, ululating, nasal whine of Hindi pop music, wail of street vendors, chaotic chorus of a million chiming bicycle bells. Our day's beginning.

"Or perhaps you're lying," he says, smirking. "You say half the time you talk about people, it's not true." He hasn't understood what I meant. "It's such a load of B.S." and he reaches, again my face in his neck; below, a constellation of freckles stretching across his beautifully arching chest, my hands press biceps, twitching rocks beneath loose sticky skin. My ear on his ribcage, I can't hear his heart yet he's more alive than any abstractions I conjure up, but when he hisses in my ear, "If Ms Betty could see us now," it's like he's thrown ice-water on my crotch. Remember it.

He thinks we're defying our boss as if she hadn't expected or even cared we'd like each other. As his unshaven chin skids along my shoulder-blades, I remember Betty's eyebrows arching. "I'm surprised you want to go overseas. You're supposed to be the housebound one."

"I just have to get out of this city," I'd said.

There was a tactful silence. Did she know Trevor had left me? She just put a

file into the drawer and closed it. When I later heard Guy was going with me, I was indifferent and sure I'd remain so, though the past year he'd been hovering around the outer edges of my life and, when visiting Toronto, always made eye contact with me at meetings; when shaking hands would always hold mine a second too long.

He falls back on the bed gasping. I study his chest rising and falling and wonder, is this all just to shock Betty, or is he really interested in me? Does he define this as a quick fling or does he want it to continue seriously when we're home?

As I get up, a click, flash, I turn. Guy smiles, holds his camera.

"Guy, I actually don't like having my photo taken without being warned." I lower my head. "I broke up with a guy who took my photo all the time."

"Sorry."

"It's O.K."

He lowers his camera, pondering. An old boyfriend. Is he putting away this significant bit of information or thinking about what film to use today?

I realize that I hope he's thinking of both.

I gather my paper, pens, tape recorder, put them into my sack. "Today we're visiting the west side of the city," I say. "Three temples, two mosques and a huge bazaar." On my skin still his cedar-scent. Through the window a minaret sharp against the sky yet it's not solid but wavers as if beneath water, changing. Good. I want everything to be unstable.

Soon Guy's fully dressed in his striped pants and vest and a white cotton t-shirt with a black shoelace tied round his neck, hair gathered in a ponytail; his white cheek

is so vulnerably white, exposed and far too fair for the harsh Indian sun. He gazes doe-eyed, breathing quietly through his full, moist lips parted just slightly and suddenly I want to grab and hurl him to the floor, strip everything that hides him from me, have my way with him.

Fool! I scream. He's practically a stranger, the trip's only five days, this isn't why you're here! I grind the words into my brain like forcing glass shards under my skin.

Then Guy says huskily, "I'd like to photograph the burning bodies. Get their final moment. That'd be cool," and something whiplashes in my skull.

In Canada I pulled my life up by the roots and set it on fire. I had no choice.

One day Trevor simply said, "This isn't working. I have no more feelings for you. It's best we move on," and that was that. I stood holding a steaming plate I'd just removed from the dishwasher. A few days later the moving truck came and then all his furniture was gone. Inexplicably, after ten years. "There's no one else, Will; nothing wrong with you; it's just time," and he shrugged his shoulders. I'd thought he was as predictable as the buses that passed our condo every ten minutes, his alarm clock that rang 6:47 each morning, the click of his key in the lock at 5:50 and his yearly vacation beginning July 1 and ending July 21. Surely he'd been changing, but I was blind, thinking once a pattern is established and the wheels of habit set in motion, inertia makes it impossible to escape. I'd once edited an article on Hinduism for Betty and read, "...their acceptance of the temporariness of all conditions, the shifting

ungrounded kaleidoscope of human expectation;" I'd thought, how horrible, how could anyone live like that?

Yet after six months in a near-empty apartment, I stood in the huge, cavernous Pearson airport and looked out at the runway stretching on and on across flat empty fields towards the blank horizon; there were no images in my brain, only a steady drumbeat at the very base of me, pure, relentless and connected to nothing specific outside of it: I want, I want, I want.

Guy and I enter the stream of life. Horn-blaring taxis hurtle past sari'd women leading goats between whirring cycle-rickshaws whose spinning wheels flash in the sun; bare-foot vendors drag wood past wagons full of bulging sacks as we step between cow paddies, traverse crumbling sidewalks, pass through clouds of diesel fumes, incense, everywhere the smell of excrement and sweet basmati rice, a chaotic jumble of store fronts below ramshackle signs, "Thumbs Up Best Tastie Drinking." Barbers shave customers on street corners as teenage boys splash ochre paint on walls, while a Western-suited businessman spits in the gutter and straightens his tie; then a dragon-faced woman clutches Guy's trousers and holds. Every minute a different smiling man approaches offers tea, "Would you like to see carpet shop" or gift emporium or curry saleshouse or astrology room, "Sir I see your mind is a butterfly, it can not settle." Cows saunter like bored tourists, chew cud in intersections, whip their tails at flies leapfrogging about their haunches. Everywhere white-washed temples stand like gleaming wedding-cakes

"The city and everything in it," I will write, "is a metaphor for something else." Doesn't that mean Guy and I are metaphors too? For what? Guy points at distant columns of smoke twirling voluptuously in the sky, winks at me and I swear silently.

Into the narrow alleyway of the Old City, round a corner, on the wall, a painting of Shiva, his black-ringed eyes, garish scarlet lips. I stare, then close my eyes, suddenly feel I've left my body. I swoop up above the city and am watching from a god's perspective. I now see myself with complete objectivity, and in truth I am absurd. All of life roaring round me, yet my mind burrows into a dark hole. I recognize the tell-tale signs: the hand unsteady as I touch a railing, eyes darting to Guy, then away, then back, then away, the shallow breathing, then the sudden inhalation as Guy turns, touches my arm.

Foolish and amazing. I thought I was beyond all this; but here it is blooming as if I were always fifteen and life had never sunk its claws into my skin. Is that the way it is, passion returning again and again? The thought is exhilarating yet exhausting as if I'm on a merry-go-round I can never get off. Life is a circle.

Still, I want to be disparate, flowing water that keeps dissolving and sub-dissolving into more and more divisible pieces, but Guy's presence causes me to coalesce, telescoping all my energy into a solid beam of light.

Guy says, "That's a pretty big Krishna," pronouncing it French-style 'Kreechna.' He has problems with names in English.

A vendor says, "Sir, it's actually Rama."

"Rama-Krishna-Hinda, they're all wild statues, that's all I know."

When a hump-backed beggar approaches holding a tin-can in three fingers, Guy flicks in a rupee-coin, says, "Don't spend it on booze, eh," and laughs.

With horror I realize his careless insensitivities attract me. He is self-enclosed, a stone, nothing comes in and nothing goes out. Isn't solidity good? His body is a boulder. I can throw myself against him, dissolve into a million pieces, a spray, mist, smoke.

The laneway widens and suddenly we're in a teeming crowd, rows of stalls piled with hills of violet, ochre, puce powders, beads, jewels, stacked statuettes. I turn immediately and see Guy is gone. A curtain falls around me. So this is how it would feel to be here alone, how I'd imagined it would be here. What's happened to my heartbeat? Yes, there it is. Am I returning to my original shapelessness, youth's form before sex and desire put streaks in the smooth wood of my skull? I take a deep breath, watch turbaned men arguing over a donkey and just feel lost. If I speak, will I hear my own echo? Damn, I only feel the imprint of Guy on me. A tank-grey cow passes, the wiry hair on its ribbed stomach brushing my t-shirt. Then I see Guy's face, a buoy bobbing on a wild sea of heads, now transformed into a wrinkled gargoyle of grief as his shrunken eyes dart. A hot liquid surges through my veins, my lungs inflate and I feel I'm rising to the sky, will merge with the sun.

I force myself back down into my body, tell myself: Quit wanting him.

"Guy!"

He looks towards me and the lined mask vanishes and his baby-face beams. He comes, embraces me just for a second. Did he miss me or was he afraid of being alone

here? He speaks softly. "So tell me about this bazaar. I'd like to know about it."

I explain that the Golghur Market was founded in the Middle Ages and little has changed since then, Guy listens, head down, quiet as a child. I watch myself watching him and I wonder which part of me is real, the desiring part or the part that watches, or both, or neither. If the desiring part tried to get rid of the watching part, or the watching part tried to abandon the desiring part, which would win, and what would that mean?

At lunch I wrap words around the food.

"These are pureed chick peas; they mash them up and fry them in ghee; this ochre paste is best with oil and..." Sentences make designs in the air. How powerful are they? Can they coat the lining of his stomach and protect his body from evil? He abruptly spits into a serviette, "Oh, it's awful," and my words all are shoed like insects, nothing left but the table between us, the unending pounding in my gut, I want, I want, I want...

Changing money at the bank, he opens his passport and a second Guy emerges. I have to repress a laugh as I see his hair shorn, black-framed glasses, paisley tie pressed inside a too-tight button-down collar, travelling salesman smile but about his sad eyes something wavers, uncertain. A little boy in daddy's clothes?

He glances at me, snaps his passport shut.

He repeatedly flips from an intense focussed attentiveness to carefree obliviousness.

We enter a museum.

"What's that say?" asks Guy.

"I can't read Hindi."

"No?" His eyes widen.

"I know. You think I know everything when I know dick-all."

Guy laughs. Then I'm pissing inside a stone-walled washroom, the door bangs open and he barges in, closes the door, slides his nail-bitten fingers down my shorts, puts his tongue in my mouth and I gasp, clutch round the small of his back, wondering, is this only to cancel out the pasty Bay Street boy image?

We stand before the famous Golden Temple "Whose bulbous dome," I write "made from a ton of solid gold juts into the sky like a huge sliced onion." In front guards wearing black berets and toting machine-guns prowl in a circle like caged lions.

We pass through the archway into a shadowy courtyard full of potted statues, a trickling, stone-hemmed stream. Beyond an inner archway, a dark room emitting the potent smell of incense, a sign "Gentlemen not belonging to the Hindu faith are requested not to enter." The inner sanctum off-limits, its mystery protected. That satisfies me. I sit on a stone bench, take notes. A rake-thin yogi twists himself into pretzel shapes, and a wizened woman in beige widow's shawl pours perfumes, drops fistfuls of flowers over the lingam of squat Shiva. I write "woman thanking God," then hesitate. She has put her hands on her lips. Is she still thanking? I write, "pondering God's greatness." And then, "thinking about lunch." When you write something, by the time you finish the sentence, its meaning is no longer true. "A yogi's face grimaced in pain" or is it disgust? ecstasy? "Founded in 1620," is this incontrovertible fact?

Yes. I underline it.

Then I look up in horror, see Guy has started to take pictures. He holds the camera like a gun, aims at the kneeling woman. Click. The yogi locked in a photo frame. Click. The prostrate pilgrims ripped from their context and mounted like dead things on the wall.

In the widow's photo everything stops. Her flowers merely hover and will never touch her god's forehead. The yogi's legs will remain tangled an eternity, and the pilgrims' prayers will stop halfway to heaven.

The walls of Trevor's and my condo were covered with photographs of us smiling in tuxes, or holding hands beside our boat, or helping each other build our cottage, or lounging on air mattresses in our swimming pool. Why do people always have photos when the most commonly heard sentence is "It doesn't look like you at all." Sometimes talking to Trevor at the kitchen table, I couldn't tell whether the man before me or the picture on the wall behind him was more real.

Click. I have the sudden desire to grab and throw his camera against the wall. Still, he smiles at me. This is a job and I know the magazine needs photos. I sense Betty's presence, a benign deity in a Gap pantsuit who chants, "The leaders of all great religions act immorally."

On the bus Guy says, "I wish you'd told me what everything there was. I didn't know what to take pictures of and what to ignore. Can we see the burning bodies soon?"

I look into his beautiful pale eyes. Is he a monster or a waif?

When the bus reaches the hill summit, I start to talk more about the religion here. "Reincarnation is central. The Hindus believe it happens over and over. People die and then after they're reborn, death, birth, on and on."

Guy is chewing gum. I wonder where he found that here.

"Pretty freaky."

"What do you mean?"

Then surprisingly he says something that's hard to answer. "What's the point of all that repetition?"

"Well, the transformations happen...just cause they happen." I say. "There is no point, I guess. But still the changing is valuable." Then I get a new idea that pleases me. "It's like homosexuality. It's pointless. It doesn't produce any babies or whatever. It just is what it is and you accept it has value even though we'll spend most of our lives wanking for no reason, shooting sperm into space that does you nor I no good."

I begin to feel a bit depressed. Guy has lowered his head. He brushes his hand across his face.

On the other side of the aisle two long-limbed blond women in tie-dyed t-shirts are speaking German. One has an oval purple crystal she keeps rubbing on her forehead. New Age freaks.

Just for a second I imagine how I appear: a pasty white boy in designer jeans who sits smugly talking about reincarnation. Late afternoon back at the hotel we make love on a bed criss-crossed with bands of sunlight. With Trevor I'd thought that the

more we made love the more solid our relationship became, yet now I imagine our earth-bound bodies crashing inanely against each other. As Guy moves swiftly in and out of the bars of light, his appearance alters. Close up his cheeks are fat, Buddha-like, and then his head turns and there's his sharp brow, knife-blade nose, a Seigneur in a Renaissance painting; then as he moans, his mouth like a dying fish, eyes flash, his nose wrinkles sarcastic, a snarling mongrel...Can I catch him in my net? Would I know him if I saw him? I rejoice as I feel I never shall or could. Sunlight flickers on our moving skin and I imagine our bodies burning. After the conflagration will we shoot to the sky or will only ashes remain on the earth?

At the room's wobbling desk I try to write about the Golden Temple. Should I use the widow's view, the yogi's view, what I imagine are their views or what seems my view or Guy's backdropped by Betty's. Choosing one cancels out all the others.

Guy mutters in his sleep, French words issuing up from some childhood hearth in northern Quebec, a place I've never been. A world in his skull just tantalizingly beyond my reach.

At breakfast I gaze at the hair curling over Guy's t-shirt and he talks and talks while cramming butter-dripping toast into his mouth. My heart pounds within my chest; lifting my tea cup I see veins bulge in my forearms. My desire for Guy is stronger today than yesterday. Does that make me more myself or less? Then we're out on the sun-scorched streets, pushing through throngs that surge forwards, reverse flow, divide and spin in dizzying eddies. We cross oil-splattered dirt roads, dodge

careening cycle-rickshaws, pass crying women clutching babies, a snake-charmer on a traffic island, when suddenly the muezzin lets cry his plaintive prayer of longing. I stop, look up at the brutal cloudless sky. The ascending snakes of smoke are visible everywhere, seem titillatingly close. Guy gazes wide-eyed as if seeing a stripper reveal one knee. His camera swings from his neck like a dangling Cyclops-eye.

Touching my pen in my pocket, I think, today for a short time, Guy I'll research you. Waiting in the bus station, I start to talk about Toronto, then Montreal, ask Guy about his job, then say lightly, "Do you have a guy there?"

His forehead creases. "Boyfriend you mean? Like, for a long time?"

I shrug pretending indifference.

"Yeah, last year. But not now."

He doesn't only fool around then.

In the corner stands an altar to Krishna, a blue-faced statuette, flowers, glowing incense-stick. Before it a young man crouches, head bowed.

Speaking carefree, "Your guy, what was he like?"

"Ah, he was short, pretty muscular."

"I mean, his personality."

"A fun guy."

"Fun?" Am I fun? "And?"

He eyes me. "What?" He looks away. His limbs have become stiff. "He was O.K."

"Why'd you break up," I say yawning.

"It's..." his brow creases. "It's kinda hard to describe. It's not fun." His voice is sharp.

I sit in silence. The praying man hasn't budged.

I hope Guy will ask about me but he starts combing his hair.

"I had a guy. Trevor. I think I mentioned him to you. We were together a long time." Guy continues combing but his head doesn't move. I add, "Ten years."

"Holy shit!" Is he horrified or impressed? "Do you got a picture of him?"

"No. I threw them all out."

"Shit!" And then, "Was he real hot?"

I glare at Guy. "I'm not sure I liked him."

Do I even like you? I turn away, imagine my body dissolving into sand particles that blow away in the wind.

Guy starts talking about the makes of tires on Indian trucks and I wonder if our story will end with a firm resolution and final goodbye or ambiguous open-endedness, my free-form desire going on forever.

I hear the devotee muttering, "*Om ma gee osh om gee.*"

The whole bus lunges and rattles and the seats shake beneath our butts as we try to gaze through the windows smeared with swirling rivers of petrified mud.

We get off at the southern end of the city and approach the Durga Temple, an empty stone shell adorned with blurred carvings of gods and goddesses. The inside is an empty cavern full of boulders and heaps of rotting flowers. When I can't help comparing it to the interior of a European cathedral, I again realize that, despite my

pretensions, I'm a Westerner, an outsider. When Guy starts taking photos, I don't mind. The temple has been long dead, its days of transformation past.

But out the back entranceway, for the first time—I have to step back, I stand, not breathing--the Ganges river. Light-specks dance on the water flowing between cracked, parched banks and in the distance, pointy-roofed tents, rising pillars of smoke and there, the glowing hissing fires that twist, turn, spark like eyes flashing, rooted stationary points that pierce through the dark constantly-moving shapes of milling human forms.

"Jesus," says Guy and I turn and see his mouth's open, eyes blazing. Of course he doesn't look at the sky, only the fire. "I hope it's not too far for my zoom lens."

I stand, words choked in my throat. "Take my photo," I suddenly say to distract him. "I'll wade in the river."

A smile forms in slow motion. "That's a neat idea."

I immediately turn my back to him, keeping my face away.

I remove my sandals, hike up my pant legs and step into the cold water that immediately stings my feet, as blood rushes to the surface of my skin; my heart pounds fast and my pores open. Against my soles the muddy bottom, neither solid nor soft. My body now looms large in my consciousness. Does it silence the voices in my head? No, it intensifies them. A fragment from a book. "Though all manner of filth is thrown into the Ganges, Hindus bathe in it, believing the water washes away sin." Can modern people believe in sin? What are my sins? Tunnel-vision? Idolatry? Or a terror of breaking into fragments that can never be rejoined? When the water's just above my

knees, I stop, look up at the empty plain on the opposite shore, a straight line perfectly balanced. Suddenly like machine-gun fire, click-click-click-click...I hurl out one hand to shield myself and, bending at the waist, lose balance and fall sideways into the Ganges.

Every pore of my body jolts wide-open as I'm surrounded by grey and floating particles of green. I don't know where is down or up but realize that beneath the surface he can't see me. Will I finally become water and flow downstream to become part of the vast Vanasian Plain? Then my foot touches the earth and Guy, his camera, the temple bounce back into view. My feet meld with the solid ground that ahead rises up into clay banks, like an extension of my own body that stretches on into the distant grey hills rising and falling as my breath-filled body expands and contracts.

Back on shore, Guy says, "God, Will, I feel awful. I didn't mean to startle you. Christ, are your clothes wrecked?"

Shortly after, dripping in a nearby teahouse, I suddenly say, "Do you really have to take pictures at the burial ghats? I know Betty wants them but...I'm amazed you haven't gone out there yourself yet; you know where it is."

Guy says quietly, "I like when you describe things to me. Otherwise it's not interesting." He looks at me, eyes wide and unblinking.

Then I say it and I'm surprised how easily the words come out. "And Guy, are we gonna see each other when we get home or is this just one of your fuckfests you can tell Betty and your friends about?"

He tries to smile but then his eyes water. My God, it's like watching a statue

bleed. "Actually I thought...we could see each other back home, maybe on weekends? We don't live that far apart." Toronto and Montreal, the highway like a vein between them.

He puts his hand on the table, touches my thumb with his.

I say O.K. I'm glad I only half-believe him.

Back on the bus, his leg against mine, why do I feel I've experienced this before. In Hinduism, Shiva becomes Vishnu becomes mortal becomes a god...Trevor, Guy, others flash through my mind like a rapidly-flipping deck of cards. The feeling I have is always the same but the outward form, the glistening eyes, hair-locks that buckle like waves in freak seastorms, a head sometimes ovular, discoid or quadrangle, always differs.

In the hotel I try to write words but my pen will only make lines that continue from one page to another.

That night in bed Guy has become solid. His face ossifies into a square-jawed warrior mask as arms jut stiff as a rock idol's and his birch legs reach deep into the earth. I clutch him as if clinging to a cliffside and look skyward.

The last day we rise with the sun and head out into the street. Everything looks the same.

The force of inevitability pushes us down past pens of stirring animals, through ghost-abandoned alleyways. Guy's demands are as real as metal bars pressed to the face. Our future has a shape now and I don't want it erased. We are going to the burning ghats. There is no choice. Fate has decided and it was all doomed to happen

from the beginning. The moment the ghats were first mentioned, you and I both knew the story would end there. Still, uncertainty hovers in the places the sun can't reach and about the edges of my vision there is a blurred trembling.

Smoke billows up from a crackling fire reeking of balsam and sandalwood that stings my eyes, as here on this stone and mud platform, the last drama of life and death is carried out. We pass the "No Cameras" sign.

A glint-eyed man approaches, gesturing ferociously with his bony, paddle-shaped arms. His sparsely-haired, domed head and jutting, beak-like nose give him the half-human, half-bird look of one of the Hindu eagle-gods carved on temple entrances.

Guy lies, "I know, no photos. I don't got any film anyway."

Two chandal, Hindu outcasts, carry a bamboo stretcher with a body wrapped in multicoloured silk and adorned with gaudy flower wreaths and burning sticks of incense. Weeping relatives chant and sing; the beloved is carried to the river, submerged. A priest chants as the body is lowered along the pyre. A billowing wall of flames as the logs snap and spit. Is this the precise moment when--

I hear the click of a camera.

Guy is now hidden like a sniper in a trench.

I step down but away so people won't think I know him. The eagle-man has turned away from us.

Before the burning fire, a statuette of Shiva. I close my eyes and, for the last time, leave my body, swoop up and view things from a god's height.

Again I appear ludicrous. I stand, clutching my desire for Guy like an old coin

I found but refuse to throw away, while Guy opens and closes the doors of a cage that is at first small and then becomes bigger, inside which corpses writhe into nothingness.

Guy is no more substantial than a photograph; our two cities are just dots on a paper map that when set on fire becomes ashes in five seconds. All of India is a cloak I've torn from the clasping hands of a gaunt-cheeked child and wear wrapped smugly round myself. I've tried to bandage my old wounds with words from a foreign dictionary.

Back in my body, I gaze at the round "No Camera" sign staring at me like an eye.

Suddenly I hear a shout and see the bird-man has grabbed Guy's camera with both hands and is pulling, the cord straining around Guy's neck. "What the hell! Get lost, creep!" He turns yells, "Will, get this freak off me!"

Guy and the eagle are only two feet from me. I could easily take one step and pull away the small man, but miraculously my body has turned to stone, is rooted to the earth, unmoving, as if it'd been here for centuries.

The two men are locked in a frenzied, jerking tug-of-war when suddenly the cord snaps, someone shouts, either Guy or the man I'm not sure, and as if by magic the camera flies up in the air, makes a wide, perfect arc, a form more balanced and symmetrical than anything I've seen in this hurly-burly city, and then lands with a splash in the river.

Guy stands slack-jawed. The man has vanished into the chanting crowd, as if he never existed and was something I willed into existence. Guy starts to shout, swear.

He turns to me, pushes, shoves me. Indians laugh; then he crouches, his face in his hands. I gaze at the spot where the camera vanished. The water has closed, the wound healed.

I say, "Guy, I'll pay for your camera and film."

In an alleyway, head lowered, Guy finally says, "Will, I don't understand you at all."

We stand at an intersection, look at each other.

He doesn't touch me.

What remains?

I see Guy's eyes, pale, luminous.

With each step on the grey, cracked concrete, the old thudding song in my heart, I want, I want, I want...

Gotta Have Nick

I've always had a Santa Claus fetish. Years of therapy haven't altered the fact that the sight of a red-clothed, pot-bellied man shouting, "Ho-ho-ho" sets my skin on fire. Panting I ogle the suit's plush, velvety fabric edged tantalizingly with strips of white animal fur, which hide nothing but cling voluptuously to every curve on Santa's massive, flesh-packed body. His sheer girth gives him a presence other men lack. The deep, thundering, ultra-masculine voice issues from far within his vat-thick chest, and when he laughs, every inch of his body trembles spectacularly.

Right out front, the huge, over-conspicuous, quadrate, silver belt-buckle just begs to be undone; below, his gigantic stomping boots hint at the magnitude of other members, while, above, a gleaming pom-pom dangles from a cap-tip that bends like a half-erect penis. His blindingly white hair cascades in swirling waves down his head, shoulders, face, and his glinting, ice-blue eyes, looking into mine, seem to pierce my very centre; my knees buckle, I collapse and, with eyes closed, I imagine I'm pressing my mouth into his white glove that's softer than anything I've ever touched.

My fuck-buddies put up with me.

"I have to wear this red hat with the little ball on it?"

"Quit calling me Kris Kringle; my name's Steve."

"But I don't want to say Ho-ho-ho when I come."

"O.K. if I promise to give you a truck set, will you get off my lap?"

I'm not the only one who loves Santa and I wish other men had the guts to admit it. The cowardice of the gay community is incredible.

Once at a Queer Nation meeting the talk turned to alternative sexual practices, and finally said, "All right, I want every guy here who's honest and horny to stand up and say, 'I want to be Santa's butt-boy.'"

People looked at their feet, and one guy started talking about golden showers. Imbeciles!

I'm the only person who wears a Santa suit in the Gay Pride parade. I've even carried a sign, "Santa's little helpers want blow jobs," and no one's followed me.

Once I went to The Barn for fetish night in my Santa suit. Approaching the doorman, I adjusted my belt and made sure my beard was straight. "Ho-ho-ho, little boy. Have you been naughty or nice?"

He glared back. "Only leather allowed."

Why is our community so bloody conformist? Do all our desires have to be identical? It'd be like discovering every package on Santa's sleigh contained the same thing, or like opening a present and seeing you got the same dildo you were given last year and that again your parents forgot to include the two AA batteries you need, so you can't play with it right away or show how it works to all your aunts and uncles that are going to be arriving for Turkey dinner in about an hour.

Because Christmas, everyone knows, is the most erotic time of the year. Listen to the carol lyrics: "Come all ye faithful," "Shepherds quake at the sight," orgasm-imitating "Pa-rupa-pup-pum's" and "fa-la-la-la-la's" fill the air, and ripping off

November's calendar-page to reveal December is like tearing off a man's jockstrap. Streets become lined with long, twinkling, phallus-like strings of lights, dangling mistletoe forces total strangers to press their lips on each other's bodies, while seductive Santas on streetcorners rhythmically ring large, clangorous bells or sit glaring from plush department store thrones, emitting such blistering sexual energy that only children are allowed to approach and touch them. All around, swirling, burgeoning throngs of frenzied, panting shoppers heave bags bulging with wrapped packages that will be touched, shaken, fondled by trembling, famished, curiosity-wracked hands. The pandemonium and tumult increase until December 24th when Santa finally blows his load, and we wake up to stockings crammed full of liquorice whips, half-naked tin soldiers, dick-long candy-canes, and mountains of presents in irresistibly lurid, shiny paper that our nails tear, gash, lacerate and shred—Pine trees become penises pointing at the sky, Christmas wreaths hang like giant cock-rings—Once, at Aunt Mildred's, as I reached for the cranberry sauce, it all became too much and I had to race into the empty study where I ejaculated over the walnut-wood Nativity Scene. "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come." Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year.

But when it's all over and the room is littered with torn wrapping-paper, dismembered GI Joe limbs, crumpled tissue-paper cups from *Pot of Gold* chocolates, and your mother says she found the bill for the S & M dungeon-set that came with pieces missing, you suddenly realize: Santa didn't bring any of these things; your parents bought everything.

I understood all this, the Christmas I turned 30, as I stood staring at myself in the mirror, my Santa beard coming unglued. I thought: Construction worker fetishists have real construction workers they can lust after. Guys into uniforms can chase cops who are really cops.

Was my desire connected to anything outside of me?

Did Santa really exist?

From the depths of my being, a voice suddenly rose, boomed loud, definite and incontrovertible, saying, "YES Virginia, there IS a Santa Claus who will bring you all the joy of Christmas and rip off your underwear with his teeth."

It was then I immediately understood why Santa never visited me: He thought I didn't believe in him, and up until then, perhaps I truly hadn't, or like everybody else, I ignored his own needs and was fast asleep when he arrived, leaving him not so much as an *Inches* magazine he could jack off to.

The next week I went to the library to do some research. When I saw the first known picture of Kris Kringle, I swooned. "Born in 1793 young Kris showed a propensity for generosity and the comforting of the sick and needy." He stands in youthful splendour, gleefully carrying firewood into a family's home. The wife's dark eyes smoulder as he passes and, looking closely you can see her husband, watching young Kris, has a bulge in his pants. Kris could satisfy in every way possible. The last authentic picture was from 1840, "when he was granted eternal life in exchange for all his kindness." After that, there were no more Santa sightings. Perhaps people were tired of him or thought he was too old to be any fun, so he just stopped visiting and

instead remained at the North Pole. Why cross the whole world if all you're gonna get is a glass of warm milk and a few goddamned cookies?

Yet in the final portrait you can see a tortured, clenched look in his eyes; Santa has needs that aren't being satisfied, desires that Mrs. Claus, the elves and his reindeer know nothing about.

Santa, if I could take you in my arms, the heat from our bodies would melt all the snow and ice in the Arctic wasteland where you live, and together we could discover the true meaning of Christmas.

The time had come for direct action. January 1, 1996 was the day I began writing raunchy letters to the North Pole. I enclosed nude photos of myself. I sent one each month, then once a week, then once a day.

At the summer solstice, in an empty field I faced north and sang as loudly as I could, "I Saw Mommy Rimming Santa Claus."

The months passed, but Christmas came and went and there was no Santa anywhere.

I redoubled my efforts. I lay awake at nights calling out his name. I'd gaze out my bedroom window, which faces north, and say clearly, "You see me when I'm sleeping, Santa. You know when I'm awake. You see me now, you wild untamed thing. Come, I want you."

I had my chimney widened for easier access and the roof flattened so there'd be no danger of the sleigh toppling into my neighbour's rose bushes.

"Santa, tonight's a sex party," I said loudly. "I'm the only adult left who

believes in you, the only person who wants more than toys. Only I will hold your magic penis in my hands, rubbing it like kindling to create a fire that will consume us both. And remember Nicky, I'm only mortal and can't wait forever."

I sometimes wondered if between my intellect and desire there was a tiny gap where disbelief lodged. I investigated my self and found, no, I couldn't believe more. I knew that when we want something badly enough, the world wraps round and molds itself to our desires.

Then finally Christmas Eve 1997 I sat up and at exactly midnight thought I heard above me, bells jingling and the crack of a whip. The sound vanished.

I ran to the window and what was my amazement when I saw a curved, rectangular-like object disappearing into the sky.

And it wasn't my imagination. The next morning I discovered that the top of the alder tree had been knocked off and my neighbour was screaming because there was shit all over his patio. The police came to investigate and, yes, it was reindeer excrement.

I went out back and stood gazing at a steaming turd as one would at a religious relic.

I was stunned, could not speak for almost a week.

For the following twelve months I thought about Santa every day.

And the next year, bells jingling, a sleigh vanishing.

What was I doing wrong? Why wouldn't Santa come in?

Finally on December 24, 1999 at 11:55 pm, as I stared at the milk and cookies,

I had a revelation. I leaped up, flung the tray against the wall and replaced it with a bottle of lube and foot-high piles of condoms.

Suddenly a clattering on the roof. I should have known: Santa plays Safe.

The creak of the chimney-lid opening, a boot kicked, then sheet metal rattling, the clatter descended, grew louder, and suddenly Santa was there, right in my living-room. He stood in front of the fireplace smiling.

I nearly fainted. I took a deep breath and, leaning against the sofa-back, steadied myself.

I gazed into his ice-blue eyes and finally said, "Santa, I've been a good little boy."

"I know you have," he replied warmly. "Thanks for the invite. It's nice to know some people still want it."

He touched his belt buckle and suddenly, as if by magic, was completely naked. His pale stomach rose like a magnificent iceberg, and his erect penis was as red as Rudolph's nose.

"I'm your Christmas present," I said. "Unwrap me."

"Thank God," he cried, approaching. "I haven't had sex in 150 years."

He threw me under the Christmas tree and, as he tore my clothes off, a choir started singing "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." Above my head our gyrating bodies were reflected in a trembling, silver tree-ornament.

My mouth wandered over Santa, enjoying all his startling flavours--it was like biting into *Pot of Gold* chocolates after misplacing the menu, being repeatedly

surprised at the unexpected tastes: the delightful butter-mocha, the thrilling cashew-cluster.

Soon Santa started thrusting, crying out, "On Doner, on Comet, on Cupid, on Blitzen," and when he came, it was like a shower of presents falling from the sky. He did it again and again. I kept switching positions: up, down, over, under. My body became the world, sometimes Asia, then Africa, North America, Antarctica, and all night Santa travelled over it depositing his gifts everywhere.

The grandfather clock struck 4, and I looked and saw the room was piled to the ceiling with presents, the hanging stockings so full the seams had burst.

Santa suddenly rose and said, "I must go." In one second he was completely dressed.

"Go?!" I said breathless. "Go? But are you coming back next year?"

"If you want me to."

"And the year after and the year after?" The words exploded from me. "Santa you must, you must!" Listening, he gathered up his empty sacs, his whip. "And I promise, I promise to be a good little boy all year. I'll only have sex using condoms and try to come at the same time as the person I'm with and never leave before he's come."

Santa smiled and, with his rosy red cheeks, for a second, looked just like the picture on my grandma's cookie-tin.

"Wonderful. I'll be so happy to see you." He stepped into the chimney.

"And don't feel guilty about visiting only once a year. I'm somewhat

commitment-phobic and a long-distance relationship suits me just fine."

I ran forward and bit into the seat of his trousers so that when he ascended the chimney, I did too. Up on the roof the reindeer lay panting, as they'd been humping too. Steam rose from their bodies, half the snow was melted, and Rudolph's red nose was completely brown.

Santa sat in the sleigh. He quickly tapped the ~~whip handle~~ on the chimney and the deer assembled.

"Ho-ho-ho," he bellowed as the sleigh rose into the air.

I stood waving. I cried, "Bye Santa. I love you!"

Just for a second I saw, outlined against the full moon, the rows of reindeer, legs moving in perfect unison, the sleigh with curlicues above its runners, and the small, still form of Santa seated, one arm raised.

And I heard him exclaim as he rode out of sight, "Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"

Laughing Non-Stop

Monstrous, elephantine, blood-webbed, unblinking eyes, piercing, mauve pupils that stab and impale, the oblate nose obscenely moist, wound-red emitting a deafening HONK when touched, the mouth lipless as a skeleton's, beige teeth flat as tombstones, the gaps between which fingers can be caught, shred or severed, and no hair on the top of his head but, on the sides, heaps of poisonous, pink mould, his trumpet-mouthed ears full of hook-headed fuzz brittle as the hair on tarantula-legs.

"Hello everybody, my name's Drooper!"

A shriek high as a tuning-fork struck on concrete cut through the children's cheers, cries, laughter.

Mrs. Freed pushed between the clapping, outstretched hands, her high-heels clapping to the back of the class where Roy crouched beneath the craft-table, his chest rising and falling, hands clutching the leg so tightly you'd almost swear you could hear wood cracking. Mrs. Freed pried him loose and hurried him out into the hall, sat him on the tiled floor and said, "Wait here for a while."

The steady hum of the fluorescent light above soothed him. He gazed at drawings hung along the wall like tea-towels hanging in a suddenly quiet world without wind. Psychedelic sticks and squiggles danced from one end of the hall to the other. The solid, cool stone tile beneath his behind was reassuring. His breathing became steadier.

He could hear the circus-music lilting like a man walking with a limp, the high-

pitched accordion-whine like a baby crying. The laughter and shouts of students rose and fell in waves. He made out the clown's voice, shrieking like a train-whistle, then bleating like a goat, then a grandiose vibrato like an opera singer.

He pressed his face to his knees. Don't get taken over, he whispered out loud, thinking of his friends Murray, Tom, Sally. Don't let them take you over.

The world was very big. The schoolyard fence was not the earth's end; the ground went past it and continued on and on into the distance. Roy had seen the map on the classroom wall, learned about North America, South America, Asia, the vast uninhabited expanses on the world's surface; yet in the blank regions where nobody lived, in the empty spaces between towns, cities and highways, clowns, the invisible clowns were dancing.

When the door handle clicked, Roy bolted to his feet and ran to the end of the hall.

Mrs. Freed spoke haltingly. "Are you sure you don't want to just talk to the clown, Roy? He's very friendly."

Roy heard a voice, a crackling American accent, "Hey pardner, don't be scared. I'm your friend."

Roy raced down the L-wing, into the washroom, the cubicle, slammed shut and locked the door, sat on the john and put his feet up. He took the roll of toilet-paper, gleaming white and unbelievably soft, and pressed it against his face, closed his eyes.

I should wrap myself with this and become a mummy. That way if they find me, they'll think I'm dead; they'll go away and leave me alone.

In the kitchen Mark said, "He got scared of a clown?"

"Be quiet. He'll hear you."

"I hope he does hear me."

"He's always been scared of them but he seems to have gotten worse."

"Jesus Christ."

Roy lay beneath the covers, listening in his bedroom.

Soon he got up, went to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Mark said, "So Roy, I heard that at school today you acted like a girl."

"Mark."

"Are the other kids making fun of you, putting on clown noses and going 'Boo.'"

You know, if the guys on the hockey team ever find out, they'll give you a nickname just like they did that Spenser kid. 'Mollyboy' or 'Sissyspaz.'"

"Mark, honestly." Janey turned to Roy. "Tonight we're having spaghetti and meatballs."

"There you go pampering him again. That's not gonna help."

Roy put the glass under the faucet and turned the handle.

Janey said quietly to Mark, "He's picked up something loopy by being around your friends."

"It's good for him to meet new people, and you like it, don't you Roy? Before, you were so small, and I couldn't have people over." Then he said, "We should take him to a circus again. How about that, eh Roy?"

Janey said, "Don't be ridiculous."

"Roy, you'll like it. Lots of clowns and you'll see they're funny. A clown gets water sprayed down his pants and we laugh; he trips on his big shoes, his pants fall, he's got on flowered gochies, it's hilarious--"

"Mom, I don't want to go to the circus."

"Come on!" said Mark. "You'll love it!"

"What's it matter if he's got some fears; he'll outgrow them. Fear is normal. I'm terrified of spiders even though they're not dangerous. We've all got irrational feelings."

"My son doesn't."

Janey put the plates on the table, then the knives, cups. She gazed at the steam hissing from the pot on the stove. She sat, ran one hand through her hair. Then she turned to Roy and said quietly, gently, "Honey, why is it you don't like clowns?"

Suddenly Roy felt he was at the bottom of the ocean. If he spoke, who would hear him? Words formed in his head that dissolved before he opened his mouth.

That night Roy lay in bed while his parents argued. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamt he was surrounded by a group of clowns that were hitting him with little paddles and laughing. Then they all started saying, "Shake my hand", "Shake my hand," and when he did, a vibrating, metallic pin drilled into the tender palm of his hand again and again; they sprayed bottles of seltzer in his face and the hard, salty rods of liquid stung his lips, cheeks, nose, made his eyes burn, and when he stood up his pants started falling down, and each time he pulled them up they dropped, and each

time they dropped his underwear was more embarrassing, first having red-and-white stripes, then turning girly-pink, and then covered in tulip-bulbs, and then little rabbits eating ice-cream. The clowns laughed and laughed, holding their stomachs and falling to the ground, hysterically beating the pavement so hard with their fists that everything, the bungalow he lived in, the sidewalk, his backyard tree with the swing on it, started trembling and, when finally the earthquake happened, the street, houses, sidewalk, school and parking-lot at the end of the road were ripped into a thousand concrete shards pointing in all directions at once. He called out his mother's name and was at the ocean-bottom surrounded by schools of fish wearing clown noses. When he tried to speak, his lips opened, water filled his mouth and one by one the laughing fish swam between his lips and down his throat.

He awoke trembling. He lay there for a moment, told himself to be calm. Looking about the dark silent room, he knew most of the clowns were still a long way off, though they were getting closer. He got up to go to the bathroom. As he passed the kitchen, out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed his parents in the half-lit kitchen. They were pressed against each other, both naked; in one hand his father held a riding-crop.

In the washroom, Roy's lips beneath the faucet, the cold, clean water rising from the centre of the earth.

The next morning Mark shook him awake.

"C'mon, she's gone."

Roy, bleary-eyed, was dressed, combed, fed.

"Let's go."

It wasn't until Roy was in the car that he realized what was happening. "No, I don't want to go!"

"Shush, shush." Driving, Mark kept saying, "Mom thinks she's such tough stuff," and chuckling.

The circus-tent rose like the huge pot-belly of a sleeping giant. Strings of blinking lights hung from the roof and tin-foil, sequined streamers blew in the wind. The empty parking-lot was streaked with ribs of light and shadow.

"We're early," said Mark. "Do you want a donut?"

Roy stared at the dark, square entranceway, then at his smirking father.

"It's gonna be a great show," he said, patting Roy's head.

As Marc led Roy in, the boy resisted, digging his feet into the carpet but the ground sloped downwards and the black doorway contained a magnetic force that drew him forward.

Throngs of adults and shouting children spun before him in a kaleidoscope.

Trumpets blared, and monkeys, a giraffe, flag-strewn elephants paraded in a circle and then—about a half dozen clowns, each completely bald, heads motley as stained, rancid heads of cauliflower, mouths like diagonal knife-slashes made in fetid plasticine faces, all squealing so hysterically you couldn't if they were laughing or crying.

Roy wanted to control himself because if he didn't, his father would lose faith in him completely, but it was impossible; besides, Roy knew that with clowns, self-

control only harms you.

His scream was like a fire alarm Mark couldn't shut off. He covered Roy's mouth with his hand, his scarf, then embraced him. "It's O.K."

Roy knew his best defence was to let the fear flood his body, flow unrestricted through his lungs, throat, mouth. When he's undivided like this, the clowns cannot touch him.

Outside, Mark, trembling, put down the exhausted boy. "Geez you're one fine cracker," he said.

Roy lay in bed with a fever.

"So bloody arrogant." Janey choked back tears. "Right under my nose and I said no. I should be the one who knows how to deal with him. I see him more."

Mark kept his head down.

Roy closed his eyes, sensed the clowns were getting closer.

When he opened his eyes, the edges of his vision were blurred, cloudy as if somewhere, unseen, a clown had made a V with his index and third fingers and poked it into Roy's eyes, just as he'd once seen happen on *The Three Stooges*.

Roy listened to the wind beating at the window-pane, rattling the loose eavestrough above. He recalled the map-covered walls of his classroom that daily surrounded him on all sides. He knew now that all across the vast, empty, wind-swept tundra of the million, jagged, unjoinable, jigsaw-islands called the North-West Territories, and down through harsh, impenetrable, rock-gouged forests and night-

black lakes of the Canadian Shield, through the never-visited, wild wastes of Northern Alberta, Manitoba, Quebec, where wilderness stretched away on all sides seemingly forever, there, the clowns were crawling out of underground caves, emerging through damp, fern-lipped clefts in the earth, from behind thundering, boulder-rimmed waterfalls, and in the thousands, millions were coming together and migrating south like packs of wolves, moving closer to the city where Roy lived. The clowns he'd seen today and at school were testing the territory for the others.

When Roy fell asleep, he dreamt the clowns surrounded him. They leapt at him like dogs and bit out huge chunks of flesh.

Janey and Mark sat talking in low voices until Mark turned away and ran a hand through his hair. "Geez, if any of the guys at the loading dock find out my son's going to a head-shrinker!"

"There's no choice. He's gonna see clowns on T.V. or at school. Why should he have to be upset for no reason?"

At night Roy again heard the metronome tick of his parents' bed hitting the wall, and he fell asleep amidst the sound of his mother's laughter like tinkling glass and his father repeating "Foxy, foxy lady..."

The next day Janey said, "Roy, today we're going to take you to a nice lady who'll make you feel better." Crouching, she ran a comb through his hair. "You can tell her whatever you want--even about Dad and me. She only wants to help and hear if you have any problems."

Travelling along Brown's Line, Roy gazed out the car window, the breeze

flicking at the bangs on his forehead. Stripes of light and shadow flew across his face. In the air was the smell of flowers, not regular flowers, but clown-flowers. The smell was sickly sweet, like vanilla extract mixed with the scent of burnt cotton-candy. The flowers were worn on the lapel and when you approached, they shot streams of sticky jelly or sour milk that stung your cheeks and made your eyes run.

The clowns were not so far away. The breeze was now blowing from the North.

When they left the car, Janey said, "What's that smell? Like roses but gross."

Roy stared at her. She was starting to realize.

She pointed her wand-like key-stick at the car and, click, everything magically closed.

Roy sat on the squeaky sofa and gazed at Dr. Rummel, a stout, buxom woman who, in her paisley jumper and bib, seemed to be an overgrown kid herself. Her glasses, iron-rimmed and hanging from a steel cord about her neck, were all that was adult about her.

The first session she asked him a lot of questions. "How is school?" "What's your favourite subject?" "Who's your best friend?" "Why?" She smiled a lot and nodded her head, said "Oooh" and "Aaah" even after things Roy didn't think were that interesting.

Finally she said, "You did really good today. I'm glad you came."

After, Mark said, "So what's wrong?"

"I need more time for observation."

Mark wanted to say, 'At what you get paid, I'd think you'd observe faster,' but instead fell into the gloomy silence that had overtaken him recently.

Soon Dr. Rummel let Roy play in the toy-room full of GI Joes, Barbies, Terminators and plastic dogs and cows. She occasionally wrote things on her elastic-bound clipboard.

One day she put a 5-centimetre-long plastic clown in the play area. When Roy saw it, he took a deep breath, stared at it, then grabbed and hurled it to the other side of the room. The next few sessions Dr. Rummel brought other clowns, and Roy responded the same way.

"We're making progress," she said to his parents. "He keeps throwing the clowns away. This clearly gives him a feeling of power over his life so he can fight whatever the clown represents."

Mark was ecstatic. That night he bought a video, *Barnum and Bailey Circus Clowns*.

"Hey Roy, let's see how much fun you can have now."

"Mark, I don't think--"

"Come on."

Bozo's face flashed on the screen and Roy began screaming.

Mark yelled, "She gets paid for what? For what?"

Finally at the eighth session Dr. Rummel was speaking to Roy and suddenly interrupted with a comment designed to sneak past his willed, judgement-inducing, conscious mechanisms and unearth whatever was hidden below. "Er, clowns, Roy, you

hate 'em. Why?"

Roy looked away, again felt he was in empty space reaching for words that dissolved when touched. He took the plastic Geronimo and moved his legs so he was walking across the bridge.

Dr. Rummel sat quiet, unmoving. Clearly, this would be one of those serious days, no games but a barrage of questions.

"I was thinking," her eyes shifted upwards, "about the clowns' bodies. You don't like them. Is there something about their bodies you don't like?"

He shrugged.

"How would you describe them?"

He stared ahead, thought for a minute. Then he said, "Creepy."

"Creepy," she said, "as in, they'll creep all over you?" She picked up the Peter Pan doll. "I'll tell you a true story. Once there was a boy like this boy and there was a...man." She carefully lifted Bozo. "A clown who did very bad things to the boy. The boy felt very sad. He wouldn't tell anyone about it because the boy thought he himself was bad. But who was wrong, the boy or the clown?" Roy watched quietly. "Who?" she repeated gently. He didn't answer. "The clown was wrong," she said, "not the boy." Exasperated, Dr. Rummel finally said, "Roy, has anyone ever touched you...in a way you didn't like?"

He reflected. "Once Murray hit me."

"Only then? Did anyone else touch you...in a bad way? Did a clown ever touch you?"

He reflected.

"No."

"Really? Did you ever get close to a clown? Did you always run away from them?"

He thought to himself. Had he ever actually spoken to a clown? Of course not. He wasn't crazy.

Dr. Rummel collapsed back into her chair. "I'm your friend, Roy. I'm here to help you. You know you can tell me whatever you want."

He placed Geronimo on the tractor, drove him back and forth, back and forth.

Dr. Rummel told his parents she'd have to try a behavioural approach because the analytic sessions weren't working.

That afternoon Roy walked slowly about the playground, past the line of noisy children waiting to get on the slide, the kids screaming on the whirly-spinner, listened to kids shouting on the swings. From the top of the domed metal scaffolding of the monkey-bars, a boy sang, "I'm the king of the castle and you're the dirty rascal." In the hopscotch-courts girls played jumpsies and double-dutch, "Lento--jolio--peppers," while the younger kids drove Tonka trucks about the octagonal sandbox. He heard two older kids talking: "Did you hear about the Newfie who said 'No'?" "No." "You're the Newfie."

Soon all this would be wiped out. Now the clowns were camped out, just on the edge of the city, living in makeshift tents that protected them from the rain, wind and sudden drop of temperature at night.

Just above the distant hill Roy could make out the pointed roofs, the occasional outline of a faraway figure with a hairdo round as a basketball, or wearing a long, narrow hat, sometimes shaped like oil-tanks or the Eiffel Tower upside-down.

At night in the darkness he could hear chuckling coming from the distance. His father came in, turned on the light and said, "Who's making that racket," and Roy pointed out the window.

His father marched to the window, flipped open the blind and stared into the dark, brow creased.

Roy could see everyone was changing. His mother was putting on make-up everyday as well as gaudy lipstick as red as a fire engine. Turning to him, she said, "Do you think it makes me look happier when I wear this?"

The air on the street was saturated with the smell of burnt candy-floss. People stood coughing in doorways and Roy saw an old lady who had to be wheeled indoors.

Roy dreamt he was trapped in the rotating fun-house barrel; no matter how quickly he moved his feet from one side to the other he couldn't get off; at one point, exhausted, he collapsed, yet the barrel kept moving until he hung upside-down in the air. Then he was lost in Bozo's House of Glass, desperately trying to find his real reflection in the ceiling-high mirrors but he was always distorted, his forehead triangular, his chin pencil-thin, or his chest wide and rectangular beneath a popsicle-stick head; in some his teeth were as large as a rabbit's, in others his eyeballs covered his whole face, while his ears stuck out like parking-meters, and when he finally crashed through a pane of glass and was out in the midway, everyone, including his

father and mother were either short as dwarves with enormous square feet that clanked on the ground like toppled mailboxes, or had torsos curled like commas, or heads shaped like hour-glasses, or gigantic, bulbous behinds that went from their ankles to their necks and farted in your face when you got near.

Roy awoke breathing heavily. He ran his hands over his body to make sure it was still all there.

The next day Mrs. Freeman had to close the classroom windows because of the noise, shouts, screams, the sound of clapping hands and accordion music coming from beyond the nearby hill.

Even with the windows closed you could still hear it, so Roy tried to concentrate on the blackboard. $7 \times 2 = 14$, $8 \times 2 = 16$, yet he knew he could fill his head with every number in the world and stil' the change that was to come was inevitable.

As he walked home, the street was silent. Birds called gently from one tree to another. A lone car crawled past, its dangling muffler scratching faded exclamation-marks in the pavement. Roy stood and gazed at the hill, which now, just for a moment, appeared to contain only trees, rocks and grass.

When he entered the house, his mother and father were seated quietly at the kitchen table.

After dinner Janey said, "Roy, we were talking to Dr. Rummel and she's asked us to do something special that may help you."

She looked at Mark who sighed. "She wants me to dress up like a bloody clown."

"She says it will help if you watch Daddy put on a clown costume. You'll see clowns are just normal people like everybody else and there's nothing to be afraid of." She carefully put a heavy shopping bag on the table. Then watching Roy, she slowly took out a polka-dot clown suit, rubber nose, wig and floppy shoes, and laid them before him. "See, Roy, they're just clothes."

Roy said nothing but stared quietly. At one point he reached out and briefly put one finger on the spotted nylon pants.

Janey said, "Now, Dad can put it on."

Mark took off his shirt, shoes, pants, put one leg, then the other into the speckled suit. When he got his arms through the ruffled sleeves, Janey stood behind him and clipped shut the clasp.

"Now for the make-up," said Janey.

She opened the little jars of red, blue, white, green face-paint. She used blue as a base and painted large red circles on his cheeks, white spheres around his eyes, a green oval encircling his mouth. She told Mark to put on the wig.

"How do we use the shoes?" Janey said.

They discovered they could be easily slipped over Mark's bare feet.

He stood up, looked at Roy and, trying to smile said, "What do you think of your old dad now?"

Roy just watched quietly.

"Mark, you should do a little dance," said Janey. "Move your hands in the air and stomp your feet."

Leaping Mark swung one hand in the air. Then he stopped. "I feel like a bloody homo," he said.

Roy was silent.

"What's this?" said Janey. She discovered a water-pistol at the bottom of the bag. She filled it with water from the sink, then held it before Mark's face and squeezed the trigger once. Water struck his cheek and then suddenly, miraculously, the room seemed to fill with light, as Roy laughed.

Janey squirted her husband again and again as Mark danced faster and faster and Roy's laugh grew louder and louder, resounding from one kitchen wall to the other. Soon Mark's face was completely wet, the red face-paints flowing onto his polka-dot chest. Janey opened the kitchen fridge, took the remainder of the Sarah Lee pie they'd just had for dessert and smushed it in Mark's face. Roy screamed in hysterical laughter.

Then Janey snatched a carton of eggs from the fridge, opened it and broke one on Mark's forehead, then one against his cheek, then she put two on the chair and Mark sat on them. Then she said, "Mark, pretend it's an apple", and Mark said, "Oh, look at this delicious white apple" and bit into the side of it. The yolk dribbled down his chin as he spit out bits of eggshell.

Then Mark said, "C'mere Roy!" and rushed into the living-room. He clicked a video into the slot, smearing whipped cream on both the volume-dial and the ON-button, and when Bozo's smiling face appeared on the screen, Roy began to cry.

Mark stared in disbelief. Then he shouted, "Jesus fucking Christ!" removed and

flung the wig to the ground, reached behind to undo the costume, tore it off in one swift movement and stormed upstairs.

Janey cried out, "Oh Mark, please, honey, Mark." She pressed the VIDEO-OFF button and ran upstairs after him.

Roy sat quietly staring at the abandoned clown costume.

He wouldn't cry any more.

He knew the time had almost come. Perhaps this disguise could save him. At least temporarily.

From above he soon heard the rhythmic pounding of his parents' bed against the wall and the entire house began to shake; somewhere a huge fist was beating the ground and when he rose and looked out the window, he saw the entire street was trembling, trees starting to fall. He could only be safe from them if he pretended to be like them and now there was no other choice. He slowly put one foot, then the other into the polka-dot costume, lifted it over his shoulders, reached behind, snapped the clasp shut. The suit was big, allowing him still a bit of growing room if he needed it. He slapped on the leftover paint; it didn't matter too much how it looked, just as long as it hid the fact he'd been crying. The pounding intensified. Weeping silently and trying to ignore his fear, he stepped carefully down the stairs to the side door, put his hand on the knob, turned, opened, stepped through the doorway.

He stood on the street; the pounding had stopped. In the upstairs window his half-naked parents looked out with mouths open.

Then It happened:

A rising roar of clamorous shouts, hoots, shrieks, shrill accordion music, applause like rain on pavement, a sing-song "Dog-gie DAAW-GEE", as on the distant hill a multi-coloured wave rises up and over, descends, and from the south, north, west, east, teeming, riotous, chaotic crowds of leaping, bouncing, crawling, cart-wheeling clowns. Their hair juts like helicopter-blades, their protruding tongues wagging like dog-tails. They swarm forward across the roads, sidewalks, lawns, flow up onto bungalow roofs, where they scale chimneys and T.V. aerials. They scream through bullhorns, wave signs reading "GUFFAW GUFFAW," dance in speckled undies, hit each other with huge rubber hammers, run races on their hands screeching all the way, swim in puddles of water an inch-deep, blow gigantic police-whistles in each other's ears, roll back and forth through puddles of sparkly paint, strike two-by-fours against each other's behinds that then honk like cars in traffic; they dump pots of sludge-coated spaghetti on each other's heads, pull unending strings of elastic snot from their noses, douse each other with buckets of tomato soup, chocolate milk, and confetti. Wearing floppy shoes and ballerina tutus they prance in ridiculous circles, blow kisses from atop bungalow awnings or telephone-poles or while hanging from hydro-wires. Suddenly they all pull out a billion whoopie-cushions, sit and the whole world farts at once--and then in the sky, a huge whirling fan appears sending forth a blinding storm of shredded tissue paper, inundating the formless, tumultuous multitude; paper fragments slap Roy's face, get in his eyes, hair, mouth, the sun has become a strobe-light flashing, someone blows a horn in Roy's ear, rips off his velcro-seamed pants to reveal floral undies and a neon sign flashing "Kick me", takes his hand and together they dance,

spinning round and round and, in Roy's gut, a sound forms, part-shriek, part-wail, part-bellow, that rises up through his throat, mouth, between his lips to merge perfectly with the outside world, a sound of defiant, pain-fraught, joyless, triumphant and obscene laughter.

The Royal Conservatory: Statement and Fugue for 8 Voices

Allegro (♩=104)

Op. 64, No.2

Statement

MEZZO-PIANO

1: The Royal Conservatory of Music looms like a castle, a battleship, a mortuary, a cathedral. Its rooms are like matchboxes, amphitheatres, half-lit caves, telephone booths. There one smells fumes of daffodils, drying resin, tour-buses, lemon wax. Outside it zoom BMW's, paper airplanes, high-frequency radio waves, hummingbirds.

The Royal Conservatory of Music blooms like a chrysanthemum, a dandelion, a cheese soufflé, the ember in the end of a lit cigarette.

2: Sitting in my over-upholstered office and gazing out through the latticed windows at the frost-covered courtyard, the empty, circular, cement fountain, dangling icicles, dead squirrels, and trees reft by lightning, I think it has been a good life I've lived here as a piano teacher at the Royal Conservatory of Music, and as I hear the metronome-like click-click-click of the accordion-shaped radiator, it's as if my name's being repeated Ted-Ted-Ted-Sims piano teacher extraordinaire, oh not extraordinaire but O.K., fine, accomplished and content, and as I stand, open the door and place my gold-buckled shoe on the speckled, tiled floor and head out into the half-lit corridor where the glorious sound of the tremulous glissandos of contrabass-players mixes with the booming roar of pianos played in the lower register with the pedal down, accentuated

by the sudden, bright, staccato squawk of people whose throats are being slit, the sound rises and falls and one feels one's submerged in tossing ocean waves or is being beaten on the forehead with a blunt machete, and as I step between corridor walls covered with paintings of my old, beloved colleagues, past the balustrades adorned with vases of tulips, baskets full of hissing scorpions or the severed, still-beating hearts of romantic composers from the mid-nineteenth century whose blood drips in straight lines down the wallpaper and coagulates in little puddles just below the electric sockets, I think with pleasure of the joy, the wonder, the cracked jaws and kicked scrotums inherent in every bar of every piece I've ever taught, and as I approach the main lobby, I remember the conservatory's star, now-professional musicians, the harpist who won first prize in the Vienna Mozart festival, the flautist who stabbed her instrument into her boyfriend's stomach cavity, the two mezzo-sopranos who gouged out each others' eyes with ice-picks and I think the Conservatory is a magnificent place and I have lived a magnificent life and how hard it will be for me to retire and renounce my magic powers and become like mortal men, and as I, for the last time ever, push open the Royal Conservatory of Music's heavy, lacquered, oak door that I've stepped through a million times before, and look out at the street, which I realize is no longer a street but a fire-filled abyss within which writhe shrieking, blood-spattered, goblin-faced figures, and flailing, still-alive, half-dismembered corpses, their intestines dangling like tangled treble-clefs, then, making sure my tie is straight, I take one step and fall forward.

3: Miss Rumpelstiltit plays the piano in a style oh-so-elegant. Elegant. Swelligant. Intelligent. She is magnificent. Look, as her wrist superbly arches as she delicately, oh so delicately plays the couplets in Mozart's Sonata in A+. And oh her pianissimo is so delicate, swellicate, immellicate. Hear the phrases soft as fingers pressed against the downy breasts of birds that don't squawk but worble, phorble, morble. Oh Miss Rumpelstiltit, play on, play on. And she does. Mozart's cadenza not influeneza nor cumenza but slupenza, nermenza and even chorpenza. And now listen as her hand lifts and there is a pause, a silence, a mysterious void where the deafening racket of our ever-babbling lives stops and the whole universe leans forward with its ear cocked listening for that secret concealed in a double-quarter rest. There it is. Do you hear it? Then Miss Rumpelstiltit's hand slowly descends and plays five clear, bell-like notes, like a diagonal line stretching across a blank canvas, and life returns, wraps round me in a warm embrace as—elegant swelligent, immeligent, the main theme returns like a lost dove flying home to snuggle, nestle in my arms, cooing joyful, ecstatic—relligent, velligent, onselligent!

4: In the Conservatory basement whenever the students run their bows across their violins, the horsehair cuts through the strings, then saws into the instrument's wood frame, severing the top half, which falls to the ground with a loud thud. The cellos have been splitting in half sideways, and when the viola-players place their instruments under their necks, the lacquered bodies disintegrate into hundreds of unjoinable pieces that make a terrible clattering sound as they strike the floor and get stuck in people's

shoes when they accidentally step on them. The Royal Conservatory's head office has been getting complaints from both students and parents and the janitor is getting tired of sweeping up the sawdust.

But just this week it got worse. One thought only the string section was affected, but at Monday's rehearsal when the harpist touched her instrument, all the wires snapped at once, then the percussionist struck the snare-drum which exploded like a balloon pricked with a needle, and the knob on his drum-stick flew off and began bouncing about the room like a ping-pong ball. Now the trumpets' horns repeatedly fall off and roll back and forth across the floor, sometimes hitting people's ankles, and when the trombonists thrust forward their slides, they dislodge and shoot straight across the room, breaking windows or getting stuck in walls, as the bassoons ascend like rockets into the ceiling. The rehearsals take place in a whirlwind of flying instrument parts, and ceiling-plaster falling like rain. Then yesterday, when the tuba sounded its lowest note, it emitted a noxious gas and all the choir members fainted, the flutes went limp like sagging strings of toffee, as the clarinets dissolved to mercury that made a loud hissing sound as it dribbled down the students' legs.

Unfortunately, parents had to pay for all the practices in advance and the Conservatory is sticking to its no-refunds policy.

Mrs. Johnstone, Stephanie's mother, is outraged. "I paid good money for my daughter to become musical but I didn't expect all this tumult and racket."

Mrs. Binkley said, "I can understand a few difficulties, but this is absolutely ridiculous. I'm afraid the experience might make my Bobbie tone-deaf if it doesn't turn

him off music altogether."

Ms Price told us, "It's very dangerous for the children. The shooting trombone-slides could easily hit someone in the head, and the snapping harp-strings could take someone's eye out."

The President of the Royal Conservatory of Music has assured parents that with time the students' playing will improve. In the end, however, no one is sure if it's really the students or the instruments who are not co-operating.

5: Not eating margarine would mean undermining my integrity as an artist. I know you're all thinking, well, doesn't that make you a very vain woman? But I feel vanity is a part of art and the non-vain are really non-artistic.

Each night before I sing, I rub margarine across my face and forehead; I massage some through my hair. I squeeze crescents of it into my ears. Then I bite into large cakes of it trying to get some stuck between my teeth. Margarine makes me feel free. It reminds me that I'm a woman and a human being and a magnificent performer and that most people would suck the shit from my ass if they could be me for one hour. Margarine brings me peace and teaches me the value of life.

Sometimes when I roll margarine into wax-paper-coated tubes and stick them up my nostrils, or after smearing swaths of it over my eyes, I feel truly spiritual. Last week as I fingered the *Becel* label, I began weeping. I swallowed a bowlful, spread some on my kneecaps, the back of my neck, and shoved a cake of it up my rectum, then I had a revelation. The revelation was "You're beautiful and life is beautiful.

Keep on living. Don't give up."

Before my performances I lie in a large tub of margarine. I am coated in margarine as if in Holy light. Later I shower and, as the margarine flows off my skin and down the drain, I feel I've shed all impurities, any private weaknesses, humiliating moments of fear, notes accidentally sung in the lower register. I am a soprano.

In the concert hall I stand before my audience. I think: I am golden light. I am better than you all. I am margarine.

3: Oh Miss Rumpelstiltit, you are a sly one. At first elegant, swellegant, and now in the second movement, a whole new repertoire, effect, and let us say it, register. Your fingers dance as on a hot-iron plate--pick-pock sick-sock rick-rock-- like a bunch of toy-hammers pock-picking against one's head-- lock-lick mock-mick dock-dick--a group of tiny people scurrying about the deck of a ship that's sinking--sock-sick nock-nick chock-chick--or ants crawling in and out of the hair follicles of a man half-asleep on a desert island--rock-rick shock-shick fock-fick--oh Miss Rumpelstiltit you're a shrewd one, you're a feisty cracker--nock-nick thock-thick--watch her fingers like scalpels-- dock-dick--chisels--sock-sick--dancing popsicle-sticks--sock-sick bock-bick, oh Miss Rum-pel-stil-tit you know your mu-sic makes me dock-dick stock-stick it's all too knock-nick notes like fingers dock-dick touching feeling pock-pick probing every orifice in my body.

6: Because I play the oboe, I should die. My ears should be torn off with pliers, my

chest gashed and ribs rent from my chest one by one, my head, pelvis, and limbs shred and devoured by the dagger-sharp teeth of fierce, leaping hordes of savage, famished jackals, grizzly bears, tigers and hyenas.

Oh everybody says, "The oboe's sound is so exotic, faraway." "There's only one oboe in any orchestra because its sound is so particular." Which means I'm a freak. I can't stand the sight of my face in the mirror: eyeballs like pulsating maggots, cheeks and forehead a fetid mass of exploding, volcano-cratered, pus-spewing acne, ghastly, ten-ton, rusted iron-bar glasses held together with masking tape coated in dripping mould, cracked, bloody lips displaying rotting teeth and festering gums about which pus-headed worms writhe.

If I could roll up in a corner and put a bullet through my brain but I don't have a bullet, brain or even a corner, I live in the garbage dump just out of town where I suck out the remains from the bottom of soup-tins and swallow clods of shit-crusting earth to survive. But worst of all, once a month Federal Express arrives with a message, "We need you to play *Rite of Spring*," or "We still need an oboe for *The Pastoral Symphony*" and I must haul myself out of the pit full of muck, piss and vomit where I lie moaning, put on a tie and appear before PEOPLE.

Now I sit beside the other wind players, whose instruments correctly have one reed, unlike my freak-horn which has two.

Eyes closed, trembling so much my knees are making the music-stand rattle, I count the bars, 20 before the orchestra stops and I must play the solo in the First Movement of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*--6 long, drawn-out notes, F E-flat D F E-

flat D, against a backdrop of silence. Unprotected, naked, bare, exposed to the vicious, well-dressed, steel-eyed multitudes glaring down at me through gold-plated pince-nez, ready to judge and condemn me.

Oh that I had never taken a single oboe lesson in my life, that oboes never existed, that I never existed, that music never was!

4: One night the instruments tried to escape from the Royal Conservatory of Music. Who could blame them? First the flutes carefully aimed themselves, then leapt at the doorknob buttons, releasing the locks. The woodwinds hopped clanking behind; from the east wing came the brass section scraping along the marble-tiled floor as kettledrums rumbled down steep stairways. When the first-floor lock was open, the instruments fled into the unlit parking-lot, sheet-music blowing from the door of the Conservatory's store. But then the grand pianos tried to fit through the door. They were too wide and, in desperation, began pounding their frames against the doorjams, finally waking the security guard, who retrieved all the escaping instruments from the outside world and locked them back in the Conservatory.

The instruments still remember their brief dash to freedom. Just for a moment they were outside the Royal Conservatory of Music, in a world without sound, no one unwantably putting their lips on their orifices or shoving cleaning pipes down their spines. On cold winter nights when the wind moans in the rafters, the instruments, locked in their felt-lined cases, begin weeping. The sound starts slowly, then rises to fill the building. It is a haunting sound no human has ever heard, in a key none of us

could ever understand.

7: Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching...

The Royal Conservatory of Music's guest conductor is masturbating in the third-floor washroom cubicle.

Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching...His belt's undone and its metal catch keeps thwacking the outer square. Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching...

The high-pitched sound rises up and over the cubicle walls. It is the sound of the door-knocker at the Pearly Gates. And the sound of keys that jingle from St. Stephen's robe as, arms waving, he conducts Celestial Choirs. It is also the sound of spoon clacking teacup during long-ago visits to Aunt Mabel whom the conductor loved, and it is the sound of muffled, tintinnabulous voices of long-lost childhood friends calling from a faraway country to which he can never return. Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching...It is also the sound of money being counted, the earthly money his fame brings into the Conservatory. Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching...

In his mind are long, lacquered violin-bows, the hole at the bottom of the kettledrum he's always passed but never touched, the dark S-slits in the sides of cellos that can never be seen into even when tilted toward the light, and the abrupt, in-unison leap of viola-bows that sit poised on their strings the moment he raises his hand. Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching...

He has never been able to find anything equivalent to the sound of the belt-

buckle in any music anywhere, and he wonders why Bach, Mendelssohn, even Beethoven didn't use it, and as the tempo increases--Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching--he has a sudden revelation about the bringing together of violin-bows and the holes in kettledrums, the merging of piccolo-sticks and the gleaming horns of tubas--KA-CHING KA-CHING KA-CHING--now he will change his life, he will not conduct any longer--and as 1,785,519 sperm, each shaped like a 32nd-note, some staccato, some marcatissimo, suddenly strike the cubicle wall, he realizes--yes, he will become a composer.

4: List of items on order for Royal Conservatory of Music Store:

--Bach's *Well-Tempered Klavier* adapted for hand-and-arpit solos.

--Bela Bartok's *The Lost Show Tunes*.

--Heart of Chopin removed from tomb in Holycross Cathedral, Warsaw, Poland. (Just on loan long enough to make copies.)

--Sheet music in Braille and, conversely, sound recordings of the world's greatest paintings.

--Clara Schumann's *Why Am I The Only Goddamned Woman Composer In The Whole Bloody Nineteenth-Century?*

--Handkerchief Franz Schubert used to cough up tubercular phlegm. (Just on loan long enough to make copies.)

--Motivational tapes: Chopin, *I Feel and Because I Feel, I Can Do It*.

Bach, *God God God*.

--A Canadian Coupling: Murray Schafer composes for *The Trouble with Tracy*.

--Specially-priced, corporate-sponsored metronomes installed with speakers that shout HON-DA HON-DA at lower tempos, M-BANX for Allegro, and BUY-BUY-BUY for Presto.

3: And then finally, Miss Rumpelstiltit, the return, the return I'm craving, the gathering tide, rising, whirling streams of notes climbing up and up, about to burst the dam-walls that contain them, round and round and higher and higher--and then--**BELLIGANT SWELLIGANT MELLIGANT**--I cry out in ecstasy--**VELLIGENT WELLIGENT SELLIGENT**--tears stream down my cheeks--**SMELLIGENT HELLIGENT NELLIGEN E-L-E-G-A-A-A-NT!** The roar of applause and I leap up, clapping, screaming, and then she rises from the piano bench, yes, Miss Rumpelstiltit, braids of hair arranged in cornices above her lily-white forehead, she meekly steps forward and--what's happened?--she's not there! She's--what?--She's fallen onto the floor of the stage! Staring forward, not believing, I finally see it: Someone has had the nerve to place a banana-peel on the floor exactly where Miss Rumpelstiltit will step. Some people start laughing, and then others laugh and like fire leaping from tree to tree until the entire forest is ablaze, the hall erupts with deafening, demonic, tumultuous, pulverizing laughter. "This is an outrage," I cry. "AN OUTRAGE!" but already crowds of people are swarming forwards onto the stage, each carrying a metal-legged, wood-back chair that they begin, one by one, to break over the back and beautiful head of Miss Rumpelstiltit.

8: I am the President. Of the Royal Conservatory of Music. I work hard every day. I am respected very widely. I hire the new teachers. I advertise the new concerts. I call the agents of the guest artists. I rent out rooms to a marvellous faculty and I speak to donors who bring money, lots of money into our fine institution.

I'm qualified. I have an M.B.A. And I have a B.Sc. And I have an A.R.C.T. and I've studied piano, cello and flute. I have also written music. I published articles in *Musician's Quarterly*, *Musician's Monthly* and *Adult Musician*. I can add a balance sheet. I can varnish a table top. I've been to Guatemala. I studied carpet embroidery with the greatest teachers of our day and I can shoot a bull's eye point-blank at a distance of 5 metres. I once rode a horse through a dry riverbed and I've climbed the Leaning Tower of Pisa with suction-cups on my feet. I shot terrorists in the war in Bosnia and have tracked yetis in the High Himalayas after translating the *Bhagavad-Gita* into Latin and Greek. I have swum from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, and after rounding Tierra Del Fuego, I jet-skied to the North Pole.

I spend my free time moving Arctic air masses back and forth between Greenland and Siberia and I've recently started stitching the holes in the ozone together with threads from the wings of gossamer angels. Sometimes I am an angel myself.

When I get tired of flying back and forth between the Throne of God and the Pearly Gates and exploring the Highest Heavens full of Archangels who are always doing their nails, clacking gum between their teeth and watching *Laverne and Shirley* reruns, I descend to Hell to crack a few jokes with Satan ("Hot enough for you?"), then push through the lower stratosphere and escape into the Milky Way, where I start

planets spinning the wrong direction, hide a few of Jupiter's moons when no one's looking, rearrange the rings of Saturn so the green ones are separate from the red, and play with the thermostat-dial on the back of the sun.

Then when I'm bored I go back to the Royal Conservatory of Music to do some filing and return a few emails.

Last week God called me on the phone and I said, "Geez God, business is good but I miss the old days, just you and me hanging out in a distant galaxy, playing pool with stray meteorites and making stogies out of the burnt-out asteroids."

Someday I'm gonna blow this popsicle-stand for good and join God seven eons away for few rounds of crap and some nice, cold brewskies.

Fugue

MEZZO-FORTE

7: Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching

4: HON-da

HON-da

7: Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching

5: Margarine

(Silence)

7: Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching

4: HON-da

HON-da

7: Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching Ka-ching

5: Margarine

(Silence)

4: "And it was dangerous because the harp-strings could take someone's eye out and already students had started swallowing bits of falling plaster."

5: And when the margarine-flashlight shines up my vaginal canal

4: escape far from the Royal Conservatory of Music

5: lighting up the very centre of my being

4: out into the parking-lot and vanishing into the night

5: I know women are superior to all men and I'm superior to all women because I am coated in margarine.

3: Velligent

6: But I can't stand their steel-eyed faces

8: I set planets spinning in the wrong direction

6: boring into mine

8: make hula hoops from Saturn's rings

6: as I hold my oboe like a frozen turd-stick

3: Melligent, Swelligent

6: if I could have a million railway-ties driven into my skull, my intestines torn out and thrown beneath the pummelling wheels of a charging, ten-ton truck and the rest of my body boiled in carbolic acid.

(Silence)

2: Making sure my tie is straight, I take one step and fall forward

3: the quarter-rest's a mystery, all you have to do is listen

5: With margarine under my armpits, I know God is ever with me

2: Making sure my jacket's done up, I take one step and fall forward

3: She's elegant, swelligent and in fact yelligent and velligent

2: Making sure there's no lint on my lapel, I take one step and fall forward

4: they dream of a world without sound, the sun rising and falling in silence

2: Making sure I'm not playing pocket pool, I take one step and fall forward

8: I'll talk to God like in the old days before either of us had made it big

2: I take one step and fall forward

I fall forward

I fall forward

4: m-banx m-banx

m-banx m-banx

A man plays one note on his oboe, before listeners who have daggers hidden in their pockets.

A woman coated in margarine stands erect before a mirror.

A president gazes skyward and contemplates life on Pluto.

A group of non-unionized instruments plot a second escape.

I am gazing at Miss Rumpelstiltit as the chairs go tumbling over her.

But every floor's on fire.

Every floor's on fire.

Every floor's on fire.

Every floor's on fire.

Perhaps it's always been so but nobody noticed for the cry of smoke alarms always sounded like—music.

1: The Royal Conservatory of Music looms like a funnel cloud, a tidal wave, a dropped H-bomb, a blazing hurtling planet that has finally collided with Earth.

2: I take one step and fall--

one step and fall--

one step and fall--

5: As margarine seeps into all the pores in my skin I know I alone am beautiful

7: He thinks of the S-slits, the subtle curve of the harp-frame

6: My mouth on the double-reed, playing F, E-flat, D--

4: The instruments huddle in the emergency exit, trembling with anticipation

3: And I run through the riotous multitudes, their chairs raised like swords, towards my prone Miss Rumpelstiltit, who gazes at me weeping and imploring

2: one step

one step

one step

one step

(Silence)

(Silence)

(Silence)

(Silence)

(Silence)

(Silence)

FORTISSIMO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

4: Then the piccolo leaps, lands like a dagger in the forehead of the sleeping security guard

5: And the fire touches the foot of a woman who, because of the oil in her margarine, bursts into flame

PRESTO! PRESTO! BUY-BUY-BUY-BUY!!

6: I pull my mouth from the reed, look at the shrieking crowd, 10,000 daggers fly towards me, strike my shoulder, face, neck

5: In a margarine-blaze I'm now brighter than the sun

4: The exit-door bursts open and the instruments flee into the night

3: I take Miss Rumpelstiltit in my arms, press her lips against mine

8: Arms outstretched I pierce the ozone layer, see God counting poker-chips beside Neptune

2: I take one step and fall forward

forward forward

5: I'm beautiful

2: forward

4: m-banx

4: piccolo

3: I press her body against mine and will hold onto her forever.

6: And now I know my life is over, I stab the oboe through my heart.

7: And surrounded by walls of flame, I know I'll always be a composer.

5: margarine

7: Ka-ching

4: m-banx

3: swelligent

8: angel wings

4: plaster

8: angel wings

4: plaster

5:-MARGARINE

(Applause)