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Canada

My Blue Devils

Anne Marie Weiss

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

January 1994

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ISBN 0-315-90931-5

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ABSTRACT

Blue Devils

Anne Marie Weiss

The thesis is a Creative Writing project, a novel entitled *My Blue Devils*.

Vladimir Nabokov maintained that novels are at best fairy tales which create fictional and fantastic worlds out of "the chaos of the everyday." The world of *Blue Devils* is the city of Montreal in the early eighties, and Montreal, in a sense, is its main character. The focus is on the extremes and eccentricities of this landscape--its Catholic iconography of churches and steeples, graveyard angels and shrines, as well as the icons of kitsch and of arson, the burnt-out buildings in the inner city. The work is not intended to be a "realistic" portrait of place, but an emotional, spiritual landscape from which the inter-related characters emerge, defined by and defining their surroundings--the landscape of Heaven and Hell.

Structurally, the novel is divided into three parts, each corresponding to times of the day, a circular journey from five p.m. to five p.m. the following day. The language uses techniques borrowed from stream of consciousness--shifts in meaning, discontinuities, non sequiturs--with focus on the rhythms and sounds of words, using non-mimetic techniques to explore the elusive relationship between language and the world.

In memory of
Josephine

Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her, and to wonder what was going to happen next. First she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything: then she looked at the sides of the well, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book-shelves: here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs. She took down a jar from one of the shelves as she passed: it was labeled "ORANGE MARMALADE," but to her great disappointment was empty: she did not like to drop the jar, for fear of killing somebody underneath, so managed to put it into one of the cupboards as she fell past it.

"Well!" thought Alice to herself, "After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down stairs! How brave they'll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn't say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!" (which was very likely true.)

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

And I fell as a dead body falls.

Dante, *The Inferno*

My Blue Devils

- I. *Les Terrains Vagues*
- II. *Les Enfants Terribles*
- III. *Belle Laide*

I

Les Terrains Vagues

Louise...

A black cat on the garage roof---skulking across, stalking something, disappearing over the edge, over to the other side.... 5 p.m. Hottest part of the day--heat escaping from the pavement and the gravel, rising up like a cloud. Across the roof, in the shadow of the lone tree, three figures in winter coats in the sweltering heat appeared to be sleeping, even dead. Dark lumps of cloth under the tall branches.

The wind picked up for a moment, sent the leaves twirling in tiny circles, dazzling as a mirage in the bright grey haze ... then stopped.

Behind the vacant lot ... another road where the cars went down the hill, then up, flying up and over the black iron bridge, down to the canal, to the St. Lawrence, to the south, to eternity....

--He didn't have a thing on her. There were a million trees and a million boys out there. See the light of day. They could all go to hell. This country was dangerous, even more, willy-nilly and hot....

Don't start.

A thin dark man with wild childish eyes slipped out from the flat below, stumbling and stuttering to himself, pulling a kitchen chair awkwardly with one hand, dragging it out on its metal legs along the porch below, then stopped on the landing and looked up, put his hand through his hair as if thinking for a moment, then flopped down on the chair.

"Ch-chick-a-d-dee, hel-lo. How's about you and me, w-we go for a walk. I-I just seen your man, j-just now, and he-he-he says he's going to be late, t-tells me to take you out, s-so you don't get lonely...."

"Jerzy's not here, you know that ... don't lose that chair again."

"Don't worry, I-I know what I'm d-doing."

"Don't get lost."

"I ain't..."--as he minnowed down the steps, dragging the chair across the gravel, down the alley, past the door to Club 99, across the street--that went down to the old railway tracks and a clump of thorns--and across to the empty lot with the lone tree. He plunked himself down and started to toss out breadcrumbs from a paper bag. A flock of pigeons appearing in the field where he sat tossing the food into the air ... birds swirling around around the giant tree ... landing on the ground ... landing in its arching branches.

Black panther crawling, belly down, across the back roof of the garage ... slinking across the yard.

--Don't start that again, devil!

She wondered for a moment when Jerzy would come over-- hitting her with a thump--of course, he wasn't coming over ... not today ... maybe never. She stood up to go to the fridge for another beer, but it was too hot to move, and sat down again on the old green milk stool she had found on Notre Dame, wobbling from side to side, and wondered who had made it, and when ... such a long way from home, like hers.

Francis was holding court like a preacher in the long dry grass, one arm swinging madly.

--Why couldn't she be like him? At least Francis knew how to relax--under the shade of a tree on a comfortable chair. Still had that feeling she should be doing something all the time, even in this heat--like doing time in purgatory.

Clouds on the horizon. Dark thunder clouds rising above the highrises of Montreal: the giants...CP...IBM...UIC...PCB...DDT...CIA...all hovering in the distance-- vaguely threatening. Black clouds rising above the Hotel Champlain, the deserted hotel where they had climbed inside through a broken window, followed the wide curving staircase--molded plaster casts on impish faces fallen on the floor ... collapsing railing ... and where her oldest friend Gabriel had fallen down a heating shaft, down into a pile of old newspapers below, falling as he said like Alice down the rabbit hole.

--Shoo devil! She swatted at the turquoise bug circling

her head, landing on her arm, taking off only to land on her ear. A cockroach scuttled by her feet towards the kitchen, but she felt too lazy to stomp on it. Pink thongs were just not the instrument of death, not like police boots. Not the same kind of impact. She flapped her thongs on her feet-- pretty good though at making them click to a cucaracha beat.

Sly panther crawling across the garage roof ... an angel of mercy flying over the Hotel Champlain ... a dancing devil in the garbage can....

Francis was having problems staying on his kitchen chair as he leant over dangerously backwards, about to fall head over heels into an abyss, then crashed into the grass, dropped a bottle from his upraised hand, and followed it through the long grass like a cat.

Club 99 across the alley playing some disco hit on the jukebox, music drifting out louder as the back door opened. A car pulling up slowly in the alley--a big white shining Oldsmobile.

Same ridiculous song playing again: *What's love got to do, got to do with it....*

The two men stood outside the door beside the car, discussing something. A black and white spotted dog moving lazily down the alleyway, sauntering past them, sniffing the ground. The fat man lit a cigarette, looked down and kicked the gravel with his white shoes.

The spotted dog sniffing at the fire escape below her--

up and down, up and down--as though it had found something, then stared up at her with its mustard yellow eyes.

What's love got to do, got to do with lice....

Francis stood up, waving at something in the distance near the shell of the Hotel Champlain. He balanced unsteadily on his chair, leaning this way and that, then clasped the branches overhead, scrambled up the trunk ... and fell.

--Maniacs must take some hold on things. The search for paradise, a lot of hogwash or what? Music of all these idiots. Falling in, falling out ... rip-tide into darkness. The moon-faced ass. The air so thick you'd think it was still.

Francis, lizard-eyed and mischievous, asleep in the grass, his chair, his radio-post, forgotten.

Spider on the wall. Must make some coffee. Can't even cross the street anymore. Not like in spring ... on the mountain in the cool May air with Jerzy, lying there on the slope, the dome of the Oratory on the horizon, watching people walking their dogs, and solemn-faced babies in backpacks like little emperors watching their subjects ... and down below, the still water. So peaceful on the grass ... the sky a turquoise dome through the pale green leaves of the trees.

"...What's love, what's love, but some second-hand cremation?...."

Five past five. Time just stood still.

At the back door of the club, the two men seemed to be

waiting for someone ... something ... shuffling from one foot to the other. One picked up a stone and threw it down the pavement, stopped and pondered its fall, stood there leaning against the wall, looking down the alley, staring down, holding his hands out as though drying them.

She stood up. She should make a coffee, sober up ... get another drink, get up, and take a hold of things.

But there was nothing ... nothing to do.

Gabriel...

He lay in his room, cats spread all around--on his feet, stomach, pillow, nestled in his armpit ... lying on their backs with their paws stretched out, their fur flat and limp against their bodies. He yawned and stretched out, and one rolled down off the mattress and landed on the floor with a thump.

--So where was he? Couldn't remember right now. He opened his eyes. Of course--*chez moi*. How he got home was another question that he didn't really like to think about. In the fog of awakening, he couldn't remember what he had done last night, but had a feeling it was just as well.

He suddenly jerked up and looked around ... cats went flying. He crawled over to his pants lying crumpled on the floor, started rummaging around in the pockets and pulled out three wads of twenties, and there was more. He started placing them queen sides up in neat piles of twenties, tens, then a fifty. He had a feeling there was a lot of money in his pockets, but he couldn't count it right now, and fell back on the mattress.

He knew it was terribly hot in the room, but he couldn't feel it. Rubbed his hands ... they felt numb.

He stretched his long body over to the handle and opened the balcony door, the smell and the thunder of rush hour traffic coming crashing into the dark room. His head

hurt. He tried to shut it again but something was stuck, so left it and flopped down again on the mattress. The cats in the corners staring at him. He growled and fell back with a thump.

--Maudit.

He lay there studying the old stone facades of the other apartments across the street. The heavy rolling of a truck rumbling past.

Mimi, small grey and white, came sniffing over towards him. Suddenly filled with remorse, he picked her up gently, cradling her in his arms. "Forgive me, mon amour."

He heard the thunder again over the roar of the traffic on St. Antoine. The sound of crashing coming from the kitchen. Wayne must be home, but what the hell was he doing?

He scratched his nose. Like a hawk he surveyed the dusty room. All this was his, thank you very much, but he didn't like the way he had hung crucifixes all over the place last week for a joke. It was making him nervous. Reminded him too much of his childhood.

He lit up a cigarette and smoked it absently, thinking about buying some hash. Maybe he could pick up some more at the restaurant where those Turks were so obliging.

He counted his toes. Still ten of them.

Crash of thunder. All the cats, ears pricked up.

Well at least tonight he could amuse himself with all

that mysterious money.

He put on a cotton robe that had once been white, but was now spotted with mustard stains. He placed the black cat in his arms and gingerly opened the door.

A nose in the doorway, a secret smell in the air. He tip-toed into the kitchen, threw the cat, and laughed. It went flying across the room and landed on the floor. His roommate stared at him, confused and angry, with a lost puppy expression, surrounded by a bunch of bowls, spread out along the counters and across the kitchen table.

Gabriel stood in the doorway surveying the disaster, picked up the book beside the bowl of cracked eggs, and turned it over. "Where did a cookbook come from?"

"I'm making a cake," said Wayne with a sigh.

"Well it says here to mix everything together and throw it out the window."

"Why can't you just leave me alone?"

--Well!

The telephone rang. Wayne ran over to pick it up and answered it in his best waiter's voice, "Bonjour, Hello."

Gabriel brushed aside the black cat and snarled at it. It hissed at him, skulked under the table and out into the back shed.

"And I hate the way you answer the telephone," he yelled, "And the insipid way you brush your teeth in the morning, and the dog-like way you read books, mouthing all

the words to yourself like a moron, and the way you part your hair...."

"Yes, of course I'd love to...."

--It was pointless.

The air was suffocating. He couldn't breathe.

Gabriel kicked open the door to the shed and crept into the suffocating cat stench. In the shadow of the lumber he saw the black cat, hind legs pushed out strangely, head stretched over the floor, ears curled back, vomiting.

--My God, what have I done?

He pushed open the back shed door onto the back porch. The heat bounced off the metal floor that sagged in the middle towards the drainage hole that fell to the alley below. Some strange kind of inverted stomach--the drain pipe like a sunken belly button.

He climbed the rickety ladder that went up to the roof of the shed. Up here, already there was a breeze. He jumped up the space between on to the roof edge and stepped off gingerly onto the flat gravel expanse of the roof. The rumble of the traffic. Behind, the concrete overpass of the highway; in front, the green copper bell towers over the flatlands of St. Henri. And here he was, *le grand chat* in the bathrobe seated on the drainpipe, surveying his kingdom. The clouds moving in over the overpass. Streak lightning on the horizon.

--I am the terror in the bathrobe.

He lay down on the gravel and watched the sky, rolled over and saw the church towers stretching before, black asphalt roofs of the houses ... ripple of fire catching on a rooftop ... smoke in the air ... crows flapping their wings and closing in ... *les anges noirs*.

--And this is what it must be like ... the clouds above the winged angels of death and the cat vomiting in the shed... and me the sick cat in the yellow robe crawling like a fool around the edge of the roof, peering like a hawk at the traffic on the road like looking at fat mice. No party, what party? I can't face it. What am I but legs of a dog ... chest of a hyena ... arms of a baboon ... face of a donkey ... heart of a lizard. Creep along noiselessly surveying the destruction like a stalker. What idiocy. My hands, paws of a frog, tail of the devil.

Devil walks lopsided across the roof waiting for the storm. Streak of lightning above. Not afraid. Not afraid.

Le diable stops to pick his nose.

Must tie a stone in a sock and send it flying to find the safe way across the roofs that descend and jump up in front. Peering through the skylight to see if anyone's in the bathroom. No one there below the skylight. Cat puking in the shed. My God, what have I done?

Crack of thunder. Lightning. Line of fire. It's starting. In the cracks, heaven to jump. Crack of the sky. Here across the bridge, cross the street. No devil.

What here ... think straight. Horned cats.

It was starting to rain.

Louise resting...

She felt like an insomniac zombie. Lying there, eyes open, in a cold sweat. Hadn't slept in over a week. Thunder shaking the house. It would come down this time. True blue, dog of death. Couldn't keep an idea in her head ... head like a bulldog. Some notion of suspension. Don't fall, worm. It makes no difference. The top coming off in the wind ... trees beside the highway exit lifting like dark birds about to fly.

It was humid ... like fresh putty against the skin.
Feeling sentimental--Where's Jerzy?

Time gaped open like a pit.

The marked deck.

She thought about the flesh of his stomach against her palm. A mark of redemption, or merely a jerk?

And then those moments of panic on the street. Hell gaping below the sidewalk. Afraid of potholes gaping open, afraid of falling through the floor again in her awful dreams, afraid of the pavement cracking up, swallowing her up. Heart pounding. The yellow line.

A bowl of blueberries and milk sitting beside the mattress, turning sour. The cat wandering in the door. The slap, slap of its pink tongue in the bowl.

--So why had she taken the money from Jerzy's pockets that morning? Thought when her cheque arrived she would put

it back like nothing had happened. But then she managed to spend everything, the cheque too, or was that after the fight? And Jerzy didn't forgive her, not this time. So unfair.

She stuck her nose into the pillow and stayed there. More comfortable. A funny smell ... mold.

She turned over and stared at the long cracks on the blue walls--the room empty except for a mattress and piles of clothes heaped into the corners. A jungle to wade through, and she was feeling hot and itchy, felt like burrowing into them ... and then what? No China beneath this floor. No hidden treasure or hoard of gold.

Pigeons cooing in the roof. Dog of the night. All sense and nonsense. Mutual consumption. Subterranean moles. Let's make a deal.

Get away devils!

Her thighs were sweaty, and her back where it lay against the sheets. Kept rolling around trying to get comfortable in the muggy stinking heat.

A ragged paperback on the windowsill stood up backward. The picture was of someone with a knee on a chair, upside-down, the hanged man. She had no idea what book it was. Something Gabriel had lent her. Seemed like she was always starting books, then forgetting about them. Brain going to seed like the rest of her.

The rain started pitter pattering on the roof, the sky

grey and darkening.... Open window. Rain on the windowsill. The half-read book, upside-down. Water soaking into the paper, curling the pages. Hitting the glass, tap, tap, on the glass panes, calling her out.... Streak of lightning through the grey haze of the rain. Then gone.

Turning over ... expecting to find Jerzy lying beside her, asleep--face turned, shoulders falling back across the mattress, arms wide open ... no one there.

So why was she crying? Like the rain. Then it stopped. Orange sun appearing through the grey haze--hot humid air after the thunder shower.

Pigeons cooing in the roof. The soft lulling voices rising and falling. A flutter of wings in the eaves. A pigeon flew down and sat on the window sill--spotted grey body and shining purple head, wings ruffling, round green eyes--stood there eyeing her, then eyeing the cat ... and took off, wings flapping into the hazy sky.

She picked up another book lying on the floor. A Mirror for Witches ... or was that bitches. Woodcut of a girl curled up beside an old man. Where had that come from?

Fool stepping off the cliff, eyes closed heart pounding ... the cliff.

The crack in the ceiling opening up ... plaster falling.

Nothing moved.

The crack in the wall running south and south-west.

New cracks every month. The unpainted floor, grey boards of underflooring. The bowl of water she had brought in to wash the walls, still sitting there.

The damp corner where the rain had come through--water splashing on the boards, soaking between the cracks to the livingroom, curling below and through the cracks down there on to the floor below and down ... down into the dripping stone basement. The cat stopped licking the blueberry milk, looked up at her and sauntered out of the room. Not even a hello.

Movement below the earth. The earth alive.

"You ...ker ... where ... don't even own ... get away from...." What was all the noise about? She shifted back down to the end of the bed to have a peek out the opened window.

Standing on the stoop of her porch, the woman across the street had started yelling.

Internal eruptions ... a volcano ... strange the way things changed, one moment thinking of that, now this ... hands on the floor. The dog walk. Gates of some garden. Upside-down figure staring at her. Sheets all over. Head buzzing ... all motion ... belladonna.

Out the window: "Hey you god-dam liar."

The delightful exchange. Toes tumbling like rocks down a mountain. Distant drums. A warning. Blue devils ... the party all so soon ... Mister Rogers playing with blueberries

... dogs snapping ... fool stepping off the cliff.

Outside: "W-ho, w-what's going on?"

Nadine...

There was a fight on the street. Nadine, walking home with an enormous briefcase, saw it from the top of the street, having walked out of the metro and down through the long tunnel of the railway bridge--where the concrete walls grew grey and green, "Eat the rich" painted in black letters on the far wall, and the pigeons flying beneath leaving mounds of white offal--crossed the street and the entrance to the highway, past the air vent that looked like the watch tower of the Berlin Wall, and down on to rue Versailles--a row of dilapidated greystone triplexes ending in the deserted field of the railway tracks where the weeds grew higher than her head.

A big fight.

The fat woman was yelling across the street at their house. She saw their neighbour Francis sitting, then lying at the bottom of the steps, talking back, but she could tell already that nobody was paying attention to him.

She saw the woman in the apartment next door stick her head out the window and yell, "Hey, man, I love you all. I don't want no fight."

But the fat woman just started yelling louder and louder, "What...you...t...you...grown...."

Nadine thought about turning back just so she wouldn't have to deal with this again, but then she figured, what the hell, it was her house too. She wondered if Louise was

home. Probably, she never went anywhere since she and Jerzy broke up.

The thing that pleased her most about their building--besides the third story where the bedrooms were in the roof with checkerboard dormer windows--was the fact that the building was sagging towards the middle. All illogical looking, as if it was falling into a giant hole. No doubt because the underpass over to the east ran just downhill of that air vent, or maybe it was the metro that was creating these faults in the ground, not unlike the San Andreas, and would one day swallow them up.

And what a house to be swallowed up! Even Francis, who was the least harmful of the bunch--she had heard from a reliable source--had been kicked out of his own home by his wife because of his drinking, and had moved in with the old housekeeper who was twice his age, who called him sweetheart.

Damn, it was hot. That old briefcase was almost heavier than herself. Seemed like the hotter it got, the more fights there were. This endless heatwave. Ten days already, and everyone was ready to explode.

Her feet were hurting. These heels were too high, hurt her back, but she liked them too much to change.

She wondered if Louise would pay her rent on time this month. Then maybe she could get a new pair of sandals. This time she'd try and be realistic and get a lower pair.

Ouch! All this thinking about her feet made her back crunch. She sat down with difficulty on the wall in front of the bunker-styled air vent, and adjusted her glasses.

All these books.

She wished that fat woman would stop yelling. She would tell her to go get lost herself, yes she would.

--Better wait a minute.

It was Denise again sticking her head out the window. That woman made nothing but trouble.

A large red ant was running across the wall where she was sitting, so she grabbed a book and slammed it down. That's better.

Then she saw this grubby-looking guy--looked like the one who usually went to the fat woman's--come stumbling out of Denise's apartment.

--Oh, no.

The fat woman was coming down off her porch, yelling so loud even Nadine could understand her garbled words all the way up to her peaceful sitting spot.

"You, you mother-fucker, who, what the the hell d'you think you're doing? You man, you're so crazy, you you don't even own your ass, that's what I say. Don't come any nearer or I'm going to kill you, I mean it. I'll, I'm coming right over. Watch out, I'm coming over. What the hell d'you think you're doing over there?"

Denise was coming out of the door onto her front steps,

"H-hey, I don't mean no trouble."

What a liar she was. She was trouble and the worst kind. Always sniffing round upstairs after that guy with the beard and half his teeth missing, what's his face, Gordy, with his ex-girlfriends and bastard babies always hanging around. She figured, in the long run, he was probably the real trouble-maker, just because he was so smug and sure that she too would like to get poked by him. Ugh. She'd heard stories about him, about how when he was living with some woman and she was all brainwashed and saying, yes sir, she would love to have his baby, meanwhile he was doing the same thing with a few other girlfriends who were all saying: "Gordy, you're the most wonderful lay in the world, let me have your baby." So now, when all the fuss of them discovering their rivals had died down, they all came over with their mewling and puking infants for little pool parties on the garage roof out back, and they all sat round drinking wine coolers, with Gordy looking proudly at the progeny of his loins, watching their darling babies play and pee in the inflatable plastic pool. All too idyllic.

A few of the neighbours had come out of their flats and were seated on their front steps, waiting for the show.

The fat woman was getting yelled at by a young guy with his hair in curlers, her son, and old loverboy was milling around trying to find some neutral ground, looking pretty pleased to have all this fuss make over him seeing as he was

so scrawny and over the hill.

Francis was waving shakily at her to come over and sit beside him in the front row, but she figured she might keep her seat here, till her back eased up. No point walking into the eye of the storm.

Why had she moved into that dump? Simply too cheap to turn down. Thought it was possible to fix the place up, but as soon as she plastered over cracks in the walls new ones would appear. The rent had simply been too low, and she could never refuse a bargain, not even these stupid sandals. Should have known better when the landlord was a 300-pound pervert. Well she hadn't known that at the time, but she should have known by just looking at him that he was a glutton in every respect.

She tried to get up, but couldn't.

The sun broke out from the clouds. The street looked almost pretty when the sun came out, after the dust had settled down. The rain, piddling little amount it was, must have washed at least some of the soot off the street.

Interesting architecture on the street. At least the one with the turret on the corner appealed to her. Too bad you couldn't even get fire insurance in the neighbourhood because of all the fires, most of them no doubt started by the landlords. And some pyromaniac, so they said. Such waste. So typical.

Her son was trying to pull Mavis back into the house,

but she wasn't taking any flak. "Get out of my way!" she yelled as he tried to hold her around the waist. She elbowed him and yelled, "Le'go, let go!" She broke away and ran right into her loverboy--"You monster!"--and started slapping at him.

He was whining, "Mavis, Mavis, I don't done nothing. I was just having a drink, Mavis," but she wasn't paying any attention, just kept slapping at him and shaking him like a doll.

So her son came up and started tugging her and yelling at her to stop making a fool of herself, and even some girl had come down and was trying to get her away, but she just kept swinging at them all, yelling, "Traitors!"

Even Francis was getting involved: "Mavis, y-you heard him, h-he ain't done nothing," and he kept putting his beer down and getting up, then changing his mind and sitting down again.

Then Denise opened her front door hesitantly, and squeaked, "H-hey you guys, why're you fighting?"

And the fat woman yelled. She broke away from her tormenters just like Houdini shaking off his chains, and went for her revenge, crying, "Coward, come here."

Denise took some hesitant steps down the front steps-- "Hey, what's goin' on?"--and stood nervously on the sidewalk.

The fat woman lunged at her like an octopus ready to

consume its prey.

Francis snapped to attention and put down his beer, "H-hey, w-w-what you doing, h-hey Mavis," then wove down the steps.

Her son, the girl, and even loverboy were trying to pull her off Denise, the son managing to pull her half-way by the arm, but her arm snapped back. She knocked Denise into the patch of grass beside the steps.

Two large men came running from the back door of Club 99, and fell on Mavis, pulling her screaming from her prey, her son with his arms around her in a bear hug.

Her sly boyfriend was sneaking stealthily behind the parked cars, and down St. Jacques. The smiling fox.

And one of the men who had her by the shoulders said, "Mavis, Mavis, you just calm down now."

But Mavis just screamed.

Gabriel on the roof...

The writing on the wall was all there. Communal constipation, diarrhea, consumption, thick little mice with holes for brains ... dark light ... thunder ... lightning ... the growing tension and release.

He was fed up. *C'est plate*. And this roof--a million roofs here, a millions cars riding the overpass, a million churches, all with green copper bell towers. Towers of destruction. Moth to worm ... dog to bitch ... pig to pig's feet. Ow-w! His toe had hit something sharp--a piece of glass. He sat on the gravel and pulled his toe towards his face to look at it bleeding. He squeezed it to let the scarlet blood come out faster. He should have remembered to put something on his feet, but he had forgotten, as usual. Besides, he couldn't feel his feet anymore, they were just there. Loose monkey pads to hobble around on. Man to donkey. What an ugly and monstrous life, but what was there to do about it? Nobody's fault. Pah. Maybe he should go to the dentist to remove that rotting tooth in the back of his mouth. But what would that do? Suppose that rotting tooth had some unknown value, some purpose, after which his life would be totally pointless. He squeezed his toe again. His feet were knobbly, hairy, too large. He still expected somehow to see a child's body when he watched himself ... *toujours un enfant*. Always surprised him. He squeezed his

toe again: a drop of scarlet. Wiped it off and licked his finger. *Dégueulasse.*

All horror and nonsense. After all, what was he, but a worm. Every object seemed to verify this. This very worm-like existence. He liked this worm-ness. The humility he bore, circling the monument at night, as if punishing himself for some past life, something tying him to these ridiculous rituals.

He knew what was depressing him--the sun had come out again. He hated it--it burned him, it gave him a headache, so bad he felt blinded, and even though he was oblivious to the sensation of heat, it was an atmosphere he found suffocating.

Time to leave the roof and burrow back into his little hovel. Next time he would seek out a basement apartment--more mole-like less oppressive in the heat-waves. More like a cave where he could play caveman with these troglodyte feet.

He lay on his back and stared at the sky ... white as a sheet of paper.

He rolled over and crawled like a dog on all fours over to the crooked ladder ... down, down into the abyss!

And the fire. What had they said about a fire last night? He couldn't remember anything, like a blanket of heat. *Les petits feus partout.*

He crawled backwards, lizard-like, down the ladder,

watching every step, clinging to the rungs with his claw-like hands ... felt his skin turning green ... skin of an iguana ... not that it was an unpleasant feeling.

Beside him he saw--in the window of the factory across the alley--a figure staring out at him. Was his robe open? So what? A guy in a yellowed housecoat crawling off his roof, looking like a lizard. What did they want from him? All those people running around inside like ants. He sat down on the bottom rung and stared at the factory--a brick building, each storey with large windows cut into black squares of glass, a figure in a welding mask staring out ... K.K.K or a knight errant.

Mou-Mou came out of nowhere and sat in his lap.

It all seemed quite innocent, but he preferred to be paranoid.

He lurched the feline off his lap, then remembered it had just thrown up ... too late. He walked away into the stench of the back shed--cat piss, cat shit, cat vomit--and through to the kitchen.

The kitchen had a sweet and oppressive smell--a cake in the oven. No thanks to himself.

"Way-ne!"

No answer.

--Well, well...

He poked his nose in the door of his room.

"Wayne, what are you doing? Your cake is burning."

"Go away. I'm tired."

--Well!

He couldn't stay in the house any longer--the walls were closing in. He went into his room and put on an undershirt and a pair of pants. He picked up most of the bills off the carpet and put them in his pockets. He would pick up some hash on the way. He looked at his socks hanging over the collapsing chair, but decided it was too hot for socks.

He went into the bathroom and ran the cold water from the bathtub faucet over his head, then dried it for a moment with a towel. Stared into the mirror and stuck out his tongue.

He kicked on a pair of black shoes in the hallway and ran down the steps, slammed the front door.

Down the street in front--to the left, to the right--three blocks past the new tenements. Rue Notre Dame. Into the restaurant, out of the restaurant, shoving bright foil-wrapped object into his pocket.

Now where?

He sat down on the steps of a junk shop. In the window, a doll had fallen out of its carriage, lay upside-down against the wheels ... staring.

He stared down the street at the chain-link gates to the Stelco factory. Men with metal lunchboxes and hardhats coming off the day shift. Others walking in.

"Gabriel!"

He looked up at the face in front of him, slowly becoming focused. "You're working?"

"O-Oui."

"Qu'est-ce que tu fais, là?"

"Rien spécial. Laver les fenêtres, les toilettes."

"Alors. As-tu du feu? "

"Pas maintenant, mon ami."

He should have asked him about a job, but he knew he'd never be able to stick it.

He watched him go through the gates of the chain-link fence, twelve feet high with barbed wire on top, crossing the the concrete parking lot towards the enormous warehouse, windowless, painted steel blue. He disappeared inside, his red checkered shirt the last visible sign of him as he walked through the enormous sliding doors.

A semi came gliding slowly out the gates and down Notre Dame.

What to do?

What about Louise? He vaguely remembered he had phoned her yesterday and said he would come over. By this time of day she might have a beer. At least since she had had that fight with her boyfriend. Louise was always more friendly than Wayne, but then again he had never tormented Louise. She still believed he was a perfectly normal and nice guy.

First, though, he had to calm his nerves. Notre Dame

offered no shelter. Only concrete and brick absorbing the heat all day. He slid down a side street and into some underbrush beside the canal. In here, secreted away in the trees, it was cooler. At least he could breathe. He lit himself a little smoke and contemplated the dark emerald water. This was one of the offshoots of the canal that led to a brick warehouse, the roof fallen in. Right here at the end of the tributary the brush was thick and tall. He liked to pretend he was back as a kid in the country, though they never had trees like this. It had been all very flat and barren from what he remembered. Still, this was a good spot for smoking.

He emerged, nymph-like (he fancied for a moment), from the trees. Back down the dirt road, into the concrete. As he turned the corner, he noticed some boxes dumped on an empty lot, and he went to investigate.

What had that been about a fire? Maybe someone's apartment had burnt down. Still couldn't remember.

There were a couple of pieces of clothing sticking out of one of the boxes, and he pulled them out one by one to examine them. The first was a yellow polyester top with stains ... no. A pair of long johns with holes ... no. A cotton dress with no sleeves ... that was kind of interesting. It might fit Lou. He put it aside on the ground. One brown mitten. A pair of baggy men's pants. Were they long enough? He put them aside and rummaged for

some more. Umph. Just junk. He rolled up the dress and pants and put them under his arm.

Le feu. Wasn't it something about someone wanting to start a fire. But why? That he couldn't remember.

He crossed the street and stared into the window of an antique shop. A vase shaped like a lily, about six feet high.

But what had a fire to do with him?

A mongrel dog lay asleep on the sidewalk with its mouth open, drool dripping onto the pavement.

He stepped around it and into the *depanneur*. He went to the cooler and picked out a Dr. Pepper. The fat woman behind the counter had arms that hung like jelly against her flowered dress. He fished out one of the bills out of his pockets and shoved the change back into them.

He tipped the bottle on the opener beside the counter, walked out around the sleeping guardian.

He wandered across a small playground, a couple of dark-eyed kids hanging upside down off a horseshoe-shaped jungle gym, and through the long shadows cast by the stone church behind. Never seen anyone go in or out of that church.

Did someone want him to start a fire? But why him? Why couldn't he remember the conversation from last night?

It was funny about Lou--they had been friends for years, since they were children, but he couldn't conjure up

her image in his mind right now, couldn't remember where she lived. Things fell from him sometimes. Looney tunes in his head.

Like continually falling down a hole.

Some direction.

Someone was always falling down holes ... Alice in Wonderland, yes ... but there was someone else too.

No pillow for his head.

No dog biscuits for Fido.

He leaned on a wall, finished his drink, and threw it over into a trash can.

When would he feel sick enough to continue?

One foot in front of another, that's all it took.

No... no...no time to sit down in the shade ... against this wall ... slide down into oblivion...

What street was this? Almost silent. Impossible. Disturbing. He cut away to the left past the sign--Black People's Unity of the World Social Club--and slid down a side alley. Wall to wall apartment blocks, black kids mulling over tiny patches of grass.

Was it true that they were staring at him from the balconies ... no ... paranoia ... paranoia? Creeping in like a friendly cockroach. He ran, dropping the parcel of clothes on the gravel. Too much excess information buzzing around his head. Time to turn off. Off what? Off where?

At the end of the alley stood an empty building--Ecole

Petite Bourgogne, boarded up windows. Except for one--face staring out at him.

Only way through was through. The wall was hard, unyielding. No way through. No way under it. No way over it. No way behind it. No way above it. No way beneath it. You got to go through it.

Damn wall.

No way out of it. Got to go around it.

He fled back, then to the left, across St. Jacques.

Green asbestos porcupine crossing street....

Why was everything so fluid, yet never yielded to the touch? Some locked world.

This empty expanse of the field striped with the shadows of the buildings from Notre Dame. Sometimes when he bent down, he could still find the old railway lines, there under the weeds and stones and rubble. Lines that went nowhere ... rivers that didn't exist ... black wrought iron bridges that crossed nothing ... dogs sleeping in the grass.

Oriental dilemma.

Millstone around his neck.

Now here was the real abyss. These bridges crossing a hole you couldn't even see.

Mission Impossible--"If you decide to accept this mission you will be asked to jump onto that bridge, in order to bring down certain agents we suspect of operating in the area (Louise, no doubt), and who we suspect of sabotage,

subterfuge, subrogation, succubation...."

All too confusing.

Oops. There was a figure there--a man sleeping in the grass....

How to get around that obstacle?

He crept down onto his knees and crawled on all fours to the left and around. What crisis?

And on crossing under the bridge, there it was--over to the left beyond the wastelands ... Lou's leaning house.

To the mountain...

"Gabriel...Hi...Gabriel, where you coming from?" Louise called out from the third storey window. Finally someone here. Mind over matter. "Gabriel, I've been thinking about you like why you didn't come over yesterday and what're you doing these days and how's what's his face and where you've been hanging out and how the hell are you anyways and are you going to see that band and why no if you're not 'cause you know you should go and better yet you should go with me. Hi. Hi there!"

--She's been drinking for sure, thought Gabriel.

Louise peered down with a quizzical expression. Did he seem different somehow? Yes and no. Maybe.

Francis on the bottom steps saying, "W-well, I'll just b-be moving over."

She thought she could detect a breeze in the air now ... a slow stream against her skin. She buttoned up her top, put on a pair of shorts that kept falling down till she put on a belt to fasten them up. All pulled together and ship-shape.

Crossing the street, crossing the pavement, crossing the ... all dread and fear ... the panic like before--breath stopping, breath seizing up. Her feet barely feeling the concrete, body unglued from the earth ... the cars too close, the trucks overhead ... and above, above, the circle

of the gulls.

No not yet, now, no time to fall apart.

The bend in the river ... night falling ... long shadows. Crossing the field for the millionth time and where should they go? Up over the fields, up the swank streets with drunk businessmen. Up up the street, past the hospital for the insane. Up up and over the crest. Up and over.

She yelled from the window, "Just a minute, I'm coming down."

T-shirt on, no another one, thongs, no shoes, make-up-- what for?--one last scratch, and down the stairs.

Nadine was sitting on the livingroom sofa, munching on potato chips, watching a black and white t.v. balanced on a milk crate.

"You're missing a wonderful show," announced Nadine.

"What?"

"Three's Company."

"Are you coming with Gabe and me?"

"What?" asked Nadine, her mouth full of chips, wafting the TV guide like a fan.

The heat was overwhelming. The damp still air. The smell of musty furniture. Nadine, beads of sweat standing on her nose, was massaging her feet absently with one hand, then the other, sandals kicked across the floor.

"You know, to see that band." said Louise, flopping

down beside her, taking Nadine's arm with one hand and a bunch of chips with the other. "Gabriel's outside."

"That evil twin, when did he arrive?"

Down the dark stairs, weaving, one hand on the railing, one hand holding the crumbling walls. A pile of junk mail at the bottom. The door stuck--pulling it open with a yank--and then the haze of light.

Gabriel and Francis were having a chat, although it seemed to be pretty one-sided as Gabriel probably couldn't understand a word Francis was saying.

"So, how've you been?" asked Louise, kissing his cheek.

Gabriel was twisting his shoe against the steps.

"Getting along. You know."

"I see."

"It's all so complicated. Think I'm losing my memory. Couldn't even remember where you lived."

--What was he up to now? A confession?

Francis was suddenly looking much more alert. His eyes watching all. Very wide. He was wearing a t-shirt with enormous musical instruments dancing all over.

"Where'd you get that neat t-shirt?" she asked.

"W-w-what?"

"That t-shirt you're wearing."

He looked down and studied it, as if for the first time. "Oh, I got-t it-t at work. It's from that fancy store, y-you know. Funny shirt. I-I-I stole it."

"Good. Steal, don't buy," nodded Gabriel.

All terror and nonsense ... heat like a sponge.

Francis looked up backwards, "I-I've just been talkin-
nn with your g-girlfriend. S-she says she is going to have
a d-dance with me."

"Is that right? I have no girlfriend. At least, I
can't remember."

And Francis started laughing, "N-no, n-no, n-no."

Louise insisted that they should walk and go up to the
park where the air was cooler. She asked him if he wanted a
drink in the meantime--"There might be a quart in the
fridge."

Crossing the kitchen floor, wondering when it had last
been washed. She opened the fridge door--what luck, a two
quarts and a bottle of wine! Nothing to fear but fear
itself. Doctor, doctor, get me a doctor! Red light, green
light. It was all an accident. Weaving back out to the
front door, opened quart in hand ... cold, wet and slippery
... taking a quick swig in the stairway.

"W-where you goin' now? You ain't g-going swimming are
you?"

"No Francis, we're going to see a band."

"Y-you sure you ain't going swimming. I-I remember you
was going swimming last time."

"Nope."

"W-well, I-I-I don't know ... anyways, I told you then,

I tell you now, d-don't get wet! That water, it's cold and d-dark."

"We're going to a party."

Francis, oblivious--"C-cold and d-dark."

Climbing up the hill like a slow procession ... a funeral procession. Nadine with her thick hair tied up, black-rimmed glasses and red lipstick, looking at no one.

Gabriel walking ahead silently up the hill, under the bridge of the train tracks to the the south. Silent and brooding ... the chained man.

The colours on the tunnel walls, like patches of fantastic paintings, all damp and mildewed. The white droppings of the pigeons like fallen snow.

Up the street, past the house with the sign that read-- "This house is not for sale for several reasons." Gabriel told them it was the bag ladies who lived inside who'd put up the sign. The windows boarded up and pasted shut. Crumbling brick, leaning walls.

A white-bearded man hanging out of a tiny gabled window above the street--ynome in a tree house. The green paint weathered like old copper.

Across Dorchester--a parking lot, half empty, with the sound of a transistor radio blaring from inside the attendant's shack. A man leaning out, glaring at them. The Hong Kong Laundry--smell of detergent and steam, a small black-haired girl in the doorway, smoking. The mysterious

empty restaurant down the steps where no one ever went.
Smell of garbage from the alley.

The whirr of traffic on Ste. Catherine--the great wheel of torture, whirling round ... the spinning neon sign of the Sexe Si Bon. Fluorescent pink door leading upstairs into the thumping music of Donna Summers. Awkward drawings of naked women with huge nipples. A man in bermuda shorts stumbling out, then stopping in confusion.

Flashing neon in front of record store, flashing disks of light.

The parade of cars choking the street--Corvettes and dark Chevy vans with paintings of sunsets on the side--boys in sleeveless t-shirts and heeled boots strutting by pigeon-toed, women with bright lipstick clutching purses.

A rubby wearing a tuque panhandling on the corner.

Further up the street where the cafés and bars were already full--a thousand people in tight white pants sipping white wine coolers in tall stemmed glasses, smiling with perfect teeth. Drunk businessmen nosing around like dogs on business, looking at the crowded tables with lost and eager faces.

Gabriel ahead like a blind man, oblivious. Nadine, eyeing the crowd, stopped to scratch her leg, then turned away with a snarl from the gaze of two men in baseball caps. Pushing through a crowd of people assembled in front of a bar, spilling out into the street. Green awnings and window

boxes of red geraniums. Wrought iron tables and waiters in aprons balancing trays of drinks high in the air. Two Arab men in starched white shirts and sunglasses leaning on a Mercedes sports car. Walking through the smell of perfume, gin, and gasoline.

Further up the street--art galleries appearing as narrow doorways that led upstairs into other spaces. Japanese restaurants with white facades, advertising private booths for discrete dining. Sherbrooke Street and the Italian castles where the rich lived--stone turrets, limousines parked in front, the closed white mesh curtains. A doorman standing at the opened door, waiting for an approaching woman leaning on canes, led by a nurse.

The mountain was in view, the sky getting dim, and she could see the lights of the cross at the summit--lights to the old god--red lights of the radio tower--the new god--beside.

Above to the left, the deco mansion of the ex-prime minister--the old cagey fox ... levels of pink stucco leading down the rock escarpment to the gardens below ... anonymous red brick mansions with stone porticos, lions guarding the black doorways. Sweet smell of cut grass. The air hazy with heat.

Up the streets that led to the mountain ... a black limosine cruising past. Consulate of Iraq--iron grating on the windows, cameras pointing down. Consulate of Italy--

mowed lawn and stone fountain. A park with enormous wrought iron gates rising in terraces into the brush, the trees covered in creeping ivy. A woman in high heels walking a greyhound in the dusk. A man in sunglasses, jacket off, sitting on a bench reading the newspaper.

Nadine had to rest, then started complaining about the evils of the rich, how corrupt they were. Gabriel said she didn't know what she was talking about.

"Gabriel, you of all people should understand what I'm saying. Just look at all this excess." she sighed, then grimaced and spit on the ironwork.

Pine Avenue--neo-gothic, neo-Italian. There to the left the spotlights and cameras of the American embassy, a red door and stone steps. Headlights of the cars as they circled past. CIA walking by.

"Americans, curse of the earth."

"Oh, Nadine," said Gabriel, stopping to tie his shoelace, "We're all corrupt."

To the right, the hospital for the insane, the wide inviting road ascending to the stone portico, and then the concrete building beside where sometimes they heard the dim sound of screaming, like an echo from a dream.

Walking up the concrete steps beside the deserted mansion with the red tile roof. Gabriel claimed it was inhabited by witches who burned children in the fireplace and walked around at night by lantern.

"Where'd you hear that?" moaned Nadine.

"There are a lot of things even you don't know about, *mon ange*."

Then to the left and into the trees. The wide winding pathway up the mountain, twisting up the mountainside and disappearing with the rocks ... suddenly the air cooler and fresher ... in the shadows, a couple enlocked on the slope ... the sound of rustling in the branches, the canopy of dark leaves.

Gabriel came rushing past, "I can't stand it, she's driving me crazy."

Then the voice of Nadine behind, "Wait, I've got to rest. My back hurts."

The light in the trees, long moving shadows, wind like a river. Louise sat down on the stone steps ... dark figure moving through the forest ... rustle in the overhanging branches. Squirrel making a strange clacking noise above.

Up, up further into the heavens ... the cool air of evening sweeping down. Up further they went, Gabriel muttering ahead, talking to himself, up the wooden stairs that vertically ascended the cliff, stunted bushes clinging to the sides. Louise couldn't look back without feeling dizzy--vertigo. The highrises loomed up as if she could touch them, and then fall into the great space between ... nothing to fear but fear itself.

Nadine stopped half-way up and refused to budge.

At the top, from the stone wall, they watched Nadine slowly ascend in the twilight, leaning on the handrail like a cripple.

The city below was bathed in a purple fog all the way to the bridge ... black and arching across the dark moving river.

Nadine came up behind, "So let's go."

Around the bend of the hill, and suddenly the red light of the sunset ... a bowl upside-down ... the red sun descending into the green valley of the graveyards below. The land of the dead, rows of stone gravestones and tombs ... the silence beyond.

The green copper tower of the Oratory--the dome of Babylon.

Gabriel ahead, scraping the gravel with his shoe and staring absently--the lost child. Nadine, behind, holding her hip in pain. The giant lightbulb cross above shining and humming in the ink blue sky.

And out from the left--glimpsed for only a moment--in the shadows ... a ghost figure with white shopping bags strung across like giant wings along the handlebars of an old bicycle--an angel of death--sweeping along the dim path below ... and into the shadows of the trees.

II

Les Enfants Terribles

Louise's dream...

Moving up the earth, the heart strings, climbing upward and onward ... the air ... the air ... she was falling off a cliff ... panic rising.

The pull of the water ... the rising tide ... fishing for trout in a blue sea.

I have come here, not to praise you, not to beg favours, but to....

She fell on dry land, and lay there astonished and amazed, looking up at the sky. Looking into the heart of the falling sun, into darkness.

A polished stone. Her heart was round and smooth as a polished stone. The round worn knobs of her bare heels against the humid grass.

Falling off a cliff ... yet not to get up ... not to climb up ... not yet ... not now.

"I fell."

Nadine swung round and peered at her in the half-light. "What did you say?"

She'd had a dream in her half-sleep ... and she had heard Gabriel's voice. And there was the same red globe of

the sun and the humid grass against her bare feet ... and she felt almost at peace--almost, almost--but then....

Louise's eyes narrowed and she looked around in all directions. "Where's the wine? We can't have finished it all yet." Nadine was sitting there with a dribble of red on her chin. She rubbed her arm across her mouth and smiled.

"You're a peach, d'you know that?"

"I know." Nadine pulled out the bottle from behind her back. "Look, you can finish it if you want. You drank most of it anyways."

There was about an inch left in the bottle. Louise snarled but took it. Things always happened when she fell asleep. There was never anything left when she woke up, even if she only dozed for a little while.

"Where's Gabriel?"

"Don't know. Remember how he took off, saying that he'd be back soon."

Louise took a sip of the wine, and it went dribbling onto her top. She spit on her fingers and tried to rub it off, but the spot just grew larger, a spreading pink stain.

"You're such a slob."

She took another gulp and lay down in the long grass, trampled in the shape of her body. "When's Gabriel coming back?"

"How should I know? Soon I guess."

Soon and never too soon ... or was that always too soon.

Gabriel on the mountain...

Gabriel watched Nadine as she stood up in her bare feet, and went hobbling along the gravel road beside the giant lightbulb, buzzing and flickering thirty feet into the dim sky, shining across the city. Twinkling lights below the cliff, lights glimmering as far as the eye could see. Far in the distance--red flames from the smoke stacks of the east end refineries ... gusting and dying in the wastelands. *Les terrains vagues*. And over them ... wings spread ... the arms of the cross.

Full moon rising. *La nuit de loups*.

Would he be haunting the forest below?

Nadine was stumbling over the gravel--over hot coals--her face grimacing, teeth bared, the soles of her feet in pain against the sharp stones.

After a minute she sat down again muttering to herself and strapped on her old heeled sandals, stood up and hobbled, hand on her hip.

Louise stretched her arms and followed, shuffling in her pink thongs, slapping along, scratching her thigh and yawning.

He walked behind. Nadine leaning on Louise's arm, discussing the kitchen floor with great seriousness.

Turning the bend in the gravel road--graveyard below, the stone cottage of the crematory half hidden by a row of

trees ... fuchsia haze above ... the sun over the hill
beyond ... faint glow of the river on the horizon.

The long shadows of the tombstones below ... wings
spreading out ... about to fly ... all sense and nonsense
... dome of the oratory in the distance ... wide green roof
of the miracles ... the lame and the crippled crawling up
its long staircase. Maybe he should go on bended knees. He
was some sort of cripple, no, a monster ... no, a wolf ...
perhaps he would regain his human shape. The letters his
mother sent--"I pray for you every night." What a twist in
his stomach--the scraggy farm with the stunted fruit trees,
the busy road, the trucks swerving by round the curve,
flatness and pruned trees as far as you could see. No, it
was he who should pray for his mother. The time she had
screamed when he turned all the crucifixes upside-down,
convinced for a moment they were haunted, till she saw her
son's crinkled smile, hiding in the back shed, playing hide
and seek all by himself.

The slow wind of the road down ... still air. All this
lush greenery made him nervous. Growing too fast. Hissing
in the twilight. The sharp edge of the leaves against the
cobalt blue of the sky ... thump of the crickets ... like a
heartbeat ... dark thump underground--roots expanding,
breaking the stones. Rampant growth. *Les fleurs du mal*.
Vines twirling around trunks, strangling the trees.

Poisonous flowers opening in the twilight ... night approaching ... tick tock, tick tock ... quickening.

He looked around nervously. Was he being followed? A rustle of branches. A furtive shadow. Ghost face in the branches.

Crossing the road to the other side. Hippopotamus to pig. Goat to grasshopper. Fish to phantom. Crawling here, sneaking into the cemetery before nightfall. Lurking in the shadows. Ghost of summers past.

He started walking faster and faster, past the girls strolling (typically oblivious to danger) and went running through the gates of the cemetery, through the black iron bars, into the dark.

He looked around ... yes ... fur growing on the backs on his hands ... yes ... his teeth getting longer, ears pointier. *Grandma, what big teeth you have!*

"Gabriel, where the hell are we going? This isn't the way to Neville's." Nadine yelled out and waved at him.

He turned round. "I just want to go somewhere first. Just checking something out."

"Come on, Nadine," said Louise, taking her by the arm, leaning into her like a cat, nudging her along.

"But my feet hurt."

"It's not too far."

"My back hurts."

"We'll take a taxi when we get to the other side."

The angel over the tombstone ... spread-winged ... spread-eagled ... stone to feathers ... stone to flesh ... taking off into the trees like a seagull. In beloved memory. Up, up into the still leaves. Sitting squatting in the trees waiting for his next move. The wrong move. Angel to bird. Star blinking across the heavens ... but moving ... a satellite. What happened if you wished upon a satellite by mistake? Some kind of black spell. A fatal mistake. All these shadow faces watching him. (I will not be fooled.) Venus--or satellite--low on the horizon, beaming back onto the earth some coded message ... message lost, never received.

The smell of smoke moving along with the shifts in the still air ... smell of leaves ... cremation. Over there behind the row of junipers--the gin trees. That secret smell.

Terra damnata.

The crematorium was starting its nightly ritual. Flesh to ashes. Bones to dust. Ovens of the witch that ate Hansel--the cottage roof ... so inviting. The gin trees over past the the rows of headstones. The lush grass. So many bodies buried here ... beneath this body ... sprawled ... spread-eagled ... staring at satellite (or shooting star) moving across the magenta sky. Chewing on a blade of grass like Huck Finn, floating down that big wide river to the gulf, to oblivion ... secret smell wafting past ... the

burning coals ... the smell of leaves.

Or a burning building. Building? What building?
There was nothing much to remember--a back shed ... small
can of gasoline ... darkness ... hobbling, padded feet on
the ground.

Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

And me, the prince with no socks on his shoes ... kicks
them off, surveys his kingdom, propped on his elbow. Prince
Charming.

Ahead ... something he had failed to notice... an old
couple bending over a gravestone putting flowers in a vase.
The hidden voyeur. Earth to earth. Dust to dust. The woman
with gray curly hair, faded face. She leans forward to
place the white flowers on the tomb, leaning on father (long
gone but returned for this moment.) Turns to him and speaks
in muffled voice. Some coded language of mourning.

Growing lilies from the navel ... speaking in tongues.
The hidden body. Earth to earth. Dust to dust. All is
forgiven. *Bénissez-nous.* We are all sinners.

Teeth extending. Snout developing.

They were leaving. The old woman tucked her arm into
the man's bent elbow and he led her away. Her swollen
ankles. He was the child they had when they were too old.
Old enough to know better. Old enough to say no.

He wondered what a child of his would look like.
Squinty-eyed, no doubt. Sullen-faced and somehow like an

animal. Maybe that's why he avoided sleeping with girls these days.

Nadine sat down on a bench and refused to budge. "I'm tired," she said, "I had a hard day and I'm tired."

Louise patted her hand, "When did you take your back pills? You're supposed to take them twice a day."

Gabriel flopped down onto the ground, chewed the grass with his incisors. Girls. Girl talk. He lit up a smoke and lay there puffing away. He wondered what time they closed the gates. Maybe they'd be stuck here all night.

The hissing of the grass....

Over right in front of where he lay, barely ten feet away, was a stone cherub lying on its side on a scroll staring at him. He stared back at its fat stomach and kicking legs ... little wings sprouting from its shoulder blades.

Antoine Marin, 1910-1912. *Notre Seigneur, bénissez-nous.*

Teeth growing longer. He thought he heard thunder again ... a low rumble coming right through the earth, rumbling against his outstretched legs. The dew ascending through the earth ... damp earth ... smell of worms ... crow flying from the trees to the roof of a temple crypt.

Stone cherub taking off into the darkening sky ... wings flapping erratically like a bat's ... not moving in any direction ... but nervously hovering between the trees.

And between the headstones ... the angels and cherubs
... the outstretched arms ... lurked a cat crossing the
shadows, stalking mice in the thick grass.

Nadine down the streets...

The streets were getting narrower, the houses smaller--from the lawns, the open plains, of the stone mansions where they had emerged from the cemetery, where the sprinklers turned in slow circles on the velvet grass, round and round with a hissing sound. The streets silent except for the purr of a Mercedes driving past at low speed. The streets deserted. No one under the wide branching maples in the waiting chairs. No one to disturb the manicured green lawns and clipped hedges--except the morose face of Gabriel wandering past and down the hill.

Till down below--the streets became narrower and narrower, the houses closer, till they were down in the alleyways. Rows of brick houses all clumped together--the paint on the old doors peeling, a tiny patch of weeds, the crooked steps where people sat escaping the heat inside, sitting out *balconville* style. Sitting immobile, silent and exhausted by the heat. A woman sitting with a chubby wide-eyed child sucking on a popsicle.

Pain in her back. Nadine sat down on the neighbouring steps and watched the mother and child at their evening vigil.

Gabriel tried to budge her but she waved him away.

"My back hurts. Leave me alone."

Louise disappeared into the corner *dépanneur*.

--What next? Buy different shoes. Get a bust or a padded bra. Fly to Mexico for the winter. Fly north for the summer. Escape the heat. Dye her hair again. Put on more red lipstick. Leave the city. Get an operation to stop this nagging hopeless pain in her back. So many possibilities--but right now she just wanted to sit on these steps and stare at that red-cheeked child with the sallow eyes, winding his tongue around the popsicle, slathering it on his chin, then dropping it on the concrete. The child started to cry, but his mother never flinched, never moved, staring out into the windows of the flats across the street.

The streets were narrow, the houses small and cramped. The smell of boiling cabbage and tobacco. Cigarettes for the masses. Players' filters for the revolution. All nations rise.

But the inertia was too great. The smoke too thick. The dust would never get kicked up high enough. Even her friends were apathetic--full of their own lives.

The smell of burnt cabbage in the damp air.

The monotony, the way years turned into more years, the endlessness of time--and no change--lives gone on. Just survival: all that was left. So why did they give so easily ... was it so easy? Were those battles internal, never rising to the surface? Won and lost without a trace.

"Are you going to sit there all evening, Nadine? It's dark."

"My back hurts."

--Since when was Gabriel in such a hurry?

The coo of pigeons in the eaves above. Crumbling brick on the pavement. Gabriel's body stretched out by the elongating shadows from the street lights.

The distant cross of the mountain lit up between the twin towers of t.v. transmission. Speaking in soothing tongues to the lulled proletariat.

Nadine rubbed her feet and examined her toes.

"Will you stop that?" snapped Gabriel.

She smiled. "Sor-ry."

Louise returned with a bottle of red "*Cuvee du Château Plomb*".

"My favourite!" gasped Nadine, and quickly snatched the bottle from her, unscrewing the top in a flash.

A couple more gulps and the pain would go away. Definitely, next week, she was going out and finding a new pair of shoes, sensible flats.

She got up and stumbled forward bare-footed down the warm asphalt.

She felt lost--the streets so narrow and crooked, every doorway populated by cats and dirty, candy-faced children. The whistle of a train. The smell of burning tobacco from the factory wafting through the long dark passageways.

Her skirt stuck to her thighs and her feet were heavy,

but Gabriel seemed to have acquired some sort of cattle prod that kept her moving.

Louise with dribbles of red wine all over her t-shirt.

The streets narrower and narrower, the light dimmer and dimmer, until finally they came to a place where there were no more cats or children, just the railway line behind a row of houses, half of them empty, half of them caving in.

The distant screech of a train.

The end of the land. The cemetery of homes. Felt so helpless. In the face of all this desolation there was so little she could do. Perhaps a lack of imagination. Or desire. She too had become infected with this disease of the heatwaves. This inertia. Everything seemed hopeless. Especially now, staring out at this broken-down house where Gabe was pacing in the half-light. Here like shadow figures, half real on the deserted street. Why was he here? Why had he dragged them down here to stare at the broken down shell of an old building beside the railway tracks--this desolation and despair. Gabriel was becoming so animated and excited. She suspected that he had something to do with all of this, but she didn't want to jump to conclusions, condemn him outright.

His face had taken on a strange glow, his movements agitated, his hands fidgeting, his steps slow and condensed.

Nadine took another sip of *Cuvée Plomb*, and sat down on the curb, watching and waiting.

Gabriel at the fire...

Crows on the rooftops.

Speaking blue devils.

One, walking lopsided over the roof, stared at him sideways ... speaking to him, laughing at him, complaining to him ... about the weather, about his conduct, about the strangers he had brought with him, about seagulls, about the tar that was stuck to his claws, about the scavenger's life ... then went on, squawking, muttering, looking down at Gabriel as if to say--Yes, I know you are here. You haven't escaped my notice. I know perfectly well what you're up to and don't think you're fooling anyone.

The houses on the end of the block were all empty. They had come round the block, down onto this dark dank street behind the railway tracks. Half the buildings were boarded up, others appeared to be occupied, but there was no one around. Windows upstairs broken, bricks crumbling, windowsills unpainted and rotting.

From somewhere inside ... the sound of someone laughing or crying.

The buildings seemed to lean together, all in one direction ... sloping as if undecided whether to collapse at once or remain united in this last stand. Shards of brick and mortar on the sidewalk, the sidewalk itself collapsing, cracked into a thousand pieces.

The clanking of a slow cargo train leaving the city ... screeching metal on a bend of the tracks in the darkness.

At the last brick duplex, he stood in front, not moving a muscle. Black spaces where the windows had smashed out into the street, shards of glass on the pavement ... like a kaleidoscope he had once been given when he was very young, and he had gone all over the house, constantly moving the cardboard tube to see the patterns change and dance, flickering colours, shards of brightness in front of his squinted enchanted eye ... rolling over and over on the carpet, mesmerized and dazzled, as if he would never put it down and return to the world.

The doors were all boarded up. Closed mouths tell no lies. Tell no secrets. Open no pathways.

Moving underground into caves. Into burnt-out hovels.

He had no offering. No gift to bring.

There was a pain in his side, growing inward to the gut. Birth pangs of some cancerous growth.

Only last month he'd seen a woman with a hollow face and red lipstick hovering out of an open window on the second storey next door ... watching him squarely in the eye, smoking a cigarette, watching him as he walked back and forth, staring straight at destruction, as if she knew who he was. He, walking back and forth, assessing the house, assessing the way the door leaned sideways, the warp in the

outer wall that bulged out, collapsing, as if about to give birth ... as if pregnant with some new beginning.

The bulge and collapse of the red bricks.

To burn, like the last coming. The city was on fire. Like a new Beirut. Everywhere you went there were burnt-out shells of buildings. The blaze that left no traces.

There was nothing here now. Only the sudden rise of crows--the devils--in the moonlight, calling out, then landing on the blackened eaves. One crow hopped along, a clown in blue-black, quacking and screeching on its royal perch. Head cocked to one side, it watched him go by. Watched him kicking at the rubble flooding out from the former patch of ground to the sidewalk. Watched him come back and pull at the boarded-up door.

Trespassing at the scene of the crime.

A curious passerby.

The boards wouldn't budge. He went under the archway that divided the buildings, through the blackened tunnel, slumblng blindly in the dark--tunnel to the other side-- tripping over broken boards. and emerging into the haze of the backyard, facing the railway tracks, the field ... the hollow round smokestacks against the indigo sky ... the barred windows of the factory on the far side.

The smell of hops from the brewery. Of burnt wood.

Foot slipped on the rubble. Broken doors and a pile of wood, blackened and still warm from the heat of the sun.

Louise and Nadine standing gape-mouthed watching him.

He needed a crowbar to get these boards off. Then he saw an open window, and climbed up over the rubble to stand perched on a broken board, peering into the infinite darkness--the black charcoal world ... the smell of the burnt flesh of wood ... the sacrificial trees ... the hollow world. Light appearing in the faint gape through the square spaces of the broken windows, spreading in inky patches.

"What are we doing here?" asked Nadine.

But Gabriel didn't feel like answering. He shushed her and contemplated the nothingness of the dark inside. Like a cradle. It lulled him.

Peering into the darkness. The distant rumbling of the traffic. The heaving ground. Cracking open the blackness to reveal something new, something still unknown, unnamed. He stepped up higher onto the rubble, grasping at the windowsill with his nails, peering squint-eyed at the dim shell. The hollow inside. The blackened stove. The planks of the floor half fallen into the earth basement, pipes hanging from the ceiling, broken and downcast. In the corner, the metal remains of a bed--black rags on a coiled frame, the metal bedstand still intact, creaking in the corner ... as if waiting for its nightly visitor of dreams.

The remains of the staircase, leaning away from the wall, the handrail gone, collapsing.

And in the far corner ... the soft moonlight glow of

the toilet standing alone and forlorn behind the fallen door.

Water still seeping through ... dripping in a slow rhythmic pattern down the walls ... dripping down along the scorch-marked plaster.

Sparkles of starlight circulating in the dark blue light.

The shadows of light ... the moon above shining ... the heavens opening. He felt the beating of his heart inside, felt the soft thump through his clinging slivered hands, felt he had just discovered some mysterious world ... yet had been struck dumb ... unable to name it.

He swung out by his arm to grasp the metal drainpipe, over to the next window, peering in ... almost nothing left to see except darkness. A pile of wet burnt clothes lying in a heap on the floor. The remains of a chesterfield.

And the smell. The smell of burnt wood and rot. The smell he always remembered--waking up startled in the middle of the night as a child, wondering where he had been.

The smell of the burning barn.

Bénissez-nous, notre Seigneur.

Praying at night on bended knee beside his mother, whispering in French.

He felt elated standing there, the last shadow of light fading from the upper windows. Scratched his scalp and sneezed. He turned round to witness the two of them fading

into darkness ... two cats watching him with slow unblinking eyes.

He climbed down from the wood pile and climbed over the remains of a fence onto the bank of the train tracks, walking away from the scene of the crime, the scorched earth.

Though I walk through the valley of death, I shall fear no evil.

Walking away from the scene of the crime ... down the curving line of the railway ... steel cold and glittering in the moonlight.

It was nice to be so anonymous ... so satisfying and complete. Nothing left ... not even the shadow footprints of furtive paws, running across the naked field in the night.

Louise's party...

Lying back in the taxi ... staring out at the traffic ... the glare of the headlights flashing back ... the switch of the traffic lights. The pull back as the car lurched forward. Nadine in the centre--her red mouth gaping open as she yawned, her glasses twisted to one side, her head fallen against the vinyl seat.

Louise wondered if she was going to be sick. She didn't feel so hot. Not a bit.

Gabriel had his nose stuck against the opposite window, staring out. Preoccupied. He was always that way. Especially lately. She remembered him from way back. At seventeen, still a child's face. That was gone now, mostly. That time she thought he might fall off the Jacques Cartier Bridge into the swift black river pulling down on them from the suspended foot path beside the traffic. How she held onto his sleeve and kept talking so fast about whatever came into her head, gibberish mostly, because she thought he might fall over the railing, and take her too, two hundred feet down into the dark current.

She rolled down the taxi window and let the air rush in against her face. That felt better. Closed her eyes. Felt worse. Opened them again and clung to the arm rest as if she might fall into the spinning traffic.

Gabriel paid for the cab and almost pushed Nadine, still

groggy, out of the car.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Neville's."

"Ah-ha!" She adjusted her glasses, stretched her arms, wandered up the front steps, and disappeared through the people hanging out in the doorway.

Gabriel said he wasn't ready yet for the noise of the band blaring from the open windows. So they went and sat on the cement block on the side of an empty parking lot.

Louise felt nostalgic. "I miss Jerzy," she blurted out. She started to cry. She wiped her nose on her arm and searched her pockets for a kleenex.

Gabriel lit up another smoke and offered it to her. Why should she be sad? Nadine and he were with her. He tried patting her on the shoulder, stroking her on the head, holding her hand, but everything he did just made her feel worse.

"I shouldn't have taken that money. I couldn't pay it back. At least I should've asked first."

"I guess."

"It's terrible. I tried to save it up, but I just can't."

Gabriel dug his hand into his pocket. Louise blew her nose with a kleenex, and cried some more.

"Here."

"What?"

"Take this money." He shoved a bunch of bills into her

hand.

"But Gabriel..." She tried to put it back into his pockets, but he wouldn't let her.

"Believe me. You're doing me a favour. Just take it." Gabriel stood up and started running like a blind man towards the house and disappeared.

Louise tried to get up and run after him, but her head started to swim, and she sat down again. Fire hydrant swinging into view and back out. The concrete block suddenly unstable. She stared at the bills, tried to count them. All too humiliating. She stuffed the money into her pockets, held her breath, stood up, and stumbled towards the waiting stairway. Too much to think about. Too much. Too much. Her mind was moving in circles, spiralling ... then went blank. That was much better. She opened her mouth, and unknown words came bubbling out ... unknown words flowered and disappeared into a dark wavy sea of faces.

Much, much later, Louise found herself at a messy counter with strange faces in a strange dark corner. There were lots of people milling about and talking. They seemed to be having fun, so Louise thought that this was the place to be right now. And they seemed to be selling something, so she bought one for herself and for the friendly (vaguely familiar) face next to her. They had met somewhere before.

"Weren't we in kindergarten together or something?"

He had blue eyes. Blue eyes were cold but familiar.

They reminded her of someone she used to know, but she didn't remember his name right now. Wasn't that funny! Blue Eyes just kept smiling at her and leaning on the bar. Sheepish and sleepy. Nodded at everything she said. What an agreeable guy!

Nadine's face climbing a staircase somewhere across the hallway, but that faded too. Louise tried to call her but her voice was drowning in storm of noise. Melting into nothing. Nadine! Na-a-dine! Meeting Nadine was like falling in love. Well, not exactly. But you had to really love her, Louise tried to explain. She was just that way. Way? Away. She'd gone away.

Words kept tumbling out of her amazed mouth. Where they came from and where they went she wasn't sure, but there was no time to worry about it now. Not now.

Louise's attention was wandering. She took off into the darkness, through the press of bodies, some familiar, but she was too busy to stop. She had business that needed to be dealt with, business that had just come to her attention, just now. She was a very busy, busy thing. It was ahead, just above the floating faces in the dark room. She moved forward slowly, pushing against the tide.

--Out of my way, fiends!

There was a bright pink room ahead. Distorting faces. Jaguars and foxes and eels. Now what were they doing here? Someone showed her a record. Label kind of fuzzy. Who

turned off the lights? Where are my glasses? He was trying to explain what an amazing song was on this 45, but Louise was having trouble focusing on his face, on his voice. No doubt very interesting. He put the record on the turntable in a great storm of energy. Dropped the needle and smiled.

"Heart broke. And the sun is descending like a red rubber ball." Again, "Red rubber," again. "And the sun is descending like a red rubber ball ... red rubber ... red rubber ball...."

"I think the record's skipping." Louise collapsing into a bean bag chair in the corner. She stared at the stranger next to her in the pink leather jacket, admiring her coordination with the room, and tried to tell her, but the girl just stared. Got up and left the room. Louise tried to focus on the music as the music man tried to tell her about how amazing it was, but there was something wrong. "It sounds weird."

"The band blew the speakers."

The record was still skipping. The room was ridiculously hot. And claustrophobic. All that pink starting to get on her nerves. She struggled with the bean bag chair, swaying back and forth, then rolled sideways and landed on the floor with a thump.

"Jerk, you're going to scratch my record," yelled the d.j., but she just stuck out her tongue and got up on all fours, leaning on the window sill.

She leaned out the window into the thick darkness, out into the cool black air, and thought she saw Nadine going down the back steps. "Na-adine!" The ghost faded into the shadows. Chinese lanterns glowing in red and yellow where she could make out the shapes of people sitting around a crooked wooden table. Very idyllic. Very important that she go outside. She wondered if she could get down from here. Kind of a big drop. Just a hop. She wiggled out onto the window ledge and peered down.

"What floor are we on?"

"First."

"Ok."

She manoeuvred round the sill like a contortionist, letting her legs hang down the outside wall till she felt some kind of ledge with her toes.

Then she fell.

She opened her eyes. Faces staring down at her.

"Good thing she landed in the sand box."

"You think we should call an ambulance or something."

"She doesn't look like she's hurt."

"Look! Her eyes are open."

A clutter of arms were dragging her through the sandbox. Sand in her underwear. They tried to get her to sit up, but she flopped right over.

"Ah, she's probably just drunk."

"*Qui est-elle?*"

"*Qui sait? Une petite tête-carrée.*"

"Who is she?"

"Well ... I don't remember her name."

She looked up through the bobbing faces. "It's blue eyes, old Frankie."

"Fred."

"Hi'"

"It's ok. I'll take care of her."

Louise was feeling sentimental. Ol' Frankie was going to take care of her. Maybe he'd sing a few tunes.

"Strangers in the night...exchanging glances...."

"What?"

"I guess you've forgotten that one. Hey, where'd everybody go?"

Louise stood up and tried to shake the sand out of her underwear. It was kind of itchy. That was the thing about sand. It stuck to you and wouldn't go away.

"I wanted to thank you for the drink."

"Drink?"

"It was swell of you."

"Me?"

"Remember? You bought me a tequila?"

"Oh. I'm kind of stupid that way. It's ok though."

He put his hand on her knee.

"I'm supposed to be saving money."

She was going to stand up, but blue eyes didn't seem to want to get up, kept pulling her onto the sand. Seemed to want to smooch. Smooch! Well, that was a surprise. Louise made a faint attempt to untangle herself, but hey, these things happened and if it wasn't unpleasant, well it wasn't unpleasant. After all, they had gone to kindergarten together or something, though never formally established, they did seem to know each other, at least. At least!

She wanted to keep talking but things were getting more and more intricate, entangled.

Was?

There more familiar faces in the sandbox. More familiar mugs. More blue eyes. Very piercing, not in a nice way though, kind of disapproving. Very disapproving.

"Jerzy."

"Louise."

Things were definitely taking a downward turn.

"Someone told me you jumped out a window."

"Who me?"

She looked around. There was that window. It didn't look very far off the ground. Not from this angle.

Nadine's party...

Nadine woke up in the dark yard. Rubbed her eyes. No vision. Her hands sprawled out to find glasses fallen somewhere in the weeds. All darkness. Splotches of glowing light. Dark fuzzy spots.

Her hand searched for the glasses--groping open-palmed like a blind mole. Her hands like antennae looking out for the light ... for clarity. Feeling strange ... blind and unlike herself. Couldn't even hear straight, kept thinking she heard her name being called out in a drunken slur.

She peered around squinting ... cushion of weeds around her head ... lock of hair fallen in her mouth. She spat it out.

Beside her ... the blurred form of an rusted wheel barrow and the remnants of a compost heap. Dark vines of morning glory climbing through broken fence, thick and twisted. Thin heart-shaped leaves that crushed in the hand. Flowers closed and hidden in the darkness, which she tore open to find the blue inside. Convolvulaceae. Heavenly blue. She remembered how her grandmother used to pull them off the fence in her garden, cursing them, complaining how they strangled all the plants in their path, as she stomped about in her boots, yanking fiercely at the vines that would just climb up again over the fence and around her dahlias. She tore the flower off the vine to examine the thin dark veins

up close to her blind eyes, picked the flower apart to stare at its insides--stamens, ovaries, tendrils--then tossed it away into the blurry darkness.

"Quoi? Qu'est-ce que tu veux dire?"

"A qui la faute? Elle est folle."

Strange voices. She saw a small garter snake slithering through the grass and kicked it back with her feet. Bastard. Felt around for her glasses, and went crawling through the grass into the hedge, searching.

Finally felt the tangible shape of her glasses and grabbed them with her open clutching palms ... grabbing onto reality. Opened the hinges and slid them on--sigh of relief--sight--the yard beyond transforming from a dark abyss into grass and weeds, and people, not ghost forms, sitting at a table, walking out of the shadows ... blurred splotches of light transforming into square panes of clarity behind which people were walking, leaning out. Even the music was clearer, more annoying in fact, now she could hear the words, insidious, repeating themselves, over and over, ad nauseam.

All coming into hard focus.

Everyone seemed to have moved outside to the back yard. Now she remembered she didn't want to be here. The d.j. was bad, the band worse, the fun-seekers annoying and obnoxiously drunk, and worst of all--the face of old Jerzy looking out a window--that slow insistant look of his,

looking for Louise no doubt, looking for a fight.

Of course, she took Louise's side, but she could understand--in the cold clarity of perfect vision--how Louise could get under your skin: her incredible sloth, her ability to do absolutely nothing. Welfare-farewell syndrome.

But Jerzy ... his blue eyes and greasy blonde hair, his fox-like look, staring out at the world with a mixture of contempt and amusement. The way he walked around in the morning in his underpants--king of the castle--nodding politely at her, the token prol sitting in the kitchen, studying her textbooks of biology and anatomy, as if to say --Ah yes, I see what you are doing and it is very commendable to see you ordinary folks so busy and diligent, but us artists are above all this menial labelling of the body parts, this dissecting of frogs and small vermin, we artists are out here this morning in your humble and not so clean kitchen searching for inspiration....

Not that she had seen much of any inspiration in Jerzy: blobs on the wall--that's what she called his paintings--greasy marks for contemplation.

Two guys on the other side of the yard, arguing. Shaved heads and baby faces. Took off their shirts and started to fight, but it was impossible to tell if they were really fighting, or only playing. Rolling through the long grass. Everyone seemed to fight in the heat. Everything

boiling over.

She leaned on the wheel barrow to stand up. Feeling a bit drowsy, a little wobbly still.

Gabriel on the other side of the yard. She called out his name but he didn't seem to hear her. Jumped over the fence and into the darkness.

She needed to pee. Locked around. Nobody watching. She crept behind the compost heap and squatted in the weeds ... reemerged smiling.

A lull in the music. She thought she heard Louise's voice talking frantically and drunkenly, her voice pitched higher and louder than the murmurs all around.

Gabriel....

The thin line--left, then right--broken here ... star burst ... cracks in the pavement. Weeds pushing up between the gaps ... following lines ... a map ... heading here into this garden ... into this alley. Smell of gasoline in the night air.

Searching for a route, a trail of escape. Broken sidewalk. Leaning door of the shed hanging open ... a gap. Crack of paint. Black lines ... spider webs woven in the still air.

Yellow-eyed dog with long snakey tail sniffing past. Dog sniffing hand.

Step on a crack, break your mother's back.

Path to left, down into dark corner, right down into gold staring eyes of pooch. He tried to touch it but it darted away, past a twisted tree, beside a twisted house. Falling. The way a door leans open ... inviting.

Broken cup to left. Dandelion to right. Sound of rushing water ... the vast tunnels of the sewers below.

Dull thump of heartbeat. Diverging paths without end. Bits of gravel embedded in my palms.

Quiet moving things that pull together ... then fall apart.

Circle of headlights in the distance. Stars in the heavens.

Dog darts across street lopsided fashion into darkness.

Flap of dark wings ... blue devils.

Shaking all over.

Chalk lines down to a shed ... an alley ... an escape
route.

Smell of gasoline on the hands. Black marks on
fingers.

The foreign ambassador arrives bearing gifts. Knock on
the door. No one home.

Campaign over ... victory to the vanquished.

Louise's great escape...

Jerzy and Louise tumbling down the front steps yelling.

"Where the hell did you get that money, that's all I want to know." Jerzy followed her down the block, past a hollow-looking brick building, all closed up and curtained in the night. Louise wished Jerzy would go away. Plopped down on the broken sidewalk and held her head ... head hurting, feeling dizzy.

Jerzy loomed above. "And look at you. You're so drunk you can hardly walk. Louise, what is the matter with you?"

She glared up at him from the glow of the streetlight. "Y'want to know who gave me the money?"

"No."

"Well, I won't tell you then."

"Good."

"Go-ood."

Jerzy took her arm. "Look, your hands are shaking."

She yanked her arm away.

Jerzy silent for a moment. She could feel him gearing up (or down). "It's terrible, Louise. What am I going to do with you? You're as helpless as a child."

"That's right," she muttered, leaving her hands over her face, but sneaking a malicious look.

"Listen. I'll get a cab and take you home. You're in terrible shape."

"Terr'ble shape," she muttered.

"Just wait here. I'll be back in a minute."

"Back in a minute." She stuck out her tongue at him.

Louise watched him go back down the block through the arcs of the streetlights. Her mind all warped. Helpless, hopeless--what the hell did he mean by that?

"That's right," she yelled after him, "I'm as helpless as a little baby. Ha!"

She rolled over and leaned on a car, gradually making her way back to the stand-up position, and started weaving her way down the street in the other direction. She asked some people for a cigarette, even though she didn't smoke. What did it matter? They gave her a bent cigarette and a book of matches and left her all by herself. She struck a match, but couldn't get it to her mouth, kept missing it till it eventually burnt down to her fingers. Ouch! Dropped it and tried another. And another. Then she remembered Jerzy. Didn't want him to find her again and slunk across the street and down to the end of the block, and plomped on the far side of some cars, in the darkness, on the steps of an old wooden building. Faded signs for pogos and frites.

The cigarette still hanging from her mouth, the matches still in her shaking hands. She lit one, then another, but they dropped from her hands ... into the darkness below. Damn.

Hands slippery from the heat. Damp smell of burning. Wanted to jump into a cold tub, or climb up over the stone wall into the pool beside the mountain.

Jerzy had refused to take back the money like a good sport. So, it was his fault. Patting her pocket. Still there. Very secure feeling ... also kind of itchy ... like she has to do something with that wad of cash.

--So what had happened to old Jerksky, anyways?

She crept over to the corner and took a peek down the block. No sign of him. Good. She hobbled back to her old perch and tried to light the cigarette again. Oops, there went another. And another. Finally. Took a long drag and coughed.

Hot as hell....

Funny smell in the air. Like mold. Like burning. So hot out tonight. And smokey. Ghosts rising. Rubbing the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. A fever. Peering down--flames rising from below, under the steps, curling up and over towards her feet....

She ran erratically, tripping on the sidewalk, the cigarette burning into her clenched fist.

"There you are!"

Louise, hiding in the shadows near the doorway to the party, jumped nervously and peered out into the light.

"Come on, it's just me," Nadine said, pulling her by the arm, "Let's get out of here."

They stumbled down the road, and stopped in the shelter of a doorway to a warehouse as it started to drizzle. Louise slumped down, cigarette stub still stuck in her mouth, then threw it away onto the curb. The concrete steps still warm, even the air still humid and warm--the tropics. The outline of trees and a church across the street, up a ridge. Couple running by with newspapers in their arms.

"Did you know there was a fire tonight?" asked Nadine, pulling her sandals off her swollen feet.

"No...."

"All these fires give me the creeps. It was an old shed that burnt up."

Gabriel on the roof...

Climbing the crooked way of the ladders ... the inverted belly over the alley, draining water down the spout, down the center ... climbing up the crooked ladder onto the shed ... upward and onward onto the vast plain of the roof. The highway overpass--a pale line behind ... a halo. Line of dawn appearing to the east.

In the half-light--bend down and feel the rounded hobble of your heel ... scratch thigh ... itchy all over ... pleased ... amazed to see a panther appearing from the other side.

All is becoming clear--shadow forms of the rooftops starting to emerge ... mist rising ... the green copper domes of the churches--mother and father--to left and right. Heaven and Earth. The pale grey smoke, orange glow from the highway. Shaking. Turn to the rooftops and flames lick at the skin, leaving traces ... gold leaf on the arms peeling off like a snake's to a second skin ... untouched and new below.

Circle of fire.

And below on the street--a bag lady moving back and forth ... back and forth ... weaving a spell ... as you walk the path across the roof ... mark the lines that go nowhere ... a map ... paths that never converge ... lines across--key, rusty hinge, piece of blue glass, face traced in the

gravel. Traces of blue devils.

Flames across the rooftops ... smoke rising ... fog rising ... devils watching.

Tracing the lines of the city below ... green copper bell towers.

Cats coming up the ladder, out of the skylight, out of the drain holes ... from the chimney ... slinking over... bellies down ... sweeping the dust ... pressing against legs ... licking face and ears ... crawling over outstretched arms ... licking skin with sandpaper tongues ... scratching off the old scaly skin ... biting toes and fingers. *Mes diables, mes amours.*

Speaking about love, about food, about my sins.

Flames ... gold and orange ... licking the red dawn. Pigeons flying.

Red sky in the morning, a sailor's warning.

Carrier pigeons from your mouth into the red line of dawn.

Moon disappearing ... fading with the light.

Watch the sun rising. Throwing a chain down onto the street below. Watching the bag lady, moving back and forth in the half-light, looking down ... searching ... looking up ... gathering shiny object lying on the ground ... hiding it in coat pockets. Circling in a dream ... in a spell.

Flames. Panther licking face, skin transforming into gold ... tears of diamonds.

As bag woman goes in circles round the block ...
searching for something to eat ... something to love ...
something.

Steam rising ... dawn rising ... woman circling ...
night to day ... weaving a tapestry with spider threads to
enmesh ... to make you fall ... as you prowl across the
endless gravel roof ... creeping forward into the golden
light ... following the path ... the cracks ... the lines
marked out ... converging.

Endless drone of the highway above.

Water evaporating and transforming.

Gold peeling from the skin as snake curls around your
leg, up your skin, coiling itself around your chest, your
arms ... gold leaf flying away ... burnt paper in the
breeze.

Heart like a potato--all round, hard, growing shoots,
sprouting into leaf ... into desire. *Les fleurs du mal*.

As the black panther crawls over the roof, belly down,
haunches up, pitter pattering on thick leathery paws.

Flames leaping up and curling--snakes, cats, birds--
from the four corners of the roof ... converging ...
twirling round ... brushing against your fallen body.

Star of Venus fading.

Across the open plain of the roof.

III

Belle Laide

The morning after...

Headed down down into the valley. The rush of the early morning trucks below. The tunnel of love. Pigeons flying out into the light ahead. The cement building above ... the traffic below in the underground highway ... the boom echoing from the roof. What a paradise....

Louise pulled the money carefully wound by a red elastic out of her pocket. Still there.

"Nadine, forget your stupid job for once. Those people can live with a messy place. I've got the rent money."

"Don't you think you should give that money back to Gabe?"

"I guess. But he did say I was doing him a favour." She felt the size of the wad and stuffed it back into her pocket.

"He's up to something fishy these days," said Nadine, eyeing Louise.

"Oh?"

Through the tunnel. The roar of the infidels. Where do all those trucks come from?

She wondered where Jerzy was now. She wondered how

much time he had wasted looking for her--that made her smile. But maybe he never did look for her--that made her sad. She didn't want to tell Nadine what she was thinking about. She knew what Nadine thought of him--Jerzy the Jerk. True ... but she didn't want to think about that right now.

Out of the tunnel ... up the hill, Notre Dame, the twin towers, gray stone ... pigeons in the rooftops. The sky above. Once she had tried to sneak through the back doors to where the Sulpician monks lived, but the wrought iron gates into the garden had been locked. Staring with her nose pressed against the black lacework of the iron grill, trying to get a glimpse of the life inside, a glimpse of robed figures moving past. Gabriel said he wanted to be a monk, but he'd been saying that for years.

Place des Armes. Where they had fought for something, something lost and never found again. Le droit de seigneur--the spear over the heads of the bowing Iroquois. The rule of the colonialists, the new world conquered by the old, the death of so many.

Nadine spat in the fountain.

Sleeping tramps on the benches beneath the prickly trees. A clear glass bottle laid down beside.

The stone wall beside the monastery, preventing all prying eyes from seeing. Louise stopped at the front gates ... sun coming over the grey slate rooftops, lighting the apple trees, hitting the windows on the far side with a

golden light.

"Come on!" cried Nadine, her voice echoing against the stone walls.

"I'm just going to stay out for a little while. I'll ring the buzzer."

"But I'm not waiting for you."

The massive carved doors were open ... the smell of incense. She remembered going into a dark church as a child, whispering secrets into the screen, hearing the barely audible voice of the priest telling her to say three Hail Marys at the altar, and then creeping out into the heavy air on crepe-soled shoes, lighting a candle to the Blessed Virgin for twenty-five cents. Pictures of the crucifixion all around. Sacrifice and more sacrifice. The fallen Christ on the road to Calvary bent under the cross. His pale white body.

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is in thee.
Blessed are thou among women,
And blessed is the fruit of thy loom, Jesus...*

In Notre Dame, the giant shell of holy water ... the red glass of the candles down each aisle. The Jesus of Turin ... the face in the shroud, the downcast eyes. The nun who tamed the Indians, children kneeling around her like sacrificial lambs. The tiny Jesus in a golden crown on the lap of the Virgin. The smell of incense from closed wrought-iron gates....

The flicker of the red candles as a nun walked by,

flames flickering up then down again ... saluting the world ... the breath of God.

The cry of a baby from somewhere inside.

--So, how far have you come to see us--asked the marble statue leaning over, gesturing to her--Come here and I'll give you a miracle.... So what have you come here for--they asked--What do you want? You who have been a stranger all these years, why have you come back?

She stopped and stood in front of a shrine along the long aisle. A statue of the Virgin Mary, and below, partly hidden by the ornate candlesticks, the face of a woman, face turned upward in ecstasy, looking up at the painted angels ascending into heaven. She stopped at the small icon in the ornate frame, but she didn't know who it was. She pulled out a bill anyways and stuffed it into the copper slot. Lit ten candles, carrying the burning stick from wick to wick, then buried it in the sand ... flames flickering into life ... brushed her hair out of her eyes and prayed for rain--she said nothing--but she liked the feel of crossing herself ... the smell of candles ... the smell of old wood....

She spied a plastic statue in the seat of a pew--a tiny statue of the Virgin Mary standing on a crescent moon, surrounded by sparkly stars.

She sat down in a dark wooden pew, closed her eyes, slumped forward and had a cat nap.

Louise in the old town...

Sneaking out the side door of the church, the furtive traveller, playing in the passages and doors of this grey stone structure. Down towards the harbour, along the cool narrow streets. Echo of a car from far away ... echoing along the stone facades ... narrow windows.

Walking down between the dull stone facades--all closed and shuttered in the early morning. The way the walls sometimes seemed to close in, talking to her, wanting to insulate her, to stifle her. Sometimes she couldn't breathe in these narrow streets ... gasping for oxygen like a fish out of water ... opening and spitting her mouth in the vain hope of life underwater. She ran down the street grasping the plastic statue she had found--suddenly feeling guilty--ran flip-flopping down the stone pavement ... down the narrow echoing streets.

At the end of the street with the port in view, she started singing--"Oh my darling, oh my darling oh my darling Clementine, you are lost and gone forever...oh my darling Clementine...oh my...oh my..."

Couldn't remember the rest.

The concrete piers, the grain elevators, the river in the distance ... the bright white sky. The ships in dock--heavy ropes coiled like snakes ... danger ahead.

The billowing wind that followed the river, running

down from the Lachine Rapids, down to the unimaginable ocean.

Louise pulled out the money and counted it again. What a sweet feeling, squeezing the wad with the red elastic ... an undefinable sense of happiness, of calm, like a layer of fat to ward off the winter. She flipped through the bills, one after another in delightful repetition. She laughed out loud.

"La cucaracha, la cucaracha..."

For a moment she realised that perhaps she should be thinking of it as Gabriel's money ... or even Jerzy's ... but that was far too complicated a thought for the clear sky that loomed ahead above the long sheds of the port. The money was in her pocket--that was what was making her happy--no kraft dinners this week, no m.s.g. noodles in a package with fake shrimp sauce, no scraping out the dried outmeal from the pot for supper, no sneaking beers out of the *dépanneur* when the spectacled man wasn't looking. Life was so simple with a little cash. Nothing held one back, all was renewed....

Except for that rusted hulk of a ship parked over on the far side of the water ... deserted ... foreign hieroglyphics on its side. Rusted and forgotten on the river. She wondered what had happened to its crew ... a fallen world.

Louise turned left on rue de la Commune.

Nadine waiting...

Sitting on the steps of a stone building contemplating the port--still empty, except for two Russian-looking sailors on a pier and an old man sleeping on the embankment. The bronze statue on the church roof.

Waiting for Louise....

Thinking about those people--that smug couple with their pale pudgy baby--Brittany, Tiffany, or some such god-awful name--away for the weekend. How she hated cleaning their huge parquet-floored condo with its white walls--polishing their leather sectional sofa, dusting the lampshades, vacuuming their flowered Chinese carpets (made by starving children, no doubt), and cleaning the white stainless bathroom with the gold faucets ... dragging the garbage bags across the shiny lacquered floor and out the double door to the chute where the bags fell with a thump down--down into the basement below.

Still they always paid her on time--and they had cupboards full of Belgian chocolates and other delicacies that she took as a kind of secret perk.

What a way to try and make a living. Thank god, these were only temporary measures while she was at university, till she had a real job--real money.

But what would become of someone like Louise?

Where was Louise anyways? Late, as usual.

She wanted to get home before it started getting so hot and humid--no end in sight--to get some sleep, to get rid of this headache, this nagging pain....

The door clicked open behind her--a man in a beige linen suit walked out, passed her sitting on the stone steps like she didn't exist, then snuck a glance as he unlocked his black Saab. Sunday morning rituals--going home to Mother after a bad night out. He stared at her, appraising her hair, her legs. She snarled.

Making friends, as usual.

The river flowing out there, flowing around the islands, rippling east. She watched a huge steamer on the horizon, moving up the Seaway, the clang of the mission bells, the dome of the old market, the long concrete warehouses, the thin sun--yellow light on the world ... almost at peace, almost ... but

The slap, slap, slap of Louise's flip-flops coming along the sidewalk.

The sun hitting her face, glaring in her eyes, piercing her skull: "It's too hot already." Nadine felt so restless, as if she had forgotten something back at that party last night--something--she couldn't remember what.

Irritating.

And the stunned sleepy look on Louise's face--like a cat who's just swallowed a fish, but won't admit it. If

Louise had eaten any fish, though, she'd cough it up sooner or later. Just a matter of time. Louise looked uncannily serene--her face slightly stupid and angelic--like the time Jerzy and she met. What a fateful night that was! Maybe she had met someone new. Maybe she and Jerzy had kissed and made up, although there was no evidence of that from the way they had yelled. Who knew with Louise? Maybe she was just sleepy.

"So how was Jerzy?"

"As usual. A jerk."

--She must have met someone. "He's not coming over later?" Nadine asked, trying to catch her expression.

"No ... is he?"

Louise looked at her with a stunned blank expression. Nadine laughed and squeezed her arm. She had eaten some fish, that was certain.

Back inside the streets where the tall stone buildings crowded together along the narrow passageways, the air was still cool ... touching the smooth face of the stone walls with her palm.

The streets were still empty, the scourge of weekend tourists hadn't yet appeared. Thank you. As it was, her eyes were peeled shut, just slits opened to check she wasn't going to trip over the curb, walk into a parking meter.

Louise was whistling some annoying little ditty.

From time to time Nadine stopped and arched her back.

She felt the pain starting again, that slow creeping pain crawling up the backbone.

"Do you ever miss Jerzy?"

"Sometimes."

"Are you sorry I broke up your rendezvous?"

"Right now I don't even care enough to think about it."

Louise started to whistle again.

Nadine wanted to stop and sit down but she didn't dare. If she stopped she was afraid she would never get going again. She would sit on that bench ahead all day, never able to move. She would turn into a zombie, a walking, talking wind-up doll whose key had been lost. She just had to keep moving, step after step, clomp after clomp--marching on to....

Her back was starting to hurt more, that slow nagging pain crawling up her spine, tingling, sharp pains now and again ... but her pills were at home, buried in somewhere in the top drawer.

Louise, oblivious, was walking ahead, shuffling and humming, bumping against a sign post as she stared up at the pigeons taking off into the sky.

What did she have grasped in her hand? Some sort of small icon, like the ones you could buy in tacky souvenir shops, the kind you mounted on the dashboard of your car, except Louise had no car.

She took Louise's arm and opened her clenched fist:

"What's that?"

Louise stared at it as if she had forgotten about its existence, as if looking at it for the first time. "Oh ... it's a good luck charm ... I-I found it on a seat in the church."

"What the hell are you going to do with it, Louise?"

"I don't know. I just found it. It's kind of neat, don't you think? I think it'll bring me good luck ... maybe."

"Good luck?" she shook her head in disbelief, "Sometimes I wonder about you."

"You never know..."

"That's for sure." Louise was really turning into a loony tune.

"I think it will look good on my night table."

"What night table?"

Nadine offered Louise some of the candies she had stolen--two chunks of Belgian chocolate, some chocolate covered almonds, and a bag of jujube babies in bright translucent colours. Louise took a pink and yellow jujube baby and chewed on it thoughtfully. Nadine wondered what went on in Louise's mind sometimes. Not much from the looks of it.

Emerging from the narrow streets of the old town, the sun hit--a hot pancake flying into her face. The nether regions: a no man's land of old warehouses and empty parking lots. *Gervais Ironworks*. Black paint cracked and peeling.

The high wooden gate to the dirt courtyard where Nadine had worked as a bike courier--*Messagerie Zip!*--sitting every morning in the dark linoleum hallway waiting for the first run uphill to the office towers.

A flock of pigeons sitting under the eaves, flying off as a truck went by, the sound of crashing as the truck fell, banging into a pot hole, then veering off, speeding towards Point St-Charles.

Flapping sound in the hot dusty sky, birds landing on the roof ahead. Dust in the nostrils. Nadine sneezed. Here the sun was everywhere, blotching out all colour. All life. Crossing the barren waste which ended at the highway.

Silence....

Except in the distance ... faint rumble of the traffic on the highway headed towards the Champlain Bridge, to the south--to the American Dream. Did people still believe in such things? Could they? They should get a dose of some of her cohorts--Young Anarchists of America, as she liked to call them. They had talked once of blowing up that bridge, until someone had to remind them that they were supposed to be pacifists. Sometimes though she got the urge to blow up a few things.

--I want to be like Rosa Luxembourg, she reminded herself. Still, she had to admit, sometimes the short cuts to change seemed appealing. Usually after cleaning someone's posh useless condo. She was always so polite,

though, kept it all tight'y wound up inside.

Crossing the huge concrete ramp to the highway, then under the railway tracks--the creaking sound of boxcars moving slowly above, disappearing into the giant building that stretched up the hill. On the other side ... the old shell of a stone granary left over from another world, its stones round and uncut, just as they had been heaved out of the ground and piled into thick massive walls.

Walking down rue Notre Dame in the thick glare of the morning. Louise shuffling behind her, yawning, kept looking at her pockets for her sunglasses and complaining about the smell from the brewery--the smell of fermenting hops wafting through the air.

"I thought you said you liked that smell."

Louise made a face, "It's a terrible smell. I never said I liked it..."

--Short memory.

Past the old hot dog stand where they went for chocolate milk shakes--or rather Nadine did--Louise drinking that gasoline specialty of Chez Gus--*bière épinette*--home made as they said, as if anyone would want homemade fizzy turpentine. She stood corrected--Louise liked it, and for that, Gus adored her, squeezing her arm whenever she came in and giving her extra coleslaw on her hot dogs and smothering her fries in vinegar and salt just the way Louise liked it. He'd even pinch her cheeks if she got too close and call her

"*mon enfant*" ... and yet, there was something childlike in the way Louise gobbled up the greasy *mets canadiennes* and swilled down her gruesome *bière épinette*.

The bright hand-painted sign loomed ahead on the sidewalk--just looking at it made Nadine feel nauseous--the fizzy lime green bottle and stubby leaning fir trees in red and orange.

Louise took a hungry look at the door, peeping in the window plastered with signs for Pepsi, ice cream, and hot dog specials. "I'm thirsty," she sighed and trudged on.

"You only like that *bière épinette* because of the name. You think its beer."

"So you say."

"But it's true," she snarled. Making friends, as usual.

Past the old white-washed boarding house on the corner of de la Montagne with its dark red wooden door and strange sign--Clean Men Only Welcome. And de la Montagne--the road beyond becoming crooked and winding down to the river--the remains of an old cattle trail paved over (and cracking) that went this way at one time from the old town out to the marshes and grasslands beside the *fleuve St. Laurent*, the old curving road that disturbed the neat grid of the city, still snaking from the iron bridge that had once gone over the rail yards of Griffin Town, down to the dark murky water of Lachine Canal, where the barges were towed up and down, carrying grain, iron, cattle, lumber, and later, liquor to

the south. The old brick houses leaned with the incline, the ones on the end, black and charred from fire. On the other side--the iron windows of a factory. Triangular space where the road split, between the grid and the old cattle trail, full of weedy poplars that grew wild and spindly, only to fall down in the first wind storm.

She stared at the black remains of the buildings in the distance. She had watched them burn, coming home on her bicycle one night, seeing the cloud of smoke--that shaking feeling she had when there was a fire--watching the firemen climb up the ladder to the roof in flames.

They walked over the iron bridge that crossed the old railway lines, the drained marshes that still flooded every spring--the metal sidewalk beside the narrow paved road where the cars drove up and over, climbing towards the highway above on the embankment.

"It's weird, the pain keeps coming and going."

"It's those sandals," said Louise.

"I know, I know."

The wide open field where the railway lines used to go beneath, a wide open space of weeds and grass, heating up under the sun. The sun covered by a white sheet.

"Don't you feel sometimes we're wasting our time," said Nadine.

"What?"

"No, you don't think about those things do you?"

"What things?"

Nadine wished she could just turn on the fan when she got home, but it was broken. Every heat wave they went out shopping for a new fan, but they were always too late. All bought up. The bedrooms would be hot as hell by now, the flat asphalt roof like a mirror soaking up the sun.

"Tomorrow, I'm buying sensible shoes."

Perhaps nobody started those fires--the one Gabe had taken them to, the one last night--they just started themselves in the heat through spontaneous combustion, a miracle of heat ... asphalt transforming into lava flows.

And there in the distance she could see the roofs of rue Versailles ... and behind, the lone tree and a figure sitting on a chair beneath it, all alone, arms swaying--Francis no doubt--crazy Francis conversing with the crab grass and the pigeons.

"Look, it's that pile of tires I saw the other day!" Louise ran ahead, suddenly full of energy, over the bridge and through the field below, laughing as she tripped over a rock and landed in the weeds.

Louise sitting on the tires...

The palace Versailles! ... with its golden-domed roof and leaking ceilings, with its gigantic rooms and peeling paint, with its dark carved bannister and its worn out steps sloping in the center from a thousand footsteps, the elaborate moldings Jerzy had painted on it in a fit of artistic fever, and the dark green walls of the front room ... but best of all, the wall upstairs they had found under the wallpaper--golden and shining (and full of lead said Jerzy), running with darker colours of blood and indigo blue from other layers like a half-discovered fresco from Pompeii, the remains of a buried city ... traces of other lives, other decorators, who had moved through these dark high-ceilinged hallways, slept in these crooked rooms with the plaster falling. How she loved that house ... how she hated the cockroaches that lived under the kitchen sink ... that mound of plaster that had fallen down last March when the snow was melting, that had landed beside her bed missing her by only a few feet....

Nadine sleeping beside her on the tires, snoring in contentment, dreaming of milkshakes and Belgian chocolate.

Suspended upside-down--that's how she felt ... in Limbo ... like when she was sitting on the wobbly milking stool (found on Notre Dame) on the collapsing back balcony, sitting for hours in the shade of the house in the

afternoon, watching the traffic and the pigeons, slipping in and out of other worlds ... suspended ... everything suspended and held in check.

Looking up ... the sun struggling to cut through the haze. A cloud crossing it, leaving the earth in shadow for a minute like a minor eclipse ... then emerging, opening up into a bright haze again. The gathering of a breeze, blowing north, then dying ... seemed as if it would never really rain, never enough to cool this clinging damp heat ... her legs sweating against the round of the tire ... a black spider crawling out and over her flattened thigh, down the other side, back into the darkness below.

--This is my home--it says--this is my place and you are an interloper here where I live spinning webs in the field, hiding in the hot daylight. Isn't it enough that you destroyed my web, must you sit here as well?

Nadine suddenly started twitching, her arms jerking around, her body squirming, and woke up screaming-- "Fucker!"--lept up, shaking her limbs and jumping on the ground. "I'm crawling with god-damn spiders. Louise, get them off me!"

Louise struggled out of her pile of tires, her throne, tipping her seat as she got up, shaking a spider off her leg and walked over to the hysterical Nadine.

"Why didn't you tell me the place was crawling with fucking spiders?"

"Sorry, I forgot."

"Get them off me!" she screamed.

"Stop moving around so much. I can't get near you."

Nadine stopped jumping and stood there still twitching and squirming while Louise brushed them off her arms and legs.

"Oh God!... I think I've got one on my ass!" she cried, and pulled up her black skirt to the amazement of the rubbies on the other side, who stood up to stare.

"What the hell are you looking at?" she screamed at them. "Oh fuck! I'm going to bed, Louise. I'm so tired. Good night...good day...." and she walked off, stumbling in her bare feet, looking as if she was going to cry.

Poor Nadine ... she hated spiders, made her kill them when she found one in the old bathtub with the lion-claw legs.

What to do ... What to do?

She spied Francis across the road under his tree and decided to pay him a visit. She hiked up her shorts that had started to fall down and shuffled her way towards St. Jacques in her flip-flops. The day was getting more and more humid, the air thick as pea soup, but miraculously, even though she felt a little tired, there was no pain in her head. As she emerged from the field full of weeds onto the concrete of the sidewalk--and thinking, looking at the *dépanneur*, that she should get something to eat--she saw

Wayne, Gabriel's roommate, coming up the street in his white shirt and bow tie, waving, looking concerned and bad tempered.

He kissed her on both cheeks mechanically and asked her if she had seen Gabe today.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I just got home."

"I don't know, but I think I heard him early this morning on the roof, but he seems to have disappeared. He's always home at this time of day sleeping. And he left this funny note. I just don't understand it."

Have gone fishing in strange waters. For eels and other diabolical creatures. No return address. A hell of a way to go!

All my love, Gabriel.

P.S. Don't forget to feed the cats when I'm gone.

"Did he ever send you notes like this before?" she laughed.

"Never. I don't know, but I'm worried. He left me a couple of hundred dollars for cat food."

Louise scratched her ear and sneezed.

"Listen, I'm on my way to work. I'm doing the brunch shift, but I just wanted to see if you'd seen him."

"Not since last night. Like I said, I just got home...."

Wayne looked at her oddly, suspiciously even.

"Perhaps..." she continued, "Perhaps Francis has seen

him. If he came by this morning, Francis is sure to have seen him."

Wayne followed her across the road and into the deserted lot with its lone tree. Francis--lizard-eyed and mischievous--smiling all by himself, as they approached him across the snakey grass, still damp beneath the surface, under the thick weeds and thistles.

Francis grinned at her--"H-hello, chi-chi-chickadee!"--tossing bread crumbs from his pockets into the air, and leaning backwards on his kitchen chair to get a better view of the circling birds.

Wayne, looking up nervously, swore under his breath.

"Francis, Wayne here wants to know if you've seen Gabriel this morning. You know my pal, Gabriel. He was over here yesterday. You talked to him on the front steps."

"Of course, I-I remember Gab-b-briel. I saw him just now."

"Where?"

"In-n the t-tree," he answered, pointing up above his head into the branches.

"Did he say anything?"

"S-sure. We talk-ked."

"What did he say?"

Francis opened his eyes very wide. "G-God is l-love!"

Wayne groaned and made a face. "Come on, Louise, let's get out of here," and started to tip-toe again through the

grass towards the highway.

But Louise didn't follow him. She just lay down in the long weeds beside Francis's leaning chair and stared up at the white sky and the birds, dark shadows circling and landing beside her. A thousand sparrows chirping in the tree, its leaves alive with hopping forms.

She turned to Francis, "Did you really see Gabriel?"

"Sure. I-I saw him right there, up-up in the t-t-tree," he answered smiling and pointing, nonchalantly throwing food at the birds.

She stared at him--What did he see? Did he really see Gabriel, or what he thought was Gabriel ... or was this some obscure joke?

He offered her a beer with a flourish of courtesy, as if it was the greatest honour to have her take his last warm beer. She took it, and when he wasn't looking she slipped a twenty dollar bill into the pocket of his jacket lying on the ground.

Francis pulled out the contents of his trousers, examined his bag of bread crumbs, all empty, then shoved it back absently into his pockets. Still, the birds kept hovering around, hobbling pigeon-toed across the patch of gravel, giving her the quizzical eye ... sparrows up in the tree twittering--"The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

"T-today, there's goin' to be a l-lot of rain," Francis announced, staring at the sky, "He t-t-told me."

"Who did?"

"H-h-he told me."

Louise shook her head in confusion. All this talk about voices was making her dizzy. All these voices. A big red ant crawled over her outstretched arm, tickling her. She stared at it as it crawled back into the grass. Everyone had somewhere to go. It was time to go home, to sleep, but she still felt restless. She watched Francis, half dozing, one eye open, watched him muttering to himself ... conversations with pigeons and invisible beings.

Francis picked up his jacket off the ground, rummaged through the pockets, and pulled out the twenty dollar bill.

"A-a-a m-miracle!" he cried out and got up to shuffle down to the *dépanneur*. Talking to the ghosts and other invisible beings.

Nadine in her bedroom...

Waking up in the thick blanket of heat, feeling as if she had hardly slept at all...

Her cat, a fat tabby with bow legs, called loudly in the open window, then jumped in from the rickety fire escape, onto the floor, and onto her stomach, landing with a thump ... taking her breath away. She patted his dark flat head. She lifted him up by the front paws to get a better look, but he was avoiding her gaze, as if he felt guilty about disturbing her for the last three hours.

She thought with a twinge about her lab project--the cat in the fridge of the biology department just waiting to be dissected. Going up the escalators to the labs--like going up into a morgue of animals--up the long corridors into the deserted hallways with cabinet upon glass cabinet of pickled specimens--headless mice, cut-open frogs with their entrails hanging out and floating in yellowy liquid, the dissected seagull, and in the last cabinet, the pickled remains of a white cat with no eyes, the stomach cut open, paws against the glass jar, displaying heart and liver and intestines and stomach ... still, she looked forward to an autopsy, cutting into the heart with a sharp, clean knife ... a morbid fascination to know.

She looked at the clock--time to go up the hill and into the tower of the university, into the heavy

formaldehyde smell.

She stood up with the cat resting on her shoulder and went down the dark hall to the bathroom. Staring in the mirror, she brushed her teeth, then carefully put on her red lipstick with a smooth motion from side to side, top and bottom, smacked her lips together and grimaced. Dressing in the bedroom she looked out the window and saw her neighbour, Gordy, on the garage roof with one of his babies--another display of debased breeding. She rummaged in her cupboard for her running shoes--determined to wear flats today--but could only find one, the other lost somewhere beneath the clothes and the heaps of papers, so she put back her old heeled sandals (next week she would get a sensible pair) and ran, heels clicking, down the long dark stairway to the floor below.

Big black clouds on the horizon. Better be off before it rained.

Descending again to the front door, out into the dark overcast sky. Wind blowing in from the north.

Louise in the bedroom...

Panic. Paws across the stomach. Some phantom.

Sweat between the thighs, under the arms ... the sheet all kicked off and the strange still face of Nadine's cat staring down at her.

The Beast.

Book upside down on the windowsill--what was that title again? Where did it come from? Clothes in a pile at the foot of the bed. Large crack on the faded blue wall running east to west, ending down in the corner.

Blueberries and milk in her head ... overhead ... singular, how the room kept insisting on going in circles.

Sound of footsteps running down the stairs. Nadine was off somewhere again. Always busy. So disturbing.

Out the window, a faded sky turning dark, shadows across her damp flesh.

If she could get the energy up she would take a bath. Feeling quite stinky. But whenever she tried to lift her right foot, it fell down onto the mattress. Fell down and wouldn't budge.

Sleeping fitfully, the sound of thunder rumbling in the distance, the heart pounding, the mouth dry ... a flash of lightning filling the room as if it had struck somewhere on the street ... waking up terrified and excited, all nervous energy, as the rain started ... a torrent. The sky dark as

night, black clouds descending ... thick black clouds. She crawled over to the window, leaned against the sill, watched the lightning strike down near the canal--hitting something (someone ... Gabriel?) with a crooked bolt to the earth, rain pouring down in thick streams till the gutters were running like rivers, water pouring off the edges of the roof.

Hissing ... gurgling down the drainpipe through the bathroom.

Incessant heavy rain. A burst of cold air rushing through the window, flipping the leaves of the book, the upside-down man getting soaked with rain, drenched with water ... her arms getting sprayed with cold rain ... rubbing her hands on her face ... cool and wet.

Heard a crack of plaster in the hallway. Drip of water onto the floor. (How long before everything collapsed?)

Crawled back onto the mattress, lay on top of the sheets, naked, the cool draft over her warm damp body ... and fell, tumbling in slow motion, into a dark heavy slumber--vertigo--into a dark cool cave....

In her dream there was a jujube candy--about four inches high, with a big round belly, a smiling face, big cheeks and closed eyes, short stubby legs. It just seemed to pop out of her body ... come to talk with her.

And she thought, astonished--newborn babies can't talk-

-but this one didn't only talk, it was extremely articulate. It knew all about her, and it told her things with such clarity that she felt she had always been a stranger before that, and it stood there absurdly pontificating, her jujube baby, almost translucent, answering all her questions so clearly ... so strangely ... it started to trace a trail ... a haunted paradise.

And she walked ... up a rutted path through a dark twilight country.