



National Library  
of Canada

Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et  
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa (Ontario)  
K1A 0N4

*Vous lire - Votre bibliothèque*

*Vous lire - Votre bibliothèque*

## NOTICE

The quality of this microform is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

Reproduction in full or in part of this microform is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30, and subsequent amendments.

## AVIS

La qualité de cette microforme dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

La reproduction, même partielle, de cette microforme est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30, et ses amendements subséquents.

Peter and the Wolf  
and other stories

Sharon Hancock

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

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

July 1995

© Sharon Hancock, 1995



National Library  
of Canada

Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et  
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa (Ontario)  
K1A 0N4

*Your file* *Votre référence*

*Our file* *Notre référence*

THE AUTHOR HAS GRANTED AN IRREVOCABLE NON-EXCLUSIVE LICENCE ALLOWING THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CANADA TO REPRODUCE, LOAN, DISTRIBUTE OR SELL COPIES OF HIS/HER THESIS BY ANY MEANS AND IN ANY FORM OR FORMAT, MAKING THIS THESIS AVAILABLE TO INTERESTED PERSONS.

L'AUTEUR A ACCORDE UNE LICENCE IRREVOCABLE ET NON EXCLUSIVE PERMETTANT A LA BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE DU CANADA DE REPRODUIRE, PRETER, DISTRIBUER OU VENDRE DES COPIES DE SA THESE DE QUELQUE MANIERE ET SOUS QUELQUE FORME QUE CE SOIT POUR METTRE DES EXEMPLAIRES DE CETTE THESE A LA DISPOSITION DES PERSONNE INTERESSEES.

THE AUTHOR RETAINS OWNERSHIP OF THE COPYRIGHT IN HIS/HER THESIS. NEITHER THE THESIS NOR SUBSTANTIAL EXTRACTS FROM IT MAY BE PRINTED OR OTHERWISE REPRODUCED WITHOUT HIS/HER PERMISSION.

L'AUTEUR CONSERVE LA PROPRIETE DU DROIT D'AUTEUR QUI PROTEGE SA THESE. NI LA THESE NI DES EXTRAITS SUBSTANTIELS DE CELLE-CI NE DOIVENT ETRE IMPRIMES OU AUTREMENT REPRODUITS SANS SON AUTORISATION.

ISBN 0-612-05084-X

Canada

## ABSTRACT

Peter and Wolf  
and other stories

Sharon Hancock

The thesis consists of nine short stories exploring the ways in which individuals interact, and the ways in which that interaction can sometimes lead to isolation and sometimes to increased awareness of the self.

Language and setting are used to impart a fleeting sense to intimacy, its sometimes spurious nature, and the dangers it poses, or can pose, to the individual. In many of the stories, the central character lives in, or travels to, foreign countries in which she may not speak the language. If she does speak it, she retains a sense of separation in language and meaning which dilutes her ability to make contact with others.

Interaction between characters is thus seen as tenuous, with many levels that are neither explicable nor definable. The central character is, or becomes, isolated from others around her. Often, this choice is deliberate, occasionally it is imposed.

Nevertheless, the stories are also about hope, as in each story the inner life of the narrator offers a glimpse of the potential for strength and, sometimes, joy given by the touch or presence of another human being.

## Table of Contents

Peter and the Wolf	1
Spin	22
Bhodisattva	29
Jupiter Symphony	38
Bright Moments	52
Island	57
Communion	66
Hector: At Home after the War	69
Tattoo	76

## PETER AND THE WOLF

I prefer the nature of clandestine space. Motel rooms for example, with their implications of travel and adventure, and foreign, damp air, the white-lettered towels which we could use once and drop on the floor. At one time I thought motel bathrooms had their own completeness. I could imagine having to live in one for a time. I saw myself curled in a white porcelain tub into which I had piled towels, a robe, a bathmat -- worn yellowish terrycloth smelling of bleach. I was not able to think of myself like this in the bathrooms at home. It was only on the midnight trips, the hasty pullouts we used to make, the hurried, temporal visits. This was before I left altogether and space began to have a familiar shape, continuous patterns.

At least, for awhile.

Afterwards, it was the shape of him I missed most, the absence of touch. My hands and the bare, clean feel of Peter's hands, his feet under mine in the night.

I am lying on the cold bathroom floor with my head cushioned on a towel that has somehow fallen to the floor under me. I lie with my face pressed against the porcelain toilet bowl. I get up and wipe my mouth on the towel, rinse my mouth carefully with mouthwash. Blood is what I taste, copper warm, but there isn't any blood, I've imagined it.

When I have brought the trembling under control, I make myself a cup of coffee and take it into the still unfamiliar bedroom. The sheets are tangled and I make the bed absently, smoothing the corners, drawing up the sheets. I am perfectly happy to sit on my neat bed, coffee cup in hand, teeth chattering: this is only residue, I think, in a moment I'll be fine: I'll be normal. I am thinking of some scribbled notes I once read in the margins of an old poetry textbook, not mine, but one I found in a second-hand shop, the writing round and even: she is trying to forget him; he can never hold on to her. I pictured a young woman in the tight, pointy-breasted sweaters of the fifties, smug and bored in some winter classroom, making the careful, neat letters, the perfect symmetry of line against the edges of the book. At the time I was amused, now I'm envious. I'd like to be there, wherever it is, I'd like to have the sure and certain boredom, the routine. Tautologies are what I'd like: completions, the sense of ordinariness. This is what I believe.

Except that he is there, he exists, he hasn't died. I know that. He breathes, he eats, he shits, he cries, he walks around, the same way he always did. And it was me, after all, who ran away in the end. In the background, Peter accuses me of leaving him.

In one of his many incarnations, he found himself on Saint Catherine street in Montreal very early one morning: broke, tired, living the life of a much younger person, someone other than himself. Still, he enjoys the energy and smoky, beery atmosphere of certain box-like rooms where he goes at night to listen to music. He hears jazz pouring out of the cracks in the sidewalks. Everyone who walks by seems to be humming some tune, every house has a special light spilling out onto the sidewalks. The light is jazz-tinted, jazz-coloured. He hears Dixieland for the first time. He leans in the doorway of a club, really somebody's house, and drinks beer out of a dirty glass. A girl with dark hair kisses him and he holds her hand. Later, she walks back to the bus stop with him and clings to him as he says goodbye. He doesn't learn her name. He goes back to the house again and again. He never sees her there.

He finds a lone balloon floating in the flat, grey dawn. On the balloon someone has written, Bonne Fête, Clothilde! He accepts this as a measure of good will. He waits, suspended at the end of the balloon string for the rest of his life to begin. He believes in his own death and lies on his cot at night picturing blue flames, hurling himself recklessly into them. He begins to believe he wants this; he begins to think it will never happen.

All of this, and more, Peter tells me. I begin to picture his life as a series of transformations: he waits



for events, he is directed, or he floats. Like Peter, I have made a voyage. More than once I have changed my life. More than once I have discontinued space, as Peter did.

"Excuse me? Excuse me."

I look up, and a thin-faced boy of twenty or so is leaning over me and staring into my lap, on which is balanced a cookbook. I look more closely. He's not a boy, he's much older than me. Forty or so. A fine webbing of lines around the eyes and mouth. But he's dressed like a boy: jeans, t-shirt, beads.

"Uh, hi," he says at last. "I'm, um, would you like me to read your cards for you? Two dollars," he adds, holding up the greasy deck. Even so, I'm confused for a second, think he means he wants to read my recipes, then see the tarot deck in his hand and understand.

I'm relieved, this is just an ordinary request for money after all, but I tell him no thanks. He walks away quickly and I watch him approach an older couple with a baby in a pushchair. "No luck there," I think and I'm right. The couple smile in a dismissive way and shake their heads.

That leaves only an old lady wearing too many clothes for the heat. He doesn't even try.

The day is a fine one. I lie back on the grass and stretch my arms over my head. Traffic rushes by on the overpass just behind the park. On my lap the cookbook is a

comforting weight. Since I've given up reading I take pleasure in these books with their self-assured instructions and presumptions of accuracy. It's the formality I find consoling, the necessity for strict rules, for precise directions. For this reason, I like the ones with few pictures, just lists and lists of ingredients, some obscure, even bizarre. It's like a Chinese puzzle. If you can determine the rules of form you are rewarded with a final shape: graceful, complete.

"Uh, excuse me." The voice is diffident now, but also tauter, indignant almost. I look up and his face, a dark blot, hovers into range.

"Look," he's staring at the cookbook again, maybe he thinks it makes me kinder, more inclined to generosity, he thinks I'm his mother, he thinks I'll hand him cookies, maybe, from the densely printed white pages. He leans further over me and topples into my lap suddenly, his dark head disappearing into the pages between Broiled Lamb Kebabs and Garnished English Mixed Grill.

"Hey." I say, inadequately, and look quickly around. The couple with the baby have gone and the old lady is watching us balefully. She is shaking her head. "I wash my hands," she says, "I wash my hands of the whole thing."

I realize then, how thin he is, insubstantial. For a crazy minute I think the cookbook feels heavier than he does. Maybe I could tear out pages, plant them in his

pockets. Would this feed him? I doubt it. He gets up after a moment or two anyway. Folds his thin hands over his knees which break through his trousers and he's crying. Noisily and inelegantly. "I'm sorry," he says, "I'm sorry. It's just so fucking stupid." With this he curls the hands into fists and pounds them on his knees. A gesture I find theatrical. I'm glad because it enables me to stop feeling sorry for him. "Well," I say briskly, standing up, brushing the grass off my clothes, "listen -- look, maybe I can give you some money. You could get something to eat." I look away hastily; I don't want this act mistaken. He looks thoughtful, rubs the heel of his hand into each eye, wipes his nose on the back and examines the salt-smearred streaks.

"How much?"

I look through my pockets. There's not much there, five dollars, some change, a couple of bus tickets. I offer him the money and the tickets. He takes it all and I think I see a sly look cross his face. "Is that all?" he asks, and I realize his eyes are not dark as I'd thought at first, but blue like my own. "I, uh, I don't have anything else." I think of the cookbook, but he gets up, puts the money in his pockets, nods to me and, just like that, moves off. Walking fast too. I have a hard time to catch up. "Wait, wait." He stops and I pull up beside him. His face is blank, patient but unconcerned, I'm a foot he's stepped on. I can't imagine why I've run after him. He smells dirty, he

is dirty, there are black rings around his uncovered ankles, crescents of dirt under his finger nails. Close up, even his pores are black. I feel dizzy, it must be the heat, I haven't spoken to anyone in so long I've forgotten the forms, the conventions for standing the correct distance away, the lack of touch. I put out my hand to his shirt. It might have been blue once, it's a nondescript colour now, somewhere between grey and black. I can't think why I've come after him, I can't imagine what rescue I see him offering. Nevertheless, I put out my hand, imagine leaping into a clear space. In reality, there's only his thin and rather dirty hand, stretching out to mine.

Later, he reads my cards. Actually, he only pretends to read them. He's never really learned how, he says, it's just a way to cadge money from people.

"Some people," he tells me, "want to believe you can divine the future, they believe the future is immediate. Like those cookbooks," he says, gesturing to them piled around my bed, "there's nothing there until you make it, until it happens. You can't tell them it's blank space. Unfilled."

So I tell him about my own past which, like the cookbooks, waits to be completed.

My father and I are in the car, and it's winter. I know it's winter because the Christmas lights are still up on Portage Avenue and I am wearing leotards. The leotards are red and I have on a red and grey plaid skirt and a red sweater. The wool smells damp. It's night time and quite late, later than I'm used to, and there is a feeling of permission, even festivity in the air. My father wears a hat and we are listening to the radio. My father likes jazz and his fingers beat time on the steering wheel. The steering wheel is large and covered in blue fur. I can hear the sound the engine makes and the click-click-click of the turn signal when my father changes lanes.

My father and I are going to the ballet, *Les Foux Follies*. I like this name, which is soft. I like the dark, snowy night, and my red wool leotards and my father's square, gloved hands beating time in the dark. I even like jazz, though it is a difficult, complicated sound.

We drive, the snow falls, jazz, I am listening.

What is he saying to me?

Peter's father used to hold his head under water to make him behave. Once, he held Peter's head under so long that he, Peter, began to hallucinate. The sink retreated and Peter felt something caress his cheeks, his eyes, his hair. Later, after his father had pulled him out and slapped him into consciousness, he tried ducking his own

head into the sink and holding it there. "It was no good though. Whatever it was in there was gone, or didn't want me any more. It kept pushing me out. But I used to try sometimes, you know, in the bath, holding my breath, ducking under the water." He is licking my hands as he says this. Warm mouth around my fingers in turn. "And then?" I ask.

"Then?"

"What happened next?"

Peter licks my palm, "Nothing, I stopped. My father went away, then he came back. Then he died. You know." Peter shrugs.

I am disappointed, having expected at the very least some confrontation between them. Peter pushes me back onto the pillows. "You watch too much television," he says, "in real life nothing ever happens."

My father listens to jazz at home too, and other things. Peter and the Wolf, I like, and A Christmas Carol, that's a talking record which we listen to at Christmas, and Jupiter Symphony. I like the name of that one, imagine the stars singing.

I am five and it is the winter before we moved away. There is snow, snow and more snow everywhere. I wear ski pants which are made of rubber, and boots that buckle over my shoes, and a scarf wound in a complicated fashion around my forehead and mouth. My breath freezes against the wool.

Later, when I remember this, it seems unlikely. Was it really that cold? Was there snow? Did I dress this way? Of course I did, we all did. There are pictures of it, even a home movie of my mother pulling us in a sled on our road. The road has been recently ploughed and the snow is piled over her head. I remember the swish, swish, swish sound our snowpants made when we climbed up it. Our mittens got wet and sometimes froze and once, skating behind our house, my feet froze and had to be thawed between my father's hands while my mother fed me tea. A hot, bitter taste of tea and the memory of my blue and frozen feet slowly warming and then, suddenly, the incredible pain of the blood working back to the toes.

Snow. Peter and the Wolf. The red lights strung up across the avenue.

I tell Peter this memory too. He looks at me, a small smile, he's not really all that interested, but he listens anyway.

"It's true. Peter and the Wolf. We had it when I was a kid, I used to listen to it all the time. Drove my mother crazy." I hum some of it for him, but he says he doesn't know it. "It's funny that you have the same name. It was my father's record, actually. He had lots of records like

that, I mean for kids, The Nutcracker, Teddy Bears Picnic, some other ones..."

"My father," he says, "used to wait for us to come home from school so there'd be someone there for him, see? My mother would go out and leave him home. Then when we got home, he'd be waiting behind the door and when we came in he could kick us before we saw him. That way, it was more fun for him, like a sport. We were entertainment for him." He bites my shoulder playfully and gets up. "I'm hungry," he says, "what do we have to eat?"

The "we" is startling, but I say nothing. He is after all, a warm body, I should be grateful. Maybe I am grateful. Under the bed his filthy shoes lie where they have been kicked off and all of his things are scattered the room. At least he is a presence.

Except in the morning, when I wake up tangled and sweaty in the dirty sheets he is gone. This is the first time.

We had a home movie camera and a projector and a screen that required careful set-up or it would collapse. My older brother did this. There were films, sometimes cartoons, which were soundless, of a house burning and someone -- a mouse? a cat? -- trying to climb a ladder and rescue a woman with a baby. And Popeye. And then us: me in a pink



ballet tutu and tights, whirling on our front lawn, my brother and me in bathing suits jumping off our back steps, my mother, impossibly young in stretch pants. My father appears on the screen holding a barbecue fork. He wears an apron, he has hair. Our backyard has no trees and looks brownish. My father waves the barbecue fork at the camera. The camera moves in, closeup on my father's face. He fills the screen, enormous. The film ends and my brother and I make shadow puppets on the screen while the light bulb burns.

I think there must be more to this, my father sitting beside me in the dark, I feel his hand on my shoulder. We watch a male dancer's arabesque on the stage below us. He is white and far away, retreating. He becomes a bird, or a dog, a black shadow on a white screen. Shadow puppet, he's cupping his hands, holding the sun.

Peter returns three or four days later carrying a suitcase. He's cleaned up a little, is wearing clean clothes. He has beautiful teeth, I notice. He looks apologetic, tender. This diminishes him slightly but is also infinitely attractive. I let him in and this becomes in its way our pattern.

Our house was still enough afterwards you could hear the soft pressure of air against the ears.

We had a willow tree, a weeping willow, in the front yard. My father tells me this tree has a soul. He tells me water can be divined with a twitch and that the sun will always hide if you kill a spider in the house. He plays the harmonica and sometimes sings. He is a baritone. He sings: I only have eyes for you, dear, and rolls his eyes back in his head, pretending to be blind. He can pull off the top part of his thumb and put it back again, he can pull a string right through his neck, without a mark, and tell hundreds of jokes and stories. He knows more songs than anybody and will sing them for us whenever we ask. He teaches me to listen for the animals in Peter and the Wolf. He teaches us that Peter's danger is in not believing enough. He teaches us to believe. Then he disappears.

For a long time I thought of him as static, I mean immobile, unchanging, because he remains fixed in one space, permanent. He is in our house, the one I was born in, no other place can hold him. Later, I remembered the car, the night of the ballet, my father's hands on the steering wheel. My red sweater and leotards and the heavy buckled overshoes.

After my father was gone, my mother's family took us in. *Took us in* sounds as if we were living outside, on the streets. When I went to India, years later, there were

people living on the streets. Not as they do here, but actually living there, a city within the city. Sheets of plastic and cardboard boxes; cooking pots, children, here and there a radio, a bicycle, some sign of prosperity and pride: hopeful. We were not living like this, at least I don't think so.

My grandmother spoke a strange language, which I was sure was entirely her own invention. Later, when my panic subsided and I began to notice such things, I realized she spoke the way everyone spoke, strange words: nappy, basin, cooker, sweets. So it was not her, but we who were the strangers.

My grandmother's house was small and strange with low, timbered ceilings and a fireplace a man could comfortably stand in. The floor was stone, and the walls, there were flowers and a low, stone wall around the garden. The air smelled strange, phosphorescent and thick. It was all grey: the air, the sky. Except for the hedges which looked unnaturally bristly and green.

There wasn't any snow, however, and no movie projector, our car was gone, we had no records with us; in any case the player was missing. Wherever my father is, he is not here.

Peter leaves. Peter comes back. Peter leaves.

Finally, I go to Amsterdam, and take a room near the Blummarkt and wake every morning to the sounds of arriving truckloads of flowers. Perhaps, I will be alone, I think. Peter cannot follow me here, across the ocean carrying his greasy tarot cards, and find me. Not without clues, not without divination.

But soon, because we are not yet finished, I write to him and, as I had both hoped and feared, Peter follows me, arriving amidst the flowers at dawn. We go out that night, past the landlady lurking in the shadows of the hallway. Outside, the narrow, cobbled streets are treacherous, damp and slippery. He says, "Wouldn't want you to fall in!" meaning into the canals, and takes hold of my arm, laughing. I tell him it's hardly likely, but I like him holding my arm like this, like feeling the weight of his hand around my wrist, cupping my hand.

It is two, three in the morning, and the streets are filled with people. Living here is sometimes like being in the midst of a constant festival; a giant, rolling, continuous celebration. This hasn't begun to wear on me yet; I find it charming. On the *Leidseplein* the bars are still open and music spills out onto the square. We stop at a Febo to buy chips and pour thick, glutinous yellow mayonnaise over them. The lone man working the counter is small and dark with liquid brown eyes, Lebanese perhaps, or a Surinamer. He laughs at my accent, gives us two tiny

plastic forks, and waves away the coins Peter puts down. There are people sitting on the ground around the square. Some are singing, laughing. Beer bottles clink together.

Peter wants to go to *Det Koophuis*, The Gutter House, which is a converted cathedral, lots of leftover Dutch Catholicism, furtive and embarrassed almost, like embossed crosses set into the walls under the bright paintwork. You can see these only at certain angles, feel them by running your fingers over them, bevelled like old mirrors. The pews and altars and choir lofts now hold levels and levels of tables and benches, a small coffee bar, lots of smoke, lots of kids, loud music.

Peter was raised a Catholic, hence he is uncomfortable with the careless disregard of religion, although he doesn't admit it. Nevertheless, he likes the toilets in *Det Koophuis*. He takes me into them, and leans against the door with me perched absurdly on the edge of an old-fashioned sink. The faucets on the sink are brass taps with engraved lettering: *Kalt, Heis*.

Later, we walk home under the arch of the museum. It's dawn, or nearly dawn and already there are several vendors setting up their blankets under the arch. Some of them have been scarified or tattooed perhaps; it's hard to tell which in the dim light. When the day begins they will wait quietly, patiently beside the blankets for tourists to start

arriving at the museum. Tourists always admire the carved, thin bracelets of plastic and wood, and the beaded earrings, the tooled leather bags. They try to talk to the vendors, to draw them out of their narrow, still spaces.

"Did you make this yourself?"

"Are you far from home? Where do you come from?" But most of these men don't speak any language but their own. Sometimes they shrug, smile, hold up still more and better treasures: beads, shells, feathers, plastic windup windmills and dolls with papery, gaudy costumes. Sometimes they answer in rich, impenetrable voices.

"Do you want breakfast?" Peter asks. His voice echoes under the arch, "Breakfast, breakfast, breakfast."

"Do you want to get coffee?"

"No," I say, spreading my arms out to the side and whirling around in circles. "Do this," I tell him. "Do this until we get dizzy."

He laughs and holds out his arms, whirling. At the other end of the arch, daylight intrudes. The vendors watch us quietly, curiously.

"I want a beer," I say, when we have finished. "I want a beer and a Gyros with hot sauce and that other stuff, that yogurt stuff, and I want something sweet, like an ice-cream, or maybe some chocolate or something." He considers this seriously, searches through his pockets for change and crumbled bills. "Alright," he tells me, "OK, let's go."

Where do you want to go? Do you want to go back to the *Leidseplein*? To the Dam?" In the feeble light his skin looks bluish, drawn. I take his arm, "Are you tired, Peter? Do you want to go home?" But he touches my fingers gently - - with a tenderness that surprises me -- and says no.

Trolleys have started running by the time we get out to the street. We board the first one that comes. We're the only ones on board and the driver seems surprised to see us. The trolley lumbers through the deserted streets. I look out the window at the usual things: dirty canals, narrow leaning houses, the boats with the naked masts tied up to the pier.

"Why do they do that?" Peter asks, leaning against me. "Why do they take the masts off like that?"

"People steal them sometimes, the masts; people take them right off, anything moveable, anything not tied down or locked up, they just take them off."

Peter falls asleep beside me again, my hand held between both of his, his head nodding on his chest. I watch him until the trolley begins to roll into the outskirts of the city, and I push the bell to get off.

It seems there are many ways to tell this. I could describe the way the city looked from the outside, the dirty, leaning haze, the festival atmosphere, the way the dawn flattened everything out. Once, I spent a summer working on a holiday camp in Brighton. I loved Brighton,

the salt smell of the air and the carnival that went on there, even after the season had ended and the rides had shut down and the stalls with the bright paint were gone with all of the sad men in aprons behind the counter gone with them.

So I knew about such things, or thought I did; I knew the way the lights could be dazzling on the midway at night, and look dull and alien in the morning. I knew such things were not continuous.

My job in Brighton was to walk around a large table spread with prizes and collect the small brass rings that people threw at them. There was such hope in this simple act, the breathless moment in which the ring, suspended, wavered between the stuffed bears and glass slipper ashtrays and coloured pinwheels spinning in the air. The rings seldom fit over the prizes, which made it, somehow, all the more exciting. I, like the sad faced men on the midway, wore a striped apron over my everyday clothes. This apron had deep pockets in the front and clips for the rings which dangled from my chest like medals. When someone asked for a ring I collected 50p and handed him a clip full of rings. At the end of the day the pence pieces filled my pockets and I ran my fingers through them, feeling them slip through, cold and hard in the darkness of the apron.



We rest awhile on the outskirts of the city. Peter lies in the grass beside a canal with his shoes off. I have found a small shop and bought some beer and cheese and chocolate in a silver wrapper which I peel off and crumple into a little silver ball. It's surprisingly heavy.

"Do you think I should go home?" I ask, and Peter starts awake. "Huh? What?" he asks and I repeat, "Should I go home?" "If you want to," he says, gathering his shoes, tying the laces. He thinks I mean to our room.

I say, "To my home," meaning to separate it from his, wherever that is. He looks puzzled, then wary, asks carefully, "Why do you say that?" I shrug elaborately, casually, I want to tell him that I just asked that to wake him up: I'm tired of sitting quietly, I want to punish him, it seems, for leaving, for coming back. Because our roles have been reversed and it is suddenly I who have become important to Peter. This is not what I had intended at all. At the same time, I would like to tell him it's a joke. Instead I say, "Maybe it's time."

"What do you mean, it's time?" he asks, "Time for what? What's wrong? I don't think you should go. I mean if you have to, but I don't think you should leave." A frown line appears on his forehead and I would like to kiss it. I would like to take his head and hold it; I think somehow, even his ears look vulnerable, gentle. I'd like to stroke

them and tell him I was only being silly, but for some reason I look at him and say nothing.

I was wrong when I said that such things are not continuous. Sometimes, they are. I let Peter gather his things slowly, fill his pockets with the crumpled cheese wrappers, pick up the empty beer bottles. All the time he is doing this, he is asking me, "Why? What's the matter? What's with you?" I jump up from the bank, throw my arms around his neck. "I'm sorry" is what I say, "I don't mean it. I was being mean: I don't know why." Peter takes my arm, relieved. We walk away.

This is not true. I let Peter gather his things, I let him ask me, in his careful way, "What is it? What?" I don't answer him. My hands wrap around my ankles tightly, holding on. Peter moves away, he recedes. I look away. A boat chugs slowly up the canal. Two people are sitting on striped chairs on the deck. They see us on the bank, Peter standing with empty bottles in his hands, me with my hands hidden under the voluminous folds of my coat at my feet, they wave. After a while we go home. On the trolley, Peter grips my hand tightly as if in letting go I would float away like a helium balloon, like Mary Poppins, my feet dangling neatly under my coat.

## SPIN

MaryBeth sees snakes rippling under the murky, green water of the Algonquin River, also frogs, tadpoles, rubber tires, old boots, long strings of algae-covered wire, parts of cars, other odds and ends too buried under the dark water to identify. MaryBeth envisions long, white bones, carefully picked clean, rusted metal boxes tossed in and forgotten. What's in the boxes? Gold coins certainly, large gems, a white ostrich fan: MaryBeth argues for large gifts, improbable splendour.

When MaryBeth's dad was a boy (*and awhile ago that was, too*) he came here, to the Algonquin, with his dad, to fish for eels from a punt (*what happened to the punt? Gone, and the eels too, for that matter*).

MaryBeth's dad wore at the time, short pants, a wool vest, heavy rubber boots with their own wet, enclosing smell -- in winter too (*didn't the other kids have a laugh at first! The rubber boots and his bare knees pink and knobby with cold above them -- wasn't he the boy, then!*) That was before he learned, before he found out about corduroy trousers and plaid buttoned shirts and black shoes, heavily polished, with deep ridged soles.

MaryBeth's dad calls her "Stork" because of her long, thin legs, that's why, and the feet on the end of them too, long and thin, just like a stork's. That's what he says and

MaryBeth takes his word, never having seen a stork, but he has, says he has (*Where, Dad? In the old country. Lots of 'em there. Nesting in the roofs -- the old roofs, them with the thatches*). He has lots of stories, her dad, will tell her a few (*when he has a snootful, sure*). Twine his fingers in her thin, brown hair and let it slide against her neck where the delicate boned ridge hides under her skin, listen, MaryBeth (*he begins*).

Listen.

Stork whirling her top on the uncovered side porch, watching the colours spin and twirl, the top-heavy precarious moment of balance before pulling out of the turn. She sometimes nudges a finger gently under the rotating tip, or traces her palm over the revolving head to knock the top off its spin, to see what happens when you do that. When Stork gets a little older, she twirls the top on every surface, floors, counters, tiles (*MaryBeth, you're sending me to an early grave with that!*), comparing angles and speed, measuring the spin. Her mother sets her mouth firmly (*Presbyterian back encased in blue wool -- O proper she is, MaryBeth's dad sings to the men at The Bar where he goes of a night. He comes to her mother in secret, the smell of whisky clinging to his clothes and demands -- and demands -- what? MaryBeth's mother does not say*) and puts the top up

where Stork, who can reach it easily if she wants to, nevertheless, does not.

A long time ago, that -- before last summer. Stork's a young lady now, almost. She stretches her long legs out in front of her, over the bleached floorboards of the side porch. Light summer tan and freckles. Her knees round and pink knobs in the centre. She holds her hands over the knees, arches her thin feet together, toes together. In the curved space she can see light, brief flashes of green and blue and yellow, red light exposing the underlying bones in her naked feet. The sun beats down on her back. In the kitchen her mother bangs pots to be sure they know how her life is, her headaches, her hands all nubby and red, the watery, weak eyes, always stopping to put her hand at her back -- Ah, just so (*that's children as does that, always around your neck. MaryBeth pictures them dangling from long cords from her mother's thin neck, swinging and bobbing on her mother's hard chest*). And her dad? Him she has heard leave home, screen door screaming open, then shut and the heavy tread across the lawn and the car starting (*can I come too, Dad? Not this time, Stork, and licking his lips because he's dry, that's what and needs a drop. Even Stork, even MaryBeth, understands that*).

MaryBeth's mother slams the oven door shut -- whump! and comes to the screen door. "MaryBeth, go up to Harmon's

*(grocery store -- small block of a room smelling of hay and farmer's boots as they all do, the stores along the road, and dim, dim lights, Mr. Harmon himself shuffling between the thin aisles and sniffing) and bring me back a loaf of bread and some of those black licorice drops (Stork can see those drops, black as the inside of her shoe and sharp with the scent of themselves, can feel them cool against her mouth and tongue, would like some drops herself too, but takes the dollar her mother hands her and says nothing because her mother, after all, is in a mood)."*

Harmon's is deliciously cool after the dusty hot road. Stork rests her hand on the glass counter, cool and smooth, smooth and cool; underneath in cardboard boxes, the delicate lace (*the ladies always ask for Mrs. Harmon to help them with these*) and satin pants and bras and garters and such as that, folded so neatly (*Stork can't imagine anyone taking them out, shaking out the folds, wearing them against warm skin*), and smaller things too: silver harmonicas, wooden pencil cases, handkerchiefs and such.

Mr. Harmon shuffles up the long centre aisle of the store from the curtained-off rear (*calico-covered recess -- Stork would peak behind that curtain, have herself a look. MaryBeth looks away*), on either side of which are cans and boxes and jars and bottles, most of them dusty with age and brown around the seals, and the labels, them obscurely coloured and all.

"...can I do for you?" says Mr. Harmon and MaryBeth asks for a loaf of sliced white and twenty-five cents of licorice (*black, o shiny and perfect and black*) in a bag. And Mr. Harmon hands them to her with a wink and, just like that (*a wink that is, a flash of time*) his cold, white fingers push up her warm brown hand to the wrist (*like the Algonquin, MaryBeth thinks of the cold, thick water touching her feet, her ankles, the forbidden territories of thighs and buttocks and belly. MaryBeth thinks of eels, sliding around the mucky bottom and winding around her ankles. And the cold, cold feeling in the stomach she has after the water has passed between her legs, rippling as fish*). Cold fingers give her a squeeze (*that will leave, surely, some mark, a bruise perhaps or brands like on the farm animals or what?*) and then let go; Mr. Harmon is only his own dim, bleached self after all. MaryBeth goes out blinking, into the flat light on the road.

At home her mother offers MaryBeth a licorice drop or two, and MaryBeth (*O the sick feeling of slick, wet, fat round drops in her mouth; sliding taste of bitter sugar in her throat -- she will surely then -- surely she will -- she will --*) shakes her head, no. "What's with you, then?" her mother asks, "Are you sick? Did you get too much sun?" MaryBeth says no, and leave me alone, and I'm going to my room, and storms up the stairs, feet slamming and slapping on the peeling linoleum.

Marybeth's room now, filled as it is with suggestive shapes, roundnesses (*Marybeth thinks of blind, stubbed fingers groping across fat, white flesh, thick and blundering, and a thin, thin piece of string, or wire, or hair, being pulled between the top of her thigh and the small curve of her buttock -- all this because of Mr. Harmon's sniffing, white fingers wrapping around her wrist and even her mother would find this forgivable*) that were never there before, and dustballs under the bed (*fat and lazy, them -- slovenly, Marybeth thinks -- thick with dirt and hidden shame*) rolling around the floor under the white counterpane draped down over the bed (*all those hidden things underneath*), the gentle brush of fringe over the bare boards (*fingers, like fingers brushing over the skin and coming to light on the hard, knobbly surfaces, the protruding bones of the uninvolved wrist*).

MaryBeth flops down on her stomach and pushes her hot face into the counterpane.

Downstairs a tap running --

the back door swinging open and banging shut -- and her dad's car on the gravel drive to the house. MaryBeth's mother arguing, arguing, arguing. And her dad, silently waiting in the car (*will have the windows rolled up, will leave the radio on, Glen Miller, that's the favourite, or BIG BAND he likes*), waits for her to finish,



to go back into the house, BANG, and her feet running up the stairs, retreating, retreating...

MaryBeth tiptoes down the stairs after the house is dark and stands pressed against the sitting room window. Her breath makes a circle on the window, the perfect shape of her mouth (*shame, O shame on you*). Angrily, MaryBeth rubs the glass until her shadowy mouth stretches, fades and finally disappears into the blackness of the prairie. MaryBeth hears the faint nightly rhythm (*her mother's pressed lips together and her dad, ah, yes, ah yes*) from her parents' bedroom coming down the stairs, curling around MaryBeth's ears until (*MaryBeth closes her eyes, Imagine, o imagine*) it is over.

## BHODISATTVA

The American and I barter in a kind of sign language and he shows me what he wants. I take him upstairs to my room tucked up under the roof where scorpions sometimes drop from the ceiling onto the bed in the middle of the night. The American crouches to take off his boots and let down his trousers. He lies across the cot with his trousers around his ankles, flies crawling over his thighs, the hot sewer smell of the river coming up through the window, and in the corner of the room the shrine with its implied Bhodisattva to remind me,

    this is not all there is.

    Hey, little Flower. Little Flower, honey. Come on up here, he says, and gestures with his hand, come on up here with me. He calls me like that, gestures towards the cot. I shrug my shoulders, tell him I want my money now, and anything else will cost extra. He grabs at my hand and squeezes it hard. What are you saying, little Flower? What's the big rush?

    Come on honey, we got all night.

    I dip the brush in a pot of ink and draw the Infinite - - the unclosed circle -- perfect, incomplete. The brush held against the paper, and one stroke, with the end curling toward its beginning but not quite touching. Resting back on my heels, I hold the paper circle in my hands and trace

it with my thumbs. The ink is damp and smears across the paper leaving the imprint of my thumb in the curved line. I burn the circle in a brass incense bowl at Bhodisattva's feet, bow three times with my hands on the floor and watch the ashes blow out of the bowl across the room to settle in the corners.

The American indicates that he wants something from the bar downstairs. Gives me a hundred dollars. Curled, damp leaves of American money with its luck and power and slightly decayed scent from being passed from hand to sweaty hand.

Go on Flower, honey. Bring me something sweet. Bring me some sugar, baby.

I go downstairs to get a bottle of red wine and a packet of cigarettes.

Downstairs in the bar, the smell from the river is almost tangible, thick and dense and cold, smelling like metal and the crushed, bruised petals of the saffron flowers draped around the Bhodisattva during festivals. The village girls gathered these decayed petals together later and burned them in silver cups under the Bhodisattva's serene eye.

In the bar the water seeps in and puddles on the floor, looking green then blue and finally red in the faerie lights

strung up over the counter. The bartender is alone and does not look up when I ask him for the wine and the cigarettes. The cigarettes are his own special brand. He has seen me going upstairs with the American and he gives them to me without asking.

The American is standing by the window. He's pulled his pants up and also put his boots back on, but he's shirtless still, and sweat creeps across his skin. He's thin and pale in the dark room; you might say he was one of the ghost people, but he still smells sweet a little, still tastes young and fresh. He hasn't been here long then, not long enough to acquire the marshy, wet smell of such people. Strange customs they have, rituals of washing and not washing, which they abandon after a time, leaving them always bathed in their bewildered sweat.

What you got, honey? What'd'ya bring me, little Flower? I throw the wine and the cigarettes onto the bed, but he doesn't move. You got a glass, Flower? You got a glass I can drink out of? Huh? A glass? You know, like this. He makes motions of drinking, green eyes on me all the time, and I get him a glass and open the wine and pour some into the glass and bring it to him at the window. He holds the glass to his mouth but doesn't drink out of it. He sucks hard until the glass is stuck fast onto his face and he can't let go of it with his hand. His tongue creeps

out between the pinched lips and flops around in the wine. Then he laughs and the glass falls away from his face and wine spills over his chest and onto the floor and the glass rolls, unbroken, under the cot.

Oh, Flower, you see that? Did you see that, honey? Come here, little Flower, come here, Flower girl. He pulls me over and puts my hand gently onto his bare, wine-sticky chest. You didn't put anything in that little old bottle, did you honey? You didn't try and put anything into the bottle, did you? Did you? Something nasty? Something to make your little American boy fall asleep maybe? Slip me into the river maybe? Huh, Flower? D'ja do that to me, honey?

He is as soft as a lover.

Soft as the bartender on the nights he lies beside me, kissing my earlobes, sucking them gently into his mouth. Ah, my blossom, my peach, he sighs. I turn my head to the doorway where his wife and children are grouped around a pink plastic transistor radio, eating rice from porcelain bowls. Over her rice bowl the bartender's wife looks over at me, looks into my eyes, and I look away.

The American puts his hand over my forehead and strokes backwards over my head and down my back and my ass. He does this slowly, with his eyes closed. His lips are parted and

his breath, thick with sex and smoke, comes out in small gasps. Little Flower, he whispers, you try to kill me?

Later the American sits in the rattan chair at the foot of the cot and draws his bare feet up to his haunches, crouching there like a grandfather. He has one of the bartender's cigarettes between his thumb and first finger. He has retrieved the glass from under the cot and filled it with wine. You know what I want, Flower? You know what I really want the most? One of those little bells. Those little silver bells like you wear in your hair, honey, like you put over the doors in the temples. Yeah, just a little silver bell. Put it up over my bunk, close my eyes, I can smell that temple, baby. Sweet as grass in there. Cool as our kitchen back home. Yeah, those temples, man. The American giggles, choking on the smoke. All them carvings, shit. Over the doors? Those women? All naked and everything. Man. What you think they do in there? Huh, Flower? What you think those bald-headed boys are up to?

The American leans forward and grabs hold of my ankle, hard. His fingers press painfully into the bone. His arm stretches like a snake, winds like an eel into the dim circle from the overhead light, the rest of him is a shadow behind it. What they do in there, Flower? Those old priests, man. The American giggles again. They sure looked surprised when we bust in on 'em, honey. Yep, they sure

did. The American releases my ankle and holds his fist up weakly index finger pointing, and sprays around the room, laughing and snorting.

The air is filled with smoke and the river brings its metallic, flower-rich smell of sewers and washing and garbage into the room. The American leans back, out of the light and into the shadow of his chair.

Flower, he says, Flower, you the sweetest thing up there.

He is silent for a long moment and I begin to think he's asleep, but then he lunges out of the chair, grabs hold of my shoulders and pushes me back and straddles my chest with his knees, crushing my arms to my sides. Oh, Flower, you are just so sweet. You are just a little girl alone up here, ain't you? He runs his finger around my lips and forces them apart and thrusts his finger into my mouth until I gag. He takes it out and laughs. What's wrong, baby? What's'a matter? Don't you like it? Don't you like it?

I curse at him and scream and he jumps off and stands beside the cot, scratching at his white, white skin. I swear and slap his legs, his thin chest, his shoulders and arms, everywhere, everywhere -- except his face. And while I'm swearing and yelling and slapping, the American just stands there, with his hands at his sides, until I'm worn out. I stop and the room is quiet. No one comes.

The American grabs my hands, holding them with his sweat-slippery fingers entwined around mine. Hey, Flower, he says. I'm sorry. Honest, honey, honest now. You think I wanna hurt you? You think I could hurt a little flower like you? I was just teasing. Here, here take this, honey. That's it, yes. Smoke it, baby, it's good for you.

The American lights one of the cigarettes and hands it to me. I take it and smoke but not too deeply, it's a brew for strength, for fortitude. Well, I have enough strength without the bartender's medicine burning my throat and eyes. I hand the cigarette back to the American. He doesn't smoke it, just holds it burning in his hand.

Flower, he says, holding the glowing tip against his palm, what hurts the most? You think burns? Or shots, what about shots, getting shot? You think that hurts? Flower, you think that's the most pain you can have?

I watch the red tip melt into his skin, the smell of burning flesh, the American takes the cigarette away and examines his palm. He grins at me, Look, Flower, a souvenir. He shows me the small hole in the centre of his palm, the raised ridge of surprised white flesh around it. What you gonna' do for me now, honey? What you gonna' do to make it better for me? The American bends over me with his hands on my shoulders. He is gentle this time and I do not push him away. He does not want anything. He strokes my shoulders and hair.



The bartender brushes my hair before the mirror where I can watch him. He makes long careful strokes from the crown to the ends of my hair. Don't cut your hair, my Blossom, he says to me. The brush digs into my scalp and scrapes down my neck and back. Don't ever cut it, he says. I have not been planning to, but I don't answer. The bartender grabs hold of a fistful of hair and pulls my head back, Are you listening to me? The next day I cut my hair as short as a nun's, as short as a man's. I braid the hacked-off ropes into a long tail and give it to the bartender, who holds it in his hand for a moment stroking the black knots with his fingertips. Then he throws it into the sewers without looking at me.

What is this, honey? What is all this stuff? The American makes a puzzled gesture towards the shrine tucked discreetly into its alcove under the window. His face tells me, his eyes, he has no idea, does not recognize the Supreme Essence, the Serene Presence of God. Ignoramus, I tell him, this is the Perfect Being, the Ultimate. The American does not understand. Fool, I say, this is God. The American looks bewildered. I laugh, Idiot, Cretin, Dimwit, Imbecile. The American does not understand, his hand tightens on my shoulder. What is it, Flower? What is all this? He pushes me back onto the bed,

What is this?

The American leans over me and I close my eyes. In my head, a quiet space, a Perfect Circle but incomplete, the suggestion of closure trailing off the end of a brush stroke. I open my eyes, watch the American bend over the shrine, gather it up in his arms and cradle it against him for a moment like an infant. Then he hurls it over the high window sill and there is a long moment until I hear it drop into the river below.

## JUPITER SYMPHONY

After Christmas, the coloured lights come down and the city is buried under wet melting snow. Nevertheless, I leave my flat every day and brave the weather, buy cheese, coffee, bread, and walk around all the circles of the city. I am pursued in the streets by urchins with snowballs and the continual ringing of churchbells, which can be heard everywhere and all of the time, even over the streetcars and sucking pull of cars passing through slush. I take a bus to the Danube on the outer edge of the city, and watch the ice break up in huge chunks and crash against the cement pylons under the bridges. Returning to the city that evening, I visit the ornate opera house, Mozart's cramped and shabby rooms off the square, and the cathedral with its high vaulted ceiling, in which I can hear pigeons settling.

*"Confiteor unum baptisma in remissionem peccatorum Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum et vitam venturi saeculi. Amen."*

A plaque tells me that Mozart played the organ here, led the choir. I picture him bent over a sea of white organ keys, pulling out all the stops to make as much noise as possible. Laughing to himself as the final notes curl against the ceilings and settle into the rafters the way pigeons do -- small grey and white ones that flutter over our heads now, cooing gently, building nests. I wonder how it sounds to them. Such alien music: loud, intrusive.

Later, I come across an alley named "Papagero Gasse" and imagine him walking here, listening to the cold silence of the city at night, thinking of warm shapes, notes of music. Constance sending him out to fetch a loaf of bread, a jug of milk for supper. He carries in his pockets, keys, small coins (the last in the house), scraps of paper, the ink running on them, but still the melodies are there, in Mozart's pockets. He hears them singing as he walks: *Kyrie Eleison, Eleison, Christe Eleison.*

Have mercy upon us.

I do my shopping in the *Nasch Markt*, which is near my house. In a small, dark shop with wurst in bursting skins hanging from a beam overhead and cheese spread out in pale circular fans inside a glass case, I admire the symmetrical arrangements through the glass. The proprietor hands me a slice,

"*Bitte.*"

"*Ah, vielen Danke.*"

A language requiring careful response, with consonants that strike like bullets against the mouth. I take off my gloves to eat the cheese.

From the other side of the case a man watches me. He is my height, or a bit shorter, but solid, with slightly slanted eyes and high cheekbones. A receding hairline, clothes a little shabby. He smiles and I turn away.

"Eine hundert Gramme, bitte."

But, as I am leaving with the waxed paper packet of neatly sliced cheese in my hand, I feel a touch at my elbow. It's the man from the other side of the case.

"Please," he says. *Bitte*, meaning please. Pleading. It is the appeal, the lack of assurance in the gloved hand on my elbow that does it.

In the tavern, where Mozart has stopped for a beer on the way home, he sits at a round table by the fire with his friends and entertains them with stories and songs. Drunk as he is, he has forgotten the bread and milk, forgotten Constance, home, the freezing wind off the river. From the bottom of his glass, an eye, lit by the fire, winks at him.

On the way home, Mozart stumbles over the snowdrifts. He slides, falls, lies on his back staring up at the heavens. Above him the stars, quietly suspended; he is reminded of the eye at the bottom of his glass. He winks at the stars and laughs. Around the moon he imagines planets, circling in disapproval at him lying in snow reeking of piss and purpled by the dark winter sky.

I am sitting in the middle of the bed playing with my bare feet which rest on Hannes' sheet-covered thigh. Hannes is propped against the headboards. He has clasped his hands over the small fold of his belly. I think of putting my

hands on the neat line of hair there, tracing it all the way down. Hannes sees me looking and grins. "Na?" he says. I laugh and shake my head, "Genug." Pronounced, ge-now, Austrian vowel sounds are sometimes curiously thick and impenetrable.

Earlier, we had put a record on to play but it has finished and the needle bumps and scratches, bumps and scratches, bumps and scratches. Neither of us wants to move but I get up, wrapping the sheet around me, and move the needle back to the beginning of the record and music fills the room again.

"*Credo in unum Deum.*" I believe in one God...

Mozart warms his bottom on the iron stove in the centre of the main room. Wrapped in layers of note paper, roaring drunk as usual, with Constance slamming the doors in rage.

Constance threatens to throw Mozart, notepaper and all, into the dirty snow banks on the street. Mozart has told Constance that he was set upon the night before by thieves, stealing his meagre fortune, tearing his clothes. Constance asks whether the thieves were the ones to leave the scratch marks on his back too. She has been crying. Her round face is puffy with tears. Eyes dark with them, long streaks staining her face, trails in the white powder. Mozart thinks of the streaks left in the sky by falling stars.

Constance knows Mozart is worthless, a drunk, self-centred.  
Nevertheless --

-- nevertheless, when he wraps his arms around her,  
nuzzles against her breast, she circles his head with her  
arms.

"*Et in Spiritum Sanctum, Dominum et vivificantem...*" We  
are under a white blanket, Hannes and I, his hands around my  
ears, holding my face towards him. He traces my nose, my  
throat, "*Macht die Augen zu,*" he whispers. I close my eyes.  
"*Qui ex Patre Filioque procedit. Qui cum Patre et Filio  
simul adoratur et conglorificatur...*" He pushes his hands  
into my hair, trails down the back of my neck and over my  
shoulders, light as breath. I can feel my skin contracting.  
"*Que locutus est per Prophetas.*" Hannes' mouth against  
mine, tastes like beer: sweet. I trail my lips over his  
throat and down his chest between his nipples and over his  
navel to the razor sharp line of pubic hair. "*Et unum,  
sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam. Qui ses ad  
dexteram, Patris, misere nobis.*"

Thou, that sittest at the right hand of the Father,  
have mercy upon us.

Mozart rearranges the furniture. The room is dark,  
there is not enough money for candles and Constance has gone  
to bed, taking the baby with her. Mozart is alone and

burning with energy. From the open door to the bedroom he hears Constance snoring. The baby makes small sucking noises, contented sighs. Mozart places a chair next to a scratched table. Scratches his head. Moves the chair a fraction of an inch over, then back. Finally, turns it over on its side. On the floor around him are the china and books and gloves and inkwells he has strewn about the room in planned disorder, a constellation of bric-a-brac and broken china cups.

Hannes and I are in the cafe near the Dom. We call this the "Newspaper Cafe," because that's what people do here: read newspapers. There are hundreds of them, in many languages, scattered over booths and counters and hanging on a rack near the entrance. There is a newspaper spread over our table and around the booth. Under the newspaper Hannes's hands are on my thighs. He grins at me across the table. His hands move up over the bare expanse between the top of my stockings and my underpants. He undoes my suspenders and slides his hands under my underpants. The radio is playing, "*Love, oh love, oh careless love...*" Bessie Smith's tired voice, raw with smoke, stretches thinly over the expanse of the cafe. Still, there is something -- an offering of some kind, or a request to be touched -- that comes from the music and moves down, all along the edges of my nerves. "*You have filled my head with wine...*"



I tip the dregs from the bottom of my cup onto the saucer. The grounds curl back into the curved bottom of the cup. *"And you left me for this life of mine..."* I set the cup abruptly back into its saucer.

Outside, it's started snowing and people hurry by with their chins pulled into the collars of their coats. The streetlights have not yet been turned on and grey light filters through the snow.

We speak in hushed voices, safe in the paper nests of newspaper and smells of coffee and the lights from the bar. *"I ain't good lookin' and I don't dress fine, but I'm a ramblin' woman for this ramblin' man of mine..."* I have a sudden urge to laugh, thinking how this music would be translated to Hannes.

"Alice?" he is asking anxiously,  
Are you happy?

I reach under the table and grab his hands, push them hard against me. After all, this is a gift, his uncertain smile, lopsided a little. I smile back, staring into his light, almost colourless, eyes where I see myself, a dark oval shape, reflected.

The waiter comes, takes away our cups and the ashtray brimming with Hannes' butts and small, balled-up pieces of paper. Outside, the snow falls.

Constance, getting up at dawn, yawning, sleep gathered in the corners of her eyes, emerges from the bedroom carrying the chamberpot in one hand, the suckling baby in the other. At the table Mozart, scratching away at his notes, does not look up. Constance surveys the mess in disbelief, then she turns the full chamber pot over Mozart, the table, the notes. Mozart is momentarily stunned, looks at Constance in surprise, and then laughs. Constance is silent.

*"Laudemus te. Benedicimus te. Glorificamus te. Adoramus te."* Adoration, *anbetung*. I adore you, I think of telling him in the kitchen of my flat, where we are preparing a midnight snack. He is standing at the sink washing vegetables. The precise, careful movements of his hands brushing the leaves, the delicate gestures he uses to wash the lettuce, slice the radish. I adore you. The shape of the unfamiliar words -- I almost say it.

Instead, take a slice of bread, thick with jam, fold it in half, eat it in two bites. Hannes asks, *"Hast du Hunger, dann?"*

*"Nicht mehr,"* I tell him and he laughs.

Later, through heavy winter separations of blankets and skin, I move my legs in unison with his, feel the joints

rolling in their sockets, the contraction of the muscles, pulling and releasing.

Mozart imagines the rings of Saturn as soprano, the craters of the moon as basso, the baritone comets and warm alto from Mars. Only Jupiter, the winged planet, winged god, safely hidden behind its unseen moons, is silent.

Mozart imagines Jupiter smiling in amusement, or disdain perhaps. Feeble human voices reaching his ears, sounds, nothing like planetary music. Mozart reaches into his pockets for scraps of paper, a pencil stub. Scribbles as he walks under the stars, Jupiter's choir, his vast silence: his melody.

The snow begins to melt and uncovers grey slabs of wet cement and cobblestones that will delight tourists in a few months time. The air feels damp and under my layers of wool and nylon my skin itches. I dream about flowers: bougainvillaea, hibiscus. A place where people sit under trees in a garden and drink tiny cups of impossibly thick coffee. I sit under the trellised roof, fan myself with a paper fan, admire the white stone path and the olive trees.

Late at night my telephone rings. I answer sleepily, there is a white silence like snow falling, "Matthews, Matthews," I shout into the phone waiting for a response,

but there is none. I put the phone down and turn onto my back staring at the ceiling until dawn. Then I get dressed and walk through the deserted streets to Hannes' apartment building. I stand there for a long time, wet snow soaking through my shoes. A man delivering milk mutters something obscene at me, but, finally, I turn away without ringing the bell.

Hannes and I are in the *Kunsthalle*, admiring arrangements of colour and space. Hannes likes modern paintings: splashes of bright colour and indeterminate shapes. I prefer an older style, with a ponderous heavy feeling to them, a solidity of form and texture. I imagine myself as one of Rembrandt's models, or Ruben's perhaps. Pink cheeks and wet sexual mouth, although, in truth, I am nothing like this, would not really want to be. Still, I do not feel weightless like Picasso's dancing women. I imagine my own form as solid, anchored in space; I have my own landscape, a continuous shape filling all the borders.

A miniature, believed to be of Constance, placed inconspicuously in one corner of the gallery. Painted before marriage, must be, looks roseate and hopeful. A small smile. None of the bitter knowledge that comes with poverty. I assure myself that her life is nothing like mine.

I imagine Mozart. Walking along the river or watching the moon from his chilled windows, noting the music down on scraps of paper. The disjointed melodies. Mozart himself: unshaven, tipsy, patched in places, the most ordinary man possible. Who would have thought it?

Hannes' touch begins to leave small, purplish bruises on my skin. I do not feel these at the time, but later, when I examine myself in the mirror they are there. The imprint of Hannes on my breasts and thighs. I touch the bruises with the tip of my finger and feel a small shiver down the back of my neck, as if a cold and not particularly friendly hand were holding me there.

I think of Hannes' hands on my throat, the tips of his fingers resting over the pulse, counting the measured insistence of my heart. I try to picture him whole, his face, his mouth and see only myself, oval and complete in reflection.

*"Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum.*

*"Et ex patre natum ante omnia saecula: Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero.*

*"Genitum, non factum, consubstantialem Patri, per quem omnia facta sunt.*

*"Qui propter nos homines et propter nostraum salutem descendit de coelis."*

*"Ich liebe Dich. Ich liebe Dich."* Pleading; it makes me think of Bessie Smith, something in the raw pain, the ache from the bottom of the throat that moves into the mouth, almost, but not quite, choking off the air, *"Love, oh love, oh careless love."* I can see Hannes looking at me curiously, waiting. Instead of answering, I nod, as if this is a confirmation of some kind.

We are walking along one of the paths in the woods at the edge of the city. Trees line up quietly either side of the path. Without leaves, the trees seem as symmetrical as telegraph poles and this makes them look improbable, faked. When I ask Hannes about this, he says he doesn't know why they all have this unnatural orderliness that seems somehow, to be an act of defiance, a statement of a particular kind. Hannes is holding my hand and I have my other hand, ungloved, retracted into the sleeve of my coat. I am watching the way our elongated shadows fall on the path in front of us.

I am thinking that shadows are possibly my favourite thing in the world; all the millions of moving shapes, the elusive light. Hannes squeezes my hand and I look up. *"Traumst du?"* he asks and I shake my head. I have not been dreaming. *"Hannes,"* I say, surprising even myself with the

abruptness of my voice, "there is something I want to tell you." He turns to me puzzled, I have forgotten he does not speak English, and I repeat slowly, "I have something to tell you."

We stop walking, he drops my hand, and our precise, elongated shadows fall like trees, like telegraph poles, on the snow-covered path.

I imagine Constance. Constance with her red eyes, the permanent swelling of tears, her white cheeks stained, tearing to pieces the demonic notes, paper-recorded melodies, after Mozart's death. Constance's own death much later, unnoticed, unmarked. Only the planets, the symphony of Jupiter, serenading her.

I am sitting in the Newspaper cafe, alone this time, toying with a small glass ashtray, a silver coffee spoon, and a paper doily under my cup. I am thinking of Hannes' swollen, embarrassed face peering at me through the spy hole of his glasses, and the way he turned away from me at the end, as if he were afraid to have me too close to the core of his hurt. I think of Bessie Smith and the open wound of her voice. I think about the way I float, a discontinuous presence, in the background. I stare at the reflection of my face and the dim, old-fashioned table lamp in the bowl of the spoon. In the spoon, the points of my forehead and chin

recede into the distance of the cafe. I think of myself sliding into this curved space altogether, retreating from the clattering of the crockery in the kitchen and the whispering of newspapers being scattered over the floors and tables.

The waiter comes and I order another pot of coffee. I pour the coffee into my cup, add milk from a china pitcher and stir the liquid into small whirlpools which eddy against the sides of the porcelain cup. In the background the music swells and recedes. I set the spoon to the side of the cup and sip slowly. The coffee, I tell the waiter who is hovering around arranging napkins and spoons and ashtrays, is good, is wonderful in fact. I drink it quickly, leave some coins on the tray with the empty pot and go outside.

Across the street in the cathedral, I hear the opening notes of a choral mass and imagine them swelling up, curling into the corners of the roof and then drifting downwards, settling over the congregation like snow. My coat collar turned up, my head down, I head into the subway station. "*Agnes Dei qui tollis Peccata mundi. Te laudemus.*" I sing, against the background of falling snow.



## BRIGHT MOMENTS

Supposing it is late one night -- a dark, still night that seems to press against you -- and you go outside to escape the pressing and the stillness and you walk along a dark street until you come upon a door, an ordinary door shining ordinary light on an otherwise black night, and you open the door and step into a restaurant and the smell of grease frying and the sounds of thick crockery being scraped by dull knives somehow make you hungry. You are ravenous, hollow, you crave rich heavy food like cheesecake and thick, dark puddings with cream, nursery food, comfort food, and when the waitress comes you order a hamburger and some chips and desert and maybe a drink and the waitress brings it all to you and you eat it and then the waitress comes back to bring you the bill and she says, five-ninety-five, and you give her seven dollars and say, keep the change, and she smiles because not many people come in on the midnight to seven-thirty shift and she doesn't make much money. Not enough, say, to keep her kids fed and pay the babysitter and all she does is sleep anyway, the sitter that is, for two dollars and fifty cents an hour, that's almost half her salary after everything gets taken off and pays for her bus pass and the uniform cleaning and the least the damned woman could do for the money is pick up the kids' toys because when she gets home in the morning she's so god-damn tired and she still has to get the kids up and give them breakfast

and tie their shoelaces and send them to school and then maybe clean up a little because the house is a big mess all the time and that's just the way it is, and only after all that can she sleep, just a little, except that the neighbour's dog is always barking right outside her window and she yells out, shut that god-damn dog up, and then feels sorry because the neighbour hits the dog with his fist and the dog whimpers and the neighbour mutters under his breath, fucking mutt, because he's afraid of the cops being called since he's had trouble once before, though it wasn't his fault, not his fault at all, only he can't get a job now, because of the record...and every day his wife goes to work and stands at her machine, the veins in her legs swelling like long, thin balloons and he hates it because she's getting so big and all the time she gets bigger while he gets smaller, and he drinks and eats and eats and drinks to try and catch her up a little maybe but he can see he's just shrinking away into nothing and even his kids, his own kids, are getting bigger and stronger and this morning his son pushes him into a chair in the living room and says, lay off now, old man, just lay off of me, and shakes his hair out of his eyes like he's still a little nervous. He's still a little nervous alright he's still a little afraid of the old man but he's tired of being pushed around and he's going to quit school, he never goes anyway, and get a job and buy his mother something nice because he loves his mother and she

takes a lot of shit from the old man and all the little kids and he's afraid of something happening to her like a heart attack or something and what if she dies and he's left alone and he has to look after all these kids and the old man drunk like he is and mean too; he has the bruises to prove how mean the old man is, look how he has stopped going to school because his teacher saw him all the time covered in bruises and asked him, finally, how he got them and he was too ashamed to tell him but he sure feels like crying, yeah. Teacher looks at him a minute and then just sighs and tells him to sit down and draws the map down from the wall to show them Brazil because the curriculum says he had to teach them about Brazil and he thinks what good is it going to do them? - none of them will ever get to Brazil and he himself has never been to Brazil and he probably never will go now, because he's engaged to a woman, he's in love with a woman, and he wants to be responsible and he thinks of his fiance and pictures himself kissing her white, white skin and pulling her skirt off her hips and down her legs to her feet and she wraps her legs around his waist and thinks, this is what I'm giving up. She's giving up herself, the right to hold herself in, to hold herself back from his probing hands and thin mouth, but she tells herself it's alright, it's the way it is, you do things this way, except she doesn't know if she really believes in love and she tells her mother about it one night and her mother purses her lips and says,

you were always selfish. Her mother believes in the natural order and she's afraid of seeing her daughter alone, she's afraid of her daughter's aging and her own new frailty - where does it come from? - when she goes up the stairs she pauses for breath holding the handrail and this is all new, all new because she's never been helpless before this, she's afraid of asking for help, of seeming to need someone but she sees it coming, the day when they will have to carry her out of her house, she's lived here all her married life, and down the sidewalk and into the waiting truck she sees as windowless and endless like a tunnel and she rushes headlong into the tunnel of her own breathless dying and grips her best friend's hand, hard, and her friend mistakes the gesture and pulls her own hand back and says, honestly dear, and brushes it across her hair, still so thick and not a thread of grey of course she dyes it, who wouldn't? - and she looks so young, sometimes she looks in a mirror and is astonished to see her young face looking back, surely she has not changed at all since then, even her husband tells her, dear you are amazing, and watches her moving around the room, getting undressed. He is astonished at his deceit, he is angry with her for believing in him and all the time depending on his answers as if he were a god though he knows of course, he is not a god and he would like to tell her, I do not know everything after all, but it's too late for that and he rubs his hand across his chest and feels the slight

pain he has noticed lately but does not tell his wife and later in bed he holds her, but it is even too late to tell her he is afraid, though he has told his mistress that he feels sometimes as if he's about to slip into a crevice and his mistress nods her head as if she knows and rubs her nervous mouth with a manicured fingernail checking for smears and stains because she is not really so young, so exotic as the word mistress might imply and she has noticed, lately, an increase in the amount of upkeep she needs. They have been together a long time, a long time and the mistress has grown old, older that is, and it is only after she sees the threads of grey in her dark hair and grieves for all the bright moments she has missed, when she might have made something of herself, something different from this, middle aged and alone, and draws a hand across her own cold flesh at night and feels the changing shape, her breasts sliding to the side and the belly as soft as the breasts and as empty and even the pubic hair feeling sparse and cold, and is not able to sleep for thinking about all that she has missed, it is only then that she rises from her bed and dresses and goes out and walks along a dark street and enters a restaurant and sits down at a table and asks someone for love.

## ISLAND

It has been nearly three days; I have kept my head, I am not yet lost. I write everything down as though when they find me at last -- I have no doubt of it -- this telling will be important. Around me is the sea, with islands popping up to the right or the left. Some of the islands are inhabited, others not. On the inhabited islands there are always small children in bathing suits who wave at me as I row past. Occasionally another boat passes me, skirting around the edges of an island, cheerful women drinking beer on the open decks holding up their oiled flesh to the sun, weak as it is at this time of year.

It was in the earliest part of the morning that I set out from the house, when the mists from the sea still obscured the tops of the trees and the path leading to the dock. This has always been my favourite time of day. The tremulous uncertainty in the transition from night to morning, as if the change might not happen, though it inevitably does. I had brought with me two homemade crab traps and several jars for the collection. I was wearing my rain jacket and a bright, purple scarf, my favourite because of the way it brightened the grey hair peeping out from under it. I thought this made me look younger and more optimistic. I had also brought with me several small spiral covered notebooks and some pens. The notebooks were the kind with the pages that flipped up, like a stenographer's

book, except they were smaller: the pens were ordinary ballpoints, most of them leaking.

Just before I'd left the house that morning my husband had told me he was considering having an affair. Not having an affair, you understand, but thinking about it. As if asking me to protect him. Briefly, I pictured myself in cage-like armour wielding some medieval instrument of death, staving off an attack by hostile agents whose faces I could not see.

We'd been sitting at the breakfast table doing nothing out of the ordinary. The oversize coffee cups were on the table as usual, the spoons with the dented bowls, the pressboards and bottles and jars for the collection. The room was dark and I could hear the quiet hiss of boilers in the lab and smell the heady scent of my husband's newest formula, something involving Cowslip and Marshmallow and some tiny pink flowers I didn't know the name for. It was partly because of the tiny pink flowers, the ordinariness of the coffee cups, the uninvolved spoons, that I couldn't think of any response, except to say that I would be back in time for supper. Then I left to make the long dark trail down to the dock with my flashlight and crab traps and the long curved scissors I used for cutting specimens for the collection.

Later, I pulled the boat onto the shore of the large green island opposite ours and drove the pitch stake in to

anchor it. I carried the traps out and set one of them into each of two small coves on the beach: sometimes when the tide went out one or two crabs would get stuck in the traps, though if the crabs were too small, or if they fought hard enough, I set them free immediately. After setting the traps I filled the pockets of my rainjacket with jars and notebooks and tied my scarf more firmly under my chin to keep out the damp.

Whenever I found a new specimen I clipped a sample and made a notation for it: "North Shore of island near stream; small, purple flower, green leaves with sharp points, November 1, 1989." I put some of the leaves and petals into one of the jars and scratched a number on the jar with my keys. I worked this way until around noon, when the mists had at last lifted and a thin, blue sky could be seen through the clouds, then I stopped and spread my lunch out at the top of a bluff overlooking the beach. From there I could look out and see the other islands. Our island was directly in front of me and I could see the east corner of the house perfectly: laboratory, porch, bedroom. Smoke was making mathematical spirals from the chimney, which meant that my husband was at work in the lab, carefully extracting the essence from the collection over the gas burners. On dark days I could see the lights from the laboratory from up here. On this particular morning, however, the daylight was strong enough that all of the windows were dark and opaque,



though I could see the bottom of the lace curtain in our bedroom window fluttering slightly in the breeze.

I scraped the bottom of a container of yogurt clean and licked the spoon and watched the white curtain billow in and out of the open window.

This was not the first time my husband had told me he was thinking of having an affair.

The first time was years ago, just after we were married. I was a young woman then, a bride, with sturdy legs, the strong, round arms of a farm girl and freckles over my shoulders and back. I still have these, somewhat less charming than they once were. I felt newly born, newly made, though at times it was as if this life had already lasted a hundred years. I felt myself waiting for something to happen, as if I were on the edge of some discovery, but then I also sometimes felt as if there was nothing new to be learned. My lips felt full, my hands supple. I could feel my body fill up with tremulous happiness, an excitement which would descend without warning, into the most palpable gloom. In the midst of this balloon-like life, my husband told me he was in love with someone else.

My husband was, is, 10 years older than I, and silent most of the time. I married him because the impenetrable silence with which he surrounded himself seemed somehow both solid and capable. I married him not only for rescue, that

much is obvious, but because he seemed to be bounded by so many invisible bands, so many impenetrable borders.

The woman's name was Dilcie and she worked on the fishing boats that docked near our harbour in the summer time cleaning and gutting the freshly-caught fish. I pictured her hands -- stained and slippery with fish grease -- carelessly wound in my husband's hair.

He told me that Dilcie was a thin, tough-looking woman with dark hair and that she had a husband and a couple of kids on the mainland. She didn't see her family all season, but went home to them every winter. She drank like a man, he said. They went to beer parlours together, they could get into the more desirable Ladies' side that way, and stood up at the bars drinking beer, playing pool, laughing. At the time I thought that was what most attracted him to Dilcie, the lack of connections, her shapeless life. Later, I realized the opposite was most likely true. It was the husband, the safe home, that made her desirable.

I saw her once. I went down to the dock where the fishing boats were tied up in rough weather, and looked for her. I thought she'd be easy to spot; there weren't that many women working on the boats then. Eventually I saw a woman wearing white overalls and a dirty grey jacket on the deck of a boat called The Underway. She was standing in the stern with her hands in the pockets of the jacket, hugging her shoulders as if she were cold. Her dark hair fluttered

over her collar. Her back was to me. After a time she went inside and I turned around and came back home and that was that.

She went away not long after, back to her family I suppose: home. My husband drooped slightly after she left and I knew from his face and his hunched shoulders that nothing had happened between them. I was relieved, but at the same time I felt angry with Dilcie -- Who did she think she was? -- I felt as if it were me she had refused and not my husband. I came across a letter he'd started to her. "Dear Dilcie," it said, "I dreamt you were with me. I dreamt about your hands, your breasts." I tore the letter into tiny pieces and burned it in an ashtray. My husband never said anything about it. As far as I know he never got a letter from her; never heard from her again. But for a long time, whenever I thought of her, I felt a sharp stab of pain under my heart. I tried to be like her. I tried to imitate what I thought she would do. I became tough, learned to shrug my shoulders and laugh rather coarsely. "Who cares." I used to say, or, "Tough for them." I stopped when I realized it wasn't making me seem more like Dilcie, only less than myself.

There was another girl after that. This was a young woman -- though I was old enough by then to think of her as a girl; to view her with the kind of amused tolerance that one might have for a pettish infant -- who used to work for

us, doing housework, and I knew her well. I did not see her as a threat; she was too vague, I thought, too agitated, her power too diluted by watery eyes, small useless gestures. She was also thin and dark, but unlike Dilcie she was fragile, almost ethereal. She had long, straight hair parted in the middle and falling over her back. She wore fringes; shawls and scarves and blouses with embroidery. This was the style of the time and less ghastly than it seems now. She was pale and said, "You know?" all the time. Her name was Marie and she said she wanted to leave the island and work on the mainland. She had only vague ideas about what she would do there, though we used to discuss it together in the kitchen while she ate her lunch.

My husband was doing most of the collecting by himself then. He came in the back door every afternoon while Marie and I were having tea, with his arms laden with bottles and jars and notebooks. Marie would ask if he wanted help and he always said no. She would get up anyway, and open the door between the kitchen and lab for him to pass through. My husband nodded to us both and disappeared into the lab.

It happened that I found them together in there one afternoon in late summer. My husband, his arm casually draped over Marie's thin shoulders, was explaining to her the chemical processes used in rendering the necessary extracts from the collection. His hand caressed her shoulder through the pink fringe of the scarf -- mine, I saw

with surprise -- that she wore around her neck. The room smelled, as always, of flowers and the rich extracts from the plants: pine, cedar, flowering dogwood. Marie stood over one of the beakers and inhaled, her pale, nostrils flaring delicately. Just for an instant I saw her carved and dreamy profile bent dutifully over the beaker while my husband caressed her shoulder with his hand. Then they both looked up and saw me in the doorway in my gardening gloves and jeans with the dirt ground into the knees. Marie smiled and my husband dropped his hand and said, "Hi! I was just explaining the collection to Marie."

I stuck my gardening fork into my husband's hand and turned and left the lab without a word.

It was Marie who drove him to the hospital and, later that night, brought him home again. He crept into our bedroom in the pale, shivering morning, and got into bed beside me very quietly. He smelled of the mists on the open water and the faint, lingering aroma of moss and cedar and forsythia which clung habitually to his hair and skin.

My husband fell asleep beside me, and I opened my eyes and saw his white, bandaged hand lying against the dark quilt. After a while, I turned on my side and slept too. Marie disappeared into the mists; by which I mean to say we never saw her again.

After that, as far as I know, there were no others.  
Until now that is.

I sat on the bluff watching the bedroom curtain flicker in and out of the maw of the house. I was thinking of Dilcie and her dark, tough face and Marie, blushing, as she opened the door for my laden husband. I thought about the way I had just seemed to grow older until I was not a young woman any more, not even a middle-aged one. I wondered how old you had to be, to be alone.

I packed up the remainders of my lunch and stowed the wrappers and bags in the boat. Then I checked the traps, which were empty, and piled them into the boat too. I pulled the stake up from the sand, pushed the boat onto the water and waded out to my knees. Cold water seeped over the tops of my boots and sloshed around my feet. I crawled over the side of the boat and took up the oars. My pockets clinked with every pull and I stopped and emptied the glass bottles and collecting jars and threw them over the side. They did not sink right away and I watched the suspended flowers bob in the waves from the oars. Then I threw the scarf overboard, I thought I probably wouldn't be needing such things any more, and after that the wet boots. I kept the rainjacket though, and the socks, although they were wet and heavy. I had thought I meant to go home but I felt myself pulling away from our island and heading out towards the open sea. I had my traps with me, my notebooks, the sun was shining and in the wake of my boat the collection dipped and slowly sank, until it disappeared altogether.

## COMMUNION

A grey room with bands of white at the windows and doors, and curtains, sheer and white, starched, prim as a nurse's cap. The tiles, blue and white circles, small and round. Clean because we scrub them daily with harsh chemicals that make the skin peel off of our hands like gloves afterwards. My sister and I sleep in twin beds, identical white iron, with blue counterpanes and stiff pillows, and undress with the light off. Our shadows enclosed in white lace. Covered. Blue shapes.

Listening, listening.

And sometimes, we are rewarded with footsteps. The soft measured tread.

Slippered feet make.

On the carpeted hall.

The door whispering open, "Girls?" My sister's eyes are open, like mine.

"Girls."

Downstairs, a rubber plant in the front room. Carpets from China, woven in silk that must be stepped around. No blundering feet against the soft, silk birds and interspaced flowers. Windows covered with lace, deceptively fragile false openings between the delicate threads. My sister and I slip through them, wander among the trellises and climbing roses and white hedges. My sister's cool fingers wind around my wrist, my hand dangles loosely.

Sometimes this dream: Our house is still, and sound escapes like balloons through open windows, gently ruffling the curtains on the way out. No tread, measured or otherwise on the bare polished floors, no cough, no sneeze, no rumpled hair, no touch of skin or cloth rubbed against the bare flesh, no whispers behind the oak sideboard that pushes against the wall. Silence. Silence.

Is it better

It is better not to take notice.

Our father's eyes are green, his hands large and contained. He wears shoes with pennies in slots like coin dispensers. These shoes are left at the door on a tray. I think of slipping a coin into the slot in my father's shoe. Treats descend, promises. A carnival of summer lights, hot flushed cheeks; in reality there is only my father's shoe, holding the shape of his absent foot.

In my bed I lie awake. My eyes are open. Beside me, my sister sleeps. Copper coins placed over her eyes, this helps her sleep she says. I listen strenuously for the sound of footsteps, for the slow creak of the door.

My head aches, like my throat, my eyes, my hands severed holding themselves, their separate pain.

My sister and I crouch against the door. Our bare feet carefully braced on the tiles, my sister's hand in mine.



White nightgowns sheer as moonlight reflecting shadow  
underneath

    This is our body, take from it.

    Downstairs we hear the slow scrape of a chair against  
the kitchen floor.

    Girls Girls

    Our father begins his ascent

        winds watching watch winding

        against his outstretched thumb. I grasp my sister's  
hand in mine. The fingers curl.

        This is our body

            My fingers curl

                This is

My body

    Against themselves.

        Air.

## HECTOR AT HOME AFTER THE WAR

I can't begin to imagine what it was like for him, making his slow return to Canada. I picture him as lost. He brushes his fingers over unfamiliar furniture, feeling worn upholstery, unexpected lumps, foreign material. He opens a book at random. The print accuses him. He closes the book and sets it back on the shelf. He wanders through the rooms of the house I've never seen. He hums a little, or whistles. His wife, Aloma, watches him without speaking. His hair has turned grey, he wears glasses: something he would never do before. I call him Hector, although that is not his name, because I want this part of his life to be an anathema, unknown. Although, the truth is it was never concealed from me. Ordinary conversations, confessions, the bitter sting of arguments muffled behind doors, or strangled by their own energy. Invisible certainly, but an almost palpable tension lingered for days afterwards.

Hector, blushing furiously, touches Aloma's white breasts while travelling in a compartment of a train going across the prairies to Toronto. The manoeuvres required to get to this state in the small compartment are extraordinary and, such are the times and the delicacy and reticence of the situation, that Hector almost gives up trying. He might have preferred, instead, to sit gazing out the window at the unbelievably empty prairie rolling past his window; night

hesitating just off the edge of the horizon, Hector might have liked to watch it settle over the blue-brown grass. But curiosity and a strong sense of duty compel him, finally, to pull the old fashioned nightgown over Aloma's head.

Aloma is silent, turning her arms this way and that as he asks her, lifting a leg, twisting her body into the required position. When it is all said and done, he gazes down and traces the red lines left by the various straps and elastics which confined her. He feels obliged to offer her some comfort, some consolation for having exposed her in this way. Well now, he says clearing his throat, well -- and stops, because in the darkness he has a sense of his own absurdity; the patent ridiculousness of himself, a small, naked and patchily hairy young man bracing his elbows and his knees against the violent rocking of the compartment.

Hector is a sensitive young man and his foray into Aloma's body makes him feel like a small, absurd animal, a squirrel perhaps, or a rat, something rodent-like and peering, foraging under her arms and between her breasts. He averts his eyes from the accidental glimpses of her body which such activity permits. In her turn, Aloma lies beneath him, cool and compliant as a leaf, turning her arms this way and that, closing her eyes tightly against the onslaught of his flesh.

A good woman, a good marriage.

In time, Hector becomes content, although confused by the unpredictable outbursts of passion that seem to be required of him. They live in the prescribed way, entertaining and being entertained in their turn by other serious young couples following the set patterns of behaviour; all of them waiting for better jobs, better homes, children. Aloma learns, as wives do, to cook, to keep house. She learns to carve rosettes from delicate pink radishes, which she drops into water to make their petals unfurl, and carrot sticks which fan out like ferns.

She cultivates flowers in pots on her windowsill. Red and white geraniums, pink and violet African Violets, fragile blooms carefully tended. Sometimes in her kitchen while peeling potatoes or chopping meat, she reaches out a finger to touch the soft, open centres of the flowers, and stroke the petals thoughtfully.

Hector has a good job with the railways as a clerk in the payroll office. He finds satisfaction in the long columns of numbers added and subtracted and the precise underlining of sums and the jingle of coins put in the men's pay envelopes. He rises early in the morning and returns late in the evening. In the summer the sun casts long

shadows on the ground and small children run across the lawns, trampling his garden.

Aloma has supper waiting for him. She has curled her hair, changed her dress, applied lipstick and is now waiting for him in an overstuffed armchair by the fireplace, cold in summer, lit in winter. She composes herself gracefully, in attitudes of benevolence and peace.

Hector and Aloma eat together in the small kitchen in which, in summer, they can hear the voices of the children playing outside and the chack-chack-chack of handmowers. The kitchen is hot and dark with the lights turned off to give the impression of coolness and the flowers lined up on the window sill give off particular scents, perfuming the air with a heavy sweetness. Hector sometimes gazes at Aloma's face, round and slightly freckled, the skin white and thick. Though, under the surface, he can see the exposed map of veins and vessels across her cheeks and at her temples. Her mouth is tender and full and slightly off centre, giving her a clownlike, humorous expression. Her eyes suggest to him an impenetrable layer of frivolity concealed behind the demurely lowered lashes.

On hot, summer evenings Hector and Aloma sit at the supper table facing one another across a narrow expanse of plates and spoons and the teacups with the china flowers painted on in spastic gaiety, speaking in the slow

deliberate way of people who share a vast and unbreachable distance.

In the beginning, he seemed to Aloma nothing less than awe-inspiring. She admired the way he wound the clocks with such mastery and skill; she approved of the masculine knowledge, the absolute sense of rightfulness and purpose in the running of cars and trains and handmowers. She had no wish to penetrate the mysterious arbour of Hector's mind, with its intricate orders and precise columns of checks and balances against which she seemed insignificant and small. Even less did she wish to participate in the fumbling spasms of passion Hector's body became subject to. She did not understand the sudden onslaught, the necessary manipulation of flesh he indulged in, although her mother had hinted, had tried to warn her, that such occasions were bound to occur and were to be borne with forbearance and feminine dignity.

She knew that her dreams were filled with pictures of men; men dressed and undressed, tall and short, dark and fair who crouched at her feet not in attitudes of submission or adoration, but a kind of singular intense love. A love which started at her feet and travelled up her calves and thighs to the place where the mouth pressed at last the tender secret flesh. A place Hector, for all his groping and squeezing had not in the least touched.

On a night when he does not come home early, she sits in the darkening living room. She sits by the window gathering in sounds and light from the street, and reads the forgotten poetry of school days,

My God! it is a melancholy thing  
For such a man, who would full fain preserve  
His soul in calmness, yet perforce must feel  
For all his human brethren - O my God!

Aloma closes her eyes and imagines a man tortured by the demon of his own reckless nature. Such a man pursues her in unchaste fashion; she imagines this in different ways. He winds around her pressing his hands against her back, she feels the absent sweat through her clothes, although she knows this has nothing to do with the poem; it is about invasion, war. About fear. She thinks then of the invasion of herself pinned against the marriage bed. She thinks of all the things he can do, of all the things which can be done to her. She reads,

Meanwhile at home  
All individual dignity and power  
Engulfed in Courts, Committees, Institutions,  
Associations and Societies  
A vain, speech-mouthing, speech-reporting Guild,

and thinks of Hector precisely buttering his toast, reading the newspaper balanced against his coffee cup, blandly innocent, ruthlessly kind. What would he do, she wonders, if she were to say to him over the soft-boiled eggs, *There lives nor form nor feeling in my soul/Unborrowed from my country!* He would gaze at her over the edge of his

newspaper, clear his throat, request the sugar to be passed. He would assume that she was joking.

In the darkness she presses the heels of her hands against her closed eyes: blue sparks redden and explode.

Hector returns home late and lets himself in with his key. The house is dark and Hector moves about quietly, turning on lights, removing his shoes and tie, taking the plate she has left him from the icebox. He sits in the living room where she has left her book lying face down over the arm of her chair. He picks up the book and sees that she has marked it in red ink: red against black. He reads,

all my heart  
Is softened and made worthy to indulge  
Love, and the thoughts that yearn for humankind.

Hector pictures Aloma reading this passage, hunching over the book. He wonders what compelled her to underline these words. He pictures her sitting across from his at the table. Her serene, closed face surrounded by clouds of restrained hair; the intensity of the passage, the cry he cannot imagine from her. Warm air stirs the living room curtains. Rising, crossing to the window, Hector closes the book, keeping one finger on the page to mark Aloma's transient, secret desire.



## TATTOO

Esther is standing at the blackboard with her back to the door. Her class, all adults grouped around her in a semi-circle, watch in affable, bored silence as she writes simple sentences. Miniature pieces of chalk, which are all the school has to give her, break off occasionally and fall into the brush wells with soft, audible clicks that give her lessons an odd truncated rhythm.

"The man ran to the store. Oops, there, um, The woman sat on the chair. Oh, darn, The girl drove the car," she writes. She turns, "See?" she says. "Sentences contain a noun and an action word, a verb." The class watches numbly and she sighs. She knows they are only here because it's free, it's warm and it gives them something to do other than sitting in their rooms, staring at the walls, perhaps watching television, which they do not understand either. Still, she would like some reaction.

Just lately she has begun to feel uncomfortable with what she teaches. Her lessons feel false, as if she is preparing them for lives they will not ever lead. There are the stereotypes she hands them: House, yard, trees, tea in the afternoons -- who does this any more? Lives that are conducted politely, neatly, against a sparse Canadian landscape of perpetual ice and snow.

There are five in this class. Three women and two men. The three women are Iranian, the men are Polish and South

American, though she can't say exactly which country.

Azita, Maryam, and Nelufar, and Stephan and Eladio. Esther knows very little about them, their names, their countries of origin, sparsely sketched details. They'd have told her more, she is sure, but none of them have enough language.

So she wonders about them, wonders how they survive here, with the strange customs, the barriers of speech, of manners. Accustomed to planned patterns, expectations of behaviour, hidden courtesies, warm sunlight and slow afternoons. At least the men have a measure of independence here, they have the coffee bars and camaraderie of smoky rooms where Esther sometimes sees them reading newspapers with pages bright with curls and flourishes. She has seen them greet one another, the hands swinging way back, then smacking together, shaking for several minutes. She wonders who the women touch, talk to, the ones without families at least.

The three women from her class band together in a knot at coffee breaks. If she approaches them, speaks to them, they giggle shyly and poke one another like schoolgirls. Azita, in particular, must be in her forties. There's some grey in the impenetrable blackness of her hair, some missing teeth in the hesitant smile. The others are probably younger, but not much. Other than their presence in her class they do not seem to have much in common. Esther has asked them separately about their lives. They have told her

as much as can be understood. Azita has a husband, a grown son still in Iran. She worries about them, calls them on the phone a lot, would like to get them out. At least this is what she tells Esther. "But how did you get out?" Esther asks, "How did you come here?" Azita smiles, waves her hand. "Bus," she finally manages, "Come long time. Bus"

Maryam and Nelufar are unmarried. Maryam says she was a teacher in Iran. Esther wonders; Maryam is by far the most attractive, the least serious of the three. Esther cannot see her, in black *chador*, leading a class of small children, all wearing *roosaries* tied under the chin and identical long, buttoned *montoes*, arranged in long rows dutifully reciting the alphabet. Maryam wears bright colours, shoes with impossible high heels, make-up, jewellery, perfume. She almost jangles with the exposure of herself, moves the bracelets up and down her bare, brown arms, touches her hair, her neck frequently. Esther wonders how Maryam could ever have gone about veiled, the secret self enclosed, reined in.

Nelufar is quiet. So quiet, that Esther worries about her. She has the least English, the least confidence of the three women. If asked in class, she responds in shy whispers, only a word or two. Esther imagines some unimaginable torture, some infliction of spirit which Nelufar carries with her.

Oddly enough, it is to Maryam that Nelufar clings.

Of the men, Eladio speaks better English. In fact, Eladio seems at times to be overcome by a florid, if somewhat unintelligible, flow of language, "I stand in circle by a park. Not a park. A kind of park, trees?" Eladio gestures broadly with his hands, indicating a circle.

"A field?" Esther suggests.

"A field." Eladio nods with satisfaction, "Yes, so. A field, and some men are there. They have guns. Not police?"

"Soldiers?"

"Soldiers. They bring a man, some boys. I watch." Eladio gravely mimics a man aiming a rifle, taking aim, gently pulling the trigger.

"They shot them?" Esther says. "In front of you?"

Esther is meant to be shocked, and she is shocked. She cannot imagine such a thing, the deliberation, the planning of an act like that. Choosing a spot, the careful aim.

"They knew you were there?" Eladio nods, waves his hand again. "Terrible," he says. To which Esther is unable to reply.

Stephan, oddly, speaks fluent German but almost no English. He is an engineer, he tells her, or she thinks he does. He is from Warsaw, he left in '81. He says something unintelligible, "Walensa" he says, and she gathers he had something to do with the workers' movement. She vaguely

remembers this. She is ashamed that it isn't clearer to her, she was a student at the time, there were exams, she remembers the strikes, she thinks, the red letters on the banners.

Esther prints the word, "wardrobe" and circles it. A soft flutter of chalk flakes off the board as Esther turns to the class. "Who can tell me," she asks, "what this word means?" Encouraging smiles. Esther sighs: perhaps it would be impolite to guess. They have unfailing courtesy, her class, they refuse to embarrass her -- or one another -- by making false claims of knowledge. Esther draws two stick figures side by side on the blackboard. "See," she says, "a man and woman. The man is wearing a hat, a shirt and trousers." She draws these in a rough, inexpert way, "The woman is wearing - oh, damn," as chalk breaks and falls to the floor, "um, a coat and shoes and she is carrying a purse, a handbag." The class repeats the new words good-naturedly.

At college, Esther was in love with another student named Walter. Walter came from a rich family and was in turns snobbish and ashamed of this fact. Studying in a hall named after his own grandfather, Walter was subversive, reckless. He wrote on the desks, put his feet up on the backs of the chairs, smoked furtive cigarettes. Yet, when questioned by a security guard or harassed librarian, Walter

would simply drop his name. Such arrogance Esther admired for a time, though less so later on.

After graduation Walter took her to India, and the heat and the crowds and the restless, slow energy of the place sucked them nearly dry. Steam rose from the sidewalks and curled around their ankles in the streets. Esther took to showering three or four times a day and combing her lank hair with patchouli oil to make it stay in place. This is what Indian women did, many of them, but it didn't make Esther's hair shine the way it did the other women's, it just darkened it and made it look greasy.

One night Esther came in from the bath with her skin reddened and damp, and her hair combed through with patchouli and jasmine oil. She felt full, fleshed out in some way: thicker. The bath attendant had pummelled her into a dreamy, trance-like state so that she felt her hips, rolling in their sockets, and her breasts, heavy, heavier than before, pulling against the skin. After she was finished in the bath Esther thought she understood better the saris and the veiling and draping of the body in silk and thin cotton and the slow and graceful walk. "Ambulation" took on meaning. "Ambiguous", "thick", "lugubrious", "oiled" -- this is what she thought of after every bath.

Esther didn't tell Walter this, she told him only about the bath attendant and the heavy combing of her hair after the bath. He liked this sort of information, the small

rituals associated with daily living. He liked to hear about the anointing, and the giggling of the women in the bath.

"After the bath, and this incredible pummelling on the massage table, the attendant helps me down," she told Walter later, when they were lying together under the mosquito net, "and gives me a small handful of seeds, anise, cumin, something else, indefinable and sweet. While I'm eating the seeds, one by one, the bath attendant puts patchouli oil in my hair."

"They do it for their men." he told Esther. There was a touch of pride, but also derision, in his voice as told her this. It was as though he were above that sort of thing himself, but liked to hear about it, liked to think it was done, "They do it to please them, the men that is."

Esther tried to tell him about the languor of the baths and the seeds, and the impervious nature of women; how they might be doing it for themselves, for the small rewards of the bath, but he wasn't listening. He took her wrist and pulled her under the mosquito net, tugging at her buttons. "The maid might come in," she told him, but he didn't care, he even liked the idea, the veiled maid entering the room, seeing the two of them under the mosquito net.

Esther draws a small figure, meant to represent a child, beside her chalk outlines. The figure of the child

looks disproportionate, and somehow grotesque, in comparison with the others. Lately, she has noticed a tendency for her figures, her careful instructive diagrams, to take on a menacing look. She tries to lighten the look by adding shoes and a small cap, but succeeds only in making the child look more stunted as though squashed between two weights. She turns to the class and smiles and shrugs, "Well," she says, "this was supposed to be a baby." The class smiles encouragingly back at her. Esther points to the shoes, drawing loops on the deformed feet. "Shoelaces," she says. Baseball cap, t-shirt, diaper. The child begins to bloat outward whale-like. Esther embellishes further, drawing amulets around the child's stick neck, ornamenting the wrists and ankles with bracelets of wire. Gold, she says, platinum, silver, adding jewellery, coins dangling from the starved neck, making the child precious, valuable, a gift.

Esther stayed on in India after Walter had gone. (Almost at once: it seemed there was a trust fund, some condition of inheritance he'd neglected to mention.) At first she was bewildered by everything and thought of herself, her pain in the third person: she has left her lover; she is numb with pain.

It is hard for white women to move around India unobserved and alone. Esther seemed to shock people: her whiteness, her aloneness. Something about her invited



dismay and comment. Her arrival at the dusty railroad stations could cause the most untrammelled chaos.

In Madras Esther fell ill and decided to stay and rest awhile. She took a room in a hotel without glass in the windows but with a hard packed dirt floor and ceiling fans that stirred the mosquito nets and gave the illusion of great coolness. The hotel also had a bath for women attached to the rear of the kitchens. The bath was lined with tiles of so deep and slippery a blue that they seemed to be a continuance of the water -- or the water a continuance of them.

The attendant was crouched under the massage table when Esther came in. There were no other women in the bath. She invited Esther to undress, beckoning with her hands towards the water, and Esther saw that her arms and hands were covered with tattoos which stretched out from under the sari in blue and purple roads mapped out over her skin, and disappearing under her blouse like sleeves.

Fascinated, Esther allowed the attendant to grasp her hand and pull her into the room. Esther saw in the cartooned skin, in the marked hands covered with coloured vines and leaves and flowers and birds, such power and such hope, almost joy, that she felt a great surge of wellbeing, even happiness.

She undressed and got into the bath. Surprised at how hot it actually was, Esther giggled as the bath attendant

ducked her head under the water and began to scrub her hair with a hard bar of soap.

Then the attendant too undressed and got into the bath. Esther saw that the tattoos covered her everywhere except for her face, her nipples and the soles of her feet. The soles of her feet were white like Esther's, whiter than Esther's. The tattoos were drawn in ink, red, purple and blue. Long lines separated into swirls and flowers and small cherubic figures and some letters in Sanskrit, which Esther couldn't read, of course. Seeing the attendant getting into the bath, Esther wondered vaguely if the tattoos would be washed off in the water and would attach themselves to her.

There was no glass over the window in the bath either, only slatted wooden shutters that let in all the light and bugs but keep out the air. Esther could smell the air, heavy and sweet, and the odours of the kitchens. Above them, fans stirred the air and made gentle wavelets around their knees. Through the steam, the attendant's hand stretched out, the fingers brushing lightly over Esther's throat, her breasts and belly. Smooth and dripping, her belly under the attendant's hand, Esther watched the arabesque of lines ascending from the attendant's hands to her throat. Esther could hear the maids in the kitchens, banging pots around and laughing. Their voices drifted up

through the window and washed over the two of them: Esther, the attendant, in their bath.

Later, Esther lay on the massage table under the mosquito net, which seemed at one moment to be made of cloth and the next moment to be some other, less tangible, and hence more significant, substance. Esther lay stretched out under the white, billowing net, her arms over my head. Half asleep, she imagined that someone had drawn blue lines like tattoos, like bruises, over her pale skin.

The tattooed bath attendant, her festive, declamatory skin, her definite touch

-- Esther's water-softened back --

Esther closes her eyes. "It's alright," she says, or imagines she does,

"It's perfectly alright."

The pots being banged around,

the sweetness of the air,

the tracing of her visible skin.

Esther's fantastic child floats in space beside her. The class is silent, a little shocked, attendant. Invasion is simple, Esther thinks: it happens quietly, without notice or warning. Life goes on the usual way. Except that there

are gaps, things that are hard to find, a phone that mysteriously rings, unexplained darkness.

Esther thinks it would happen this way: The door would open in the hall and someone would walk slowly, but not too quietly, not afraid to be heard or discovered, into the room. Such a person would be smiling a little, Esther thinks, nodding in satisfaction when things were to his liking. Perhaps a small moue of disapproval at the extraordinary. Wet scarves and mittens draped over the radiators, the flakes of chalk scattered over the floor. Esther imagines he would want to tidy up a little first.

Esther has always believed in the man in the dark and, in the natural progression of such things, has always believed in the possibilities for damage, pure and uncorrectable.

Esther's students will remain silent. They are well accustomed, it seems, to crises. Imperceptibly they will shift, drawing away, distancing themselves from Esther and her grotesque child. Esther would like to draw them all together, take them firmly in hand. "Listen," she would say, "listen." But nothing follows. Esther knows she has nothing to offer them, only this -- two nights a week they will band together, out of the cold, she will teach them the words, the speech that sticks in the mouth, the insistence of air that comes from the back of the throat.

She imagines them all barricading themselves behind the glass-fronted door, imagines herself cowering under the wooden desk while someone pounds and pounds and pounds against the glass. Fear is a sound, she could tell them, it has rhythm; they in turn could teach her, perhaps, to clap her hands, to dance.