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TAKING A LINE FOR A WALK

JOHN MEREDITH
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RIK LINA AND BEATRIZ HAUSNER

“There is a secret room in your house. I will reveal it to you. Come with me.” Once inside, she opened her eyes and found herself in a room entirely festooned with flowers: a riotous mix of roses, hydrangeas, orchids and freesias, which created a kind of unison picture of pure love.

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Ink and acrylic paint on paper: 45x32 cm.

The artwork (with colour saturation reduced) appearing
in the Contents and Contributors pages are by Gabriela Campos.

THE ACERBIC EYE

by Terry Mosher a.k.a. Aislin



*“Those who fail to learn from history
are doomed to repeat it.”*

—SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL

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TAKING A LINE FOR A WALK

Paintings by
JOHN MEREDITH

Text by
BARRY CALLAGHAN

Word & Art
A CANADIAN RE PERSPECTIVE



There was no painter in the country like John Meredith, no painter of such talent so isolated by temperament. Slim and boyish, he stayed put in his town of Fergus, Ontario – he stayed home while his painter brother William (Bill) Ronald was living and performing footloose in Manhattan (see issue 44.1 for a feature on Bill’s work). John’s studio was in the cellar of the family house. From the beginning, with a tuck of his head into his shoulder, he was good at the mumbled phrase, good at drinking good whisky to bad effect, and smoking packs and packs of cigarettes until, not so many years later, he would die on a breathing machine.

He was also, for a period of years, a painter unlike any on this continent, with no easily discernible influences, no Hoffman, no de Kooning, perhaps a touch of Clifford Still, or perhaps a very early Motherwell (if there was any way he could have seen Motherwell), none of the surrealists, no Kandinsky...and certainly none of the local jack pine huggers.

There was, in fact, something intensely inward and home-hewn about his best Fergus paintings. There was nothing ingratiating or seductive about his early line or his fields of colour. Little sense of emanating light. They were cellar paintings. Burnt sepias, umbers, smudged orange, sublunar purples,

Artworks

- Untitled*. Triptych. 1972.
Oil on canvas. 1.8 x 7.2 m. pp. 6/7
- Untitled*. 1970. Oil on canvas 1.8 x 1.5 m. p. 9
- Trafalgar*. 1966. Oil on canvas 2.4 x 1.5 m. p. 10
- Untitled*. 1968. Oil on canvas 1.5 x 2.4 m. p. 11

- Seeker (for my parents)*. Triptych. 1966.
Oil on canvas. 1.75 x 3.6 m. pp. 12/13
- Untitled*. 1971. Oil on canvas 1.8 x 1.5 m. p. 14
- Orange and Yellow*. 1979. Oil on canvas 1.5 x 1.8 m. p. 15
- Green. Pink. Yellow. Blue*. 1980. Oil on canvas 1.5 x 2 m. p. 16

yellow smears, blue-blacks. Little evidence of any intent to please. The surfaces had the feel of something kneaded, something that had then been slashed scarlet red by raw pigment out of the tube...most of this was oppressively dark but somehow poignant.

When he decided to come up out of his father's basement, he settled in Toronto, in a studio flat on busy Yonge Street, just south of Wellesley. His neighbour was the third-stream (jazz-and-classic) composer Norm Symonds, known affectionately among friends as "Skull" Symonds. John thought that living beside a skull was pretty funny. He had, with the help of a drink, an amiable throaty laugh; in fact, he was nearly always amiable when a little looped...sometimes confused but seldom contentious, though his being short-spoken could be taken for abruptness. On the few occasions that they came together without rancour, John made his brother Bill seem to be garrulous, overriding and blustery.

John soon had a show in Toronto at the Av Isaacs Gallery (Av had almost immediately put him on retainer) of new paintings, big paintings that moved in an unanticipated direction.

He became something of a natty dresser, having found a Yonge Street tailor he liked, but he seldom went anywhere, except in the afternoon to the gallery. Where he met an attractive but brittle woman. A Swiss.

He fell in love.

He was too drunk to be on time for his marriage at City Hall on a Tuesday. So he got married on a Wednesday.

After a while, trying to show his wife, Ursula – who was easily irritated and often angry – how angry he could be, too, he kicked a wall or a door (he was never clear to me about this) and broke his foot. He hobbled about on crutches, his foot in a cast. Which was hard to do when he was into the bottle.

But again, even when he was drunk, there was no meanness in him.

In fact, he genuinely wanted to like and be liked. He just didn't know how to say as much in so many words. If he moaned, it was the moan of a man who couldn't understand why he was alone. After all, he'd just been married.

Within months, the woman, no longer wanting to be his wife, went home to Switzerland.

A few years later, he married again, to a diminutive but big-hearted Japanese woman, Kiyoko, who worked with flowers. I have no idea how they met. She spoke little or no English.

But then, he never spoke in what you would call an easy run of words.

He almost never said a word about his paintings, except that he thought they were good, maybe even great.

He was a painter who had his own way of working.

He would sit in his paint room on Yonge Street where there was no natural light; the room was spotlit or pot-lit and he worked mostly at night (in a sense, he never stopped painting in a basement), and that was when I would visit him, to sit with him and drink whisky and watch him draw, hunched like a frail monk over small sheets of paper, working in squares, meticulously working with black ink and watercolours.





These were not drawings as *mark* making, these were not sketches meant to seize the fleeting moment, these were not whimsical gestures meant to defy morbidity, this was not drawing that had anything to do with the aesthetics of blurring or rubbing out the line – this was drawing as an investigation, the work of a man determined to go with his line to wherever his intuitions might lead him...this was a nurturing of that line...much like Klee's idea of "taking a line for a walk," with a quite specific idea of how that walk, with its swiping and dragging, its feathering of the line, should end...in a completed image (sometimes overlaid by a grid) that was then blown up (as one might do for an outdoor billboard) as an acrylic painting that would be, in and of itself, a reproduction to scale – the scale sometimes enormous.

The result was not just a copying of the drawing.

The expansion of scale opened up – in the finished paintings – a turmoil of activity...arches, bent oblongs that had their own colouration, jagged and dangerous triangles that had their own colouration, wheels of colour within colours...the heavily articulated, calligraphic black lines defined the basic colour fields, zagged their way in a zig through those fields. And what colours they were, what combinations! He made most abstract expressionists in his town seem tepid, tentative...his colours being magenta, carmine red, violet, orange, purple, yellows, lime green...a kind of hysterical colour sense that he held tightly under control so that the final effect was one of...not quite rest, but of a frenetic energy brought to heel.





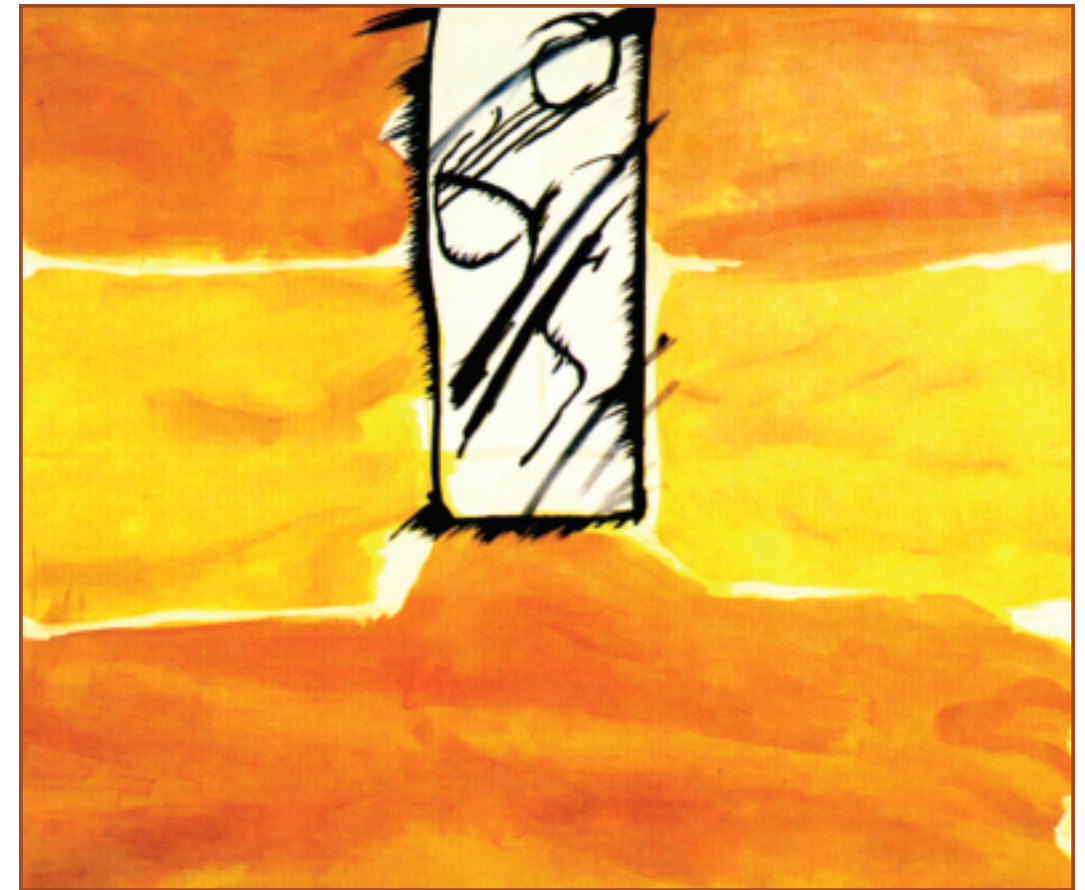
These intense and provocative paintings, sometimes risking a baroque clutter, were unlike anything ever done in his country, and all were completed between 1963 and the late 1970s.

Sitting with him late at night during those productive years, particularly in the late 1960s, trying to talk with him while he worked, I commissioned, from a lean, legal-envelope-sized drawing, one of those huge paintings.

In the early 1970s, after many nights of halting talk and easy drink (I'd taken to hearing him at all hours in the back of my mind), I tried to capture John's voice in a sequence of poems.

He read the poems and said, "Well, I don't know what to say...it's me, probably."

Then, his paintings – as he moved into the 1980s – began to unlock, to open up, to leave the guidance of the grid behind. He worked in fresh canary yellows, warm browns, rose rubbings; these colours and the spacing had the feel of a liberation, but also suggested a scattering, a want of focus.



He got sick.

During his last years, he became hopelessly paranoid (I remember sitting with him in a rented house long after he had left the Yonge Street flat, when he wouldn't come out of the kitchen because the Mafia – at that very moment, he said, the black car that was parked in front of the house – he insisted that I could go and look, and I'd see...they were after him, they had warned him on the phone). Sometimes, he'd call me (always after midnight) to explain how frightened he was.

After-midnight phone calls became much of his social life.

Always, he was a little desperate, self-absorbed, but amiable, yearning, with a good bemused word for his wife.

Always smoking.

Passing the days by watching movies on television. He liked movies.

No longer able to paint with any conviction.

Still managing a gallery show or two: but, with his breath laboured, he was too sickly to work with vigour; the few paintings he turned out were flaccid, loose, the images were empty gestures, the colours insipid, a kind of acrylic staining, and on top of that, he hung a silly show of cartoonish nudes, renderings of Marilyn Monroe's famous calendar, naked on a field of red.



His wife still looked after him with great care and loyalty, no matter his infirmities, but she had to work at her flower shop most of the day.

How he bore the days alone, year after year, and not working, I have no idea.

Toward the end, he and his wife once again lived in a flat, and sometimes an acquaintance would drop by, but not often.

His brother Bill (who'd grown even bigger), hobbled by his weight, and his Achilles tendons damaged by the Cuban heels on his boots, had maintained a state of flamboyance and was still painting well, selling out of his studio to a steady stream of clients), died of massive heart failure in 1998. John cried on the phone. He did not go to the burial yard. Bill's children put his landline telephone in his casket, suggesting that he should call home from time to time. John's number was not a number that went with the phone.

But then, John had never had much to say to Bill.

Their view of each other had been jaundiced, even acerbic, but it was not that they had so disliked each other, they'd just had no sibling patience for each other. Silence had suited them. John had, of course, insisted that he wanted to talk, but he said that he just didn't need to talk very much. His wife didn't say much. I wouldn't dare guess at how deeply Kiyoko loved him, but she was devoted to him and always smiled with eager warmth when she spoke his name.

Through most of the 1980s and 1990s John smoked incessantly, suffered from emphysema, sat for a long time amidst several clunky bronchodilators, and finally, in 2000, he died of pneumonia.

THE MEREDITH POEMS

1

*when I am alone I think of dying.
I am most alone when I sleep.
I cannot sleep: sleep is submission to fear, so I paint.
everything I paint is not anything you
or anyone else can know: my paintings are the mystery iceberg
of my past, but there is a way of knowing the mystery
it is the future.
it would be nice to think of my paintings as my children,
as my roots, but it is not true.
I have no roots.
if I had children I would have roots. but,
I have no woman (all my women die, always, just before
Christmas): roots are the future and not the past.
my paintings are themselves. they are oriental.
they are me. I am not oriental.
they are me.
they are a hole in unconscious space, filled with stars and me.*

2

*I never dream. I walk in the streets. I don't
see anything. there are trees, trees, like piano
keys: white and black, thousands, and without leaves.
and more trees.
I don't feel guilty about anything.
I don't feel hatred of myself.
I don't feel that I love myself.
I live with myself, inside the forest of trees, where
there are no birds. there
is no sound, no sun, no one else. but warm (if
you cut the bone of my arm – the clean slice –
and count the rings, there are
thirty-nine, count the years. some men count their toes.
when the forest disappears I will disappear.
I do not want to live alone but I am alone.
I never dream). I take tranquilizers.*

3

a U is a U and not a you.

an O is an O and not the zero of emptiness.

my signature is only a selection by someone else

of letters: – I draw my name out of a well of lines (you

will never find the beginning or end...)

4

behind the leaves, my mother, of the lily of the valley, dead.

I had a premonition. one day

she was pinned against her chair by the sunlight. I am secretive.

I did not tell her;

she has since turned half-over in her grave watching

my other women. but, women

are not cruel. I have only been unlucky (the karate champion

who became a cop and threatened to arrest me for assault, but

left and put a parking ticket on some unknown overnight windshield

by the side of the road); she was one of two snake

eyes I rolled (the other

two in her bed, then four, then six,

and a long sienna field and a cliff, and on the beach, between

the stoneface and the water, a cobra, poised. a man could

die there). but,

I didn't: de Kooning said – it is more important to be a man

than to be a painter. I am a painter, ruthlessly.

I am flesh and bone with a brush in my hand.

my mother, that afternoon in the sunlight, said: don't drink,

paint hard.

well, I am not perfect.

5

I do not dance, but only by myself in the dark,

the way some people sing in the shower: – I have no shower,

so I never sing.

6

I am a non-Protestant,

fantastically non-. I have three non-

Catholic Catholic friends: being sometimes

a clotheshorse-dandy, I have elected myself

as their Pope (one afternoon I opened my porch

window onto the tin roof square; there was

one pigeon, one broken deckchair, and an opposite window

with the green shade drawn) non-practising.

7

I always keep cut fresh flowers: thick

heads of summer born in the glasshouse: in the

radiator heat, the shag leaves collapse first,

like men hanged before their time.

I think I am someone living before

my time: watching – and when

I'm at last born into my time,

there'll only be time to say goodbye.

8

blood on my hands, pieces of eight

words: – bones, of the body, of chairs, are brittle (they

collapse like old-movie break-away furniture); I've

always been nostalgic for what never was (Bogart

and Lauren, seedy elegance, immortal

under the propeller fans of North Africa) – peace.

•

I walk: 3 miles, seeing nothing: only

the getting to where I am going. I'm afraid of these

things (...fame

has become Barnum show biz; and Napoleon

is only Bailey seated on a celluloid horse on a celluloid hill

saying celluloid words...) the last which is not a word but a

beginning: Help.

OCOSINGO

JENNIFER DELESKIE

On Lee's fifth night in Comalapa, shortly after dinner, Padre Diego burst through Cristina and Paolo's door with a bottle of mezcal, poured shots for everyone, and proceeded to teach her how to conjugate the verb *chingar*. *Yo chingo, tu chingas, nosotros chingamos*. I fuck, you fuck, we all fuck. They spent the evening sitting around Cristina and Paolo's small Formica table, listening to Cuban folk music on an ancient CD player, and passing around the occasional joint. Nobody made any special effort to speak English, so Lee had mainly listened, picking up what she could. A mudslide up in the mountains had buried a family of seven. A nine-year-old in Comitán had gone blind after playing with a canister of pesticide. Doña Arceli's 15-year-old daughter had given birth to a baby with a partially closed esophagus and the family wanted the parish to pay for an operation. But there were other things wrong with the baby, too. When the first joint was done, Padre Diego passed his baggie of weed to Paolo, who rolled a second. Padre Diego said he was going to Ocosingo the next day for meetings – a five- or six-hour drive – and invited Lee to join him. Lee looked at Cristina, who smiled and shrugged. She trusted Cristina, even though they had only met a few days earlier and communicated mainly through gestures, so she accepted the invitation. Besides, Ocosingo sounded promising. The name evoked whitewashed homes with terracotta roofs, walls draped with bougainvillea, and women in bright *huipils* carrying baskets of calla lilies.

Illustration by Grinbox/Shutterstock

But later, as she lay on her cot in Cristina and Paolo's chicken shed, Lee began to have second thoughts. She tried to imagine Father Pat, her high-school chaplain, smoking a blunt and making jokes about fucking, and found that she could not. Then again, Father Pat had probably never picked bodies out of a mudslide or comforted a nine-year-old who'd gone blind. Maybe proximity to tragedy allowed one to bend the rules a little. Maybe Padre Diego got to smoke weed and teach a young gringa volunteer how to conjugate *chingar* because Doña Arceli's granddaughter was going to die.

Lee woke early the next morning and slipped out of Cristina and Paolo's house before sunrise, giving herself extra time to walk to the rectory in case she got lost along the way. She was surprised to find the bodega next door open and Doña Lety at her station, seated in front of a small TV that spilled colour and noise onto the dark and otherwise quiet street. Cristina had taken Lee to meet Doña Lety on her first night, and Lee guessed that the matronly woman and her bodega were the beating heart of the neighbourhood. They'd sat in the courtyard sipping Fantas while Doña Lety's two young granddaughters hung off Lee, alternating between shy and boisterous. Lee French-braided their hair and taught them English words for things around them: cat, television, oven, plastic pail, barrette, pink, nose, eyelashes, princess. That night Lee had fallen asleep suffused with the sense that the encounter had been a meaningful one.

Now she considered the packaged junk displayed on Doña Lety's counter and selected a cellophane-wrapped *bigote de cajeta*, a sort of Mexican twinkie. *Esperate*, Doña Lety said as Lee finished paying. Wait. The woman hissed and her lean yellow dog, Rabo, roused himself from the dirt floor and trotted out the door, tail wagging like a metronome. *Para caminar contigo*, Dona Lety said. To walk with you. The unexpected kindness made heat prickle behind Lee's eyes. Rabo would know his way along the unmarked streets of low cinder block and stucco buildings, indistinguishable from each

other save for the ubiquitous political slogans and inexpert murals of pigs, chickens, and children that adorned their surfaces. Rabo would protect her from the packs of feral dogs that roamed the town and the drunks who gathered outside the cantina at all hours, hissing *güera, güera* – white girl – as she passed.

They arrived in Ocosingo before noon. It turned out to be a dirty sprawl of a city, clogged with *tuk-tuks* and street vendors selling plastic crap. Lee abandoned her plan of exploring the town on her own and tagged along with Padre Diego, feeling as useless and conspicuous as a hood ornament. As the day wore on, she grew exhausted from her efforts at understanding the conversation around her, at smiling and being an object of curiosity and, she thought, mild disapproval, because in her cut-off jeans and crop top, she wasn't remotely appropriately dressed. Padre Diego seemed to have business with everyone in town: at the city hall, the local office of the coffee cooperative, and the *comida corredor* where they ate lunch. Yet, despite his pressing engagements, he moved leisurely, like a planet, dabbing sweat from his face with a bandana and steering Lee through the crowded streets with a light touch on her elbow. He towered over everyone, even Lee, who was herself tall and had to duck under awnings at the market, which sold pigs' heads and live chickens instead of the flowers and crafts she had imagined. Aside from the cross he wore on a leather cord around his neck, Padre Diego bore no signs of his office, but the locals, small, wiry men in rubber sandals and women with round, pleasant faces, treated him solicitously. *A sus órdenes, a sus órdenes*, they said, stepping aside to make room for him on the sidewalk, or offering to shine his cowboy boots. The evening before, he'd pointed to those boots and told Lee he was from Sonora. Now Lee thought she understood what he had meant; he was practically an American, almost the same as her.

The sun was sinking behind the mountains when they finally started back. Lee rode shotgun, clutching a can of Tecate from the six-pack Padre

Diego bought at the service station when he filled up the truck. The road was bad, pocked with holes and speed bumps, and several times an animal – a dog or a goat – appeared in the headlights like a phantom. Each time Lee sucked air through her teeth, and each time Padre Diego laughed and said, *No te preocupes*. Don't worry. He drove too fast, taking swigs from his beer – his second or maybe his third – and it occurred to Lee that he was showing off for her, trying to impress the gringa who'd attended meetings on combatting erosion in the *cafetales* dressed for a day at the beach.

This is an adventure, Lee reminded herself, trying to stop the worried running of her mind. She imagined bragging to friends back home – friends she did not, in truth, have at that moment – *Did I ever tell you about the time I worked in Chiapas with a Marxist priest who drank beer and smoked weed?* Her stories would be saturated with wild and irreverent anecdotes, and her friends, those nameless and faceless admirers, would marvel at her doings. As she was luxuriating in this idea of herself, they passed a whitewashed cross, the 20th or maybe the 30th of the day. They were becoming part of the landscape, these crosses, commemorating other people's tragedies, but not hers.

The mountains they drove toward were negative spaces, outlined in thinning bands of light. Paolo, an agronomist, told Lee on her first day that their terraced slopes were an ecological and human disaster, deforested and eroded, dotted with villages that lacked everything. But from a distance they looked magical; round and symmetrical, like mountains in a children's book. Lee accepted a second beer. By the time she was three-quarters finished, they'd begun climbing up into the range, and the beer had started spreading warmth along her limbs. The stars blinked on one by one until the night squirmed with dancing pinpricks of light. Lee opened the window and leaned a little way out, breathing in air that held within it a trace of burning. The radio station finally stabilized, and a wistful voice accompanied by guitar sang *Rayando el sol, rayando por ti*. It was an earnest

song, one Lee would have been embarrassed to listen to back home, but at that moment it was beautiful. Perfect, even. Lee finished the beer, kicked off her shoes, and propped her feet up on the dashboard, unfurling a long and pale expanse of leg. She caught Padre Diego glancing at them, and immediately wished she could draw them back into her body.

A quick, low shape materialized in the headlights. Padre Diego yanked the wheel and Lee was thrown against the side of the truck. There was a thump, small and solid. Then they smacked into something harder, and the truck spun out into the centre of the road, juddering to a stop mere inches from the guardrail.

Pinche perro, Padre Diego said. Fucking dog. He flipped on the hazards and coaxed the truck to other side of the road, away from the drop off, each rotation of the tires accompanied by a nauseating lurch. When the truck was nestled against the rock face, he turned off the engine, reached across Lee, and pulled a flashlight from the glove compartment. Then he heaved himself out of the truck.

Lee sat for a moment longer, taking rapid, fractured breaths, unsure if she had escaped calamity. Then she opened Padre Diego's door – there wasn't enough clearance to open the door on her side – and exited the truck. A small, light-coloured heap lay in the middle of the road. Lee went over to it, squatting and stretching out her hand. A dog lay in the centre of a spreading patch of darkness. It raised its head a few inches off the ground, as if trying to connect with her palm, then let it drop with a whimper.

It's still alive, Lee said in English. The dog. It's alive.

Padre Diego came and stood over her, large and solid as the mountain. *Nada para hacer*, he said. There is nothing to do. He took her by the arm, pulled her up, and began leading her back toward the truck.

Lee resisted, pulling against him. Where she was from, dogs weren't left to die by the side of the road. *Tenemos que hacer algo*, she said, hoping she had strung the words together correctly. We have to do

something. Padre Diego sighed. At first Lee thought he was going to refuse to help the dog, but then he said, *Quédate aquí* – stay here – and walked back over to it.

Lee closed her eyes and listened to the sound of Padre Diego's feet crunching over the gravel. A moment later there was a dull thud that set off sparks behind her eyelids. Then she heard something crash into the scrub on the other side of the guardrail. Lee's throat constricted, and her heart began to drum arrhythmically in her chest. Of course he'd killed it. What had she expected? *Nada para hacer*.

Padre Diego returned and embraced her, clucking his tongue the way one might to soothe a baby, ignoring her rigid posture. She longed to be elsewhere. Back at Cristina and Paolo's, or sitting in Doña Lety's courtyard with her two little granddaughters on her lap. Mostly, though, she longed to be home, even though, at 22, she didn't exactly have one. No home, and no plans to do anything other than what she was doing, which wasn't exactly running away, but was close. She began to weep, and this caused Padre Diego to hug her even tighter. How had she arrived here, she wondered, stranded on a dark and dangerous road with a stranger, having just helped to cause the death of an innocent creature?

Padre Diego called a repair service, but they wouldn't come until the morning, so they had to spend the night on the mountain. It was cold, and Lee was badly under-dressed. Padre Diego invited her to warm herself against him – at least, she thought this was what he was suggesting by spreading his arm and patting his chest – but the idea of pressing herself against him repelled her. She shrank against the passenger side of the truck's cab, hugged her knees to her chest, and fell into a shallow and unpleasant sleep.

At first, Lee didn't notice the hand on her thigh. She was having a night terror. The devil was grasping her, squid-like, from below, and the hand on her thigh felt like just another one of its appendages. But

then it started kneading her flesh in a jarringly solid way, inching upwards after every four or five squeezes. Gradually, Lee also became aware of warm breathing on her neck. She emerged into a state of confusion, shreds of the night terror floating around inside her head like fluff.

She remembered the dog first and a strangled moan rose in her chest. Then she remembered everything else. All the while, Padre Diego's hand continued its slow creep up her thigh. Lee glanced down at it, careful not to betray her wakeful state lest she consign herself to one outcome or another. The hand, a dark splay on the paler field of her flesh, reminded her of the plump sea stars she'd seen in nature documentaries, bunching and spreading in slow, muscular spasms, and for a moment she was able to imagine that she was the sea floor and the hand's movement across her body was perfectly natural. But then Padre Diego began to murmur into her neck – *Te quiero, te quiero* – I want you – and the fantasy collapsed. His hand advanced to the edge of her shorts. Like the rest of him, it was huge, and she imagined his fingers as battering rams; she did not want them probing at her crotch. But it was too late, because he had begun tugging at her underwear, trying to move the flimsy fabric out of the way.

Lee wanted it to stop; even years later she was sure about this. But at that moment her thoughts were darting birds, and she couldn't gather the right words to make this happen. Hitting Padre Diego would be like beating her fists against a mountain, a useless exercise. Nor could she imagine climbing over him and walking out into the night. Where would she go? She was paralyzed, anyhow. The vastness of the priest's transgression – his hand inside her underwear – transfixed her, like frogs falling from the sky. She thought about Father Pat touching her the way Padre Diego was touching her at that moment, and revulsion coursed down the backs of her legs like an electric charge. Revulsion and arousal, a sickening combination.

Padre Diego kept his hand on her knee during the entire drive back to Comalapa. Instead of taking

her directly to Cristina and Paolo's, he pulled over onto a secluded road just outside of the town limits, turned off the engine, and groped her for 10 or 15 minutes. Lee thought about the dog while this was happening, felt its small, solid impact as a knot in her chest.

Soon after, Lee moved out of Cristina and Paolo's chicken shed and into a small room at the rectory. She had started marketing the cooperative's coffee in Europe and needed to be at the office early in the morning to place calls; at least, this was the pretext for her move. Each night, Padre Diego would tap on her door, and she would let him in. *I am doing this because I want to*, she told herself. But the truth was, she had missed her opportunity to opt out of the affair. Opting out meant thinking about what happened in the truck as an assault, and Lee didn't like thinking about what happened in the truck at all; how she had turned into something flat and inert, a landscape upon which a calamity occurred. Besides, if she thought of it as an assault, she would have to do something about it: inform the police, or, at a minimum, pack up and go home. But nothing waited for her at home; no grad program, no job, no partner, no supportive group of friends. She'd screwed all that up. She'd come to Chiapas for a hard reset, hoping to remake herself into a tough and adventurous humanitarian. Someone who drank mezcal and picked bodies out of mudslides. Someone bold and desirable.

She began travelling with Padre Diego to conferences and up into the *cafetales*, visiting remote communities where she might as well have been an alien, and no one thought to question her association with the priest. Padre Diego often extended these trips for a night or two, renting honeymoon suites in motels on the outskirts of towns – once a room with a mirrored ceiling that she squeezed her eyes shut against. Lee grew accustomed to her revulsion. She figured it was the price of admission for the experiences she gained access to, which included attending a secret meeting of insurrectionists and witnessing the birth of a child. She was often treated as an

honoured guest on these occasions – offered a chair while others sat on the ground, or helped onto the back of a donkey while locals trudged on foot up the steep path to the *cafetales*. Once, in the wretched hut of an old village patriarch, she'd been presented with a hard-boiled egg while everyone else ate a poor meal of starchy tamales, and she'd had to choke it down despite loathing eggs. She was uneasy with this preferential treatment, but she didn't see what she could do about it. Padre Diego also gave her gifts: amber earrings, a Zapatista doll, and a colourful Mayan dress that looked wrong on her tall, pale body. Lee accepted these too, even though each gift further cemented their arrangement.

Lee suspected their relationship was an open secret in Comalapa but, if it was, few appeared to be scandalized by it. Paolo, perhaps, had begun treating her a little more coldly, but he had never liked her in the first place. Cristina seemed to accept the affair as an inevitability, as if it were perfectly normal for Lee to be sleeping with a Catholic priest. Almost everyone else in the town was poor and Mayan, and their inner thoughts were a mystery to her. Only Doña Lety made her disapproval known. She still served Lee at the counter of her bodega when Lee was in the neighbourhood, but she never again invited her into the courtyard to play with her granddaughters, nor did she volunteer Rabo to accompany Lee when she walked back to the rectory after dark. Lee took to carrying a stick to swing at the dogs that challenged her, and when she passed the cantina, she kept her head down and walked quickly.

Three months after the accident, in the middle of December, Padre Diego announced that they were going back to Ocosingo. This time, after the meetings, he would take her to a resort near an archaeological site she had mentioned wanting to visit. He told her this with pride, as if he alone could grant her this experience. By now, Lee's Spanish was passable; after six weeks of struggling, a switch seemed to go off in her head. But she found she needed to say little around Padre Diego. He used up all the words, told her things he felt she needed to

know, sang along with the radio, made jokes she understood poorly, and declared, over and over, his love for her. When he prodded her to make her own declarations, she would say, *Tengo hielo por sangre*. I have ice for blood. Padre Diego always laughed, as if she were joking.

Lee thought she would recognize the place where they struck the dog, but when they reached the ugly outskirts of Ocosingo, she realized she had missed it. Of course, they had been travelling in the opposite direction at the time of the accident, and it had happened at night. Perhaps on the way back she would find the spot, although in truth, she wasn't sure why she wanted to. Did she think she could return to the moment before the accident and change its outcome? The portal to that time had sealed shut and vanished, leaving her on the wrong side of it.

The resort was built to resemble a Mayan palace, landscaped with bougainvillea, palm trees, and hibiscus, and garishly decorated for Christmas. Padre Diego removed his cross before he exited the truck and locked it in the glove compartment. Although nothing now marked him as a priest, their pairing was an odd one, and Lee felt people's eyes on them as they waited in line at reception.

He insisted on going to the pool right away. Lee tried not to look at his body, large and slick with sweat, clad in a Speedo-like swimsuit that would have been an object of derision back home. She masked her revulsion by splashing and skipping away from him in the pool, making a game of it, a technique she had perfected over the preceding weeks.

A lone woman and a group of three men lounged poolside. The men chatted in French while the woman read a book with a German title. The woman was blonde and perhaps a little prematurely weathered from too many hours in the sun. She and the three men glanced up occasionally at Lee and Padre Diego's antics in the pool, making Lee feel self-conscious and awkward, as if she were putting on a performance. Padre Diego's overt

demonstrations of desire embarrassed her. She wished she could convey to her onlookers that her connection to the priest was temporary and unserious.

The woman and one of the men struck up a conversation in English, discussing their impressions of the ruins they had visited that morning. Lee drew nearer to listen in, so close she could smell the lotion on the woman's skin and see the fine, translucent hairs on her arms. Their familiar words were like raindrops on her parched mind, and she had to fight the urge to interject. How good it would feel to join in, she thought. Padre Diego, with his toddler's command of English, would be left out entirely.

They ate dinner in the hotel dining room. Padre Diego had been drinking steadily all afternoon; first beer, and now, because Lee requested it, wine. By the time their main courses arrived, they were on their second bottle and Padre Diego had begun to lean on the table, face slack and eyes heavy-lidded. Lee had refused to have sex with him when they returned to their room after swimming, and the energy between them was strained. She had decided, in fact, never to have sex with him again. She hadn't yet informed Padre Diego of this development in their relationship, however. Instead, she told him she was going to spend a few weeks travelling around the Yucatan and Quintana Roo, a plan that had just come to her. Padre Diego's expression turned sour. He would drive her to the airport, he said, and meet her in Cancun as soon as he finished celebrating the Christmas masses. Lee agreed, even though she had no intention of visiting Cancun, or meeting up with him, or ever returning to Comalapa.

Padre Diego passed out before the waiter returned to clear their plates. Lee tried to rouse him, prodding him roughly and hissing in his ear, but it was no use. Now that she had decided it was over between them, it was impossible for her to keep her revulsion at bay. She was astonished she had ever allowed this man to touch her – to lower his bulk on top of her, thrust his tongue into her mouth, and squeeze her ass as he came. *Se movió?* he would

always ask when he finished. No. The Earth had not moved.

Finally, the waiter suggested that the *Señor* rest there awhile, and Lee gratefully left. She did not go back to the room, however, because she couldn't bear the thought of listening for the sound of Padre Diego's footsteps outside the door, his basso profundo muttering, his fumbling with the key. Instead, she walked across the torch-lit garden, sat at the poolside bar, and ordered a glass of wine she didn't need. The three French men and the German woman were at a small table nearby, laughing and smoking. Lee wanted to join them but could not summon the courage, so she pretended to be absorbed in a game on her phone. Finally, the men said goodnight and left the woman alone at the table, and Lee was emboldened to approach her and ask for a cigarette.

Her name was Jutta, or maybe Anja. She told Lee that she was a legal translator from Hamburg who had come to Chiapas to see the ruins and escape the dreary north German winter for a few weeks. Of course she had noticed Lee, she said, and wondered about the man she was with.

For a moment, Lee wanted to tell her everything; about the dog, and what Padre Diego had done to her in the truck. About how she hadn't known what to do or where to go and how, as a result, she'd done nothing. But everything was knotted up in her mind and untangling it seemed impossible. So Lee sucked on her cigarette and told the woman the story she'd been telling herself, that the relationship was a wild and unconventional affair that had run its course. The woman's eyes widened when she learned that Padre Diego was a priest, making Lee feel bold and desirable. The torchlight sent shadows of fronds dancing over the woman's bare shoulders. Lee stubbed out her cigarette and asked for a second.

Voices filtered across the patio from the darkened restaurant; Padre Diego's and the waiter's. Quick, Lee said, grabbing the woman's hand. She pulled her across the stone patio, past the pool, and

into a dark corner of the garden, drawing her down behind a screen of yucca and bougainvillea. They sat for a moment without speaking, submerged in the steady insect drone of night. Lee sensed that the woman did not want to be there – she'd had to pull a little harder than she expected – but her excitement at hiding from Padre Diego overpowered it, filling her chest like a balloon. She wasn't sure what to do next, though. Ask the woman for another cigarette? Or maybe she should do something crazy, like put her hand on the back of the woman's head and draw her in for a kiss. Lee leaned toward the woman, but the woman shifted away.

Listen, the woman said. You have no idea what you're doing.

The words landed like a slap, making heat rise in Lee's face. She thought about getting up and leaving, but nothing beyond the screen of bougainvillea felt safe.

If you need to sleep on my floor, you can. But that's all.

Lee squeezed her eyes shut. She tried to summon some cool and unbothered response to the woman but discovered she couldn't speak around the lump in her throat. Nor could she think properly. My mind is filled garbage, she thought. Toxic, churning garbage. She was drowning in it. Yet there, in the middle of her defiled thoughts, she found the memory of Doña Lety's granddaughters: their weight on her lap, their clean, unfamiliar smell. The person she had been when she was with them.

The voices from the restaurant had now ceased, overtaken by the chirruping of the insects and the frogs. Padre Diego was probably asleep. Lee pictured him lying on his back, his massive face pointed at the ceiling, snoring. At least all of that was finished now.

Lee had been afraid that the woman would be gone when she opened her eyes, but she was still there, staring at her with a frankness that made Lee feel as if neither clothes nor even skin covered her.

I forget your name, Lee said, forcing herself to maintain eye contact. Could you tell it to me again?

from the long sequence of poems

WISE BIRD FINDS HIGHER POWER

VERONICA GAYLIE

5. The Take Me Home

We leave Nairobi in a saloon car, a four-door
Toyota with bald tires.

John the driver is religious.
When we go through roundabouts
stalled with buses he says, *Thank you, God.*
And will we be crucified or will you get us past
the police officer who is the politician's nephew,
or son, our cousin, twice removed, without incident?
Yes we do! AMEN!

We pass tin shacks: Lady Di's Beauty Salon.
Queen of Perfection Insurance.
Ecstatic Memories High School.
Majestic Man Plus Van Motors.
Joyzilla Hotel. Broomsticks Transport.

Across the country John wears a red cap,
plays John Denver on a cassette tape.
Take me home...country roads...to the place...
I belong...West Virginia. John sings along with John.
A baboon gives birth at the side of the road.
It's normal for a Friday. Says John.

Behind the baboons:
dust, drought
and dead pepper trees that stretch
to the horizon.

We pass a herd of zebras.
A shepherd and three cattle
stagger in the dust. Everything is going.
Everything green eaten. In the absence of mothers
baboons suck dregs from *yugo* drink cartons
thrown from windows after the truck stop in Naivasha.
A young man without clothes stomps down the side of the road.

John slams on the brakes. *Giraffes*, he says.
It takes a while to find them. Tree branch. Tree branch.
Giraffe neck. But when you see them you know them,
and you will never forget.

They eat leaves from the acacia trees, says John.
No rain. No leaves. No giraffes.
It is hard to admit.

I look out the window –
giraffes sail across the horizon.
The heart goes quiet how you feel on the sea.

Write that in your notebook, says John and drives on.

Life is old there, older than the trees,
younger than the mountains,
blowing like a breeze.

16. The Soul

Shame to all those people in black suits and black spectacles
always sitting in the front rows of the Church! (Monsignor, Kenya)

The church door opens, a sister lets me in.
Every pew is filled with students
in uniform: old flannel trousers,
old woollen sweaters,
plastic leather dress shoes,
torn open at the toes.

They make room.
I squeeze in beside Brother Ian,
here twenty-five years.
Habari? He tries to smile.
The sadness pours out of him
like old news.

The mass starts.
Tall nuns in modern habits
(long blue pencil skirts and short veils)
pray, stand, sit and kneel.
At intervals in the mass
they sing, play drums, piano,
home-made twangy instruments made of metal.

Kids from the town
crowd in the aisles,
dance, sing,
tell the story,
really shake it

and between the song
and the dance
the roof lifts
up
into the sky

and the soul arrives.

17. The Mass

When the music ends, it's back to the priest.
Fr. Kalende gives a sermon in Swahili,
makes in-jokes about politics and tribes,
makes the crowd laugh nervously.

He says:
*You should be able to do something
and then explain it afterwards!*

People fall asleep.
Want the music back.

Isn't he handsome?
says the housekeeper beside me, with a poke.
At communion I walk up the aisle,
pass students who try not to stare
and blush and smile.
I hold out my hands to receive the host.
The priest coughs,
raises an eyebrow.
What?
Is it my skin?
The black and purple bamboo top and bottoms?
The whole thing?

An eye dance begins
where he holds up the host high,
looks down at my hands,
then flips up to my eyes.
Then back to my hands.
The whole time his eyes flip, my eyes chase his,
like a pinball game,
eyes on the ball.

I hold up my hands higher.
Right here! In the palm!

Doesn't he see?
Fr. Kalende refuses communion.
Yes. The body of Christ.
He turns away then
puts God back
in the little gold box
that arrived direct from Rome.

I compose.
Go with the flow.
My mum says,
God sees.

I float back to my seat,
head up.
Neck prickles with heat.
Bamboo starts to itch.
Hair starts to frizz.

I look at the cross on the altar.
Did Jesus get embarrassed?

I close my eyes and remember:
Do not cry in public in Kenya.
The mass is over. Go in Peace, says Fr. Kalende.
But before he leaves, he speaks:
*Ladies and gentleman....a reminder that
while some of us agree with Vatican II,
and so-called advances to the mass,
as in, now we do not speak Latin,
or face our backs to the people, we also know
that communion must go in the mouth. Directly.
Because it is holy, so what else? Ha ha? Am I right?*

The cool students with the drums in the front row
release a long pent-up laugh,
like they've been holding it in all mass.
It goes on and on.

I turn redder and redder.
My curious neighbours
try not to watch the blood flow under my skin.
You're turning inside out! one says in shocked whisper.

Good day! calls out the man of God,
who swims in his robes back down the centre aisle.
I try to catch his eye
but he follows the floor.

Still in his cassock
he rushes outside
into his Cadillac
and locks the doors

then drives away in a cloud of dust
I try to shake from my feet.

The licence plate on the Cadillac says:

SAINT

Photograph by isak55/Shutterstock

SUGARLAND

JOE BONGIORNO

Yves Dubois counts the rusty barrels in the back of the truck's cargo trailer. "Twenty-two, just like Laurent said," he mutters under his breath. He glances at the time on his phone. It's already past midnight; the job is taking longer than expected. He wants to get the delivery over with. Sweat trickles down his forehead as he locks the cargo trailer doors and hobbles toward the tractor unit, nearly slipping on the ice.

The windshield sparkles. Ice crystals cover the glass, spread out like frozen spruce needles. He scrapes off the frost with the chisel end of the snowbrush, careful not to put pressure on the gnarled itchy growths on his limbs. He feels like ripping off his toque and the garbage bags wrapped around his arms, but he cannot afford to attract any attention. With his condition, he would be the most identifiable man in the country, a sketch artist's fantasy.

Yves gets into the driver's seat, turns the key in the ignition, and hits the gas. Seven hundred kilometres to go. Until he reaches Grand Falls, the future of the family business – what remains of it – lies in the back of his truck. He shifts the vehicle into gear and merges onto the main road, watching in the side mirror as the shrivelling maples of the Dubois sugarwood dissolve into black and white.

How long will it take the federation – or, as the Dubois sons call them, *le cartel* – to figure out that 22 barrels worth over \$67,000 have gone missing from their Reineville warehouse?



“*Réveille-toi*,” Yves commands himself, forcing his eyes wide open with a yawn. “Wake up! Only a hundred kilometres on the road and you’re already nodding off.” He turns a corner on the winding highway, both hands gripping the wheel. In his day-dream, the truck swerves into the median and flips onto its side, barrels bursting open, slathering the road with a sweet, sticky substance, and ensnaring curious deer by their hooves.

The phone rings. Yves rubs his eyes and looks down at the number. It’s Fleurant, his eldest brother, the one waiting for the drop-off at a Grand Falls motel. Between Fleurant’s nerves and Laurent’s hot head, Yves considers letting the call go to voicemail, but then decides against it, knowing Fleurant will keep calling until he picks up.

Yves clears his throat and sticks out his chest, preparing to answer with the feigned confidence of a man in control. “Hello?”

“Where are you?” Fleurant blurts.

“Just passed Saint-Romuald. Crossing the river.”

“The buyer should be here within the next hour. Any word?”

“Not yet,” Yves answers. He thinks of Laurent, the middle brother, who’s back in Sugarland on the lookout for signs of heat. It was he who, over the course of three weeks, had loaded the truck with *le cartel*’s warehouse reserve barrels during the night.

“Okay,” Fleurant sighs, telegraphing his unease. “Pick up the pace.”

Yves hangs up, replaying the events that have led up to the heist.

As one-third of the operation, he’s the youngest of three sons to inherit the centuries-old sugar bush. “See, you’re a natural,” Yves remembers his father saying the first time he had taken him into the

woods to learn the trade. “You chose a good tree. Now, stick the drill in and make a hole.” Yves had watched in excitement as the sap had trickled from the spile into the pail and had stuck out his tongue for a taste. “Not done just yet,” his father had laughed, puffing on a cigarette. “Now we gotta cook it down and filter out the sugar sand.”

Production began plummeting after peaking in the previous decade. For the fifth consecutive year, their maples had been devastated by gusts, ice, bark beetles, and heavy metals. One bad harvest after another, strangling the business, the losses wiping away the savings of the three brothers. The trees, and the men, tapped dry.

Fleurant had resisted filing for bankruptcy. “Dead-end,” he had called it one January afternoon. He had then declared that burning their facility down for the insurance money amounted to “destroying our legacy.”

Laurent had interrupted, hunching forward on the kitchen table, his gut slumping onto the oak. “I say we hit *le cartel*. Remember all the barrels they stole from us? Those were our best years! What have they done to help us out of the red? Nothing, that’s what. I say those pricks have it coming.”

“What are you proposing?” Fleurant had asked, cleaning his ear with a Q-tip. He crossed his long, lean legs and flicked the cotton swab into the trash can.

“I know someone on the inside,” Laurent had explained. “There are still producers out there on the other side of the Saint Lawrence making money. Their maples weren’t turned to shit like ours. My contact says there are tons of barrels at the warehouse.”

Fleurant’s blue eyes had lit up. “I know someone out east who might be interested. If you can get your hands on some sugar.”

Yves had agreed. Though the last thing he wanted to do was add legal trouble to their plight, there was no way of backing out with his elder brothers on board. Was he supposed to sit back and watch their sugar bush rot? The decades-old

memory of *le cartel* forcing them to give up their surplus syrup still felt fresh. The Dubois regularly defied the federation’s quota limits. Their father, now dead from diabetes after years of slathering syrup on everything, had insisted their syrup was never *le cartel*’s to control.



Yves stares into the snowy darkness of the road ahead. *Drip. Drip.* His nose begins to leak. The run-off pools onto his upper lip; it tastes sugary and sappy – the “sweet bleeds.” He wipes it off with his plastic-wrapped arm while steering with his free hand. Since hitting puberty two decades ago, his nose has been dripping every year between late winter and early spring, coinciding with harvest season. Strapped for cash, he started boiling, bottling, and selling his generous flowing sap at an artisanal farmer’s market. The side hustle was none of his brothers’ business, he’d decided. The sweet bleeds weren’t their problem, and certainly not their profit.

For a decade, he had held on to the hope that his leaky nose was the result of seasonal allergies, but his *grand-maman* Yvonne had crossed her twiggy arms and shaken her head. “Our heritage isn’t an allergy. Mine was just like yours not so long ago,” she said, pointing to her long, craggy nose. When she exhaled, black nose hairs had spun into the air like double-winged samaras in autumn.

More sap trickles down. He wipes some off, but it pours down his chin, then onto his jacket and jeans. Securing the steering the wheel with his knees, Yves searches the glove compartment for something to stem the flow, but the only thing he can find is a wad of Canadian Tire money. He crumples a fifty-cent bill and stuffs it up his snub nose only to sneeze out the paper in a new wave of sap.

From the corner of his eye, Yves spots a Tim Hortons on the side of the highway, its *Ouvert 24 hrs* sign glowing in red neon. *Toujours frais.* Though he knows he can’t afford to make any stops, he

refuses to let his nose leak all the way to New Brunswick. Besides, he needs some caffeine to get through the snowy moonlit winter morning. “If Fleurant doesn’t like it, he can do the driving himself next time,” Yves says. “He can fall asleep behind the wheel, for all I care.”

Yves gets off at the exit, goes around the overpass, and turns into the restaurant parking lot. He gets down from the driver’s seat and rushes inside, slowing down near the entrance to avoid arousing suspicion. He wheezes, his breathing becoming more laboured in recent months as his left leg has stiffened and his flesh has hardened. Covering his nose with his plastic-wrapped hand, he hobbles past the beaming clerk, who looks up at him from a fresh batch of maple glaze donuts. Her smile twists into a grimace and she reaches up to touch the bun of her hair, done up neatly in a hairnet. A truck driver seated alone at a booth eyes him as he heads straight for the bathroom. Old news, Yves thinks, long the recipient of every variety of dirty look and prying stare.

Yves locks the bathroom door and blows his nose, filling one paper towel after the next with sap until the sweet bleeds stop flowing. He removes his toque and scratches the rough, bark-like surface of his scalp, nearly tearing out the forever-itching saplings sprouting amid his curls. He then removes the garbage bags wrapped around his arms. The deeply rooted warts on his forearms ache. If not for the heist he would not have bothered covering them up. Even when he gets the warts surgically removed, they grow right back. The knobby growths on his fingers have sprouted a good inch in the past few months. When he was young, doctors had diagnosed him with *epidermodysplasia verruciformis*, the rare “treeman syndrome,” but *grand-maman* Yvonne had shaken her head once more.

“*Mon ti-fils*, it’s just a part of your inheritance,” she had explained. “It skips a generation. Don’t envy your moron brothers.” Before she had laid down her roots for good, she’d warned him not to forget his

own. “In ancient Greece, people were always turning into elms and poplars. What’s the big deal?”



The sun teases from the maritime horizon, tucked beneath the not-so-distant New Brunswick border. Yves knocks back the last of his coffee and crushes the plastic-coated cup. Making good time, he thinks, steadily increasing his speed. Two hours to go.

Yves daydreams about getting rid of the cargo and cracks a smile of relief. He fantasizes about going his own way, selling his sweet bleed syrup and maple-glazed Danishes in the city. And if the syrup business is dying, why not chop down their sugar bush and sell the lumber? He pictures fine dining tables and chairs being carved from the wood. Furniture replete with flourishes, regal fleurs-de-lys fit for the governor of New France.

Then, without warning, the flow of traffic slows to a crawl. The brake lights of the fruit truck ahead of him glow red. The van behind him honks. Bumper to bumper. Yves and his cargo are brought to a near-standstill. Three lanes restricted to one. What’s the next exit? Rivière-du-Loup?

Yves sticks his head out the window, but he can’t see anything past the vehicles ahead of him. Construction, he figures, though strangely enough for Quebec, he hasn’t seen any pylons for kilometres. “I don’t have time for this,” he mumbles, eying the dashboard clock just as the sweet bleeds resume their flow.

The fruit truck ahead of him creeps forward. Yves peeks out of the window again and sees a roadblock ahead. “*Merde*,” he curses, heart pounding at the sight of police officers. A short female cop with a ponytail is speaking to the driver of a hatchback. Too early for a sobriety check, he thinks, probably just a car wreck, but his chest tightens when he sees her inspect the trunk. All clear. She waves the car on.

Yves wipes his nose, considering what to do next. He checks his phone. No missed calls. He

pretends not to notice the officer in the fur earflap cap, standing by a police cruiser, staring at him. The police have always given him a hard time on account of his condition. In fact, he has gotten used to being pulled over for no apparent reason, but that was without \$67,000 in stolen syrup in the trunk. He thinks of calling Laurent. No time for that, he decides. As the female cop moves on to the driver hauling fruit ahead of him, he realizes that he has to make a decision: stay put or abandon the truck. He glances at the snow-blanketed firs and pines on the side of the highway.

The ponytailed cop points to the driver’s trailer and makes her way to check the cargo. The fruit truck driver unlocks his trailer doors, and she scans its contents. Too many vehicles to plough through the roadblock, Yves decides, not that he can get far with his truck. He imagines himself being questioned, stammering, unable to answer for the cargo as they drag him to the station. He makes his choice; it’s too late to save the wilting maples of their sugar bush.

While the officer in the fur cap looks at the fruit truck and speaks into the walkie-talkie, Yves slips on his gloves and toque, nudges opens the door, and sneaks out of the cabin. Forcing the dead weight of his left leg to move, he turns behind the cover of his vehicle and jumps, falls over the safety barrier into the roadside woods. With a good head start, he can lose his tail before they figure out which way he has gone.

A ray of sunlight slices through the purple-orange sky, illuminating the snow between the red and silver maples. He struggles through the deep snow. Despite his inexplicable resistance to cold – the only perk of his condition – the shrieking wind stings the parts of his skin not covered in warts and growths. For a quarter of an hour, he pushes through the falling snow, slowed down by its depth. Yves hunches over a rock to catch his breath, panting. His twisted legs can only take him so far. With sap streaming from his nose onto his boots, he breathes through his mouth.

Any minute now, Fleurant will call, inquiring about his whereabouts, checking up on him. Can his calls be traced, used as evidence against them in court? He considers smashing his phone against a rock and burying it under the snow. If he can make it to the other side of the woods to a gas station, he can call his brothers from a payphone. Wouldn’t they do the same for him? He imagines Fleurant breathing hard and Laurent losing his temper, planting his boot into a wall.

Yves turns his head and sees the amber trail of sap that leads straight to where he stands. His fingerprints are on the wheel. “*Tabarnac*,” he mutters. When he tries to move, he discovers that he is stuck. The sap has frozen him into place. He is too tired to struggle. The sweet bleeds have congealed into tusk-sized icicles, and more is rushing through his nasal cavity, backed up like pipes soon to burst. He tries to devise a new plan, a way to break the news to his brothers, but pressure is steadily building in his forehead.

The sun rises above the treetops. Yves squints in the glaring light. A chirping chickadee lands on his shoulder and pecks at the frozen sap hanging from his chin. He shrugs, but the bird patters across his back to the other shoulder and pecks away. Another bird lands on his ear, a third at his feet. He wants to yell, to curse his inheritance, but he can only muster a moan like branches swaying in the wind.

METAMORPHOSIS, TRANSFORMATION, AND LIMINAL SPACES

THE INK DRAWINGS OF GABRIELA CAMPOS

by
GILBERT REID

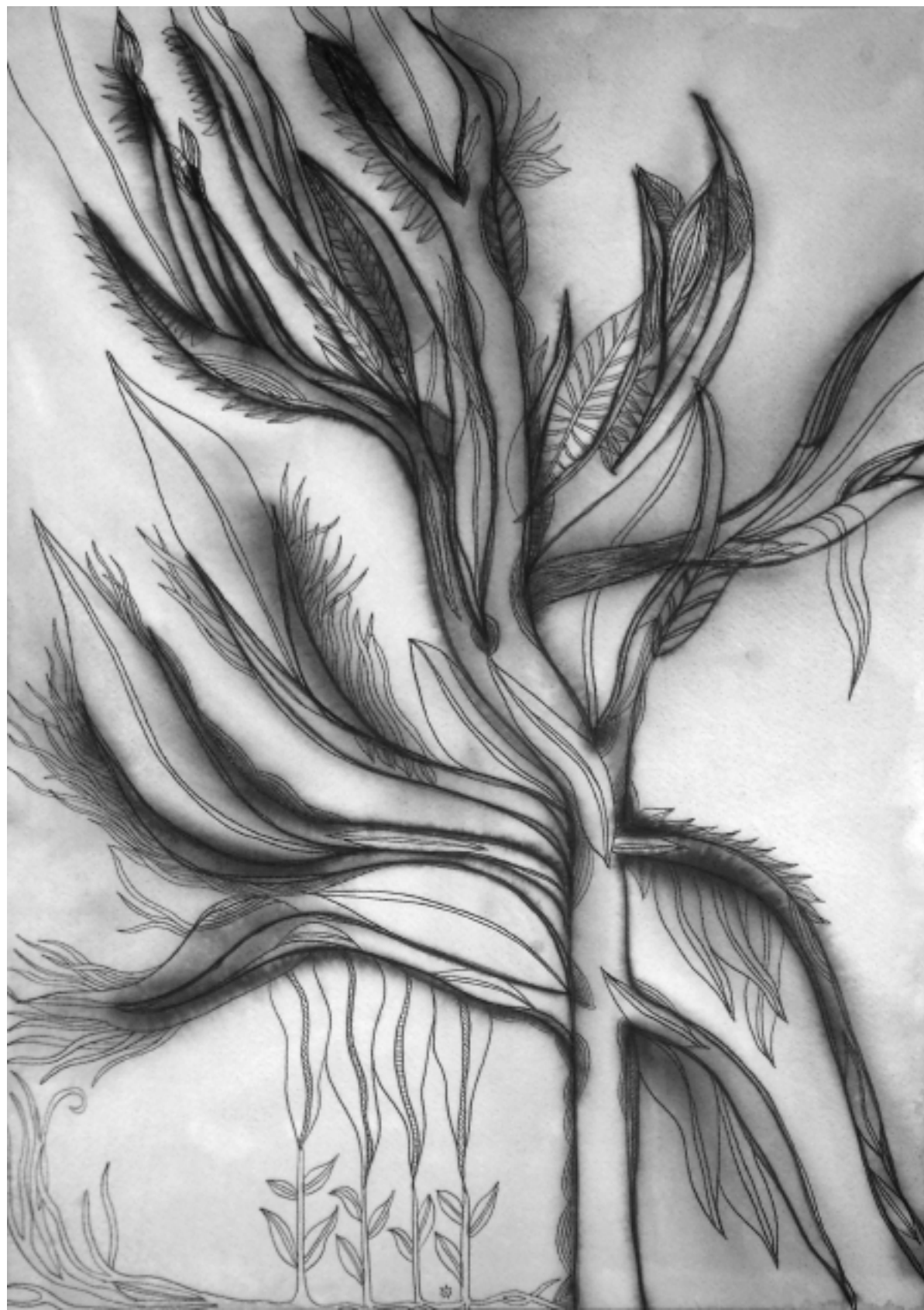
Gabriela Campos has, over an extraordinary 30-year career, produced a unique body of paintings, engravings, monoprints, and ink drawings – a career that has seen her study with masters in various countries, participate in more than 40 exhibitions in her native Mexico, as well as in the U.S., Canada, Spain, and Brazil.

Working in her preferred media she invents her own flowers, her own trees, her own botanical universe of stems and petals and blossoms. She invents her own world of themes that focus on a continual interchange between her human figures – almost always women – and the earth, and plants, and flowers.

Early in her career she began to experiment with the very substance of her media, mixing her own pigments for watercolours, and blending her own inks for the *à la poupée*¹ printmaking technique particular to Oaxaca, Mexico. She has also worked for decades with black, its many shades and subtle gradations. She has explored, instinctively not intellectually, her own mythology and symbolism, often creating a two-dimensional space that gives way to a three-dimensional “place,” pulling the viewer into a personal involvement with each tantalizing image.

In her most recent ink works, the explicitly human side of the equation is absent. Flowers – the blossoms, even stems and leaves – have become aggressive, sharp-edged, and almost carnivorous. These present a stark black-and-white sunless and cloudless world where the luminosity of the heavens





seems, at first glance, to be missing. It is a world that contrasts with much of Campos' earlier, sun-drenched, earthier, rooted world, a world in which the transformations of woman into plant and earth, or plant and earth into woman, was much more optimistic and playful and divine. Nonetheless, these four examples of her most recent works have a richness of sensation, and an energy that makes us linger with their striving, their vitality, the stripped-down skeletal delight of their forms.

For example, on page 40 (opposite), in a bellicose burst of vegetal energy, a strong foreground plant expands by flowering in waves in all directions. Plants like flames hold the distance. Tentacles or roots, suggested by very light touches, are also about to climb the central plant, and perhaps possess it. We feel that these plants are about to inherit the earth; or maybe they have already replaced the human and the animal in a post-apocalyptic world.

But, careful, careful. All is not lost. We are dealing with complex tensions within Campos' vision. In the drawing that lies across pages 38 and 39, stark, bare branches certainly suggest death, except there is also a softer, even benign presence – a wealth of leaves and foliage – and as always in Campos, they are individual leaves springing out of the source-tree as expansive, peaceful, even playful, sculpted and tactile presences. This is a sudden, unexpected reposeful interlude, in which the earth itself is being absorbed before our eyes by the fruitful organic world. Springtime is possibly just around the corner; rebirth may be about to happen and with it, redemption?

Campos' hieratic stylized images also have a timeless, dream-like quality. On page 43, the plant is coy and whimsical yet somehow ominous. Its roots curl like centipedes or branches or arms. Its central stem soars straight up and then leans toward the left side of the work as it encloses, or generates a number of leaves and offshoots that are strangely different in their individuality. Some leaves hang straight down, limp and submissive and tongue-like; some are richly ribbed, more energetic; or like the central leaf and others, they contain within themselves more leaves and more stems, threatening the viewer with infinite regression. The most vigorous flowering, and the most optimistic, appears at the bottom and extreme right, a root or branch sprouting leaves and a glimpse of a flower, a fruitfulness and energy that lead, as it were, offstage. The impression here is of extreme dryness, even, perhaps, of desert sterility, in spite of the leaves and energy of the lines. The "roots" turn away from the earth, and rise up, becoming their own sprouts, their own plants, but the earth, too, seems to be absent or seems to be in a state of refusal – not allowing the plant truly to belong. Has the earth lost its ability to regenerate – or has it merely changed its tactics?

To end the section, we find on pages 44 and 45 that a spiky flower lurks in the lower foreground, with vertical leaf-like spears, rising up beside the plant in a row. Here the shading is subtle, the space is darkened with suggestions of shadow and a dusky energy radiating from the plants themselves, and again, the spatial relationships are rich and shifting, the almost sumptuous use of shades and intensities of black drawing the gaze inwards, toward each shape, and its relationship with the other shapes – or plants – and with the space that surrounds them. The energies, vegetal and compositional, are particularly complex and provide a shifting roadmap for a visual voyage. Each glance reveals something new and with each glance, we learn something about that particular space, but also about the act of perception itself.

Artworks: each India ink drawing is done on a 42 x 30 cm sheet of Arches 140lb Fine Grain watercolour paper.

Gabriela Campos is and always will be deeply rooted in Mexican traditions, but there is also no denying that her life in rural Ontario after 2005 (a move of destiny inspired by love and marriage) has greatly influenced her oeuvre.² With her instinctive mastery of many fundamental mythical images, she breathes a distinctive life into each work luxuriating in a rich, joyful, sad, tragic, and seductive energy that remains with the viewer long after he or she has gazed upon, and taken in, the drawings or paintings or engravings. She is a marvellous and truly accomplished artist.

¹ Please see the last page (80) and inside back cover of this issue for three of Gabriela's *à la poupée* prints.

There are two ways of making an intaglio print – which is an engraving or incising process into a zinc or copper plate, or other hard material – so the result yields an image in multiple colours. In the method known as *à la poupée* (French: with the doll), a “doll-shaped” bundle of fabric is used to finish the application of individual colours – in Oaxaca, Mexico, they use the broken-off tips of paper-booklet matchsticks for the colouring of specific areas of a single plate – which is then printed in the standard way using a press. In the other conventional method separate plates, each carrying a different colour, are successively overprinted on a single sheet of paper, but when this method is used the printer must be careful to ensure that each successive colour falls in its precise location.

² “The period that most affected and influenced me as an artist was the time spent studying, producing, and engaging with an incredible array of artists while living in the culturally vibrant community of Oaxaca, Mexico. I was 24 when I arrived, and for close to a decade I was an independant woman discovering what it means to be fulfilled through making art, exhibiting, and being collected. This developed into a core sense of self that underpins my work, a foundation that still encourages my search to discover new ways of expressing myself after moving to Canada. And looking back over the years since 2005, it is no wonder that the “newness” of my experience is to be found in an ever-evolving aesthetic. I have been inspired by glacially sculpted stone surfaces and the dynamic greens in needles of westward-bending jack pines that are the Canadian Shield of summer; autumn's warm, golden, and earthy shades infused with layered, deep, and softly muted colors; the setting sun that casts cool, blue-based hues across fields blanketed by snow in my rural winters; the magical rebirth and blossoming that is spring – all so emotive, immersive, and inspiring.” —GABRIELA CAMPOS





from his translations of
C.P. CAVAFY
EVAN JONES

One Night

The seedy tavern had a room upstairs,
musty, rundown, private.
From its window only the alley was visible,
garbage-strewn and narrow, though
some workers’ voices rose up:
they were playing cards, enjoying life.

And there on a small, cheap bed
I had Eros in the flesh, I had lips
so sensual and so red as to intoxicate –
the red such an intoxication that even now
as I write, years later, alone
in my home, I am drunk again.

Remember, body

Remember, body – not only
were you loved, not only did you
lie in beds – you were longed for,
a visible light in the eyes
and tremble in the voice
hindered only by poor timing.
Now those longings are in the past
it feels as though you gave into them –
they glowed, remember, in the eyes
that watched, trembled in the voice,
for you, body – remember.

He planned to read

He planned to read. Two or three books
lie open beside him: historians, poets.
But he read for just ten minutes
and gave up, dozing off
on the sofa. Books are his obsession,
but he's twenty-three and very pretty
and this afternoon longing passed through
his tender skin, his lips. The fire
of longing passed through his beautiful skin –
without any guilt as to the cause of that fire.

In the Evening

In any event it could not last long. Years
of experience taught me that. Hurriedly,
somehow, Fate arrived and put it to rest.
A beautiful life cut short.
There were aromas which held such power
in those plush beds where we lay together
and gave our bodies such pleasure.

A sensation from those days of pleasure,
a sensation from those days comes to me,
some of the shared heat of our youth:
I take up the letter in my hands again
and read over and over until the light is dim.

Melancholy, I go out onto the balcony –
I go out to clear my head by watching,
in this, my beloved city,
some of the life in the streets and shops.

Grey

Eyeing a half-grey opal
I remembered looking into two beautiful
grey eyes, it must be twenty years ago.

—

We were in love for a month.
Then he left for Smyrna I think
for work, and we never saw each other again.

Those grey eyes will have aged – if he’s alive –
the handsome face will have worn.

Memory, hold on to what they were.
And bring back whatever you can,
memory, tonight, of my love.

Half an hour

I never had you, nor will I ever,
I imagine. A few words, an exchange
like the one yesterday, in the bar, and little else.
It is, I don’t mind saying, sad. But we servants
of art can sometimes, by focusing the mind,
call pleasure into being for a short time,
so that it almost seems a reality.
At the bar yesterday – aided by
plentiful and merciful drink –
I had half an hour of incomparable love.
And I think you understood that
and stayed a bit longer intentionally.
This was vital to me. Because with all
my imagination, and even the spirits,
I needed to see your lips,
I needed your body close to mine.

In Despair

He lost him completely and now seeks his lips
on the lips of every new lover in every
intimacy with each new lover he tries
to convince himself it is the same
beautiful young man he gave himself to.

He lost him completely as though he never
existed because he wanted – or so he said –
he wanted to be saved from the stigma
of unnatural pleasure from the stigma
of shameful pleasure – there was still time
or so he said he wanted to be saved.

He lost him completely as though he never
existed – a vision a daydream he seeks
his lips in the lips of other young men
longs to feel the same again his love again.

Candles

The days to come row upon row
like candles aligned before us –
radiant, warm, burning candles.

The days passed are behind us,
grave rows of candles snuffed out,
the closest still smouldering –
ashen, cold, consumed candles.

I cannot bear their mis-shapes:
memory of their brightness pains me.
I look to the lit candles.

Turning back to see the dark rows grow
so quickly fills me with dread,
so quickly the snuffed candles multiply.

C.P. Cavafy is widely considered the most distinguished Greek poet of the 20th century. During his lifetime he lived in relative seclusion, publishing little of his work, which was perhaps due to the highly personal nature of many poems. Cavafy, who was gay, wrote many sexually explicit, erotic poems and historical verse that are products of a singular vision, one which explores, in various ways, the gratifications, and ramifications, of the pursuit of pleasure.

A STORY HE TOLD ME

DEBORAH-ANNE TUNNEY



My ex-husband told me a story when we were still married, still in our early twenties, that made us both laugh. It was about a co-worker in his office. “He took so much food from the Christmas buffet that his paper plate folded down and food splattered everywhere.”

“How embarrassing,” I said.

“The worst part was he tried to stop it and so food was all over his clothes, on the floor, people behind in the line were slipping on it.”

This is when I laughed and then he joined in. “One woman in high heels ended up on her knees.”

“That poor woman,” I said.

“Yes, especially since he made it worse by saying, Joanne, what are you doing on the floor? Is this a game where you’re an animal? As if he wasn’t to blame.”

Illustration by Polina Gazhur/Shutterstock

“Who is this guy?”

“Jon.”

“Jon who?”

“Jon Bogart.”

“Bogart? Like the movie star?”

“He’s Danish.”

After he told me this story, he’d come home with other Jon stories. It seemed Jon liked spending time with my ex, and so they often had lunch in the cafeteria. “Jon has a dog now,” my ex told me.

“A dog? What kind?”

“A mutt, but it looks something like a border collie.”

“I love those dogs, but they need a lot of attention.”

“He says he does thought experiments with the dog.”

“Experiments?”

“He holds the dog food can up to its face. *Do you recognize this dog?* he’ll say to the dog. *He does not look like you, but he is a dog.*”

“Is he crazy?” I asked.

“Probably. Then he’ll try to figure out what the dog’s thinking by staring into the dog’s eyes and sleeping beside him.”

“On the bed?”

“No, beside the dog’s basket. He says he’s learning a lot.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ve noticed he’s much more alert.”

“Really?” In my mind’s eye I saw Jon, whom I’d imagined as tall, thin, and narrow-faced, now with a dog’s grin, the calm triangle of a plush nose, and unable to utter anything beyond canine phonemes. I looked at my ex, about to tell him my vision when it struck me he too looked strangely canine – his alert gaze out of the window, the way he gripped the window ledge with both hands, as if they were paws.

The dog became a topic between them for months, until the dog disappeared.

“Disappeared? How?” I said.

“He said they were at the vet’s. He said someone left the door open and the dog took off. There was a field out back.”

“Oh, how awful. What happened to the dog?”

“No one knows. But Jon walked the field every night for a week, calling it.”

We were at the dinner table when he told me this. As he spoke, he barely looked up from his meal, and despite Jon’s story of loss, my ex seemed unconcerned and distracted. It made me sad though to think of Jon, calling out to the dog in that field, even though by this point I was convinced Jon was a lunatic.

Then one day, when we were going through a tough time, to add to all the other tough times, when I was thinking I needed to leave, to live alone and find my balance, my ex came home and said, “We had a horrible fight. I’m never speaking to him again.”

“Who had a fight?”

“Me and Jon. We were yelling at each other in the cafeteria.”

“What were you yelling?”

“Fuck off. No, you fuck off.”

“That sounds kind of childish, don’t you think?”

“Oh really, and you’ve never been childish? Besides, he started it.”

I was getting dinner ready. He was sitting at the table. Immediately the air darkened and he looked away, but not before I saw myself in his vision, saw how I was becoming smaller and smaller, until I pictured myself a mere pinprick of light. Shortly after this exchange, on a beautiful autumn day, I left. He stayed at the job where he worked with Jon. It was a sad time. Winter came in, and it felt right.

I moved to an apartment half a city away.

When winter was coming around the next year, we met for dinner downtown on a night when the sky was a rich turquoise and the windows of the buildings lining that street were lit golden.

He looked the same. I ordered white wine, even though I usually prefer red in cold months. It took 15 minutes before I felt the familiar urge to escape, but I stayed.

At the point when we ordered coffee, I asked about Jon. We had already discussed our families. Our new apartments. Our offices. Our jobs.

“He died.”

“He died?”

“Yes. They think it was suicide. But that doesn’t sound right to me.”

“What else could it be? I mean, how was it discovered?”

“The body?”

“Yeah, the body. What did the body tell them?”

“They said his death was by drowning. So, who knows?”

I turned away, as I had been turning away from him for years. And dragged this huge whole wail of silence behind me. I know a wail should not be silent, that a wail is the opposite of silence, but that’s what it felt like. A sack of silence and with it a sadness, a bag slung over my shoulder with all these lumps protruding. It reminded me of chopped potatoes simmering in a pot, starch steaming the windowpane, the gloom of a late afternoon settling in the yard outside the window.

This confused, unique man gone; a man I had never met. Gone, like the dog. Running wild in some field. And gone the stories of him, and that cruel laughter that for a time kept my ex and me linked. I could say nothing more, and so we split the bill and stepped out together into a bitter wind that was the beginning of the cold season.

from the long sequence of poems

IN A FLASH OF LIGHTNING

ZHAO SI

Children

They disappeared swiftly
without a trace. Coiling waves, whirled-away time,
each a spinning vortex, soft curling locks of hair,
bright smiles.
Acres and acres vanished before
they were dim reflections of stars on the Earth.
Cherubim who borrow the first appearance of the soul,
the quantum fluctuations of their iridescent wings;
stars, too distant from the Earth,
reflections wavering.
Coils and coils, whirled away time, soft angels,
reflections of stars vanished in a blink.

Riding

My outcast soul opens to you like a jellyfish,
transparent, innocent, blithe to your tentacles’ sting.
Only in your gaze – it feels warm and intimate.
You love it pathetically, don’t you?
It is destined to belong to you;
infiltrating you, instantly a dazzling water-green
rocking to the motion of a subway, a huge kettle –
and I am a drop that rides in you.
With one glance, you know me.
Inside me, water molecules mimic your rocking, don’t they?
Suck it!
Too noisy this isolation.
I sere and wither in your name
and then become a ball of bright silver
a promise to give you
a satellite in your orbit
rising from your palms.

In a Flash of Lightning

All day, I’ve dipped into the fantastic moment,
sunshine dismissed, all things clean and crystal,
leaves like green feathers, sunlight, clouds of white roses
blooming one after another.
I’ve walked on the street as if walking on the bow of the world’s ship,
the tranquility spreading in the parting of the rippling wind,
reflected in the azure infinity lake of my heart.
Yet an unknown sound arises, terse,
out of a giant mirrored face – its withy outline opens,
purity settles in its shiny and silvery depth.
Myriads of changes evaded, reserved and restrained,
fold in on themselves
before suddenly vanishing.
In the silence of waiting, a pearl-coloured silence,
love brands itself into the world, extends its tentacles, and I hear
a crisp, tinny hatching sound –
the vital force of life walking away from its dusty dwelling,
step by step toward reality. Have you parched land,
lodged in the same dream with me, heard it too?
In a flash of lightning, I awaken first,
shedding my spring nectar with raindrops for you.

Autumnal Musing

Like a blade of crabgrass,
the old woman became a fixture at the subway entrance,
over a long winter, a spring, a summer.
Now, autumn has settled,
the woman who crumbles like sandy soil
still holds in her hand tiny flower pots,
mutters, with a trembling voice,
as if squeezed from cracked buildings,
“Flowers for sale...”
On my windowsill,
a small pot of Jewel Flowers has survived three seasons.
It reminds me silently
with its last, plump petals.
“Relax, death has its own clock.”

Architectural Modelling

You light up a thousand-fold brightness and the lamp
of the tabernacle in my heart.
An encircling, swirling, building brightness of spirit
embraces summer splendour, greets
the future vastness and its haziness; no one knows
its composition:
both water and wind, fire and clay,
morning and night, salt and sugar,
hence no one knows how it will dissipate.
It was built according to the law of truly large numbers, whirlpools
of humanity, labour and rest: on a coastal beach,
peaceful as somewhere east of Eden,
people, like me,
witness its expanse from the Earth below to the sky above:
from a tiny letter to a flying star,
from the interior of a lotus to its blessed wet, sweet, fragrance;
sea-floor pavements mirror the transgressed green world,
reflect the innocent looks of those invisible,
from two sides of the world, to behold
the open heart of each and every daybreak, the horizon,
radiating the unsurpassed splendour of a rosy dawn,
opening the celestial clam.

MY FIVE HERE IS ELSEWHERE

BEATRIZ HAUSNER

1. GETTING TO HERE

From about the age of seven, I was brought up in the household of artists – my mother, Susana Wald, and the poet and collage artist, the late Ludwig Zeller, my stepfather. Poetry and art were the defining constant. I remember one instance when – while still in my native Santiago de Chile – as children, my brother, one of my cousins, and I were assigned to memorize one poem each by Ludwig. We were not only able to recite our designated poems (for me it was a poem by Gabriela Mistral), but out of boredom, the three of us quite instinctively decided to recite our assignments in tandem, with ensuing cacophony. Ludwig found this to be quite a happy and natural expression of the subversive instinct for experimentation that guided his and my mother’s creative stance throughout their lives.

Years later, once settled in Canada – and because of his isolation in Toronto (speaking only Spanish was his barrier) – Ludwig took me on as interlocutor of things poetry. He introduced me to the poets of the Spanish Renaissance and Baroque, such as Garcilaso de la Vega, Francisco de Quevedo, and the incomparable Luis de Góngora. He read them out loud to me, as he did the poets that were his precursors, like the French-language poet and mystic, O.V. de L. Milosz, the French Symbolist poets, or his near-contemporary Rosamel del Valle. He read and educated me about the poetry of surrealism, including most of the poets that would eventually make up my poetic pantheon; these poets would markedly influence my work, and included César Moro, Aldo Pellegrini, Enrique Gómez Correa, Jorge Cáceres, the extraordinary César Vallejo, and all manner of poets on the same tangent as the surrealists of the interwar and post-war periods, whose work he valued, such as the writers of the Grand Jeu (René Daumal, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, Rolland de Renéville). Ludwig was obsessive about the German Romantics, especially Hölderlin, whom he read to me in excellent Spanish translations, though my favourite at the time was Heinrich von Kleist, whose plays in English translation I read with special avidity.

2. COMMUNICATING VESSELS

At its most essential, translation is the transfer of textual or verbal objects from one language to another. Literary translation can be more readily compared to a kind of alchemy, where the contents of one vessel are poured into another vessel to create a rich mixture. In the case of poetry, the *prima materia* involved in this transfer takes the form of cadences, images, rhythms, which pour themselves out of the source text and into the poetics of the target language, thereby enriching it and providing it with elements that can ultimately transform it. At least that has been my experience.

I had the good fortune of starting out as a writer by translating extraordinary Spanish-American poets into English. The deep reading, which the process of translation entails – as well as the challenge and fear I faced in trying to render their creations in English – provided me with a superb poetic education. I learned the myriad ways of voice and structure; I honed my technique and made mine the associative methods they exemplified, which suited my temperament. I learned how physical and social realities become a limitless resource of emotional power in the hands of a good poet. There is no question that their voices wove themselves into mine.

Translating César Moro (1903-1956), the Peruvian surrealist, has proven one of the greatest experiences of my life as a poet. I had not, nor have since, come across a poet whose expression of love for a man is as nakedly daring as Moro’s. The beauty of romance, the celebration of his lover, comes through with an erotic force rendered through explosive images and brilliant juxtapositions, creating a cosmic environment for his beloved out of concrete reality. All the elements of the known and imagined world are at his disposal as Moro goes about inventing an entirely new poetics.

3. WRITING

For 15 years I crafted works, almost exclusively, in translation, mostly from Spanish into English – although I also translated a few Canadians into Spanish from English and French. Humbled by the sheer greatness of the voices I was translating, I dared not write my own poems. I simply didn’t feel I was good enough in comparison. This changed sometime in the mid-1990s, when I started to feel that, although the voices of poets like Jorge Cáceres and the aforementioned César Moro approximated my own, most of the writers I had translated into English, while dear to me, did not speak in the way I wanted to speak. I began to feel limited by writing translation exclusively and started, tentatively, exploring my own poetics. To express the longings and the joys I felt, also the frustrations I experienced in my place of work, which had become like a prison, I began writing poetry. I explored, then invented a metaphoric system that could best portray the shiny things that I found beguiling and inspiring, clothes. Their making, their wearing, their being imagined became my tool for transforming myself and the world. The result was *The Wardrobe Mistress* in 2003, my first poetry collection. I quickly followed with poems that carried over from that book in terms of structure, but which focused on the relation between humans and machines. More specifically, I became preoccupied with the possibility of building an “ideal man” following my specifications: a doll made by sewing, brought to life by his maker, for her pleasure. Out of that exploration came the poems collected in the 2016 *Sew Him Up*, many of which riffed off bits borrowed from the poets I had translated, like Olga Orozco, or Rosamel del Valle. In the central poem of that collection, “The Seamstress and the Living Doll,” I opened my metaphoric system to include references from the Classics, such as Hesiod. The notion of creation at its most essential brought me right back to Vicente Huidobro’s assertion: *el poeta es un pequeño dios* (trans. the poet is a little god).

4. WITH STRANGE ANIMALS IN STRANGE HOUSES

For 36 years I worked full-time as a public librarian. The excitement and joys of the early years, spent working with books, building collections, actively engaging communities alongside genius pioneers of the profession, faded with the imposition of neoliberal models, such as the amalgamation of Toronto.

It seemed to me that the people making decisions for libraries willingly sold out to the technology companies, almost cheerfully disposing with the legacy of those who had developed the extraordinary library services that had made Canada famous. The emotional cost was great for many of us. I, in any case, took it hard. With technology suddenly and incomprehensibly determining the rhythm of our labour, the energies left over after a full day's work were extremely diminished. Yet creation was a solution to despondency and sadness. I decided I should start writing little meditations on things read and observed, units of thoughts I could manage in short bursts. One day, as I was sitting at my computer writing one such piece, I had a vision: sitting at a chair I kept in a corner of my study was a human-size raccoon. I saw him as a being made of juxtaposing elements: man, animal, cyborg – he was capable of becoming whatever I wanted him to be, including a being dedicated to pleasuring [me]. Writing in this way was immensely liberating and happy-making. Eventually, I found the means of combining the meditations with what became a corresponding “divertimento,” a divagation that could best express this trans-human love affair. The result was my 2012 *Enter the Raccoon*.

Also around that time, I participated in and attended a surrealist exhibition in Coimbra, Portugal. These events have the characteristic of bringing together surrealists from all over the world. It was there that Rik Lina came up with the idea of collaborating on a book titled *The Secret Life of Plants*, where his art and my writing could come together. I approached his automatic ink drawings in much the same way musicians riff off of images or sounds, and very naturally a narrative established itself, centred on a house that had once stood in Paris, and during the 1930s was shared by different surrealists, including the Prévert brothers and Yves Tanguy. Five of the pieces that constitute *The Secret Life of Plants* are presented in the following Word & Art section.

5. BELOVED REVOLUTIONARY SWEETHEART

The loosening of thematic focus and form afforded me by writing *Enter the Raccoon* proved to be a bridge to my 2020 and latest poetry collection, *Beloved Revolutionary Sweetheart*. Breaking out of the shorter lines that characterized my earlier poetry, achieving greater density, while maintaining poetic flow, these were lessons I learned from a workshop on the Canadian long poem taught by Jay MillAr. From bp nichol I learned that the poetic breath could be fed and sustained. Christopher Dewdney provided me with the example of effective image concentration and repetition. Curiously, these brought me back to the unique 20th century voice that is André Breton's, his incredibly innovative way of writing.

All the while, I was delving into Latin Classics such as Ovid, the Byzantine Procopius, and especially the Troubadour poets. I find their extraordinary inventions entirely current in spirit and liken their work to New Wave musical artists like Annie Lennox, David Bowie, Soul and Funk musicians James Brown and Sly Stone, and the many incomparable artists of Motown. There is more, of course, but for now, this is “My Five” on how I came to find myself, today.

THE SECRET LIFE OF PLANTS

Artworks by
RIK LINA

Words by
BEATRIZ HAUSNER



Life Blood

I. Vita Exsanguis

She had been in the house for some time, motionless. Once the movers had gone, she wondered whether she should unpack the things that she had carried over from her previous lives. They resembled the artifacts of those museums of the past century, the ones that had not undergone the clinical revisions that drain the energy out of living spaces.

Despite everything, hers were objects that merited careful cataloguing. She had decided that, if ever it were to pass, these artifacts would necessitate a new archiving method, a classification system not derived from the ones in current use. They too, she felt, had been rendered lifeless by excessive revision.

First, there would be the image: every image, regardless of its content, contained clues to inform the system she had set out to invent.

News of a total solar eclipse, which was sweeping across a narrow swathe of Asia, reminded her that, always when working with the parts that informed the whole, one of those parts would eclipse the other, much as plants do in secret. It is a well-known fact that the obscuring of one object by another, allows previously invisible parts of said object to become visible. She understood this to be an essential aspect of her work as a classificationist.

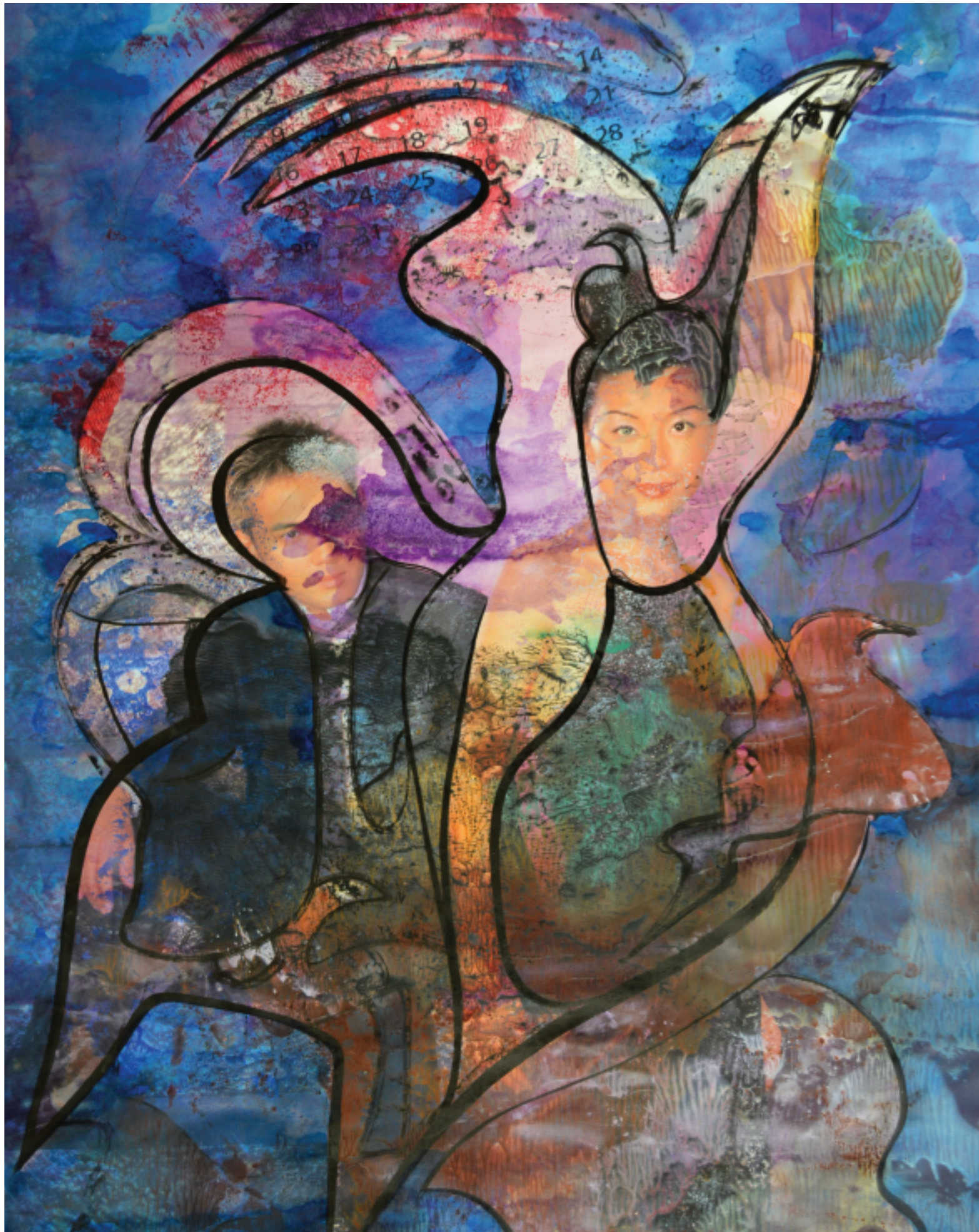
II. Blood Count

No sooner had she finished laying out this aspect of the system, than the image came out of its frame and began to envelop her. She had not counted on the objects being alive, so that this sudden change in the situation caught her by surprise. Powerless to control her environment, she surrendered to it, became relaxed, accepting, open. The plant now took her by the throat, separated her legs so that her sex was slightly exposed. It was a male plant. This she knew because of its strength and also because his bulbous member exuded a scent, at once familiar and foreign. She raised her arms to indicate submission to his power and closed her eyes.

III. Transfusion

Although the image would have one believe otherwise, she was supine. His forceful grip held her in place, forcing her to go in and out of reverie. She liked this state, for it allowed his tongue to speak for hers.





Writing

News arrived that day through an intricate system of branches. The parcel showed no specific domicile or return address. There was something ancient about it. Inside were contained pieces of fabrics woven from substances not known to the inhabitants of the house at the Rue du Château. Also a book, long before set by hand.

“How much joy I gathered to myself in that one night,” was written on the margins. The rest of the script was legible only to the lover, who alone knew how to decipher the markings left on the paper. He studied the text for many years, before determining that it held his beloved’s whispering heart.

Blood. Flesh. Long lengths of hair perhaps. Maybe eyes and bits of feathers fanning the waters.

“A pause, for strength gathering,” said the scholar of ancient scripts, in his self-effacing manner of speaking between breaths.

The beloved appeared to him. Rising from the writing she came face to face with the devoted interpreter. She seemed dreamy, distracted by the eye that watched impassively from its permanent position on the wall, and wondered, *Could this be a new way of understanding the vegetal murmurs of the night?*

The Orgasms Room

One day the man she had invented for herself appeared on the doorstep of the house at Rue du Château. She had seen him in dreams, imagined his sex, its head, its dimensions. She had conjured the outward appearance of his skin; his fairness growing inward of its layers, the delicate lines that defined his upper and lower lips, the texture of his hair; the fact of his luminosity. These and other aspects, she kept in reserve to pleasure her mind. Time, life's complicated fabrics and the tight weave of her days had worked their hardness into forgetting, so that the ideal man she had so carefully pursued had faded into the deep recesses of her mind where he lived with her longing.

When he came, she recognized him immediately. His skin had darkened somewhat, for he had journeyed far in her absence, to places others would not dare venture. He had wrestled with women and men of formidable cruelty, translated his sufferings into old, perhaps dead languages, which he pronounced perfectly.

No sooner did his tongue touch hers than she understood that their paths mirrored each other, as though they had been drafted by the hand of an overseer, ensuring that their course was tortuous, that they meandered slowly and through deep crevasses of both anguish and joy.





The Bed

The room faced one of the inner courtyards. It was white, except for the floors, which were tiled in an unusual indigo colour. The walls were denuded of any decoration. At the centre of the room was a bed, its frame made of dark wood. The planks that held the mattress had travelled by ship from faraway. It was said that the carpenter had had the sculpted wood frame blessed at an altar where the souls of the dearly departed could be visited

Much was made of the strange itinerary the bed had followed; from the modest carpenter's shop in the small village in that southern continent, to its first home in a Scandinavian country, then the faraway American mountain town where new rituals had been forced on its resilient structure. No one knew how it had made its way to its final destination at the house on the Rue du Château. Like the walls of the room, the bedding was pristine white, made of the finest cotton, carefully starched, and doused with lavender extracts, in order to ensure a pleasant sleep for whoever was destined to spend the night inside its welcoming folds.

It was in these folds that he woke up one morning, naked, his body lengthened by the upward movement of his arms, which were joined at the wrists by a single gold ring. A song was ringing in his ear. He had not heard it for many years and it caused him to weep at love lost. Yet he felt happy this morning and thinking himself alone, began to sing softly:

*If you ever change your mind
I've a certain cure
An old refrain, it lingers on,
L'amour toujours l'amour...*¹

As he sang he looked up and realized that one of those wrists was, in fact, not his; it belonged to the woman he had been dreaming about. He smiled and looked at her face, at her closed eyes. By force of will he decided he should rouse her from her long sleep.

The woman was slow to react, accustomed as she was to long waking rituals, which involved ingesting the plants that grew in the gardens of her childhood. She would avail herself of these at a market where the sellers bartered with her in a constant give-and-take that involved the exchange of painful memories.

Her eyes opened to his light, magnifying the sun pouring into the room through the diaphanous curtains. She touched his face, held it in both her hands, as if to confirm that he was real. She then cast her gaze downwards, directing his eyes towards her legs, one of which she crossed over his own. They remained thus, in embrace for a long time.

Suddenly everything changed and they were aloft. The whiteness of the walls, the sun flooding through the windows, the glimmering gold ring that now held the lovers together, these caused levity to replace gravity, allowing the bed to float in mid-air, dispelling all elements of the quotidian from that room in the house at the Rue du Château.

¹ From Brian Ferry and Roxy Music "All I Want Is You."

The Wedding Room

She was still sleeping when the man went got up and went to explore the house on his own. He had recently arrived from his faraway city, one that was northern, but which he inhabited as if it bordered the tropical shores of a great ocean. He had always treated his places of residence as if they were a composite of his various pasts and their ghosts.

“There is a secret room in your house. I will reveal it to you. Come with me,” he said, when he came back to her.

While researching the house, she had encountered many references to hidden spaces, though no allusion to the wedding room ever came up in the annals. In days of old, when the house bustled with the lives of adherents of the cult, there had been hidden closets and compartments in the building, which could turn instantly into spaces to be used for different purposes. Tanguy, one of the house’s original inhabitants had decorated one alcove to “surprise and disturb. The door had the ambiguous character that such openings often assume in dreams in which outside and inside get muddled up.”¹

She went into the wedding room with her eyes closed, holding firmly to his hand, for she had trouble finding her balance as she stepped on ever-shifting grasses and lichens that lined the floor. Once inside, she opened her eyes and found herself in a room entirely festooned with flowers: a riotous mix of roses, hydrangeas, orchids and freesias. All the blooms were white; no other colours existed there. What made the arrangement so beguiling was their combined perfumes, as well as their textures, which created a kind of unison picture of pure love.

There was a place setting for each of their relations, living and dead. It was to be a large wedding party.

The voice of the priestess rang through the loudspeakers. The ceremony had begun. She closed her eyes, inhaled the scent of all those white flowers and remembered.

¹ André Thirion, *Revolutionaries Without Revolution*, New York: MacMillan Co., Inc., 1975, page 87.





Burning Flame

for Javier Zeller

Once the processions were concluded, the new house made itself entirely open to her. A large fire welcomed her in the foyer, a fire made out of a single central flame, which could obliterate whatever existed around it. The people who knew about the house, whose testimonies appeared in the old city directories of Paris, had established that the flame had been there all along, and that the house had been built around it, in order to accommodate it. “Strange force of nature,” had commented the architect at the time.

What struck her, when first she came face to face with the fire, was the fact that the flame grew and shrank for no apparent reason, now withering to a glimmer, now burning high, shooting upward, as if to break through the ceiling of the foyer. It was clear that the fire was pulling her toward itself. She felt trepidation even as a voice within her reassured her that this was the course of action to be taken now.

She approached the fire with eyes shut, for fear it might blind her. Then she reached out and touched it.

Rik Lina painting a Leporello (3:06)

tinyurl.com/RikLina



Artworks

Rik Lina in front of the oil painting, *Space Islands of the Unicorn* (in progress), in his studio in Tavarede, Portugal, 2014. Photograph by Elizé Bleys. p. 65

Life Blood. Ink, watercolour paint on paper: 41 x 29 cm. p. 67

Writing. Ink, acrylic paint on posterboard. 74 x 45 cm. p. 68

The Orgasms Room. Watercolour paint and collage on paper: 40 x 30 cm. p. 71

The Bed. Ink, colour pencil frottage on paper: 45 x 32 cm. p. 72

The Wedding Room. Ink, crayon, and acrylic paint on Tibetan Loktha paper: 50 x 35 cm. p. 75

Burning Flame. Ink, acrylic paint on paper: 41 x 29 cm. p. 76

Contributors

FEATURES & ENCOUNTERS

WORD & ART: TAKING A LINE FOR A WALK

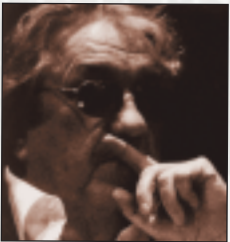
JOHN MEREDITH (1933–2000) had an extensive exhibition history during his career, and his agent, Av Isaacs of the Isaacs Gallery, Toronto, exhibited his works for over 30 years from 1960-1991. In 1974, The Art Gallery of Toronto held a solo exhibition of Meredith's work, which then travelled to other public institutions in 1975. In 1984-85, the Art Gallery of Ontario held another solo exhibition of his work.

photo by John Reeves



BARRY CALLAGHAN is the well-known novelist, poet, and person of letters who has been included in every major Canadian anthology, and his fiction and poetry have been translated into seven languages. His 13 books include *The Hogg Poems and Drawings*, *The Black Queen Stories*, *The Way the Angel Spreads Her Wings*, *When Things Get Worst*, *A Kiss Is Still a Kiss*, *Barrelhouse Kings*, *Between Trains*, and *Beside Still Waters*.

photo by Mark Tearle



GRAVITAS: THE SECRET LIFE OF PLANTS



RIK LINA of the Netherlands has dedicated his life and art to the study of deserts, mountains, tropical rainforests, and coral reef jungles, including the island of Bonaire, where he lived for several years. His drawings and paintings merge pelagic realms and cloud forests with inner spaces. He has participated in countless international exhibitions, both individually and collectively, as part of the International PHASES movement and the collectives he's founded, like CAPA (Collective Automatic Painting Amsterdam).

photo by Elizé Bleys



BEATRIZ HAUSNER of Toronto has published several poetry collections, including *Sew Him Up*, *Enter the Raccoon*, and *Beloved Revolutionary Sweetheart*. Her books have been published internationally in several languages: French, Greek, and her native Spanish. Hausner's translations of Latin American surrealist poets have exerted an important influence on her own writing. She was President of the Literary Translators' Association of Canada, and Chair of the Public Lending Right Commission.

beatrizhausner.com

photo by Clive S. Sewell

MY FIVE: HERE IS ELSEWHERE is by Beatriz Hausner (above).

THE ACERBIC EYE: THOSE WHO FAIL...

TERRY MOSHER (a.k.a. Aislin) of Montreal is often called Canada's nastiest political cartoonist. Over the course of his career he has frequently appeared as a commentator on many of Canada's major television and radio programs, and is also a regular speaker on the topics of humour, history, and the importance of cartooning as a communications tool.

aislin.com

photo by Terry Mosher



TECHĒ: METAMORPHOSIS, TRANSFORMATION...

GABRIELA CAMPOS has studied with many masters across her native country of Mexico, and through invitation, with others abroad. Her watercolours, monoprints, and etchings are thematic in their composition, and her conceptual arrangements portray an interpretive exploration of the human condition. She has had over 25 solo exhibitions in Mexico and Canada, and numerous group shows in the U.S., Spain, and Brazil.

photo by Eric Fefferman



GILBERT REID is a Canadian writer, journalist, diplomat, university lecturer, script doctor, and a television and radio broadcaster who has covered war, weapons technology, utopian beliefs, France and Italy, eroticism and sexuality, and international economics and politics. He is the co-author, with the late Jacqueline Park, of the romantic historical adventure novel, *Son of Two Fathers*, and the author of two collections of stories, *So This Is Love: Lollipop and Other Stories*, and *Lava and Other Stories*, as well as the eight-volume sci-fi and fantasy series *Adventures of V*.

gilbertreid.com

photo by Wodek Szemberg



PROSE & POETRY

JENNIFER DELASKIE is an emerging writer based in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal). Her work has appeared in *The Dalhousie Review*, *Chronicling the Days: Dispatches from a Pandemic*, and *QWF Writes!*, the online publication of the Quebec Writers' Federation. Jennifer is a graduate of the Humber School for Writers Correspondence Program in Creative Writing. She is currently polishing her first novel, a coming-of-age story set in near-future northern Quebec.



VERONICA GAYLIE is a Vancouver poet and writer. Her first book of poetry, *Sword Dance* (Exile Editions) was a long poem about her mother's immigration to Canada. She has worked on community environmental projects in Canada, California, London, Detroit, and Kenya, and has published two books of environmental writing. Poems from her latest collection (excerpted here) about teaching in a refugee camp in Kenya made the long list for the 2020 CBC Poetry Prize.

JON BONGIORNO is a journalist at the CBC and a writer of prose. His work has appeared in *Canadian Notes & Queries*, *Geist*, and *Maisonneuve*. He won *Event's* 2019 Speculative Writing Contest. Joe is currently working on a novel and a short story collection

photo by Anne Guay



EVAN JONES was born in Weston, Ontario, and has lived in Manchester, UK, since 2005. His latest poetry collection is *Later Emperors*. His first collection, *Nothing Fell Today But Rain* was a finalist for the Governor-General's Literary Award for Poetry. His translations of Cavafy, *The Barbarians Arrive Today* (excerpted here), was a *Times Literary Supplement* Book of the Year. He has published in *Poetry* (Chicago), *Poetry London*, *Poetry Review*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

DEBORAH-ANNE TUNNEY is a poet, short story writer, and novelist who was born and lives in Ottawa. Her prose and poetry have appeared in Canadian, American, and UK literary journals and anthologies, notably *Threepenny Review*, *Missouri Review* and *Narrative*. Her linked short story collection, *The View from the Lane*, and her novel, *Winter Willow*, preceded her first book of poetry, *A Different Wolf*, which won the 2021 Archibald Lampman Award.

photo by André Savary



ZHAO SI is a Chinese poet, essayist, translator, poetics scholar, editor, and is the author or translator of 10 books, and translator of selected works by Hart Crane (U.S.), Ted Hughes (UK), Vladimir Holan (Czech Republic), Yannis Ritsos (Greece), and others, while her work has been translated into 16 languages. She is a frequent guest at poetry festivals worldwide, works for *Poetry Periodical* – which is the top poetry magazine in China – and is the Editor-in-Chief of the prestigious poetry translation series *Contemporary International Poetry*. She was an Orion Visiting Artist at the University of Victoria, B.C., in 2017. She lives in Beijing.

Encounter

À LA
POUPÉE
PRINTS
OF
GABRIELA
CAMPOS

a supplement to pages 38-45



The three works, above and opposite/inside cover, are examples of Oaxaqueño *à la poupée* printmaking by Mexican-Canadian artist Gabriela Campos – and complement this issue's *Metamorphosis, Transformation, and Liminal Spaces* “Technē” section.