

BILL DIREEN

Coma

THREE STORIES

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FICTION

Wormwood. Paper edition *SPORT 18*, 1997

Utopia Rag. Paper edition *Nusquama* Alpha Books, 2002

Oñaevia, fable. Paper edition Alpha Books, 2002

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Nusquama. (German tr. A. Loeffler). Paper Titus Books, 2005.

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L. in *A Foreign Country, New Zealand Speculative Fiction*, edited by Anna Caro and Juliet Buchanan. Random Static, Wellington, 2010.

Jonah at Kapiti. Digital format, 2016.

Stadium. Digital format, 2016.

OTHER

Versions Translations. Poetry. Paper edition Kilmog 2014

Tourtagebuch. Tour Diary (tr. A. Loeffler), 2012

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HIM

The site was marked for demolition and development. A sign by the hole in the netting read One And Two Room Apartments. We spent one night together in that make-shift bed. She folded the quilt back, revealing her marks of illness and of injury. My fingers fitted between her ribs, they lit on her soft belly, tracing the lower curves. She unclenched my fist till I had no grip at all. *O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out?*

The first bus fired it engines and shot me north with a force that could kill to my first job since peace, a peace never more like war. The island was no longer inhabited. I would care for the plots of those who had died there, according to their Wills and the wishes of their descendants in other lands. In the morning she knew it was going to rain. She piled up a few cartons for cover saying, Yes, I should do that. I should go ahead and do what I had promised to do before we met.

The bus passed the remains of a bombed factory. Smoke was casting a fat shadow over a car park full of charred cars. It

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had been bombed months before, but for some reason fires started up again. Hooligans, the driver said. No one had bothered to put the fires out.

Next morning I boarded a ship that passed into a fjord. Another night passed and I boarded another bus. The drivers were getting tetchier. Early snows had made the roads unsafe. Finally, I was the only passenger left. The driver shouted over the engine, 'See them? The lights!' and I saw a crawl of strokes widening with fire-orange like plane tracers.

The bus slowed at the border and I decided to go back to her. I was going to get out and walk back if necessary, to walk and swim and lie and steal my way back if necessary, but the guard at the border didn't care about seeing any papers. He waved us on as if to say 'If you've come this far you ain't no threat to no one. Hell! Get to hell out of here!' I shouted at the driver to stop but he dropped down a gear and squirted out of the gravel, shouting something about the border guard I didn't understand. He yelled at me to sit down and shut up.

*

It was the nineteenth winter. As every morning in summer I walked naked from the cabin towards the sea, but this time there were men on the beach around a fire. They folded back as a single organism and one of them dropped to shooting position. Another shouted not to make any sudden moves. I

told them this was my home, the island, that I lived there and worked there. One of them followed me back into the cabin while I dressed. He checked my papers, and we settled down around the flames to talk. One of them looked at the sky. He had spent most of the night looking at the stars. They had not seen the stars for six months. They had been living underwater. They said there was war again and offered me smoked kippers. I remembered a poem: *The rank is but the guinea's stamp*. They were respectful. I told them about her and me. They looked uncomfortable. I wrote her name on an envelope. One of them coughed politely, and said 'Shore leave's over, chaps.' I wanted to go with them. I walked into the sea after their boat. The water boiled around them as their iron hull went under.

Others arrived... unliving... bludgeoned... oil stained, most of them... murdered on the rigs. Soldiers, too... a hole in the head, or parts of their bodies nibbled away. 'Bury me!', they cried, so I put them in with the old ones, with the skeletons of fishermen, or a minister with silver fillings in his teeth. They could have a nice old chin wag.

*

On the morning my son found me a gull was having trouble taking off from the shore. It ran and tried to fly but could not. I was bathing in the sea, the smaller fish up around me, the bigger ones just out of reach, when I heard the sound of

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an engine, the old ferry straining. It was not the date of a supply drop so I did not expect it would be dropping anything off, nor anyone. I was waist-deep in the sea, when I saw his figure approaching my hut from the other side of the island. My soldier, my son. He must have been twenty, twenty-one. I knew immediately he was my son and I was worried about what he wanted to know. Would he ask about us, about me and his mother? What would I say? That it might have been better if his mother and I had not kissed? Or would I nod like an old one and look as if I had forgotten something, my hat, my stick, names and dates and desires? I walked out of the ocean, naked as the day I was born. He peered into my cracked face. He looked around with the same crumpled curiosity, as if trying to figure out what was in this hard ground for me. He had received my body, my shape.

*

I told him about the soldiers who went back under the sea, about the oil riggers in the double graves, about the Northern Lights. 'You should see them once in your life,' I told him, and those lines came back to me, ... *questi, che mai da me non fia diviso ... a bocca mi bacio tutto tremante*; '...the one... the one who will never be parted from me... the one ... the one I will never leave ... kissed my mouth... trembling ... my lips ... all a-quiver...'

He didn't ask about her. After a few minutes he started to talk about God.

A strong lad, stronger than me, than I had been, he was. He wanted to be of help so he dug me a grave, though we didn't have anyone to put in it. It's still there, the grave he dug me in the baked earth, like an open book. And he gave me a book as well, as a gift, just what he was reading, since he hadn't brought anything special for me. Something about ballistics. He said he'd be back, 'maybe next year', and he never talked about her. He talked about God and we waited that evening for the Lights. We drank tea and I showed him Ursa Minor.

*

My mouth has changed. Not the lips but the mouth. My bottom jaw juts out, the teeth rest differently against each other. I have let the beard grow and I think my hair went white not long after he left. I look at the stars. I tell myself that one day boys like him will navigate them. I look at the ocean and I think that I could still cross it, I would only need a boat and a reason.

So I guess I will never leave here, not now.

Today I caught myself grunting. I think I have been grunting for years and didn't know it. When I break up the

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ground, which isn't often, I grunt like an old man, though I am not an old man, not truly; and I limp though there is no pain in my legs. I walk with a limp that is not real. I am just making sure. There's no reason why I shouldn't limp even though there's no pain. I mean, no one can see me up here in this place even the gods have abandoned, pretending one leg is shorter than the other, caring for plants that are weeds in any other country. I have the poems I learned before the wars. There's the one about a soldier, *Pâle dans son lit vert où la lumière pleut*. I make little translations in case he comes back to me and asks what they mean. 'Pale in his bed of green', or 'In his green bed, pale'. 'In his green bed, pale, where the light rains' or 'pale in the raining light' and so on. It passes the time. I have forgotten some of them. A line here, a line there. Some of the lines are shorter than they used to be, words are missing. But I imagine, what do I imagine? I imagine that they will come back to me.

HER

I knew it would end in birth or else I would die. I hoped he would come back. I thought, I will learn to read, and never did.

That iron is a cankering thing! he cried, and dived head first into the charity bin on a whim, firing shirts and coats out behind him till he found a quilt. Wrap me up, what he did, all up, right there in the quilt, then we put it over our heads and went back to the empty lot. He was the man I had been waiting for. He made me laugh, he did, as I let myself go. I will be thine. It came over me within seconds, tight in that swaddle. I told him, 'This is it!' and he said, 'I love you.'

We were not attacked, but he would have defended me. He wasn't a coward, and he wasn't a Romeo. He didn't go on his knees but he did not walk over me. His lips laid an orbit around me, I was his only one there and then. The ridge of his chin-bone was hard as he said those words, the ones he wed me with and it came over me within minutes, waves of it.

Before light I was woken by a grub crawling over my face and cried out. He calmed me. He talked about the slow, fat caterpillars in the country, how in autumn they make their windowless cocoons, how it is hard for them in the city where there are not enough trees and too many cars spinning to the centre in the dark.

In the night some police asked us for our papers. He said in dialect that he had lost them. It wasn't true, but he had to bluff for some reason. He gave them a name, another name, and an address in another city, right down to the zip code, then he added 'ground floor', as if that was really something. He had a way. But we didn't laugh in their faces, we didn't dare. We were deadly serious until they lightened up. Not that they laughed, but they looked at the bursting couch and gave him a grin and forgot us. They were looking for something else. He was afraid for me. He said 'if they had known who he was', as if he was really someone, but I knew he wasn't anyone. And he knew it too.

Careful of me, he was. I wanted to tell people. I wanted to shout it out but he knew what I was thinking and said, 'You have to keep it hid.' He told me to look unhappy if I wanted to be successful. He said if you look happy they will hate you. When bells chimed somewhere he cried 'Red currants', and we found them, currants, at the base of a ruined wall. We plucked them just beneath some graffiti: YOUR IGNORANCE IS MATCHED ONLY BY YOUR

SECRECY. He said berries are like jewels that grace the ageing plant. But the birds had that look, that mateless look about them, and the wasps were hungry, getting at the split berries, flying about us as if we were trees.

In the afternoon the winds came like vandals, and people on the street drove their hands into their armpits for the warmth, leading with their chins as if they were walking uphill, or had made a difficult decision. The trees let their leaves go, and everything turned orange as rooftiles for a few moments. Then the clouds closed and rained, it rained on the boxes piled up over me, over the sofa that evening and he was gone. Don't talk to me.

A day passed, still and empty. I forced a tap with an 8-shaped faucet and splashed water over my face and went into the city. I cried 'Can't you please help me?' Thousands did not, but for three weeks my luck was, you might say, good. At night I lay under the pile of make-do covers, and just when I was sure about my condition freaks arrived chanting slogans. It had something to do with religion, or democracy or perhaps it was football. They'd planned a pitched battle and were soon bludgeoning each other on the waste ground. One fell on the sofa near me, I could see his brains like fish innards. I left by the hole in the wire netting, I could have lost Rusty then and there but he clung on. Tough monkey, even then.

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From that day the idea of us two together kept me going. After he was born, when he was outside of my body, I was never really convinced that he and I were two separate persons on this earth.

I wanted him to learn. I knew some lines, *My soul cleaveth unto the dust*, and Rusty repeated them after me. He'd have had a great future on the street, I reckon, but there were laws. State laws. They took him. We had come to the notice of some department. They showed me the seal and I could only agree. Now that's power for you. They took the years of his growing to manhood from me. It was so sudden I wasn't prepared. I had forgotten things like that happen. Love had made me stupid. They took my little boy somewhere he would get square meals and an education. They said 'Don't try to follow us!' so I did as they said. I watched as they drove away.

After that I wanted more than anyone else, more than myself, more than I could eat, more than I could carry, more than I could bear. Anything. I blamed the ones who gave me food, I blamed the food I forced down, the sacks I dragged, the roaring buses, the blinding sun. I blamed the silences that gave no answers, the sponging suck of the night. I heard no one and no one heard me. I was not there. I had no voice. Louder, louder still, I called at them, the people who walked by as if I wasn't there. I shouted at them. I told them I was flesh and blood. I dared them to notice me. I dared them to

spit at me at least! And some of them did. I waited. I waited to see one good man stagger. It came, not every day, but it came... one staggered after walking by me. I had got to him. Then something would lift him up and straighten him out and push him on, something that would not push me. He would find his balance and his hand would grab a rail, he would stand up and walk with forced purpose down those steps, along that street. I would shout after him and jeer and cackle at him and point a crooked hand at him, because he had admitted, and now I knew, he was no better than me.

There came a point when everything was too late. When I stood up the blood drained from my head, my eyesight dimmed and I had no belly. I was dissolving, sure of it, they would find a lump in a puddle, a stinking puddle with a gob in it, that would be me, rejected out the end of existence. I did not want to live, I wanted an end to this mockery. The bile came. My hair crusted with it. I would become a shadow. My eyes were growing weak, but I could see a face staring at me out of the vapour, hand of a life reaching to me. I could make out a figure moving about me where I lay like a crumpled quilt. He had been there in the shed, for how long. The face of my boy, grown, returned to me like the night, dumb.

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RUSTY

I first saw light, or dark as it was, a year or so after the first Peace was declared. What can I say? What do I know? If she'd had her time over she'd have had me again, she said, though I cried a lot, screaming the newborn anthem like a hooligan.

She shuffled along the same streets day after day, dragging me before the public. That was our downfall. She made no concession for their peace of mind. They had to buy it. 'I don't know where I'd be without you,' she'd say, counting the small change.

I imagine that I screamed and bit and kicked and spat, but perhaps I went quietly, eagerly, when they came to take me from her.

My foster parents took good care. How many years? I couldn't be sure, since they had the record of the years, not me. They clammed up if I asked about her at first. In the beginning I hid food under my pillow, and I wouldn't give them my clothes to wash. Then I settled down, they say. I never hated them. Sometimes they made the bed over me, the two of them. I lay down with my hands stiff at my sides as they floated the sheet in the air over me.

I studied Motion and Mechanics. I wanted facts. When I was too old to deny I asked, Who was she? Where was she? They said it was natural to ask, they knew the time would come. They said I should travel a bit and look for some answers.

I asked them all, the ones who went between doors, 'Have you seen her? Haven't you seen my mother. See? She looks a bit like me.' Yes, I had a photograph from some document, though it was years old and later when I found her it didn't resemble her at all. I soon ran out of food and money and for a short period of my life, needing to eat and to keep warm, I became like them, the wanderers. Word got around among them, they gave me directions, and I found her in the corner of a hut. When I entered there was a stench which did not revolt me at all, and I heard her irregular breathing. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dimness I took it all in. Winter was upon us but we'd see it out, wouldn't we? I covered her up and got medicines for free. I knew how to deal with them, the pharmacists. You have to speak slowly and clearly without pleading or undue familiarity.

She asked me to read to her, by the light of a Wanderer's Lamp, 'Even when I seem to be asleep,' for the sound of my voice. I never had the knack for poetry, not like he did, but I read or recited what I could. She was evacuating everything. With each day she grew weaker, 'Everything has turned grey,' she said, boiling with fever.

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‘Even when I seem to be asleep.’

I knew she had gone, her face went still and those little lines, the pain lines, the ones that were there even when she was asleep, smoothed out. The pain was gone. I kept on reading. She could hear me there, from the land of the dead. I turned it down, the lamp, right out. Before I left her, I put my hands upon her face and that’s what I took with me, she’s in my hands and in my lips because I kissed her.

I’m still reading now just in case that’s what she meant, even when we are on a mission, though she’s in heaven and he’s a fisher of corpses on his barren island. A guy in my unit had a book of poetry, he read it to me and told me what it means. *Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben*, ‘Whoever’s alone now, that’s the way it’s going to stay.’

When I was very small I was neither sad nor happy. I did not think ‘I am a child, I am weak and stupid.’ I thought, ‘I want to be a criminal, they are hard and clever.’ They took me forcibly, but without violence. My foster parents gave me food and clean clothes. They lowered the sheet over me. I asked questions. They let me go, and I found her.

When I returned I trained and saw combat.

When I fired the rifle I thought about it, you know, what was happening to the bullet. We had to fire past others who were scrambling over the ground before us. It was important to understand it all, momentum and trajectories. They showed us films in slow motion. You could see it, what happened. You could understand. We learn nothing through speed, it makes things smaller, they whirr by, we don't understand, how can we? It takes time to understand. Years and years of slow time.

The military gave me all I needed. I obeyed. That was all they asked. I trained. I dressed. I carried. I ran. I stood to attention. I listened. There was a story. About a mad man on an island and an envelope with a name written on it. Her name.

I asked for leave.

*

When I laid eyes on my father he was naked and standing waste deep in water. I have seen fear. It was in his eyes. He was afraid of me, my own father. If he had been clothed I might have embraced him, but as it was the moment passed. He dressed and made tea. I could tell that he remembered it all, about him and her, but I couldn't bring myself to ask him.

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I pick-axed a grave for him. We sat on the shore hoping for the Lights which didn't happen. He remembered some poetry, one was about a soldier in a field with two holes in his side... and another was like an epitaph, *If you want me again, look for me under your bootsoles*. I had a feeling for him, and a feeling for him and her together, and why she hadn't gone with him.

To pass the time I told him what I had learned during my training, about motion and the physical world, and about God, that the smallest and the largest are in our domain as we are in God's. We see the smallest and largest but our understanding is inadequate. We are seen by God. He understands us, and the smallest and largest and all else besides. He is adequate. He is all. I told him we cannot make a picture of God, we make pictures of football stars, pictures in the image of our selves, diagram of the world with circles and lines, but in the light... in His light we are found... it reveals us and the world to ourselves in lines as it reveals colours that are beautiful in themselves. 'I will pray for you,' I said to him, and I said I would come back to visit him again but I guess I lied.

He told me to bring him a sapling back after the war was finished and he'd put it in where the soil was good, maybe in that grave I dug him. I said I would, but it's a long journey and you can get piles from sitting too long in a bus. The

Northern Lights, you should see them once in your life, but there are some things that are not going to happen to you, to me, in our lives. The driver, he said something terrible must have happened to my father to make him live alone like that. He was nervous of my uniform. He asked how my father was when I left him. He was afraid too. He was afraid I had killed him.

I rejoined my regiment. There were hundreds of us in each plane flying over the war zone. I looked down on the land passing underneath. I saw mountains marked by a shattering of shaded ridges. A river came into view. It wound down onto plains reaching towards an ocean dotted with a few small islands. I asked the soldier next to me where we were going. He didn't know either. Our ears imploded as the plane descended. We could feel the ground getting closer. I was afraid of the landing, as ever, but we touched down safely and were soon springing from the belly of the plane. I had the feeling I had lost something. My left hand was clenched as I jumped onto the tarmac, but something was missing from it. A bag? My parachute? My tags? As it was impossible to go back I hunched up and ran towards the military hangar. I followed the men tracking along painted broken lines down a corridor open to the sky and lined with iron plates. I ran after them into a makeshift space hemmed with plastic and aluminium and with a ceiling of billowing parachute cotton. I did not look at the signs, the others were following them. A little way ahead I could see the bobbing head of the soldier

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I had spoken to. Time, yes, we have all lost a little time. We trotted up a staircase. I retraced: fatigues, parachute, the window, the mountains, the plain, the ocean, the bracelet of islands, the fear of landing. What had I been thinking of? Of whom? I drew a blank. Unless... yes... of no one. That was it. I had not been thinking of anyone since take-off, not my state parents nor my limping father nor my fallen mother.

I looked about.

I was in a prefabricated barrack. A uniformed woman was shouting at me from beside a double flap door, 'You've lost your battalion, honey!'

Seeing my confusion, she shouted helpfully, 'The vehicles!' and pointed encouragingly not in the direction I should go but at a small suspended gun-metal sign with a red day-glo arrow on it. I ran through a pair of thick rubber flaps and threw my rucksack into the waiting hands of a marine. The truck stalled, and then took off nearly throwing me out again. I was sitting on the end of a bench facing another row of soldiers. A sergeant was crouched at the driver's end passing Heckler & Koch G11's to the men on his right and left who passed them on till one reached me. I held the gun-stock across my lap and leaned my head back against the padding. I had that feeling of losing altitude again. I could see an ocean, a celebration of blue and gold. It seemed I was going to crash. Then I felt a cool breeze, as if that freshly-

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washed sheet was being lifted above me. I knew I had to give up everything, even trying to understand, and the gun fell from my hands.

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Sunshower

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They had enough of me can't blame them there's a lotta me to feed look at that paunch hunt me for blubber. Gunna be a scorcher.

Made a nuisance of meself spot of bother slow on the uptake like Auntie May says if I had a girl I'd suff'cate her too much beef Auntie May's worth a few kilos too 'Yes Auntie May No Auntie May what's in the fridge Auntie May' troop down Ken and May's work it off in the hideout can't fit in it now, dog, he can, scrambles in, peeps out the gun turret brown eyes blinkin' through the slit. Car.

Straight down the centre line.

No pity. You'd reckon on a day like this, doing the ton a man needs shades shoots the eyes out that sun breezy sheela lickin' ice cream over her shades comin' on at yer up the billboard by the pub that's what I want but there's a lotta me to feed suff'cate her quick as a fat shades what I need see 'em in the bowsers on the racks with the little mirrors clean you straight up make you okay shades do Auntie May cleans me up likes you cleaned up does Auntie May 'Yes Auntie May

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Thanks Uncle Ken' be as good as him one day, here's another shirt see you look after it and 'Use that thing I got you from the chemist for your blackheads!' she yelled so the cash hands could hear. Then Ken's shirts wouldn't fit me no more but she got me some big ones from town stood over me while I tried 'em on here come the armpits 'What a pong!' and she blows out makin' a face puffin' her cheeks she always washes 'em when I visit wash the smell of me it does gives me another one 'Are you wearing it off?' she asks every time and sniffs and waves her hand as if a sandfly was on her nose. Yeah, wearin' it off right now Auntie May that's fat there right there pints of it trees in a mile or so end of the straight better chance at the trees full tit along here no brakes some of them and no fat people sweatin' kilos on their seats. Car.

Shot like a wad straight through new model seen 'em in the yards in town for the massacre against Scotland lined up like tin soldiers have to watch out there see it in the Sunday paper gas pumper all night bowser gave the hoods stick they drag him out to the free air gun and shove it up his arse grab the till leave him squirming. Cops got 'em, someone's inside wrong someone probly I mean whaddya have to do, whaddya—to deserve that? Sunstroke if I don't watch out Fatty Found Flaked Out tie my hanky tie it in the corners looks dumb better'n nothing I mean it kills, that sun, hear about that Yank tryin' to get a kiwi tan, forty winks all it took, grilled him fit for serving! Car.

No brakes some of 'em.

Uncle Ken he does those fat packs three dozen bangers cling wrapped, did a sheep once, inside job ask me no questions tender yeh they killed that one proper didn't know what hit 'im that's the trick get one that trusts you then slug 'er in the back of the head that's the best meat no fat three grills spit-tin' sheep and Ken's kegs you could drink and drink and I never chucked what a piss-up! Ken he promised when I'm twenty one but what about when that chick was cryin' on the couch and the doctor was there and all the guys outside like cattle and Ken brought the kegs out under the trees so everything was okay nothing to worry about everyone drinkin' and pissin' on the pine tree and the old handmower and singin' Happy Birthday to my cousin even though he's only got one ball and me glad I'm not a girl bleeding and trying to make sprogs up and down with the moon and all that. Creek around here. By the pines. Twenty minutes down the straight. Car.

Burning like hell! Hoods! Out of sight. Off the road. Into the ditch. If I'm quick. Jeez I'm shaking. Backing up. Close my eyes. I'm asleep. It's a dream. I'm a sheep. Fat and dumb. Comin' over. Through the grass. Who's this then? In the ditch, then? XXL, then? Funny hat, then? Don't say nothing. Make it worse. Take it lying down. Let 'em do it. Go ahead. Very funny. Over me. Turn over fatty. Face the music. Very funny. Roll in the ditch for 'em. Make it easy. Help 'em do it.

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Stings that does, in the eyes. Hot that is, hotter than sun. Open your mouth, yeh, do as they say. Sunday drinking. Very funny! Free DB, eh! burning stinking Freemans, eh! Skinny Jimmy Freeman's laugh. They're spraying each other now. No, not funny. Keep 'em shut. Don't go septic. That's all. Can't piss all day. Finished with me. One last squirt. Shake it all about. Just don't go septic. Close me eyes. Jam 'em shut. Didn' see no one. Nothin' doing. Leave him be, yeah please please leave me be. I'm not worth it. Never did nothin'. Feet through the grass. Big Rick's voice. Car doors slam. Slow take off. Four in the back. Fuck each other! Hear 'em whoop. Good one, eh! Sunday squealies. Burn the gum. Now they're flying. Must be over. Car.

Fat chance. Make those trees. Down the straight. Can't go faster, legs are chafing. A quarter hour, then no worries, getting dark, it's in my head, take a breather, make the trees, think of heaven, Auntie May's, tucker in the fridge, cool, cool shade, a quarter hour, getting dark, Uncle Ken, he'll throw me a piss-up, twenty one, like my cousin's, beers out your ears, in the shade, be all right, have a snooze, lie down safe, not like that Yank, in the stream, no more Freemans, no more Jap shit, no brakes some of them ... I was lucky, took their stick, in my head ... count your blessings, yes Auntie May, no making babies, bleeding dunnies ... never make it ... be there soon ... in the fridge ... throw a piss-up ... twenty one ... here I come ... never make it...

Martinborough, 1993

Coma

The gods bless you

May you sleep then
on some tender
girl friend's breast

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I'm feeling the cold and the thinness of the air. I'm gaining in size. I'm trying to turn. I'm swimming in a fluid, thickening. I thump into a wall. My head is throbbing, my skull is about to crack.

The beat of a drum as loud as I can stand and the swirl of a Wurlitzer. Deafening. I am curled in the ear of a dragon. Blood is pulsing. A membrane. I am in a tympanum, in a blood vessel in the dragon's brain, on the warm side of a peritoneal wall that separates us, me and another, from others.

Some cataclysm, a bursting. Light. I am breathing, returning to her, feeding at one many times the size of me, at her aroma of love. I won't let go.

I'm saying Don't and Go away. I'm listening, hoping for a voice, a certain voice, but I hear a different voice, not the one I was listening for, one I am afraid of. The second voice belongs to the same person I was wanting. The voice I wanted to hear and the voice I am afraid of belong to the same person... to one and the same person!

Another person has two voices. He is there, holding me roughly. He can't help it, his hands try to be kind. His fingers dig into me. Just the sound of his voice, even his kind voice, makes me go still, waiting for a blow. Sometimes another voice comes, one I don't expect. It soothes me all the more because it is unexpected.

Nearly everyone has two voices and there is no way of knowing which one they will use.

Some have more than two voices at different times. Some have two voices at the same time, hiding one voice behind the other. Some sound angry when they are playing. Some sound gentle when they are about to hurt you.

There is one who can speak with a second voice without moving his lips. I laugh. Others like me laugh at him. Perhaps we really are terrified and we are laughing to defeat the terror of the ventriloquist. I look around. We are laughing because we are relieved. We are all together watching him, relieved he is there. We do not think about the strangeness of what he is doing. If we thought about it we would be terrified. We would have to admit that life is like that, hidden voices of immobile faces in the flapping jaws of dummies.

We do not think about it. He makes us laugh. He is not life. He is all that life is not. We laugh at the clown and the clown doesn't care. It makes him happy.

I'm asking in such a way as to get what I want. I'm learning what to do if you want to have two voices. You think about one thing while saying another.

You can do one thing while thinking about another too. If you are in a hurry you have to think about where you are going — but if you are walking slow you can think about other things as long as you watch out. You have to watch out even when you cross the road. Some drivers sit low in their seats. They are blind to people less than three feet tall.

I'm big enough to have to watch out for people smaller than me. People want me to walk faster. I'm running when there's no one else around. I am running while looking at the sky. I'm flying.

I'm holding my breath for as long as I can. I can hold out for longer and longer periods of time. Animals don't do that, not for the heck of it. They hold their breath, beavers and dolphins, but they do it without thinking about it. I am doing it to see how long I can hold out. I'm not an animal. I can

count. Thirty five ... thirty six... thirty seven.

I remember the right things to say so as not to be called names. I'm reaching for the names I want to be called, the voices I want to hear. I'm reaching for the other side of the pool before I explode. I am going to a school where boys throw their oranges and apples at a wall just to see them smash open.

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I collide with Kathy in a playground and hurt my knee. Kathy is hurt, too. She blames me for getting in her way but we make up. From now on we use one voice with each other and we never argue. In all those years we never argue or use any other kind of voice except the one friends use.

Our teacher is tall and beautiful and is never tired. A kid comes to school with bruises on his face. People say he asked for it. I don't know what to believe, my dad says he must have asked for it. Kathy says he probably asked for it, but I am not so sure.

Kathy's mother lets us in on the secret of her chocolate icing. We spend our after-school time baking and selling cookies. We spend the money on sweet things that don't taste as good as our baking. They have fancy wrappings and we eat them anyway and get to like them. We want more. We are hooked on them. We eat them like boys until nothing tastes good.

Boys don't have taste buds. They eat anything that comes their way. Boys are like that. Except my brother. He is more of a girl. Boys eat more than Kathy or I can eat in one go. They eat as if it is their human right. They try to outdo each other in everything and when they have finished outdoing each other their dads praise them and tell them that next time they will outshine the others. Boys were invented to be harder and better at everything than girls. Boys can bash into each other and think it's funny. If they don't laugh it off they stick up for themselves and begin to fight. They can roll in the dirt like dogs. They can punch and kick each other and not feel a thing. I should have been a boy. I think I would have been born a boy if my mother hadn't wanted so much for me to be a girl. My mom's mind is stronger than nature.

Kathy has brothers. I don't want to kiss them, but I want to be like them. Her father sounds like the president to me. I figure he has more money than my father, but Kathy says it's just an act. His car smells like furniture polish. So does he. Kathy hates the way her father smells but I like it. I never tell Kathy I like the way her father smells. I like the way my father smells, too. He smells like my grandpa used to, but not exactly the same because he smokes different cigarettes. My dad lifts me up so high I am scared. I laugh, and he thinks I like it. I am laughing to fool him, and so he will keep holding me. I laugh so I will like it and not be afraid, so I will forget the back seat of his car smells of dirt. When it rains he takes me to school and I climb over the back of his sedan. He lets me out the rear door and tells me to knock 'em dead.

A boy in another class says that our car used to be his dad's car. His father grows potatoes out of town. I ask my dad if our car used to belong to that boy's father and he says Sure, what's wrong with that? That boy's dad used to pick up boys from our town in his car, the one that became our car, and he drove them to his fields where they did his work. Then he drove them back with their dirty boots and dirty hands and dirty pants and he gave them their earnings out of the glove compartment. My dad lost the key to the glove compartment and had to force it open. My dad used to work for him, for that boy's dad — not in the fields, he used to do his books on weekends. Then my dad bought his car. So that's why our car smells of earth. It's the smell of that boy's father.

There's a boy in our class who smells of cheese. Kathy says his family is too poor to buy soap. Another boy's father is a minister. My mother says he won't go to heaven just because he is a minister. We go to church sometimes, extra clean. Church doesn't smell, but I think it should smell of furniture polish. In church the minister talks to adults as if they are children.

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Kathy talks more and more the way the coolest of people in Seattle talk. It's in the way she makes her words and the speed and the things she is talking about. She has a hand-made quilt. She didn't make it with her own hands — her grandmother made it. She and her granddaddy come and stay with them every summer. Kathy's eyes turn into black pearls when she talks about her grandparents. Once, she heard them doing it. At least she thinks that's what they were doing, even though they can't make any more babies.

My mother is complaining that time is going too fast but I can't wait for the years to fly. I am eleven, I am twelve.

I don't care about the things I used to care about. We remind each other what we used to be like, Kathy and me. We laugh about it. It is as if we were not ourselves back then. It is as if we are different people. Our bodies have changed and we are talking about boys. Kathy has a date, and I am mad about Randy.

Randy takes me on the highway in his Chrysler New Yorker. It is beige, rectangular and kind of hard-looking — beautiful in its own way, I guess, and it smells like new. It is one of those cars that lives most of its life in a garage. I sink into my seat till I can't see anyone on the sidewalk shorter than three feet. What would I need to look out the window for? Randy is describing everything to me as we drive along. Every few miles there is some place that is important for him, but not for me.

We are driving down ever-narrower country roads and I decide to break in to his world. I tell him about me, about the ventriloquist when I was small. He looks interested for a second, then he starts in telling me about sword-swallowing. He used to watch the Circus Show on television hoping to see him the sword swallower.

'It's no trick! He really swallowed them!'

He asks me if I want to go to the Circus in Seattle and I am controlling a reflex to say No when he tears into some dirt on

the side of the road and tells me to get out. His voice is not mean, not as if he wants to harm me, but he isn't thinking about me at all. He is thinking so much about something else that it is a drag to speak to me.

We walk a way till we come to some woods. Strangely, the further we go away from that car the closer we grow. He is talking to me, thinking about me and about us. A little way into the woods there is a lake. The largest of the trees on its border has a ladder going up into the thick of it. I climb ahead of him. There's a lookout post with a tree-hut big enough for grown people up there. Randy has a surprise for me. His dad's binoculars. We scope along the branches of other trees till we find all kinds of birds I never knew existed. Out on the lake a pair of wood ducks seem to like each other. Nearer to us, at about our level, we spy a mother who is still feeding one of her little ones, even though the little one is grown up enough to fly and feed itself.

I nestle up against Randy but he can't act natural. It's his father's binoculars. He puts them back in their case where they belong. We kiss and we kiss. I think it is new for him, as it is for me.

On our way back to the city Randy promises I can come with him when the shooting season starts. He asks whether I have ever tasted ring-necked pheasant. His mom knows how to cook it real good. The tower won't be so tranquil then, he

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tells me. I don't know what to say. I am afraid he doesn't have any feelings. I am hoping that pair of wood ducks goes on honeymoon before Randy rolls up. I am telling him no, I don't want to kill any birds.

He is laughing. He so wanted me to say I could go with him. He is laughing because deep down he really wants to hit me. He is laughing so hard that his breath clouds the windshield. He is yelling into the windshield, 'Birds don't matter! They don't know they are going to die!'

It is Thanksgiving and there's roast turkey on the table. Randy has invited me to be with his family but my dad says my mom will be disappointed if I don't eat with my family. He is so reasonable it makes me angry but I stay in and hardly touch my meal. I see Randy cruising by on the street outside. Three times he passes. I say I'm not feeling well and go to my room. I wait long enough for my mother to come and see how I am, then I slip out the window. I am so excited I can hardly swallow. I have never done anything like this before. He tells me there is going to be a surprise. I climb into Randy's Chrysler and he takes me to Renton. When he opens the door of his house his mother has another Thanksgiving meal prepared for us, another turkey with bread-crumbs stuffing and mashed potatoes. He's apologising. He says it would have been a ring-necked pheasant but he didn't get a shot at one.

It is the first Thanksgiving since Randy's father 'went missing'. I figure he has abandoned them, but then I hear he served in the Gulf War and later he was stationed in Somalia. They are hoping that he is alive, that he is being

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held hostage or prisoner somewhere and that is why they haven't been told he is alive. They have to be patient. News will come. But I think, and they think it too, he ain't never coming back.

It was Randy's dad's Chrysler. On the wall there's a photograph of him and Randy with hunting rifles and camouflage hats. They are so over-dressed I figure they were going to pretend shoot a circus bear so I ask him what they were shaping to kill.

'We had decoys that day. We bagged the limit of wood ducks.'

I am losing my appetite. He is telling me that shooting birds isn't like war. War, he is telling me, has to do with what is right and what is wrong.

I should not have woken up this morning. I hide my feelings this time. I tell him his father was very courageous to defend his country. Randy's face clears up. He looks so happy I could cry. Then I say 'A lot of wars could be avoided if people talked to each other.'

Randy has that airhead look again, as if he is not thinking about me at all. He is preparing his speech. He looks into the space between us and says, 'It was a war that created the United States of America. Without that war we would have

no life, no liberty and no happiness. War is right against wrong. War is good against evil. Do you know what evil is?’

His mom brings out a photo album of last Thanksgiving. There they are, the three of them, joyful mom, proud dad and Randy, the proof of their union. Randy has fetched something from his room. It’s his own scrapbook. There is no escape. He’s showing me what evil is as if I really need to know. Yes, I think what he is showing me just about captures it. There it is. He’s pointing to a photo of a man hanging by his hands, hands nailed to a tree. In his mouth is a piece of the stomach of his own son who is lying on the ground near him, disembowelled. Now Randy has got a camera and he’s taking shots of the three of us and I am trying to look like it’s fun. Somewhere in the nowhere of all of me I know I have to get out of there.

I nibble. Randy’s mum says I eat like a bird. She is talking about Randy’s cousin who eats like a bird too. It is the slowest meal I have ever eaten. It is the first time in my life mashed potatoes taste bad.

The main meal ends and I haven’t touched my portion of pumpkin pie. I tell Randy I had better be getting back to Seattle. I am putting on my coat when Randy’s mom draws the curtains and brings in a birthday cake. Randy’s dad was born the day after Thanksgiving Day, but they always used to celebrate his birthday at the conclusion of the Thanksgiving

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meal just in this way — with a cake and candles. Randy explains to her that I have to go, so I can be with my own mother and father and my little brother, but suddenly the tears fall and the cake falls and one of the candles is burning there on the floor. Randy's mother is sitting on the floor like all the air went out of her. Randy grabs my arm, and we run to the Chrysler. Randy is saying his mom might harm herself, and he will have to get back to her, so he takes me to a bus depot in the centre of Renton and leaves me there.

Why does he leave me there? There aren't any buses today. I figure that out even before he drops me off but I don't say anything about that. I get out and hug him like he's a baby and tell him everything is going to work out fine. After he has burned off I borrow a cigarette off a teenage girl talking on her cell phone. She asks if I am all right and I say Sure, at least I am out of that psycho ward. We talk for a bit and she offers to call my dad for me.

While I am waiting for him to come I hear a baby crying and I am down, way down. Being down is not-having. Down is being without. Something just left me and the emptiness in my nerves and in my bones and in my brain is telling me Randy isn't going to be the father of my baby after all.

So my dad drives down with my mom and my little brother and by the time they arrive they are arguing with each other in the car. I am sneezing and going through tissues. My brother is smirking at me but I give him a look and he realises this is something serious. He is all right, my little brother. Sometimes I am afraid for him. He is too soft. He is going to have to watch out for himself. So, back in the car it looks as though I am going to get away with it but as we approach the house my mother is trying to hide tears. My father looks at here and says 'Here we go!' and my mother is saying sorry to everyone but every sob is proof to my father of my evilness.

We enter the garage. My dad goes to his workshop. Usually, when he goes to his workshop we hear a medley of sounds as he uses his tools and contraptions. This time there is nothing but an eerie silence.

I am in bed for two weeks and when I wake up my father loves me again. My mom is asking me all the time how I am. She is afraid that I have got myself loaded with an

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unwanted passenger. She looks sick. She is the colour of the clouds and her skin is hot like she's been microwaved. It is shining like wax around her eyes and when she looks at me it isn't me she sees, it's herself. She's seeing herself in me, and all she did or wanted to do before she married dad.

Kathy pulls me through. For months we are together every day. Through the fall and winter we stick together. Then we move up a grade. Kathy has chosen other subjects from me for the new semester. A whole week goes by without seeing her. Another week is almost too much for me. I am missing her.

I am listening to our geology teacher telling us about next month's camp when my eyes engage with Neil's. We meet after class. My heart is racing and something else too. A wave is racing towards me, I am about to dive. I am controlling him. It is an embrace like no other. He has forgotten his act. The wave has come not for me, but for him. He forgets himself and all masks fall from him. He goes almost unconscious in that rush, and is revealed to me. I know him as I will know no other guy. I love him, all his physical strength and his boyish fragility.

So why does he behave as he does when he is with his friends? You would think we had never come so close. I can't get near him sometimes. He sticks with his buddies. He says he can't see me till the end of the week. I want to tell him the end of the week will be too late. It is as if I will have to begin all over again with him. It is as if that experience we had, in that car he pretended he owned, never happened.

He isn't ready for me. I can hurt him.

I'm boarding the bus to go to camp. The driver is adjusting the sun screen as I pass him by so I can see his empty seat and his slack safety belts while he's standing up like that. He's got a boil on his neck. I'm hoping he drives the bus instead of rubbing his neck. I figure bus drivers eat fast food and never change their shirts. I'm wishing Kathy was there. I don't want to sit next to anyone other than her so I put my carry bag on the seat next to me. A girl younger than me takes the seat across the aisle on the other side. She wears what her mother buys her.

The bus's engine is rumbling and we are about to roll away but a girl one year senior from me shows late and breathless and takes the seat next to me. She tells me her name loud and in my face, Melanie, so I don't have any choice but to tell her mine. She takes a magazine out of her bag, zips the bag up and stashes it above our heads, examines the other passengers and settles in to read the magazine. I don't have much time before she asks me where we are going to.

We're passing out of the city. Melanie is reading noisily. I'm

looking between the gap of the seats in front of me down towards a font of light from the front window that is bathing Neil. He is three seats from the front in the aisle seat. I look at him down the aisle and in reverse in the reflection.

Melanie is examining shots of her favourite model. The girl across the aisle is powdering her face. You can see the powder, it is like a second skin. Her face is merging into another face, her mother's face. She is trying to be her mother. Now she is talking on her cell phone, using the voice of her kin, loud and slow and half-interested. I hear that voice, that way of speaking, and I can't stand it.

We are rolling along I-5 and I am watching Neil and loving him. Melanie has flicked the last page of the magazine and is telling me about her family and how she loves Jesus. She's asking me questions she knows the answers to, like do I know how many people are dying of hunger? I am reading a minimap at the same time. There is a table giving the distance to Tacoma and Olympia.

'Eighty thousand a day!'

Our geology camp seems a long long way.

There's a sign saying If You Are Going To North West Hospital You Are Going The Wrong Way. I can't help laughing so I have to tell Melanie about the sign. She says the sign

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is there in case you are having a baby. Her breath smells funny. Like tar. I wonder if she is afraid. I offer her some gum. We chew for a couple of minutes then I tell her I was born in North West. She tells me she was born there too and she's making like she wants to exchange rings. I ask her if she's noticed the guy near the front of the bus. She hasn't, and that pleases me. I tell her about us, about him so she tells me her life, all the guys she has been crazy about. Next stop Renton. Her love life is a bomb site. She would have made a good race caller, if women were allowed to do that sort of work. I tell her about my dad and the cliffs at Snake River where we used to go for vacation.

The roads are slowing so we are going off the interstate to avoid a complete jam. I never saw this part of Washington. I never knew it existed. The same kind of store with a different kind of kid hanging out, military types and trucks in convoy. Tiny town neons and roadside food joints. Signs flash in broad daylight as if their businesses don't have to care about electricity. I'm seeing a lot of derelict-looking warehouses. I'm thinking about a queue outside of hell.

We have picked up the last out-of-town passenger and are back on the interstate climbing a hill in the slow lane. With South Tacoma and the SR 16 interchange behind us, the driver switches on a movie about some Hungarians and a nazi-type who are cruel to their prisoners while smuggling arms somewhere. So they have to die.

There are a few explosions so we put on our headsets. A beautiful woman is in love with a hero, a tough-talking, pock-marked cop with a heart of jelly. The beautiful woman is waiting for the cop by the ocean when her cabin is blown to pieces and she goes up with it. He's going to have his revenge. He is going to kill and kill. The cop is staring at the smouldering ashes and syrupy music is pouring in when the screen fizzes and our own nightmare begins.

The bus has stopped, I don't know why, and a guy with a gun is standing beside the driver. His silhouette is craggy like a starved raven. He's leaning over the driver and gesturing at us. The driver is nodding his head. The guy with the gun is tying him in so he can't move anything except his arms. He

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can only reach the gear lever, the accelerator and the brakes.

The bus moves a few yards along the shoulder of the road and stops again. I can see the back of the driver's head. He is showing the driver something on a road map. I'm thinking California and my heart gives a leap. He tells us to throw our cell phones into the aisle. He is saying we had better do what he says and do we know who Silas Blewcher was? That's the guy who shot a driver and shot himself and sent a bus over Aurora Bridge two years ago. This time the bus has moved up a gear and the creep is telling the driver to stay on the road.

Melanie is sobbing now and I say to her to quit it, I say to her to hold her breath and count. I tell her he's a creep and he's gonna die and she nods her head as if I am going to kill him for her. Poor kid. God. I am saying God. I am saying what I can remember from the Declaration of Independence and praying for this creep to die.

I shoot a glance at the girl across the aisle who is powdering her face. I can't believe it. I want to scream at her. There is so much powder on her face you can't see the skin. She is looking into a compact and powdering her cheeks and her nose and now she is taking out her eye liner. I think she is pretty enough to be a corpse, if that psycho needs one. Melanie too. I can't believe I could be so cruel. Are we all thinking things like that, hoping it will be someone else he picks on?

Why aren't there any cops on this road? There are always cops around when you don't need them. He needs them. He needs his showdown. He's one of them. He should have been a cop himself. The ones you hate are the ones you rate.

He's walking down the aisle like a cop, swaggering, and telling us to sing. I used to like that song. Some kind of damage, to want everyone to sing.

Just touch my cheek before you leave me, baby

He is getting close to me. He is going to kill me. I am thinking What if he doesn't kill me? What if he only maims me and ruins my life? What about the baby I am intending to have? I don't want this creep to take away my baby before I have even had it. He walks past me to the kids at the back of the bus. They start singing too, but no one is singing loud enough so he goes to the front again and tells some of us to stand up. He's pointing at Melanie and telling her to sing louder. She tries, but it doesn't come. She opens her mouth but she can't make any sound at all. I hear the shot and Melanie falls on top of me, but not because she has been hit — there is a hole in the window above us. The psycho is yelling at the driver to keep in the right lane. He's turning back towards me and Melanie. There's no need to fire a second bullet — she can't get any more scared — but I hear it above the engine, I see it, another tongue of flame, and I hear it in the same instant as the slug drives through

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the window above us. Melanie's body jumps like an electric charge when that second shot fires. I'm holding her in my arms like a baby. There is a second hole above us — two holes are staring at us like Randy's father's binoculars. I am telling Melanie that we will both see Woodland Park again.

'And the Elephant Forest?'

'And the Elephant Forest.'

'And Bug World and the Trail of Vines?'

'You bet.'

*Then slowly turn away...
I won't beg you to stay... with me...
Through the tears... of the day...
Of the years... baby, baby --*

This creep is making us suffer. If that's his game he's winning. I am feeling all the hate we have inside, all of us, and he feels it too, he feels that we would tear his head off and eat it if we could. The driver is jiggering about now, like he's sobbing. I am hot and wet, but not as hot and wet as Melanie. Sure — she has pissed her pants.

There's a noise like sirens and the psycho crouches down but it's only a convoy of cars with Cowlitz county plates heading

north, sounding their horns as they pass us.

The windows are steaming up. It is like a bath-house. The air conditioning comes on and chills us to the core, it drives an icicle into my temple. I'm sneezing. Everyone is complaining, like everyone. Suddenly we are in the most normal situation in the world, the air conditioning is blasting at us and no one has any fear about complaining to a psycho with a loaded gun about the air conditioning. The psycho acts like a regular guy. The driver can't reach the air conditioning controls so he reaches down to turn down the speed of the fan and that's when Neil makes his move. He pounces like a dog possessed. He has the psycho on the mat. He is thumping the psycho's head again and again with the chamber of the gun. Why doesn't he put a bullet in his head? That would be quicker. Psycho is unconscious. The driver has slowed to stop. He is yelling at Neil to let him out of his seat. Neil's knuckles and the gun are glistening. The psycho is probably dead, but Neil keeps on hammering him. There is a rush for the doors. We wave down passing cars. Neil and the driver and the psycho remain inside till the cops come.

It is five months after the hijacking. I meet Neil at Market and before you know it he dumps on me. An artist at the loft where he has been sleeping has turned weird.

'Last night she says to me, "Dick's been here. That's his brand of cigarettes in the ash tray." So I tell her, "That's my smoke!" but she says "Dick always used to leave them to burn like that, to the butt." She's sure that Dick is in me, and she is going to get him out of me!'

'Scary!'

'I have to get out, believe me, she's going to kill me!'

Another match made in the checkout line. Poor Neil. I have seen this one about town. She was crazy even without having gone through a hijacking. She has exotic eye spacing, and her small mouth would fit Neil's perfectly. You can tell just by looking at her that she wants a guy who looks cool first, everything else second. One guy will do. And then another guy will do. Neil is in over his head. He doesn't want to die.

He still has some games he hasn't played on his computer.

'She has multiple personalities... and... you got to help me.'

He's looking towards me in a way I have seen before, not at me exactly, but at a spot in the air between us. His voice is a mixture of desperation and meanness. Randy used to sound like this when he wasn't thinking about me at all. Neil isn't thinking about me now, but he will be, again, if I play my cards right. I look at his arms. He still doesn't have any tooth marks on them.

'You can stay with me.'

It happens like that. You have a glimpse of eternal happiness and you say whatever it takes to go there. Those words roll like golden nodes of saving grace from my mouth and for the moment he is mine. My brother is about to have a roommate. Neil brightens up. His voice is true. He is thinking about me.

'You're a real pal.'

We go to the loft to get his things. It is a former sweatshop, divided, with a common kitchen and living area. The place looks as if it has been torpedoed. Paint bombs have exploded everywhere, and there are sharp-edged sculptures made out of screens and cables. Neil can't find his leather pants. He lights up, leads me through a door, and we fall like boxing bags on the bed. His shoulders drop. It is stronger than I expected. I nearly spin out.

He is coming to when I hear the rattle of keys. We scramble for our clothes but she is in the room. The light comes on. It's her.

Her phone rings. Silence. It rings again. She doesn't take her eyes off Neil. She has taken a Saturday night special out of her handbag. She is saying to Neil, 'Why did you give me this? Is this what you gave me this for?'

Neil didn't give it to her. Dick did.

His eyes dart to me. She snarls at me to get out of there. I

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don't know what she is capable of. She pulls the hammer back as if she isn't bluffing. I edge towards the door. She spits at me and I am out of there. I am running. The elevator doors at the end of the hall are open. A woman inside sees me running towards her and starts thumping the elevator button to close before I get there. I get inside before the doors close. I run out onto the street and duck into a shoe store where an employee gives me a hoodie from the lost and found to get rid of me.

I cross the road. Should I call the cops? I wait for a shot. Nothing. There are tears in my mouth. I wipe my face. Nothing.

I am walking home shoeless and prepared for any eventuality. I am expecting guys to whistle at me, for people to stare at me. I avoid the edges of parks and playgrounds, but no one disturbs me. I don't feel any eyes, no eyes on me at all. Sometimes you get lucky. People just know you can't get any further down.

I can't get in touch with Kathy. She has flunked out of college and is looking for work. I lie low for a few days until I can't stand my room any longer. I go out seeking. I am looking for Neil even though I know he can't be in the neighbourhood. I see him in other guys. I go home with one of them. He just wants to make me happy. He tapes a feather to the whisk of his battery-powered egg-beater and I pretend it is fun.

A few days later I find Neil with friends. I am happy that he is alive. He makes a sign to me that the time isn't right to talk about what happened. I have power over him. I want him there, anyhow.

Kathy meets weird types. They are drawn to her, or her to

them. An underground musician once told her that he performs best when he knows he is being ripped off. I never understood that. I figured he was just another one of Kathy's losers. But there is a way in which being ripped off gives the pleasure of a parasite to the one who takes advantage of you, and all the pleasure of the situation itself to you. You are free, in a drop-out kind of way, to do what you want. Reality is a fake wrapping around a diamond. The parasite thinks he's ripped you off, but he only has the wrapping. He thinks you are a loser who will never win, but you have the diamond in your hand. I am burning for this guy. I would go anywhere with him right now and I could kill him right there in front of his buddies if I had the means.

They are drinking Jim Beams, him and his friends. I don't care too much about the future, but they all think they have one. One of them will have a brand new pack of cards in his pocket, and another one will own an automobile that smells of sweat and saddles. Later they will go to a casino and when they lose they will pretend that it has been just for fun, as if they were only there to drink beer and drool at the strippers.

I'd like to go to a movie but the one I want to see has not yet been made. It's a film where guys like that walk around naked and lost on Mt Rainier. It is dark, so dark you can't tell if their skins are black or white, and they won't know either *because I stole their minds!*

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On my way home firemen are pouring a white powder like flour over oil or blood on the street. There has always been an accident. At the next corner a guy is crouched down talking to a sealed grey metal box, the kind you get where there are traffic lights. He appears to be communicating with someone inside it.

I'm going crazy too. My head is shrinking. I am turning into a sea bird. If I had wings I would fly, and I would eat bugs like Neil.

I am trying to forget him and Kathy needs to forget a few things too. She has been temping as a receptionist for a psychotherapist and she's crazy about one of his patients. Jim, that's his name, is an old hand. He knows all the theories since humans first thought about curing each other, and he's an expert at the stratagems therapists use to encourage or calm down their patients. At the end of a session with Jim it's the psychotherapist who needs therapy. Kathy is putty in his hands. She says Jim is a saint who says the coolest things. I ask her what kind of things.

'He says... *The self is outside us*'

'What does that mean? That's enigmatic!'

'He means, y'know, we identify with an image.'

'Which image?'

'Any image.'

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'You mean... we choose an idol and mime it up... we pretend to be someone else?'

'No — not pretend. We *are* someone else, outside.'

'So what's inside us? Are we empty inside?'

'I don't know. No... I don't think so.'

'Maybe we are empty inside! Like beautiful bottles. We think we are the stuff that's been poured into us but we don't know our own beauty.'

'There, you see? Isn't that the coolest thing to say?'

'Yeah, sure. It gets you thinking about ... about yourself.'

Sometimes I wonder about Kathy. And I am not sure Jim can be trusted. Kathy is telling me that 'Female masochism is an invention of desiring men.' Here we go again.

She is telling me about the guy who invented Masochism.

Every time we meet she has some new expression or term. If it isn't the pleasure drive it is the death drive. If it isn't the knowledge of pleasing another body it's the pleasure of teasing another body. Here comes a sharp-breaking curve-ball: 'Paranoids and psychotics love their delusions as themselves.'

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I take a swing at it: ‘You mean, the psycho on the bus couldn’t love anyone else — that was his hang-up?’

I just made it to first base. She’s inviting me to meet Jim. ‘Won’t you come along? We can talk about that.’

Randy used to talk about a screw ball. It curves into the batter, rotating with a downward tilt. You have to hit it on instinct. I am going to steal Kathy away from Jim.

Running away can be risky. I have known plenty of kids who have escaped for a time to Miami or to Montreal or New York — some of them leave themselves behind, or their minds have been replaced by bong water.

I put it to her that we fly to California for a few days. ‘Don’t you have a girlfriend in San Francisco?’

We arrive at night. One lake of glittering suburban lights displaces another and we are guessing out loud the different localities we are passing through. When San Francisco comes into view my heart leaps.

We stay with Kathy's friend who is stoned when we arrive and will be stoned when we leave. Her dad has ended up on the street.

'It happened overnight, y'know?'

I don't believe it, that it happens overnight. It happens over years of bad luck and being hated and kicked around. Kathy is talking about how German has three genders and how we not only have a father and a mother but a neuter parent in our minds who is neither male nor female and at the same time both male *and* female. She is saying that her friend is suffering because her dad hasn't measured up to her idea of that 100% male dad. Kathy's friend is happier now. She is thinking that her dad isn't such a failure and that he must be suffering too. I am thinking Jim has followed us here. This

isn't what we came here for.

We are dressing tough and eating Chicken Teriyaki. That's Japanese isn't it? I ask Kathy because the guy preparing it is Chinese. He is so happy. He is smiling all the time and it isn't a mask. He is just so happy to see us. He has guessed I am in love with Kathy when even I don't know it myself. He is twice my age but boyish and you can taste the seaweed in the dish the way you can't when the food is microwaved. He has notices from the quarter pinned on a board. A poster from the cops wants recruits with Asian backgrounds.

We see some bands. They are cool. They seem to have ordinary people in them. The audience looks cool too, no boy-friends with binoculars, no odours of sweat and saddles. A guitarist opens the gig all on his own. He's got an effects box he calls a Mousehole. The sound is so small and thin that the soundman tries to up the volume but that only cause feedback. Everyone groans. The guitarist apologises. He sends the sound to another box he calls The Wired Cat and on an instant the sound fills out and warms us up. It is all strange and good to me but the guitarist still isn't happy. He pretends not to know how good we are all feeling now. He says it'll work properly next time. People around us are smiling.

Now a band is playing grooves, groove upon groove, with keyboards, they've got five or six keyboards up there, the kind we used to have at Junior High, and the layers are

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vibrating against each other. There's a cathedral in my mind. I'm thinking, Didn't a bridge collapse once from reverberations like this? The Golden Gate Bridge is about to come down and people don't care! Kathy doesn't care. She likes this group more than psychotherapy. The music and some of the words stay with us all night as if we are thinking them.

*Do you feel the way I feel?
Tell me how it makes you feel
Can't you say the way
I think you feel?*

We climb in a taxi and go up to the look at the Presidio's gigantic trees. It's all so peaceful here and now, no one wanting us to be what they want us to be, only the hugest trees wanting us to be what we want to be. Blue-gums and gentle acacias and there is a Monterey Pine. How do they manage to grow so big? They must have withstood everything the universe had to throw at them — the strongest winds, the hottest, driest summers, the cruellest hailstorms. Having known all that violence, their stillness gives birth to the greatest calm of all, full of acceptance and boding.

*Do you feel the way I feel?
Tell me how you think you feel
Won't you say the way
You think you feel?*

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I take Kathy's hand as though it is the most natural thing in the world. I lie my head on her breast and with her hand on my hair there, I swear, the world could stop and I would die happy.

We are in a bus climbing higher from Castro. Kathy says it's a cool ride but it's steep, real steep. I don't see how the bus is going to make it, and now there is a U-turn that it can't complete. The driver has to back up and edge his way around it. I am looking down and my head is spinning. I can't take it any more. I am yelling at the driver to let me out. I get off without looking to see if Kathy is with me but when the bus passes she has hold of my hand again. She is saying she is so sorry, she forgot about what I have been through. She is saying she doesn't know what she was thinking of, to suggest such a thing. I feel good again. I tell her it wasn't her fault. She is the only friend I have.

She is trying to find a book for me, something her therapist would approve of. I am grateful to her and more. I am sorry to be such a drag. I am imagining something — that we live in Bernal Heights together, that we have a life in this city, a dog we walk in the park, and friends we can laugh with and dream with.

Time is running out. We are listening to college radio on the

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waterfront in the sunshine. We are imagining together what it must have been like, this city, when there were bread queues stretching for a block, or when the poets were out there scoring, or when students were lighting up and dropping out. Kathy wants to check out the new library. I want to ask an agency about jobs here, but the fog is a stranger pushing me back to Neil.

In Seattle, Kathy is working extra hours and I don't want to be poor either. I am serving coffee and bagels in a sandwich bar, going to a class, then serving appetizers in a Pike Place restaurant.

The word blue has a new meaning for me. A customer from Wyoming is telling me the French like their steaks underdone, what they call 'bleu', like blue. Bruises are blue. Billie Holiday is blue. Things tender are blue.

I hardly see Kathy, but I have more money than before. Not only am I no longer poor, if I spend what I earn it will look as if I have even more. This is what it is all about.

I see a lesbian couple. One is dressed naturally, earth tones, a hand-woven sweater. The other is wearing the strangest combination of denim and lace you ever saw. She is holding a polished tan leather bag shaped like a lunch-box. I am trying to figure out whether they have dressed like that for each other, or whether they love each other even though their styles clash.

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It gives me an idea. I buy what it takes. I am cutting my hair and dyeing it auburn. I am practising my smile. I am buying a bag for my cellphone, denim that will be revealed, and lace that will not be touchable until the quietest moments. I hardly recognise myself. I call Kathy. She is with Jim and can't talk. I decide to go through with it. I will watch Neil without him knowing I am near. When the moment is right I will reveal myself, the new me, transformed. I will have him in my power and I will have him the way I want him — blue.

I take every precaution so he won't notice me. I watch him meeting his buddies, getting in and out of their cars and I watch him meeting women. I laugh to myself. I listen to myself laughing. I am jealous, but not of those women. Jim says jealousy is fear of being compared with your rival. False — at least, those women are not my rivals. He is my rival. He is a traitor and a thief, stealing me from myself and from Kathy. I will have my revenge. I am going to have him the way I want and afterwards I will walk away as if nothing has happened.

We meet as if by chance at Market. We drink beer in a filthy bar where the music is too loud to think. He has me the way he wants, in a borrowed car.

I am sitting in my apartment thinking that the rain is honest, and that breaking someone's bones in anger is honest, but Neil is not honest no way, no how. The minute it is over he acts as if nothing has happened. He is not honest with me, and he is not honest with himself. He believes his own act. He believes he is a noble killer, a lion who has control of his instinct. Sure, he is a prowler, but not a lion. He's a traitor in my house, walking around in my house day and night switching the lights on and off.

The rain is sweet as honey, and golden like honey, too. The sun is in on the act, aiming at me from off stage somewhere. This is a gliding rain, as if it is sliding down invisible spider threads. I am in love with the honest gliding rain as I go to meet Kathy. Long overdue cups of attention pass between us. It is all over between Jim and Kathy. He has gone to spend some time in a hospital. Kathy is talking about exchanging apartments with her friend in San Francisco, about finding a job there and making a new start. She says to me we could go together. 'We'll find a new life. You'll find a new Neil.' Can you believe that?

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I explain the situation to her. 'Neil is a shop window, you know? I can see straight through him. I can't blame him for being what he is, but I can't get him out of my mind. There is only one Neil in a person's life.'

I am waiting for her to show me that she understands, that she feels that way about Jim, but she is looking away as if I have exhausted my credits. The coffee is cold and Kathy has stopped listening to me.

She throws a party and she asks Neil along. She promises me we are going to have some fun, but that means *her*. She wants to show her independence from Jim. I imagine that I am going to tear Neil apart but the party is wild — I drink too much and lose my fix on him. He has eyes for a Canadian wearing triangular-shaped glasses. I don't even see them leaving. Suddenly he's no longer there and everybody is fake. The party is a farce. I flunked. I take more of everything. I go to Kathy's bed and can't sleep. I hear the party dying down and go to watch what's happening from Kathy's port-hole window. Kathy is talking to a guy with long groomed hair. I don't think Jim would have approved of him. She never comes to bed.

Laughter is a noise birds make.

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The light hurts our eyes. It is already afternoon and we have been invited to a concert under the stars by her long-haired friend, whose name is Kau. He is a singer. His band is getting noticed, and not just by college kids. Their album has debuted a little way up the charts. Instead of playing in noisy smoky clubs to devoted fans they are going to play sell-out concerts to thousands of people who only want to forget their bosses and their jobs. Kathy is hurrying me up. This is no ordinary invitation.

I have never met a god before.

We are sitting in an equipment storage room full of empty drums cases, without any other furniture or windows. It is little more than a storage container that has paid its dues. It smells of undiscovered strains of mould and alcohol. The history of Rock and Roll is written in indelible markers on the walls and there are some famous band names in here. Kathy says we are probably sitting on the same bench where Liz Phair parked her ass. I act impressed but the place is like a prison cell. A roadie comes in to check on something and leaves. Kathy and I agree that he is weird. He is back a few minutes later. He goes to the back of the room, asks us who invited us and leaves again. He is worried about something in here and it doesn't take me long to find out what. In an empty drums case is a stash of drugs worth a lot of money. He comes in one more time and tells us it will be more fun for us if we go into the band room. When he says the words 'band room' he piles on the syrup and looks at us as if this is what we came for, right?

The band room is a half a step up from from the storage room. Kau isn't there. The roadie explains to one of the

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musicians who we are. The musician looks up briefly from an electronic tuner and smiles at us. His smile reminds me of my brother. He has the same look about him as if he is going to be beaten up really bad one day. He returns to fine-tuning his guitars.

We read the graffiti and smoke for a while, but Kau still doesn't show. The guitarist plugs one of his guitars into a tiny amplifier to check the tuning by ear. The sound is like the Mousehole we heard in San Francisco. I ask him if he ever heard of a Mousehole or a thing called The Wired Cat. He looks at me as if I have said something completely outrageous. His guitar is perfectly in tune. The roadie gives us an indelible marker and tells us to do what we want. I write 'THINK YOU FEEL' in between Liz Phair and P. J. Harvey. The roadie announces that Kau has finished warming up and when he arrives no one must talk to him because his voice is ready to sing, not to talk.

The manager arrives with a look in his eyes as if he is counting backwards. He goes through a check routine with everyone until he gets to us. We are not on his checklist. He doesn't want us anywhere. He doesn't like us and I don't like him. I put him in a movie shot through microscopes, showing all the crawling mites living at the roots of our eyelashes. Every mite has the face of this manager.

Kau is about to show. The guitarist entrusts his three guitars

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to the roadie, who carries them to their stands on the stage. He becomes visibly nervous now that his tools are out of his hands. The bass player has stood up. He is tall, strong and serious, and he is angry with us for hanging around backstage. He says to me severely, 'You know, a musician's preparation determines his precision and timing.'

I am thinking that if preparation is as important as they say we are in for a show as exciting as slow rain.

I have figured out without even hearing their music that this band is not going to change the world. When Kau shows he doesn't make any sign that Kathy exists. He's making like he's carrying the world upon his shoulders. Is this the prince I saw through Kathy's porthole window last night? Kathy takes it all seriously. We sit there quiet as lambs, smoking, until all the musicians except Kau have taken the stage.

We are watching them play an instrumental piece when the manager instructs us to go out front and dance. I want to stay there, backstage. I don't feel like taking part in any stampede. The manager says, 'Oh yeah? Last concert some kids like you stole Kau's underwear.'

Rock musicians are superstitious, but their managers are just plain suspicious. I am high, and my pride is hurt. I am yelling at the manager, 'What would we want with Kau's stinking pants?' The roadie is saying they were truly lucky, and if we know who stole them it would be patriotic to get them back! I hate this guy. I don't like this band any more. Kathy is telling me to cool it, we might upset Kau. From the stage we

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hear the drummer's kick-pedals rolling wildly. The world is waiting for Kau, who bursts from the dressing room and tears past us, taking the stage on-cue to a burst of planned applause.

Kau has got off to a good start. The roadie and the manager are happier now. The disagreement was partly a case of pre-Kau tension. Kathy senses it and plays along with everyone. She is agreeing with the manager about the importance of dancing. They are laughing together in a business-like kind of way, like one and the same. Now she is agreeing with the roadie about the importance of lucky underwear. We are allowed to stay backstage but I am disgusted. Kathy and the roadie are watching the climax of the set, hypnotised, grooving from the side of the stage. I want to be alone. I am backing off from the stage, passing the door of the dressing room. I want to sleep forever in a storeroom with empty drums cases.

Time is running out. The music is getting thinner, the players are losing their precision and timing. The band is putting down their instruments. Only one guitar keeps on playing. It is very distant. There are no drums. There is no sound system any more. The sound of a guitar is squealing from a tiny speaker in my brain. A lone guitarist is saying the whole thing will work better next time. He and his guitar have been cast in green plastic. He is smaller than a gift in a cornflakes packet. He is curling up in my dragon's ear.

There is no more band. There are no more bands. Bits of underwear are hanging like rags on a fence.

I am as one asleep, where sleep itself is not what it was. I am unawake. My life, bits of it, returns, pieces of music and things people said. I am not conscious, I can't be. If I am conscious why can't I lift my hand.

There is some light coming in to my room, golden and warm, flooding through a crack of my eyelids. I can't move my eyelids. My life, my real life, remains. My room where I grew up,

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my toys, and the world around about me, I feel them. There is Kathy. Kathy! She can't hear me. I feel her near me, really there, talking to that roadie while others take no action. They move like people who have no power of action. You'd think they were dancing toys, dancing slowly, so slowly.

I am night, all nights. This night is a part of me. I am a plane turned to stone. When will I hit the ground?

A hand opens my lids and shines a flashlight in here. They don't even know what they are looking for. What did I hear when they thought I couldn't understand? What did I smell when they were busy keeping me warm? What did I say to fool them? What did I eat or drink not because I was hungry but because it filled me up? What did I fear, and why did I fear and why did I laugh? Why were we so relieved that we laughed? And now this dust, this fog on the verge of darkness. I am in a new medium, not air any longer. I can go longer and longer without breathing. It is like swimming in the pool. I can breathe the medium. I am not an animal. On the other side of my medium is the stuff that people and animals breathe.

The manager of the band bursts in saying, 'What is she on?' and 'Who gave it to her?' I am breathing again, breathing their air. I can smell the love of my mother, turned earth and gum, saddles and sweat. The manager yells 'Bitch!' not at me, but at his rotten luck. He doesn't want me to die when the

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band is about to crack the market, not while he is the manager of the band. He's swearing and making a lot of noise. Now he's shaping to take a swing at someone. No one dares tell him what I took, or what mixture, least of all the roadie with the rifled stash. The manager is cursing and looking like he wants to hit me this time, but he only taps my face gently, as if trying to coax me back, watching for reflexes.

He shines the flashlight into my eyes again and curses. He puts his ear to my heart. It is still beating.

He puts his hand on my forehead — his wide fat palm rests a second on my brows.

He lowers his head onto my chest. I don't move.

Kathy is stroking my face.

Now she is arguing with the others. She wants to call someone, a doctor. That makes the manager really angry. He says it is too late, even for a doctor. He tells the roadie to get Kathy out of there but Kathy will not go. The roadie slaps her and the door opens. It is the singer from the band. The noise from the dance floor blows in like a storm. He jams the door shut. He is walking towards me. A fly hits a light bulb and falls on my face. I don't flinch.

'She come out of it?'

The manager shakes his head at the singer.

'She ain't never comin' out of it.'

Kathy is in tears. The singer tries to soothe her down and he's going to succeed. He is speaking softly to her. She believes what he is saying and she will do what he says.

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They are not going to call for help. It would be the end of the band. Kathy is kissing me goodbye and stroking my face. I feel her breath I swear I do, and I feel the cold when she is not there any longer. She leaves with the singer, she leaves me in this backstage too-late room surrounded by people confused and afraid and exhausted.

The roadie and another guy have taken me up. Away. They don't speak. They have no words inside them, or else the words they would say are all stuck together. That will be why they can't call a doctor. They are the still tongues, taking me to my bed in the heart of the forest. They are going to leave me here where everything is quiet and the world has stopped making love.

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A cat is rubbing against my leg. You'd think it would know I can't give it anything. I ain't never comin' out of it. The rain is harder now. Drops touch my face. I don't feel them. I don't flinch. I hear Kathy's voice, 'Over that way! She's over there!' but I am no longer there. I am speeding through the universe. Behind me, far below, propped up against a tree in a forest is a body, the one I no longer inhabit, the one no one knows anything about.

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