

THE BLACK CRICK POETRY AND PROSE MOVEMENT

1 Tessa and Pears Ripening in the Kitchen

Mother came back in the afternoon her arms full of pears from the single tree in the yard. Every year, she tells me, I coax twice as many pears out of that tree. She leaves them to ripen, every available surface is covered by the green rumps, their stems sticking out like fingers. By night she has left for the country. For the first time, Tessa sees the house, compares the walls to the pictures in her head. Smells like pears, she says. That night, for the first time, we make love.

At three in the morning I wake to thumping. The cat is knocking the pears from the kitchen table. I navigate by scent, the musk of pears is raw in the darkness. I call to the cat to get away from them then sit at the table, too sleepy to pick anything up. Tessa is on my hands, her dust woven deep in the lines on my fingers. I am thankful for the world getting this small if only for a moment the smell of pears tough like structure breaks through the thin ghost of Tessa's scent

MICHAEL REDHILL

After Max Died

I remember lying under the new pine staircase looking up through its spiral eye to the skylight above. In the day clouds danced the sky slowly across the glass, walked the wooden steps. At night every rail was a lit candle converging at the centre of blackness

In that time silence ruled the house. We spoke in pauses.

I remember being outside alone and taking a clump of soil in my hand. I held it at eye level saw earth hanging inches above the horizon a foot below the sun. Did this because I could.

Faces pulled tight as onion skin. One night Annie spilled coffee on herself. Didn't move. Just watched the stain spreading over her shirt.

I remember the smell of pine especially.

MICHAEL REDHILL

THE WINNERS OF THE CONTEST

THE JUDGES

DON COLES is a professor in the creative writing programme.

KEVIN CONNOLLY is a former Excalibur Arts Editor and current editor of WHAT magazine.

DEENA LINSKY is the producer and host of "Write-On", Radio York's poetry hour.

JULIA STEINECKE is currently enrolled in the Creative Writing programme at York, and is a former Excalibur reporter.

Winners can collect their prizes March 5, 1987. See Lorne at Excalibur.

Many thanks to all the people who submitted work.

Paul O'Donnell

LADYBIRD

An hour after breakfast, I can feel the food in my throat like I've swallowed a clod of grass, thick and hard and unmoving. I go to the Ladyman every morning. When I can't get the bananas I try to eat things that will balance out: acid for base, base for acid. I don't like the breakfasts. Even Kim, who serves me every morning at 7, says breakfast is not one of their strong points.

I rise early because I sleep early and I don't usually dream until 1, and even then, they don't get bad before 5. Small room. Every thin grey floorboard has a nail that should be hammered flat, but I'm not good with my hands—not for delicate jobs. Been living here for almost six months—I can walk the room in the dark now without stepping on anything.

Ladyman is across Peiler from me. Every morning Tenhaus opens the grille in front of the restaurant and it makes a noise like barbed wire being pulled through glass. My alarm clock. I hear it at 6:30 and it wakes me, yanks me mercifully from the sleeping heat I'm in. I wait until 6:45, get up and navigate the floor. In the mornings it's easier to walk in here because the air conditioning has been turned on and the whole building shakes like a wet dog, including the nails which drill my feet if I get too close.

Ladyman. Smells like a birdcage, worse depending where you sit. It's a small restaurant with a sagging waterstained ceiling and white vinyl tile on the tables that has peeled up over the years. Nobody who is a regular sits more than two to a table here. As soon as a third plate is put down, every drink spills. There are signs on the walls with prices, three red hand-painted panels separated by DRINK COKE and APPLE PIE AT LADYMAN'S MMMMMmmmmmmmm, crust on the pie gone blue and the filling grey.

Kim comes to me no matter where she is or who she's serving. It's only 7 by now, but her hair is already like warped presswood from the kitchen and the running. Eyes that arrive at you from somewhere no-one enters. She calls me Mac and is always courteous enough to ask what I want, even though it's the same every morning. Bananas in milk, Mac? Yes. Brown sugar on top today, because my mouth tastes a little sour. Brown sugar for you Mac, sweet or sour. And she smiles, white at me as she moves off to the kitchen, face like a wing that glides.

Tenhaus doesn't like her doing this for me because it isn't on the menu. Sometimes he hides the bananas and that's the mornings when I have to eat the eggs which upset my stomach. Sometimes I bring a couple of bananas and put them in the basket he has emptied in anticipation of me. Once he told Kim they had

run out even though she repeated three times there were bananas out there, there were two left. Mr Tenhaus, I'll only use one—please, he looks hungry. And only then him letting her. To my bananas, which he says she must charge me \$3 for, even though Corn Flakes and half banana is only \$1.25 and the brown sugar is free.

He yells at her for talking to me, for being slow in an empty restaurant, for not cleaning the glass in front of the grill, which has been at that hue of brown for as long as I can remember. I think it's the colour of the glass since no amount of scrubbing gets it clean, and I've watched her scrub it a hundred times. Still, fat German Tenhaus cries thickly at her, and heavy yellow gobbers collect at the corners of his mouth. Mein Hesse, I am not paying you to be furniture. Looking at him I think a 6 inch blade would never touch anything vital. It would sink squeaking through the soft fat to the handle and stop, as if it had been slipped into an envelope.

Then there are times when I think he is touching her in the kitchen and she speaks hurriedly and quietly, and I hear the cutting board squealing along the floor. Him talking deep to her, telling her in a voice that is almost not quiet enough what she owes him, that if it weren't for him, she'd be working for her supper. I am what you are alive thanks to, you are not here from God's goodness. Main Vogel—do not fly little bird, you are here because I love you.

And her breathing so scared that I want to dive through the glass he slides the plates under and knock him into the cutting board, spreading his white whale-body into the cracks in the wood, into the gouges made by the knife, into the holes where her cries fall to when he can't hold it in anymore. But he doesn't deserve it.

Today I couldn't afford bananas, and he left only one. Told her not to touch it, he was saving it for his lunch. But Mr Tenhaus, I'm sure you can get more before lunchtime. He's hungry and he has a delicate stomach. Then you take his poor insides to your kitchen and nurse him. I am not a hospital for invalids, my dove. I am a businessman.

Mac he's obstinate. Come back at 1 when he goes for his lunch and I'll get you whatever you want. So I eat the eggs and some toast with cream cheese—Kim, it's ok because I'm healthy enough to eat a live rat and run a race. Look, at 1, I'll bring something for you, something you'll like.

So I am feeling this clump of egg paste floating in my neck and I can barely climb the stair to my room without getting short of breath. Thinking, lie down on the bed, her face seems only inches from mine when my eyes close. Kim, it's ok, because no matter how things change or try to bury you, some things no-one can steal. Like the things you look at before your eyes travel out of that chamber and arrive.

Shipwrecked. I am building fires to attract anything that might see them. I am hungry, tired. Can't drink the water, I'll get more thirsty. I hear the soft sweep of wings above me, speeding through the tree I sit under, and she flies down out of the sky. She is holding bananas in her hands. Her wings pour out the fire. I eat the bananas, and for everyone I eat, she gets smaller. Smaller and smaller until it's only her eyes and the wings, and then a wind comes up and pulls her into the water.

Almost 12 when I wake up. Down the street is a drugstore and it takes me twenty minutes to walk. My stomach is empty, I can only spend 35¢ out of the \$2 for a Hershey's or I won't be able to afford what I came for. The woman who takes my money has the name "Robin" stitched into her jacket, but I am sure that is not her name because she looks like a Linda. I want to ask for the manager, ask why can't these people even have their own names? Why is everybody melted down into slag heaps of names and salaries? But I don't, and Robin thanks me for shopping here and gives me no change.

By the time I get back and put on something nicer than this it's 1 o'clock. Out the window I see Tenhaus shaking his finger up and down at her. Her blouse is not as clean or pressed as it was this morning—I think a button is missing too. He leaves. Every day at 1 until 2:30 he goes, leaves her in charge of the drunks who don't have the energy to drag themselves out of the Ladyman at 1 when the lunch specials end. He goes somewhere where he can spend the day's profits so far on good meat, on cigarettes, on women if he eats quickly enough. Leaves her in the restaurant where there is no-one to serve or even speak to.

MICHAEL REDHILL

The first and the next

1. She remembers the first afternoon and the space under the stairs where he showed her he was older, a fifth-grader she didn't even like but he'd walked her home

2. Stopping at his house was his idea How was she to know his mother was out, what he wanted?

3. She remembers the first as fast, his blue underwear still falling as she ran guessing her way through the house

2. She remembers the next time, the next man drag her nails the length of those sweaty arms covered with black hair

Elbows, there sharp child bones stabbed him & tried to draw blood but he made her drive the boat saying Nina Nina in that voice he used Be a good Nina

Lesley-Anne Bourne

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