

FIRST PRIZE

POETRY



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ISABELLE GUIMOND STUDIED ADVERTISING ILLUSTRATION AT COLLÈGE SALETTE IN MONTREAL AND IS CURRENTLY PUTTING TOGETHER AN EXHIBITION THAT SHE HOPES TO HAVE READY BY FALL.

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ONCE A MURDERER: POEMS FOR THREE VOICES

TEXT ZOË LANDALE

“As members of human society, perhaps the most difficult task we face daily is that of touching one another – whether the touch is physical, oral, emotional or imaginary. Contact is crisis. As the anthropologists say, ‘Every touch is a modified blow.’ The difficulty presented by any instance of contact is that of violating a fixed boundary, transgressing a closed category where one does not belong.”

Anne Carson
Men in the Off Hours

ONCE A MURDERER

Once a murderer held a door open for her.
It was Supreme Court; they were returning
after a break. She glanced at him,
a Vietnamese in black polyester,
said, *Thank you*, and rustled by,
chewing on acknowledging
the good manners of someone
who'd hacked a man to death.

modified

not wanting to touch

The sound, a witness said, a *knife*
going into watermelon

physical, oral

The man she was there for
was guarding witnesses.

Every few months, she sees him
at court or over coffee
with eight of them crowded into a booth,

**a closed category where
one does not belong**

listens to him swear and make jokes
that ought to be
totally unacceptable.

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And yet, as she did with the murderer
who held the door,
she scoots on by. She laughs, accepts

his crisp shirt,
his clean trimmed fingernails.

His wife's picture
on his desk.

Her own husband on a line
so frayed she threatens to cut it.
But they honor their snapped-tight tie
and tow it everywhere:
red, luminous, awkward as a hot air balloon.

Now, on the street corner,
filthy snow against the curb,
the other man tells her about an arrest
he's planning tonight,
a sexual predator.

His face lit-up, attention honed so fine
it's almost delight,
though what he knows already
lacerates;
wait until after the interrogation.
The four-year-old with gonorrhoea-

Wind from the western mountains
is a thin blade.
Behind his head,
the glacier holds its austere white witness
saying what it always says to the sky.

He hugs the woman goodbye.

If her daughter ever asked
what's between them
she would tell her a door. A knife.

THE HUG

When she sees him unexpectedly
at the tire store,

green coat and shiny tie
with cartoon characters on it
that no male in her family would wear,
but she likes anyway because it's his,
he raises his arm in a *C'mere*
and have a hug gesture.

She slips into the half-circle of warmth
he makes and looks up.
He smiles down.

Winter stretches until they stand at the edge
of some larger place, sun-filled,
a ravine below them another step
would tumble

them

into.

She basks

he makes her free of the door marked
"Authorized Personnel Only"

& doesn't that bite each time?

they come encumbered

**anthropologists say,
Every**

hawk, hurtling down

in early morning hours when he can't
sleep he tells himself, *serve and protect*

light & open arms

against the heart
open

**where one does not
belong**

her brother's elegant silks

she doesn't even think
transgressing

welcomes his smell of soap, clean shirt

oral, emotional

she wants in

on the edge.

a fixed boundary

He carries the weight
of so many victims' stories,
there's darkness back of his eyes;
maybe that's why she plummets into them

bleakness x warmth: his face lights
the way newspaper
catches flame from a match

forgets to notice
if they're blue or green.

Their clinging amid the smell of rubber,
concrete and December cold is discomfiting.
We should break away, she thinks,
but she's always savored
nestling close to the chest
of a good-looking man

embarrassing comfort

this man with dark marks
under his eyes, thinning hair

and he seemed to be memorizing her face
like an Identikit sketch he hoped he'd never need,
holding her like luck.

She is not over him as she believed
though she remembers her husband-
his green coat almost the same colour
and soft feel-

any instance of contact

smell of Christmas evergreen,
bags of free popcorn

She is afraid her friend standing behind them
will chastise her later
when they and don't and don't
move apart.

Every touch is a modified

EYE CONTACT

Blue. His eyes as she falls into them
are the colour of Johnstone Strait
in a twenty knot westerly:
she wonders how she forgot.

imaginary. Contact

So much between them is amnesia or confusion;

alone in her house
when she asks him to demonstrate
interrogation technique

maroon floors shine

devious

he brings his face inches from hers
and she doesn't flinch

the way she's supposed to,
he says quietly, *We know one another now.*

the way a stranger would

Kissing would be more like it,

only they're playing it straight with spouses-

this is what he said right at the beginning-

since they met a year ago

she's been trying to give up fascination.

Today is business. As usual.

the most difficult task

The heart always wins, doesn't it? he says
about someone else;

bastard

She looks down at her notes, says,

I don't know.

The phrase, thin cloud along mountain ridges,

does little to block sun on the water

the way they look and look at one another,

like using scissors to cut the heart right
out of you

eyes locked,
lives passing, dazzling as cruise ships
against the choppy sea.

contact is that of violating

Going north in Johnstone Strait,

a fishboat bucks a westerly for hours.

When he leaves with only a quick sideways hug,

she's thankful. They're making progress,
motoring on by.

perhaps

LIGHT ON MOVING WATER

Separated for weeks by a perilous
expanse of air,
they greet one another boisterous
as travellers at an arrivals lounge.

**emotional or imaginary.
Contact**

Down below, the sea glistens, pewter
and malleable, scored
by the changing geometries of tugboats.
Wakes open into triangles
fan out smooth again
much the way their lives intersect
and go on, empty
of all but the forgiveness of water.

see how high they are?

& guilt, a stone that won't warm
the touch is physical

When they hug,
he says, *You're looking wonderful*;
it's a mantra.
Walking toward his office door
he presses her close,
she wonders how innocent
touch can ever be.

the breast to chest thing again

he talks about hoping she'd wear a
raincoat to his office, nothing on
underneath
A joke?

On the steps, she moves upwind
from his cigarette;
they talk with others from work.
His face so close to hers, smiling,

**violating a fixed
boundary**

his eyes, there's a discontinuity—
she's in the air looking down at
ocean, waiting
to stop falling beside him
metal handrail at her back.

again

Ambiguities swim silver between them
but this much she takes away,
a fish: his affection is huge,
a noun, and reflects.

boil & glint
shadow in the deeps
Every touch
light on moving water

TODAY SHE IS INVISIBLE

Today she is invisible.

**perhaps the
most difficult task we face
daily**

she doesn't mind much;
it frees her.
She is starting to understand.

herself glazed in the mirror of his eyes,
object

Before court, what attracts him
are Crown counsel, officers in suits
who cluster by the doors.
Men and women conspicuous
by radiant cleanliness;
if they cannot keep creation
from splintering
into murderers and victims,
they can at least shower
and get their hair cut often.

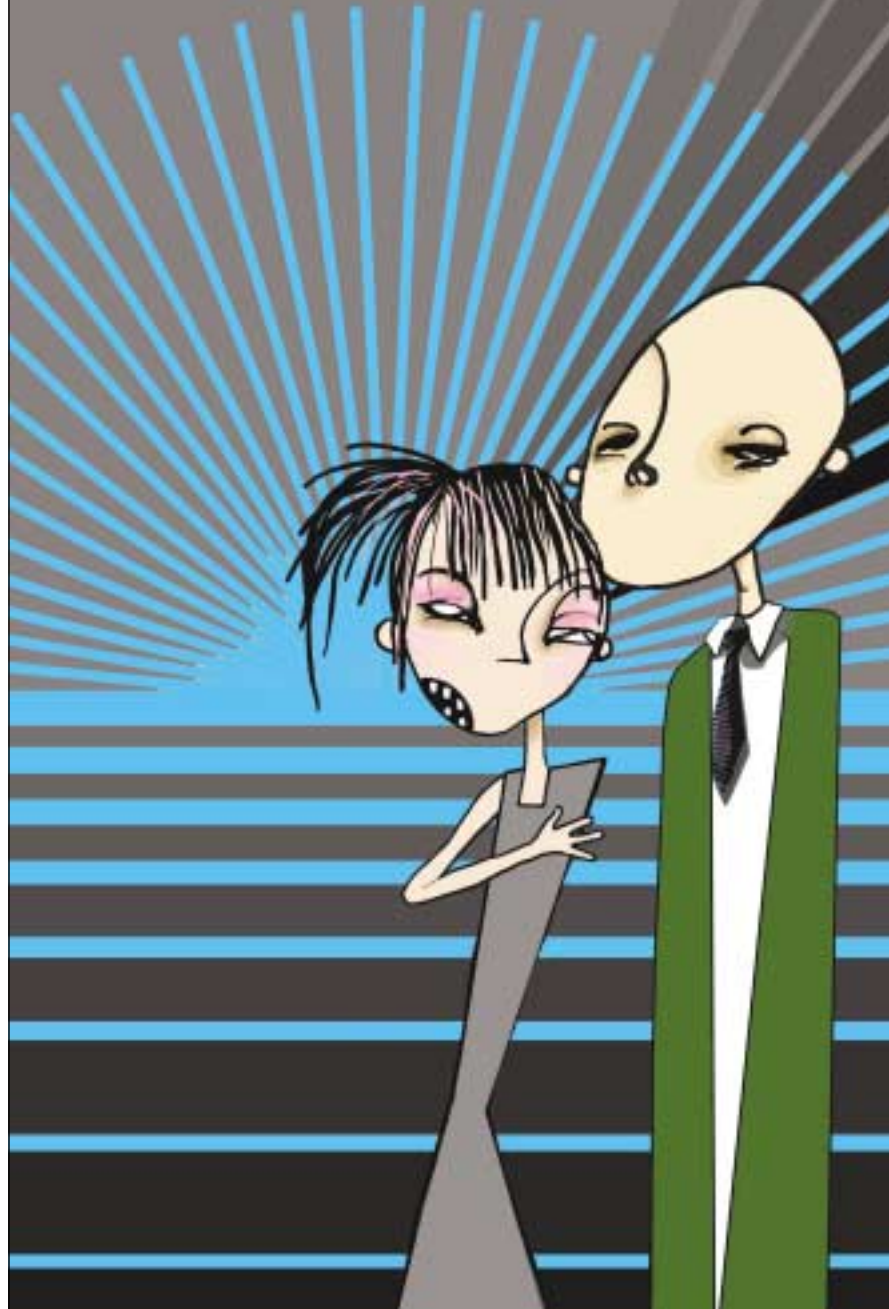
emotional or imaginary

subject & object

stars of their own shows

They smile at her, she's *the writer*, familiar
and well-dressed.

stitches them into story, spotlights



Still, witness room doors close
in her face.
At breaks, a phalanx goes
downstairs and she's invited to join
only sometimes.

police stand outside & smoke
droop like hydrangeas, thirsty to be told
they've done well on the stand;
she waters them

On the stand,
he has bags under his eyes
she never sees face to face.
Something about losing
her way when they're too close

it's called *violating your personal space*:
he's showed her the technique
in interrogation

though she should know by now.

why does he do this?

There are enough jokes about him
and women.
He tells a story with clear plastic
evidence bags.

safe distance

The accused's blood-spattered checked shirt.
Shoes that match footprints in blood
by the body.

**Every touch is a modified
blow**

Today, being invisible,
she sees for miles all along the valley;
stump ranches where people make
prayers of work, the forest
with its dark ripple of evergreens.
She understands the warmth between them
had gone beyond game;
his intense recognition
fierce and open as a red-winged hawk
prey in sight.

dropping, the crisp sound of feathers
against air

Now he has sheered off.

She won't offer more unguarded smiles.

He looks weary and elegant.
The hug she didn't get today
reverberates
but she sees
he wants only the surface flash
between male and female:

perhaps

over lunch (nothing red)
the blood-spatter expert from Halifax
gossips about marital infidelity
boundary, transgressing

give him a moment
when he wasn't distracted
and he would embrace
by reflex.

She is a reflex with him.
A woman with bright lipstick
to tease,
a civilian conspicuous in his world,
the bleak four a.m. one where human blood
pools on floors

this is what his pager, going at four
a.m. means: yellow intestinal fluid
on the mattress & floor, red high as
the ceiling

where he is a hunter.

She moved.
Of course he'd pounced.

**crisis. As the
anthropologists say**

SLEEPING BEAUTY* BECOMES INDIGNANT *
the unclaimed child AT JAVA JUNCTION

What she sees this time is him stroking
her hair, a gesture of such intimacy
she couldn't believe
he'd reach out and fondle her
in front of another officer,
even if she was off-duty.
She and her friend had been talking
about how Jan was to be Watch Commander
and whose ass she'd chew, being Jan:
nothing personal mind you,

a closed category

where's your discretion?

the Queen of Mean

*looks like she belongs on the back of a
bike, another officer once said*

then her friend mentioned his name
and said, *Oh look*
and it was him wearing sunglasses

what are the odds?

a different green jacket
than the one he wore all winter.
He was working

outside, the Queen of Mean waiting for
caffeine; she elicits full confessions
from rapists, pats them on the arm

and wouldn't join them but
while he waited for coffee he drifted
over and stood beside their table
just long enough to caress her
as if his hands didn't know
he was still talking
and she, she leaned into his touch
as if it were home.

bonding technique used in interrogation

The difficulty presented

STEELHEAD FISHING

touch

Days now she has known
she must give up wanting him;
understanding arrived perfectly formed
while she was watching a friend
sing *The Messiah*.
It broke over her the inevitable
way a wave builds,
green rush and roar
of water on polished gravel.
Now, across the table, he watches her
as if he were a controlled burn eyeing
first growth timber.

is physical

gold light, cupping

or an orgasm

transgressing

she drops her gaze now
no game

Across their coffee cups
she sees in frame after frame,
the changing angles of his arms mimic hers.
Her hand opens the way his does,
they mirror postures with shoulders: who started this?
They lean forward.

touching

how much they want

With December rain, steelhead
fin up newly-risen rivers, tasting home.
Water is the language of solids.
This too, lies between them,
the way she eases around
extended eye contact.

desire like a rock
you could walk on

we face daily

Each winter, he curves a thread of brightness
into grey sky, casting for steelhead.
It's one of those questions that has to be asked
over and over, the line drops
to the river's deep tea-brown and floats down. rainy days
Catch-and-release, the long silver solidity
of the fish gleaming, twisting in arcs, dull light
as he pulls one toward the bank.

task

perhaps the most, oral

Days now she has known
answers rise like bubbles to some vast horizontal plane
where oxygen changes form.

**The difficulty presented
by any instance of contact**

Across the table, she warms herself
at his eyes' transparent fire.
How grizzled his eyebrows are,
white against black like quick lines of *no*, repeated.
This is what love means,

this she believes implicitly

returning to where you can breathe

she thinks. We break the surface, inhale,
shake our heads in wonder.

Always before, she's liked to bring fish home.
This business of cherish-and-release
leaves her gasping.

a closed category []