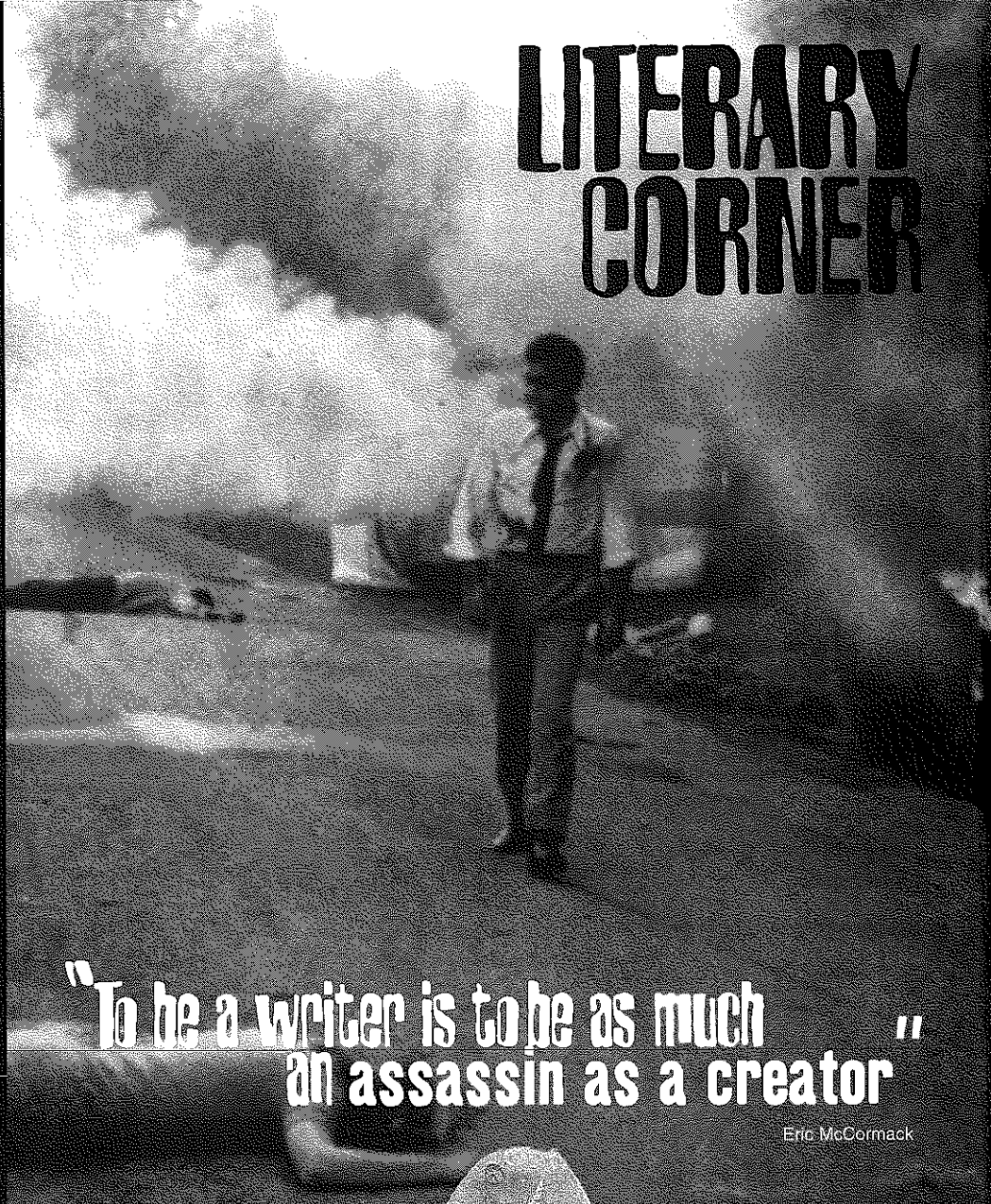


Border/Lines
Introduces Its ...
Literary Corner

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Eric McCormack
and the "orgiastic feminist,"
Raj Pannu. The author of the
collection of short stories,
Inspecting the Vaults,
and two novels,
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and *The Mysterium*,
McCormack writes teasers,
updates Borges.
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her first manuscript
of poems.

Also,
Shyam Selvadurai's
poignant comments
on *Funny Boy*.

LITERARY CORNER



**"To be a writer is to be as much
an assassin as a creator"**

Eric McCormack

CHARMED LIVES

By Eric McCormack

"To be a writer is to be as much
an assassin as a creator"

THEY'RE gathered around you, all ears. You choose your words carefully — you're trying to tell them something real, something that actually did happen. "It was a month ago," you say, "a Friday afternoon." You stick to the facts, the bare truth. You tell them how you were driving to the city. Jill was with you. David Thomas, one of your students, was in the car too. "It was around three o'clock," you say. "That was when the accident happened."

You tell them how your car was forced onto the shoulder of the highway, somersaulted and landed upright in the ditch.

You weren't injured. Your passengers weren't injured. Everything should've been all right. THEY'RE listening sympathetically. They're relieved you weren't hurt.

"Yes," you say, "everything should've been all right." You've done your best not to talk about the people in the car as though they were characters in some book: the woman, Jill — fair, witty, her arm brushing your knee as she switches the radio endlessly from station to station in search of satisfactory music; the young man, David Thomas — ponytailed black hair and beard, nodding earnestly at everything you say; you, the narrator — greying hair, green eyes with wrinkles around them like mandalas.

You've omitted all that kind of stuff. You haven't talked about the kind of day it was — mid-October, the sun at a brilliant angle, the emaciated limbs of the trees showing through multicoloured

rags. You've omitted lyrical descriptions. You've kept quiet about your premonitions — how you first became aware of the approaching red car in the rear mirror, menacing with the glint of its darkened windshield, coming up fast. If you were going 120, it was going 180. You even said to the others, "Will you look at the speed of this guy?"

You might have mentioned how, out of the corner of your eye, at that very moment, you noticed the relic of another wrecked car by the roadside — a fender wrapped as daintily as a birthday ribbon half-way up a telephone pole. But you've omitted any kind of calculated, bizarre detail. You haven't unnecessarily dramatized the accident itself (you continue to call it an "accident"), how it happened where there was a long, leftward bend in the road; how the red sports car came alongside, deliberately veering towards you, metal tearing at metal; you pulling away to the right, ever further right, till you were ploughing into the gravel. How, even when your car took off, launched up, up, up into the air, revolving slowly, the engine roaring, you were quite detached, objectively certain that it would turn through 360 degrees and land squarely on the flat bottom of the ditch. How in mid-flight, upside down, you called out, but in a calm voice, to the others, "Don't worry, we'll be all right!" And when the car landed on all fours on the grass with the wheels splayed out like Charlie Chaplin's boots, how you laughed to yourself, exhilarated; how you even tried to reassure police and medics who were suddenly around you. "I feel fine," you told them over and over again. "I lead a charmed life" — sitting there on the grass, the thick, damp grass — "I need to hire a car right away. We were on our way to the city." How the plump, anxious looking medic shook his head saying, very gently, "It wouldn't be wise for you to drive right now." You've omitted these kinds of heroics.

THEY'RE still listening with that look of people hearing the truth. You've told them simply how the car somersaulted and landed in the ditch. You've stuck to the facts. So far so good. They're waiting to hear the rest. They know there must be more. But how can you possibly tell them what happened next? Imagine

what they'd think if you came right out with it?

"It was like this. Sitting there on the grass, I forgot, momentarily, all about the person I love most in all the world. And when I remembered, the medic told me she and David were fine. I got to my feet, a bit wobbly, and went round to where they lay on plastic sheets at the passenger side of the car. She seemed so happy to see me and took my hand and held it to her cheek and said, 'I'm fine, honey. My neck's a bit sore, that's all.'

"I squeezed her hand and I loved her more than ever. Then I looked over to see how David was. But the man looking back at me from the other plastic sheet was someone I'd never seen before in my life. He certainly wasn't David Thomas. This stranger was clean-shaven and had a freckled face and his hair was short and light brown. And his eyes weren't David's eyes. He said, 'I'm all right too.' And his voice wasn't David's voice.

"I knew something was wrong. I knew everything was wrong."

THEY'RE listening, but what are you to say now? That at first you were bewildered; that you thought there'd been some incredible mix-up and that this unfamiliar young man must be the driver of the red car. That you looked around for David Thomas and asked where he was. That no one — not the medics, not the police, not Jill — seemed to have any idea what you were talking about. "But honey, *this* is David," Jill said, "right here beside me." And when you asked her about the red car that caused the accident, she said, "Red car? I don't remember any red car." And she got up on her elbow and looked over at him. "Did you see a red car, David?" And he looked first at her, then at me, and with a little smile, he shook his head — no, he hadn't seen it. And Jill was worried about you: "Are you sure you're all right honey? Why don't you lie down?"

THEY'RE listening, waiting politely. They don't realize how much you're keeping from them. What if, for example, you were to tell them about your life since the accident?

"That was a month ago. Since then, things aren't the same for me. I've had CAT scan after CAT scan; they show

nothing. The Valium doesn't help me sleep. As the days go by, Jill looks at me more and more strangely.

"I teach my classes as usual. Every Monday and Wednesday, this stranger sits in the lecture hall in the same seat where the real David Thomas used to sit. He watches me. I've accustomed myself to his presence and talk expertly, as though nothing has changed. Time passes, and the memory of the David Thomas I once knew passes, becomes flimsier.

"Everything, in fact, seems somehow flimsier to me now. And why not? Even Jill seems capable of vanishing forever, at any moment, like someone loved hopelessly in a dream."

THEY'RE still waiting, listening, but their eyes are a little restless now. They're thinking of moving on. You could hold them if you wanted. You take a deep breath. What if you were to tell them everything, the whole truth? You notice Jill and the others standing together in a corner; you can't see their faces. You breathe deeply, and deeply again. If you'd any sense, you'd keep quiet. But it's hard, so hard to resist. You clear your throat. You hesitate again. You can tell they're disappointed. They think they've heard all that there is to hear. They're beginning to disperse. This is your last chance. Your heart thumps. If you're going to do it, you'll have to do it now. You take a final breath, and, without knowing what you'll say, you begin.

"Yes," you say, "everything should've been all right . . ." You're not sure they're listening anymore, but you tell it all. You're not sure they're listening any more, but it doesn't matter. You feel so happy again, so free, it doesn't make any difference at all.



Janieta Eyre, from "Incarnations," *Attis*, 1995 (courtesy of Garnet Press Gallery)



Janieta Eyre, from "Incarnations," *Cat's Cradle*, 1995 (courtesy of Garnet Press Gallery)