

LITERARY CORNER

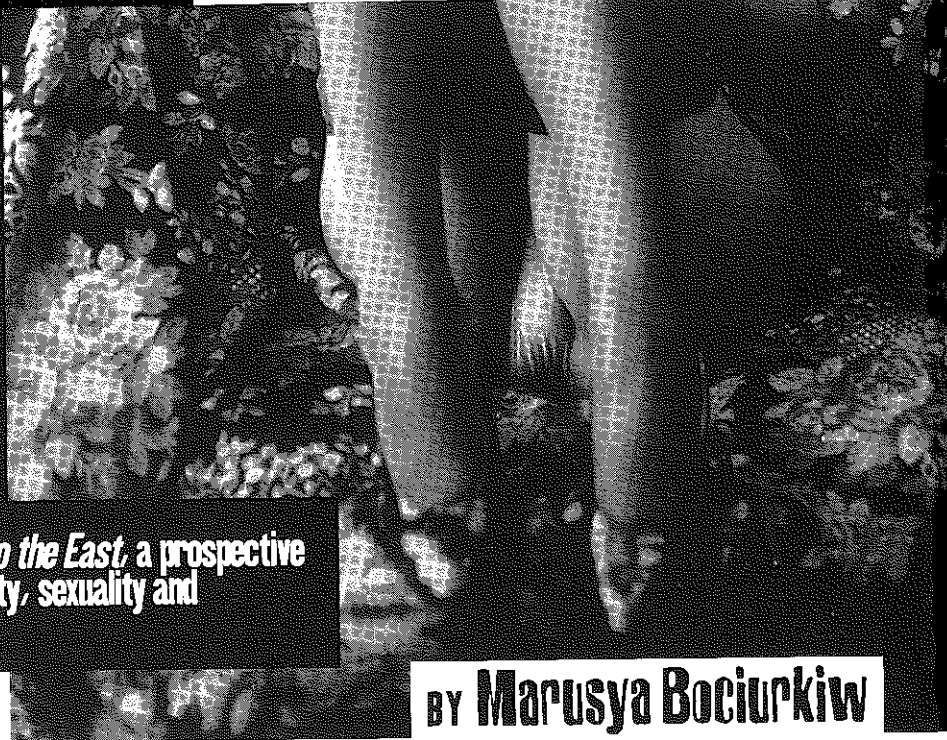
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FORREST GUMP IS ALIVE AND WELL AND LIVING IN MOOSE JAW

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"Forest Gump..." is from *Halfway to the East*, a prospective collection of linked stories on ethnicity, sexuality and Canadian identity.

BY Marusya Bociurkiw

1 a.m. in Toronto: clear skies and a chance of frost (Vancouver, cloudy with periods of rain). Zoe, in Vancouver, lies in bed with the Saturday *Globe and Mail* weather page spread out on her lap. Out of a combination of habit and need, her bedside clock-radio is set to Eastern Standard Time.
She figures Sonya is probably sleeping right now, mouth set in a tight line the way it is inclined to do in sleep, like a child who has said NO a hundred times. Outside Sonya's apartment, at the Mr. Donut Shop near Bathurst and St. Clair, there

is sure to be lots of emotional action going on. The booths are probably probably full of cops and drunks ordering crullers, and watery coffee for under a dollar, and talking about the referendum results as though they had been a narrow victory for the Blue Jays. It occurs to Zoe that a major difference between eastern and western Canada is not necessarily politics or architecture, but rather, that you can't find Mr. Donut shops out here, you can't locate that particular combination of vinyl, formica, sour cigarette smoke, and an endless wall display of crullers.

Everything here is a Starbuck's franchise, all the words are in faux Italian.

Zoe wants to call Sonya, but she doesn't have a crisis big enough, or a piece of good news exciting enough to warrant that shocking ring of the phone at 2 a.m. The referendum results don't quite cut it, and besides, her exact position is unclear. She would have voted no, but she isn't exactly a Forrest Gump character, the mid-point of Canadian identity, who seems to be alive and well and living in Moose Jaw. The kind of guy who does a really good pretend Québécois accent at parties, yet couldn't pronounce a non-anglo name if his life depended on it. The type who boards the Unity Plane with a big old Maple Leaf flag he got from the Kiwanis Club, goes to Montreal for the first time in his life, gets drunk, walks around with his Saskatchewan buddies shouting in English about what a great country Canada is, then comes home and sits in front of the TV with a beer, watching the referendum results (while his wife does the dishes in the kitchen), going *Yess!*

Zoe wants to describe this vision to Sonya, warn her somehow. But it isn't enough of a story to interrupt the pale blue membrane of her girlfriend's dreams, that surely encircles her at this very moment. And it is no substitute for the scent of that intimate vapour of sleep, that only lovers get to breathe.

11 p.m. in Vancouver, muses Sonya absently, the time-differential a bothersome jingle she can't get out of her head. She and Eliza are sharing a joint, leaning against a makeshift bar at a King & Dufferin speakeasy: a post-referendum blow-out, organized by a gang of francophone dykes and their friends.

The huge warehouse studio is full of old televisions, piled up in corners or lying face-up in the middle of the floor. Pre-taped CBC News footage plays on them: Peter Mansbridge peering through monitors that have *oui* or *non* painted on the glass. Very retro, very Nam June Paik. Sonya knows about Nam June Paik, 60s installation artist, from her lover Zoe, who isn't here, but should be. Zoe has left town in search of work, and Sonya was laid off from her medical technician job three weeks ago. These days, she finds herself circling the city in

search of an idea, some new way to be.

She is watching a performance piece by Joyanna Silver, video-performance poet and ex-lover-four times-removed of Zoe's. Joyanna, who is anglo, and the writer Manon Bernier, who is franco-phone, are having sex on the up-ended monitors which are made up to look like a bed, with pillows and a thin sheet through which Peter Mansbridge's innocent face can be seen. After an elaborate, performative orgasm (Manon screaming, "*Oui, oui, oui...*"), Joyanna smears a *fleur de lis* on Manon's back with menstrual blood. Sonya figures the blood is faked, but can't get close enough to tell. It, too, is retro, a throwback to the early eighties when you couldn't enter an alternative gallery without seeing somebody's stained tampon hanging on the wall.

Then, another performance begins. A *corps de ballet* of women with nylon stockings over their heads runs around, delicately brandishing hand grenades. The semi-famous painter Nick Stavropoulos pirouettes through the room, a Pierre Trudeau mask on his face, and his dick dangling away, shouting in a falsetto voice, "Just watch me! Just watch me!" An all-dyke chorus line huddles around a mike, snapping their fingers and chanting: "*Poutine aux Québécois, poutine aux Québécois...*" Guys in army fatigues aim toy rifles at people in the audience, who laugh haltingly, nervously. It seems to Sonya that this performance has moved past the boundaries of anglo good taste, even with this hip crowd, and that that is what is exciting about it.

Sonya goes to get another beer. For some reason, she starts thinking about her one and only trip to Québec, when she was a kid. Her mom took her and her sister, Kat, for Expo 67. Sonya would have rather gone to Lourdes, France, but this was a good second choice. Her favourite tourist site was St. Joseph's Oratory, the big church on Mount Royal. Sonya was in her religious phase then, and found it stirring to watch old women climb the steps to the church on their bare knees, and to see the petrified bones of saints preserved in jars. Also, she remembers that whenever she tried to speak French, people would say to her that she was *anglaise*, and her

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ma would always go, no, no, no, we're not English. But if they weren't English what were they?

Midnight in Vancouver, and Zoe is wide awake, remembering the time she and Sonya first made love. It was raining at the time, you could smell the wax crayon aroma of wet pavement from the window. There was that late-night purple big-city sky. There was Sonya, studiously working away at Zoe's cunt, trying to make her come, but Zoe never came the first time. There was her, Zoe, flipping Sonya over, confident, tough, like a boy, then sliding her hand down Sonya's body in a sleazy kind of way, and watching expressions pass like clouds on Sonya's face. There was the way they curled against each other afterwards, ferns in a forest, listening

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to the rain, the kind of perfectly comfortable fit that doesn't happen very often. There was a glass of water by the bed, a Silence Equals Death poster on the wall, a book of Ukrainian fairytales that had fallen to the floor. There was a cat who jumped on top of them when they were finished, wanting dinner, and a phone that rang over and over again in the next apartment.

Zoe pulls herself back, looks at the unfamiliar pattern of city lights outside her window. The memory is good, maybe too good: it's like a drink too early in the day, it will get you later. She looks around her room, white walls, blue sheets, a strange, low ceiling, and tries to breathe in the smell of rain mixed with what she imagines to be the very faint, comforting salt smell

of ocean, or is it just the memory of Sonya's cunt?

The atmosphere in the room is really wired, giving Sonya energy. She feels like a tourist in her own town. There is something comforting about that. Since coming out, Sonya has organized her world into a simple us and them configuration, *us* being lesbians, *them* being everyone else. Lesbians are good, lesbians are supportive of women. Lesbian relationships are better, safer.

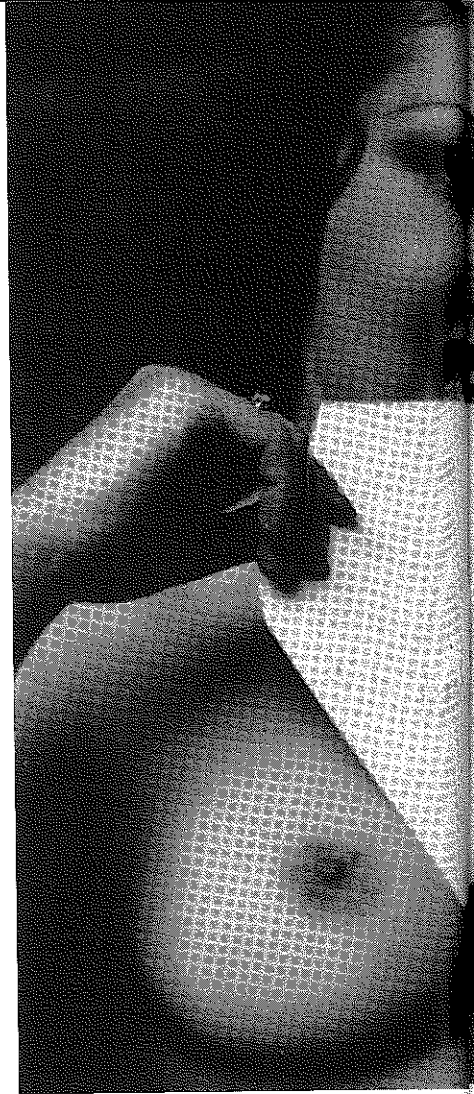
But now, looking around, she begins to doubt her own dogma. There seems to be a lot of fawning over the few gay men who have shown up, especially the semi-famous ones, like Nick. There is some kind of unspoken definition of who is hot and who isn't, so that some dykes form a kind of popular girls' circle, and other dykes hover around them. There is the exoticization of dykes of colour, with the most Anglo, upper-class white dykes vying for how anti-racist they can be, since they have been brought up on power and they realize that, right now, that is where the power lies. There is a lot of tension, a lot of stress about clothes and haircuts and getting invited to parties. Maybe being so good and pure had just gotten too boring for words.

1 a.m. in Vancouver. Zoe turns on the radio, needing that crackling wall of sound. It's been wall-to-wall referendum coverage, now it's wall-to-wall cutbacks. The federal government is going to get mean, get even, get lean. Zoe listens to pollsters and government officials being interviewed by benign, soft-voiced CBC interviewers. What people are saying is horrific: less money for single mothers to feed their kids. People on welfare having to pay for their medical prescriptions. A new head tax for immigrants, and then, in some provinces, not getting any social assistance for three months, just so the immigrants can toughen up and prove they really deserve to be in Canada. All of it spoken in a low, modulated, common sense kind of voice, so that Forrest Gump can pay less taxes and occasionally give to the food bank. This is Canada. Zoe keeps thinking about that Gump-guy in Saskatchewan waving his Kiwanis Club

flag, how malleable, how hopeful, how desperate he is.

The rain stops. 1:10 a.m. clicks into place on the clock radio.

The thing is, you have to figure out something besides despair. Zoe moved to Vancouver to escape Toronto's hard edge, and to get just ahead of the tide of conservatism that's been sweeping westward, like bad weather. She's doing hack work on American feature films, moving furniture, hanging drapery, driving around town looking for 30s Depression glassware, 50s formica tables, or 70s shag rugs. She wears a beeper like all the other crew, and she keeps crazy hours, on call all the time, and talking endlessly about work on her days off, about how stupid each director is and how sexist most crews are, about how imperialist the whole thing is, with the Canadian actors playing extras and being told not to get in the way of the American stars.





But there is a kind of satisfaction in it, that she doesn't admit to. She likes working with people, each with their own specific job. She definitely likes getting paid, and she likes being part of something bigger than her own artistic imagination. She is always tired, always eating takeout, always avoiding her own film work. She wonders if she will ever make art again, and is fine with that thought. There is a whole myth about how art is this transcendent thing, that gives hope. She knows this isn't true anymore, and maybe never was. Art is just hard work, like everything else.

4 a.m. in Toronto: Sonya imagines herself on a cloud above the party, transcending all the nasty things about it, like the Blessed Virgin Mary she prayed to so fervently as a child. Someone hands her a joint, she feels a bit dizzy, her head not quite connected to her body. But it might not be the joint. It

might simply be that she has seen too much, and now needs to close down.

Sonya's sister Kat once told Sonya that she has the ability of seeing through most people and their transparent self-deceptions. "You have x-ray eyes, like Superman," Kat had said. "You better watch it, kiddo. Most people don't like that."

It is true that Sonya can see through Joyanna Silver as though she is a piece of film, with all the cloudy compromises Joyanna has made with herself to get ahead. Like dots of malignant blood cells visible in an otherwise pure bloodstream, Sonya can see Eliza's deep, self-hating need to align herself with male power, even though Eliza is a dyke and supposedly a feminist. Like a lung with clots all over it, she can see how Zoe has curtailed her ambitions, just so she can feel safe, and how moving to B.C. is a running away, which never really works. And worst of all, she can see how the lesbian community is doomed if it doesn't find some infrastructure to let it take care of itself in the long-term, because it is poverty, rather than AIDS, which is going to kill most of them, in the end.

The thing about seeing through people, the problem with it, is that it leads to existential despair. It's true that everyone has big, dirty clouds obscuring their x-rayed souls. But it suddenly occurs to Sonya that there is something very Catholic in the way she wants everyone to have a pure unblemished soul, when she thought she had left all that Catholic crap behind.

Zoe gets up and stands at her kitchen window for awhile, listening to the wind and the distant howl of foghorns. Her apartment is on a rise of land, so that from her kitchen she can see Burrard Inlet and the curved line of lights that is Lion's Gate Bridge. In the daytime, on a clear day, she is surrounded by a blue half-circle of mountains. When it's windy, the apartment shudders like something alive, and she likes that. Toronto is a city with no horizon, no natural referents. And Toronto is a place she will always be referenced to, her compass needle constantly

spinning without the CN Tower to get north and south in line.

She won't be able to push furniture around on film sets forever. Will she be able to turn to art again for hope?

The party beaks up at 5 a.m. Sonya ends up in a cab with Joyanna and Eliza. Eliza's head flops against Sonya's shoulder, while Joyanna keeps up a running commentary about the party, who said what about whom, and the technical fuck-ups that happened during the performance, including some problem with the congealing of menstrual blood. From that she segues into her upcoming retrospective in Banff, the cool and famous people she met recently in San Francisco, and a book deal in the offing with a British publisher. Sonya can hardly follow what Joyanna's talking about, but she senses that Joyanna is trying desperately to make everything happen before she gets old or before all the arts grants dry up, whichever comes first.

When they get to Queen and Spadina, Joyanna helps Sonya get Eliza safely into her apartment before she totally passes out. It's a woman thing, making sure they each got home safe.

Sonya gets back in the cab and Joyanna hands over most of the cab fare. "It's too much," says Sonya. "That's OK," says Joyanna. "It's Ontario Arts Council money. Gotta spend it before it gets repossessed." Joyanna walks off along Queen Street, her pink vinyl raincoat catching the neon. And Sonya heads north to Bathurst and St. Clair in that smooth, luxurious movement of a taxi on a nighttime road late at night. Flashes of idealized beauty and flares of paranoid fantasy alternate in her head like carnival lights. A spark of truth, either way.

When Sonya gets to her apartment the phone is ringing. She glances at her watch, calculates: 2:30 a.m. in Vancouver. Zoe, probably, getting home from a film shoot. But the ringing has stopped by the time she gets to the phone.

Photographs from the book *1000 Nudes*.