The following three chapters are from the opening of the novel *The Forgetting Room,* which is set in Northern Ontario and in Japan.

No walls no roof no anything my house
doesn't get wet doesn't get blown down

Ikkyu

1.

I stand just outside the vast city of the homeless, that city within the city, beside those who live with no walls, no roof. I never sleep outdoors like they do, or in bank machine foyers left open by careless customers, or curled up, hot and sweaty in a torn sleeping bag over a grate. But I feel a link to those on the street I find difficult to explain. I feel more at home busking on the street than sitting at the office. In closed doorways, twice a week, under long acoustic awnings, I moonlight for extra money and the electricity of playing on the outskirts of the city few really see.

The first time I heard the word *busker* was in Toronto when I came down from Mattawa on a class trip. A ragged trio played *Imagine*—one on guitar, one on tin-cup and another singing harmony. Halfway through, the harmonist sat down cross-legged, sniffed something in a paper bag, and spent the chorus on his back singing at the sky.

"Buskers," my classmate said. "Fuckin' bums."

But I didn't think so, and I don't think so now as I wait for Carl to haul his amp and Fender Strat to this patio.

I slide my beer out of the April sun and into the shade of the umbrella and lean over my Japanese study notes in Hiroko's handwriting, which is cleaner than mine will ever be. I realize I've forgotten my sax.

The payphone mouthpiece stinks of cigarettes.

"Carl."

"Yeah."

His voice sounds small, shrunken.

"Can you bring my alto? I forgot it."

"Where are you?"

"At the Rivoli, I've got a great seat on the patio."

"Stay there."

"Sure. What's up?"

"I've something to tell you. Hang on."

Toronto is beginning to thaw. It's only April but already perfumed groups of girls in skirts and black boots are marching down Queen Street, their voices in love with the possibility of summer. The sun is hot and the air smells of asphalt. I glance down the street to gauge where we should play.

Last summer we began in a doorway at the intersection of Ossington and King, a dingy corner where not much traffic passed. We were trying out new songs. One night three prostitutes took their positions opposite us under a yellow lamp—some cars slowing as they passed, others making the quick stop. These women were our meter of success: if they snapped fingers, sang, or swayed we knew the new song had a groove. Mid-evening an Albert Collins blues number derailed and a young one shouted over, Nah, nah. Fugees baby! Play me some Fugees. An older, hoarse, throaty voice cut in, Fugee my asshole, girl. Elvis. Elvis's the king.

Once, just down from this patio, a man who appeared to be homeless—his clothes were stained and his dull eyes cowered—perched on his heels as we played. When we took a break he pulled a shiny orange out of his overcoat and without a word tossed it into our case. Carl took it out. There's a parable in this, he said.

Sometimes a man who was always high on crack would satellite us, pushing through groups of women who had gathered to listen, asking for money or sex. His eyes were burn marks. When I glimpsed the terrible hunger in them I was afraid of him, of what he might do to satiate himself, and once called over a policewoman to move him on. Most of our roving audience were simply the poor: women over forty, native men and women with red, worn out eyes. Van Gogh said there is more in men's eyes than in cathedrals. *So I paint faces*, he wrote.

One shuffling slow-moving fellow with a long horse face told us he chose street-life. Social services had set him up with an apartment and a job cleaning hotel rooms. After two months he decided to return to the outside. No one looks at you straight on, he said. You just float. In a way, coming from where I had, I understood him.

I shuffle through Hiroko's vocabulary list.

Ongaku, music. *Kao*, face. I'm waiting for word on a job teaching English in Japan.

Finally Carl comes in and I push over the pitcher of beer I've kept cool in the shade. The air is still hot.

"Summer's coming on," I say, smiling, lost in thoughts of playing. Carl nods. He's dressed for it, wearing long shorts and a red, open-necked shirt from the seventies. His mass of dark curly hair is held back with a red rubber band. He fumbles with a pack of Player's Light in his large hands. I look around for the instruments and don't see them.

"What's up?"

He takes a drink of beer. "Nothing. I… just didn't feel like it tonight."

"O.K."

He lights a cigarette and we sit for a bit. "Your mother called this afternoon. Chris," he says and pauses.

"Your… your dad's gone. He passed away last night. I'm so sorry."

He comes around the table and gives me a hug. He starts speaking again but something has shut off inside me and I can't hear him. I look at my hands. They appear strange in the pale, setting sun. They lift the glass to my mouth, there is a taste of cold, grainy beer in my throat, and then they replace the glass on the table. I don't feel a thing.

2

In the Mattawa of the 1970s, my tiny childhood village four hundred kilometers North of Toronto, I grew up with ghosts: my distant, eccentric father, his communist past,

his British relatives I never met who lived and died 'across the sea.' There were also, of course, the typical fears of childhood—ghosts with or without form, night winds creaking through my windows, waking in the dark, being shadowed home by schoolyard bullies. But it was my mother's stories that floated through my nightmares. From the 'West' came Halloween stories cooked up to startle my friends, and—if we pleaded—tales of Catholic exorcisms and hauntings that she had picked up at convent school. Eastern ghouls emerged from her vast library. She shared and encouraged a burgeoning Japanophilia. Guilt-free, she said. The Japanese don't believe in guilt. Or sin.

From her books on Japan whole cities of strange figures filed into my dreams. When I woke at three a.m. after a night of reading, it was she who held me to her, my heart shaking her nightgown.

"No more for you," she said.

My breath was ragged against her. The windows were black.

"You know why those creatures look scary?"

She fished her book from the waves of my bedsheets. On one page a pale-faced kite with crooked eyebrows hung out a tongue twice as long as his head. I came out of my fear and looked at her.

"He is shouting: Evil spirits get away."

I looked at the hanging red strip tongue, the mouth eternally saying Ahh.

"O.K. But what about this?"

I turned the page to a man with a black crow mask and a long, drill-bit beak.

"Remember how we talked of lightning rods attracting bolts out of the sky? To ground the shock? His beak is a lightning rod to ground nightmares."

Something moved outside the window. Maybe a bird or the black river.

I sat up and pointed to a floating woman. "What about this?"

"I think you're feeling better now dear."

"And this gargoyle?"

She stood up and switched off the light. "Goodnight."

"Just tell me about him."

"*That* creature," her voice spoke in the half dark, "stands guard over a temple. He protects you. They all do."

When her footfalls ceased I flicked the light back on.

A gargoyle with six python-sized arms, stubby elephant legs and a hippopotamus jaw stood outside a thatched-roofed temple. His eyes were plates. The caption read: *Protector of Buddhism*. What looked to be fearsome was refuge. Japan arrived in paradox before I was ten, as the river rushed by my window and my heart beat rapidly in the still, black morning.

3

In summers the ghosts turned into musicians. My father's friends crowded into our unfinished house with their guitars and harps and spoons and fiddles. There was Wilf who sang Hank Snow and Willie Nelson with a soft, molasses voice. There was the first violinist of the Deep River Symphony who bowed out "Little Wing." There was a band of Chippewa men who chanted over skin drums and taught my sister and I to tap a beat with palms as flat as books. And there was a retired opera singer from England whose voice rattled my windowpane and aroused dogs.

The music of my father's friends would float out the windows of our blue house, through the semi-forested enchantment of pines along the yard. It would carry itself along the slats of the gray docks above the whispering river and up the footworn path to the black train bridge where no law could stop its crossing. I would stay up as late as I could, falling asleep to fiddle and harmonica, flute and native drum.

The man I stayed up latest to watch was Paul McKnight. I could hardly catch a word he said in his French-accented English but I never missed a stroke of his bow.

My sister, beside me on the green sofa as the musicians assembled, pinched me.

"Make the Japanese kite face."

Paul brought his fiddle up to his thin chin. All I could see was his long, dark hair and faint lip-concealing mustache. He reached for a cigarette leaving the violin tucked and hanging.

"Shh."

His pale face lit up in a flare of match. Then his arm began sawing a fast, easy-swaying French Canadian reel full of a village far from here and grass of a different smell than the long grass along the banks to the bridge. It was about a life of ease that swelled and slowed, that suddenly ducked under a fence and swung into river-side trees. It dropped you onto the rope swing strung from your tallest pine and swung you out over and into cool, clear water.

Smoke rose from ashtrays and the still hands of those listening.

I looked over at my father.

Brenda whispered, "Make the kite face."

I stuck my tongue down and out and ballooned my eyes and she collapsed into giggles.

My father looked like the homeless man I sometimes saw in Mattawa. A dark-skinned man with a distant face that made my heart clammy. When I asked my mother why he had no home, she said: "Oh dear, he's just a sad old soak. Likes a drink." My dad didn't drink, but in both their faces was this *other*. My dad had a whole repertoire of *otherness*, most of which involved doing normal things at unexpected times. Pumping the hand of the long-time neighbour in the hardware store saying, "You seem *awfully* familiar." Stretching out full on the floor for a nap as guests arrive dressed in finery for dinner. In the sweep of Paul's reel, he appeared to be only half in this world. His graying hair swayed lightly to the music, his eyes closed. I felt suddenly afraid for him in his wrinkled suit-pants and his torn brown shoes. His face closed and yet open to the music. A shiver passed down my body. He opened his eyes, stared at me and smiled. But in the rapture of the music he was looking right through me.