

# Death Culture

BY KIM ANDERSON

*With thanks to Ana Isla.*

## death culture

*Olympic Killing. Bomb ravages crowd.* The headlines scream at Eliza as she stumbles past the *Sun* box on her way to Mama's Bakery. Her morning inspiration coffee is used to these interruptions; often they are worse. Serial killers seem to be popular. Airplane crashes, rapists, and mass murders, good sales too.

"A large latte," she says to the woman in white, hoping, this time, to be ready for the end when it arrives.

Out on the street again, the sun is shining brilliantly, and Eliza considers spending the day in the park.

But deadlines loom, and so she forces herself to make the march back up the hill, towards her computer.

"Where was I?" she wonders, turning on the terminal.

Where indeed? Setting up a database to trace product consumers. Client base. Location.

"How many pizza eaters in my postal code as opposed to yours? Where to target?"

Eliza's eyes swim in front of the screen.

## robots

"Jamie. Love, come here."

Eliza stretches a hot wet cloth towards the child. His dinner, so carefully placed in front of him, is all over his face, the table, and the high chair

from which he has escaped. He runs back and forth between the cupboard and where she is sitting, gradually moving all of the pots from under the sink into a metal obstacle-course on the kitchen floor.

She dodges in and out. "Let's get you cleaned up. Today is your birthday, so we are going to get you something special!"

Jamie looks at her with the silent approval of the ones that understand, but don't speak.

"How about it?"

The store is full of colour, noise, light. Yet as Eliza works her way down, the aisles pile on. She manages to slip past the Pocahontas collectibles, princess, Indian adventures, keep 'em locked up in a pocket locket. She is, at the next turn, met by Force: Special Police Formulator Force FBI action gun set dyna fighter shrunken heads Fire Warrior Robot Troop skeletal knights. Robots shooting, punching, killing maiming.

And for the technologically deprived, Indian weapons.

"You're dead!" the child in the aisle next to Jamie says to him, jumping across the checkered squares that mark the floor. He points his plastic yellow Powerblaster.

Inside her pocket, Eliza rattles the stones in the medicine bag that Auntie had given Jamie as a "happy birth" present. She finds a stone and glides her thumb over the smooth side. Looks on.

"Fall down. Now!" the boy says. Jamie stares. Hangs onto Mama's leg.

## welcome

They lean in, hovering together over the little plastic device, waiting anxiously for the purple stripe to emerge. Eliza thinks of how many times she has seen it on TV: The long face, the stumbling over the words, the

"WHAT IS IT HONEY?"

("I'm pregnant.")

*Where are these guys in the scheme of things, that this should come as a great surprise to them?* Eliza wonders.

Then, as slow as a smile that spreads across a face with news dawning; good, then surprising, then hardly believable, the purple presents itself.

Eliza and Andy look at each other. Flashes of life pass back and forth between them.

Welcome speaks to her.

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She is met by  
Force: Special  
Police Formulator  
Force FBI action gun  
set dyna fighter  
shrunken heads  
Fire Warrior Robot  
Troop skeletal  
knights. Robots  
shooting, punching,  
killing maiming.

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Diana Dean, "The Birth," 58" x 66", Oil on Canvas, 1986.

He greets.

**science**

Sitting in the doctor's office, she can feel herself drifting in and out of consciousness. Perhaps this is not a good day to come here. Eliza has been up all night trying to finish the database that is due today. Already sleep deprived, already guilty about working too hard on the outside, when there is so much work to be done on the inside. She shakes it off, reminding herself that guilt is an unnecessary emotion.

Right. Don't feel guilty about eating, not eating, working too much, too little, to exercise, or....

Eliza closes her eyes. *Relax. Garden.* The plants flowering, the shrubs waving her into their depths. She moves her hand across her stomach and thinks life energy into her day-dream, moving body and little spirit closer to her mind. *My love* she breathes. *My little love.*

But then, the tomato plants. Move.

Eliza slides, down, below the surface. White plasticized fingers begin to pull apart, roots moving, blood, samples, drawn out and categorized. This one makes it smaller, more productive, disease resilient. Indigenous DNA floats up the Amazon, ecosystems of knowledge pulled apart for sale.

She has travelled to where capital teams trade numbers for lives. Total market. *Don't think about this.* Eliza struggles, but something is asking her to look. Continents away, and in her garden, she is introduced to the most base level of ownership. That which patents life. *Why do I need to see this? Why now?*

"Eliza. Come this way." the nurse says.

**a down town**

"Hey Lady! You wanna' buy a VCR?" Eliza isn't sure she is ready for more today.

And Yonge Street has never been Eliza's favourite walk. Especially now,

the poverty grinding its Queen's Park Policy down the town, scattering lives along Yonge. The desperation in people's lives lies heavy on the pavement, sleeping bags heaped over the growing masses.

"C'mon, 25 bucks. I just need a hit. That's all."

He has moved in front of her, partially blocking her way.

"I'm really sorry,"

*for what can I do?* Eliza tries to move beyond him without brushing him off.

"Well FUCK YOU LADY!" he pushes her aside and her body, delicate perfection, reacts. The balance of water inside is thrown crazily against the glass of the head shop window. This now brings attention on him, and before she can sort through her feelings and find anger about this assault, she is drawn to him. The cops have slammed him against the cruiser, more violent, more brutal than his older-than-he-really-is body can withstand.

*When a woman is pregnant, so is her partner. They must pay special attention to what they put into the body. What they take in. Back then, it was forbidden for the father to kill or butcher an animal in any way.*

**movement**

"We're moving out of town" she announces to Andy when she arrives home. "It's time."

Andy nods.

"I know."

**growth**

Housing problems and the absence of a generation prevent them from moving to the reserve. They find, instead, a house nearby that has been for sale for a long time. The owner, unable to find work in the country, is living in Toronto.

They, unable to find work, will find life.

Growth. It must be possible. What about mother, the great provider? Can she provide?

Knowledge that is community, love. Survival of the love-liest. They are here to prepare for the birth, and wait for the end of death culture.

#### **anishinaabe university**

"I hear you want to know about the herbs," the old woman says, over the Safeway parsley that Eliza has scraped one more database pizza to buy. Eliza looks across and sees grandmother waiting.

As they wander through the bush, the plants each telling their story, Eliza feels renewed by the spirit around her. The baby turns and swirls inside, stretching a foot here, a bumpy elbow there, small ripples of life showing themselves on the edge of a mother's skin-stretched drum of a belly.

"Eliza. We can start with this one." Grandmother says.

"This is good for birth."

#### **disasters**

*Flash flooding. Volcanic Eruptions.*

The healing has been creeping along unacknowledged by mother's sick children. With every environmental law torn down, every release of poisons in the name of *Business, Growth*, another internal explosion. Patches and blemishes, smoothed and cosmeticized by the outside, masking the overall movement within.

#### **fire**

On her way down to the river, Eliza must stop to sit down. There is heat, incredible heat boiling up and down. Her feather fan passes the cool air across her face, and in a few minutes, she finds the energy to look around where she has landed.

First, the sunlight, bursting in and out of the school of dancing leaves. Her eyes fall softly down. Floating her like a leaf making its way to an autumn ground. When she arrives, she does not find the cool hibernation she is looking for. But fire.

It starts like a speedy plant, shooting from the ground. Eliza sees it. A flame of singular purpose. It pauses, preserves a moment of its flicker, as if thinking whether to proceed. Then, stealing sideways, it flirts with the dry grass around. Back and forth as a fire can do without revealing when it is really ready.

Eliza stands up. Is she the one to stop it? She pulls her jacket around her, but stays rooted to her spot, transfixed, unable to smother this fire.

Then, as quickly as it starts, it flips, spits, and is out.

Eliza stays put. The wood surroundings take on a dampened dead. For the moment. She does not investigate further.

Sitting on the bank minutes later, Eliza gives thanks to the waters.

#### **crash**

"Well," Andy says, walking into the kitchen where she is boiling some raspberry tea, "I couldn't get any groceries because the bank card didn't work. The computer systems are down. Burnt out again. So ... vegetable stew again tonight."

"I think we had better learn how to fish," she says.

Jamie looks up from his seat on the floor where he is playing with a toy fishing rod, another birthday present. He smiles a front-toothy smile.

"OK Mama," his eyes tell her.

#### **birth**

It starts, slowly. Eliza has cleaned

every corner of the house, prepared food, picked flowers. She sits down to read, and then she feels it. A feeling of discomfort. Feeling full. Restless, and ready.

By the time Andy and Jamie arrive home, Eliza can no longer doubt whether she is in labour. He calls other helpers: the child care auntie, the midwife, the back-rubbing friend.

"Try to rest," the midwife says over the phone. "You have a lot of work ahead of you."

As the upheavals in her body begin to take on more of a force, she feels she is being pulled in every direction. She wants to escape, up, out of her body, but there is no way. She chants low. Ground, and resist pulling up to a twist and tighten with the tension of the pain.

In her search for comfort she moves all around the house, as if in her own house, her body will find some relief in a different location. But there is no escaping this house. This is where she is, where she will stay. And in the end, it will all be good.

At 24 hours, her voice hoarse, her long, thick hair dripping sweat, her muscles all rip and strain, she is reminded of the purpose of her work. Through the tearing, the burning ring that has become her, who she is, she breaks through. The pain is gone. That's all she can think about. No more pain.

And then the midwives lift the new babe up to place on her breast.

#### **arrival**

"She's a girl," mother says.

*She's here.*

#### **home**

Let's work the space for her.  
For him  
For all our relations.

Grandma nods.

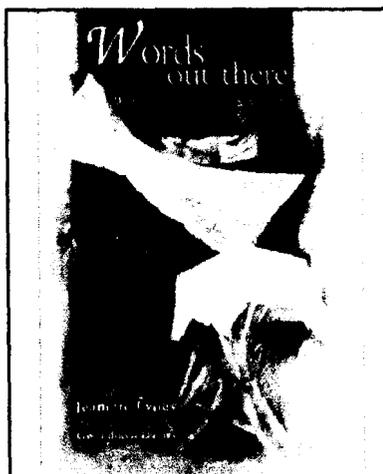
*Kim Anderson is a Creel/Métis writer and educator. She is the author of A Recognition of Being: Reconstructive Native Womanhood (Second Story Press, 2000). Kim lives in Guelph with her partner and their two children.*

## LORRAINE THOMAS

### Kohkom

Elsie flows like a river  
 Secretly thru my veins  
 Like a waking bear from  
 winter  
 Medicine comes thru dreams  
 Calling calling in whispers  
 Accented in forgotten Cree  
 Her Indian image preserved  
 On a black and white  
 photograph  
 She wore thick braids of  
 sweetgrass  
 Cupped by a bandanna  
 Small and sturdy  
 Birch bark skin  
 She was Mooshums  
 backbone  
 She walks carefully thru my  
 sleep  
 My mother's mother  
 Her moccasins dancing the  
 round dance  
 With ancestors of the sky

*Lorraine Thomas is a 27-year-old First Nations Cree. She has published several poems as well as a short story.*



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## DIANA PEACOCK

### Guérison

On espère  
 Que la blessure  
 Guérit  
 Finalement

Souvent on attend  
 Longtemps  
 Même jusque  
 A la fin de la vie

Cette blessure  
 Qui dure des années  
 C'est causé  
 Par une perte  
 Si profonde  
 Inexplicable

Ça hante tôt le matin  
 Et tard le soir  
 Mais l'assurance existe  
 Que la guérison viendra

*Diana Peacock is a Toronto poet.*

## MALCA LITOVITZ

### Bubbi's Limoge

When I look at your dishes,  
 your splendour returns —  
 casserole dishes with gold  
 rims  
 and roses on lids —  
 stately cake dishes  
 towering with the majesty  
 of the occasion —  
 breads with crowns  
 regal beneath the full moon  
 of the New Year;  
 the sugar bowl smiles  
 and the creamer dances,  
 curtsies to the New Year —  
 full, round, sweet.

Magical law of return —

God of small miracles  
 ringing in the year  
 on Limoge china.

*Malca Litovitz is a professor of Creative Writing at Seneca College. Her recent poetry collection, To Light, To Water (Lugus, 1998) is this year's winner of the National Book Award for Jewish Poetry.*

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