

TERENCE BYRNES

The Imagined Portrait

DURING the course of photographing and writing this book, I found that men and women have different views about the value and meaning of public display. This accounts for the smaller number of women in *Closer to Home* despite the fact that there is no shortage of women writers. Young women will spontaneously rest their chins on their folded hands and gaze into the camera as readily as anyone, but they also enjoy being liberated from that role and told to do nothing in particular except chat with the photographer. In this case, their youthful attractiveness is all the authority and dignity they need. If they can be said to perform a role for the portrait or portraitist, it's the role of someone who is free.

Men in general are easier to portray because our culture's history has given us many images of men that would seem to be unflattering but leave their dignity intact and even enhance their sexual attractiveness. A man can be raggedly unshaven, slouch indifferently, or sneer, and enjoy being seen in the light of his Byronic rebelliousness, like Count Lara, whose "vital scorn of all" fixes the type. If a man doesn't look physically fit, dressing well makes the sins of the body disappear because his status is implied by his taste and the ability to buy clothing. And if he dresses poorly and isn't conventionally handsome, a variety of other "looks" – from the biker, to the slacker, to the cool nerd – are all sanctioned (thus made admirable) by Hollywood films.

Women who do not have a sense of their lasting attractiveness as they age don't enjoy the same freedom. For some, the mere fact of being a photographic subject is a severe emotional trial. In one instance, a woman writer who contracted pneumonia told me she was relieved because she had a terrific excuse to call off our shoot. Others simply denied permission to use their images in the book, citing reasons that ranged from photographs that incidentally showed chipped paint in their homes to the admirably direct assessment, "It doesn't flatter me enough."

Appearance is obviously an important part of life, and only a fool would deny the relationship between a woman's status and her appearance. Still, it's disheartening to discover that clichés are the surest way to retain the appearance of the authority and dignity that



CLOSER TO HOME

the author and the author portrait

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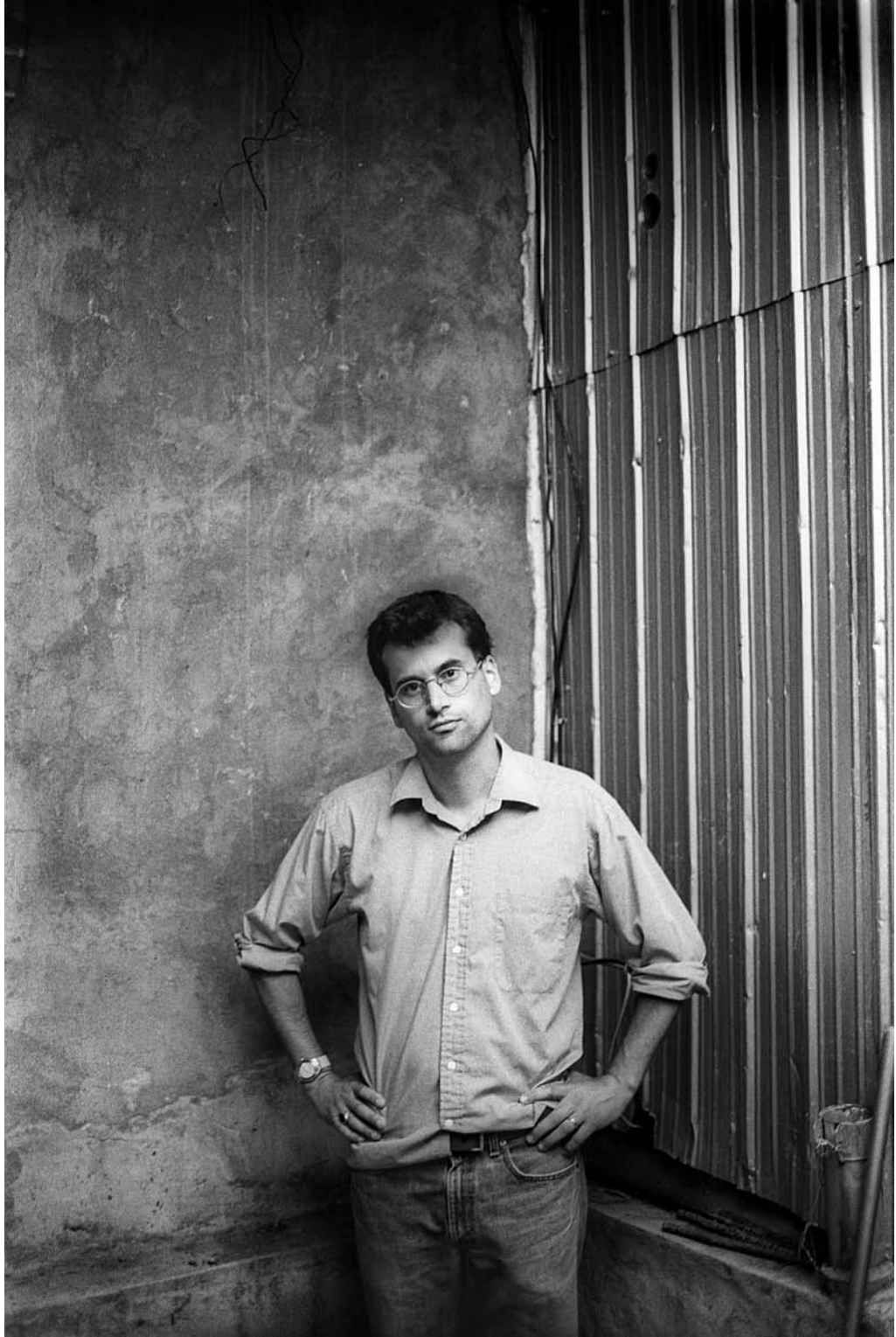
literary success seems to demand. My favourite literary portrait demonstrating this is Irving Penn's 1951 photograph of Colette. She appears to be reclining and is wrapped up in what looks like a velvet blanket. Penn's angle was low, as though the camera were sitting on Colette's stomach. Her sleeves are large and floppy and, cocooned as she is in the blanket, she looks as though she might be dressed for the sick room. Penn has separated her voluminous and curly hair so that her rather high forehead is exposed, something Colette hated.

Yet, she put up with it, presumably because of the photographer's name and his well-known work with *Vogue* magazine. It's Colette's right hand that gives the game away, though. Whether by Penn's direction or her own choice, it is folded awkwardly into a fist on which she rests her chin, as though this recourse to invoking Arcadian tranquillity will rescue the dignity she feels to be at risk.

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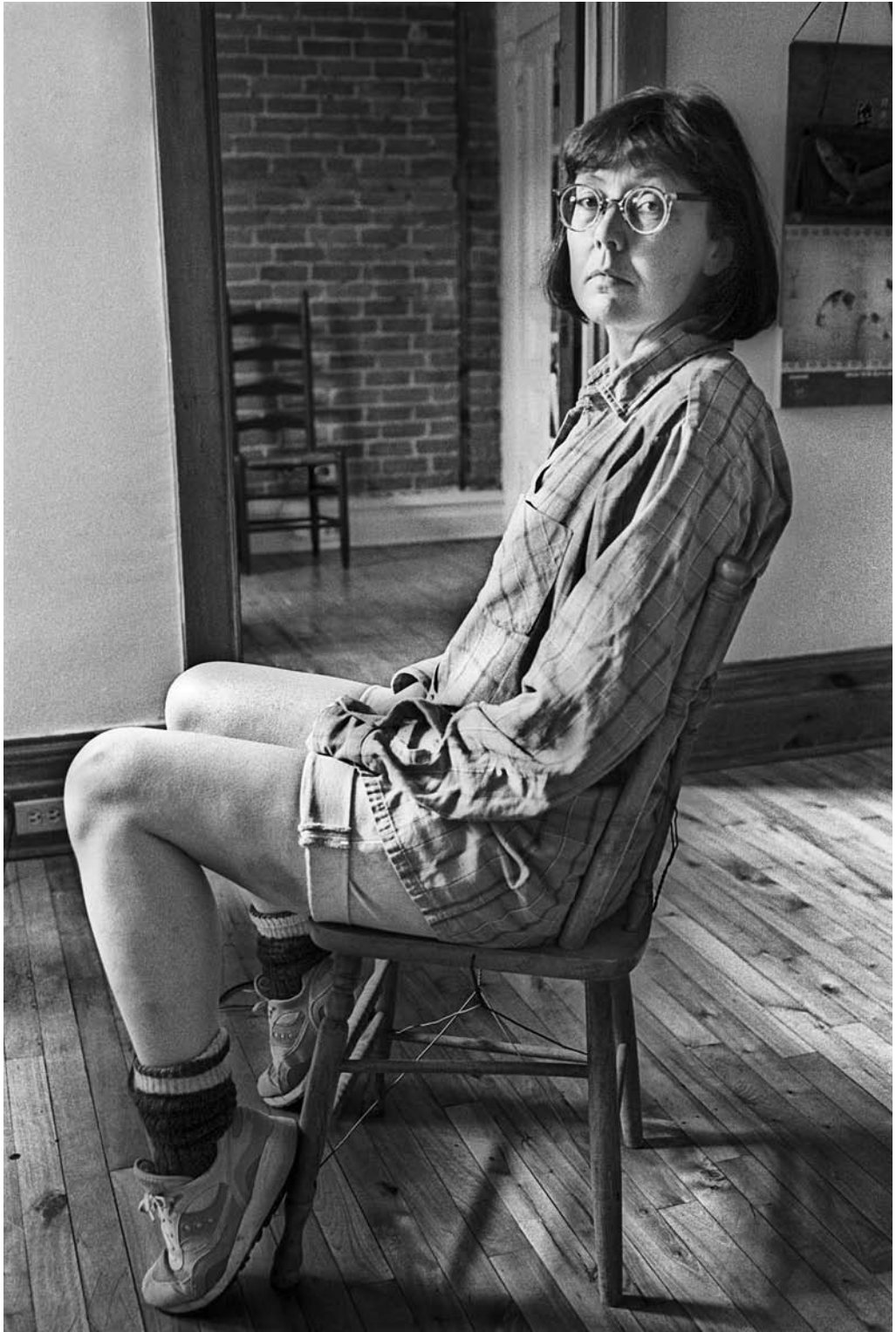
Andrew Steinmetz behind his apartment on Rue Waverly,
Plateau Mont-Royal, September 2001

When I first met Andrew, he was a ward clerk at a Montreal hospital, and had just written a book about that experience. Hippocrates wasn't the resident muse in his home, though. In his bright front room, above a reading stand tucked away in a corner, he had hung a photograph of his great aunt Eva Steinmetz, who is shown playing an accordion in Vienna in the '30s. Eva appeared in a touring version of *The Threepenny Opera*, knew Brecht and Weill, and studied acting with Max Ophüls. Andrew had known his aunt well, owned many photographs of her, and her presence in his imagination gave him a sense of possibility that nourished his notion of himself as a writer. That sense of identity also encouraged him to leave Montreal because, he told me years after our shoot, he had felt a certain "urban provincialism" there, and everyone living on the Plateau "reflected everyone else." At the end of our conversation he asked, with hopeful urgency, if our 2001 session in his old home had produced any photographs with Eva's picture in the background and, if so, could he have a copy?



Anne Carson in her apartment on Avenue de l'Esplanade, Plateau Mont-Royal, October 1998

Before our session began, Anne showed me her paintings of South American volcanoes and laughed at their limited palettes, explaining that she had only had three or four colours of paint with her when she painted them. The colours were fine for volcanoes, but the llamas she painted must have posed a challenge. A drawing she had made of Gertrude Stein oversaw our relaxed discussion of art, her map of ancient Greece, and her family's summer cabin in Ontario. After a while, I suggested that we start taking pictures. Anne agreed readily, then paused indecisively for a moment, and told me about the distress a recent portrait session for *The New York Times* had caused her. Then she placed a surprising restriction on our shoot: "You can only take one picture of my face," she said. It was stated in such a matter-of-fact way that it sounded almost like an ordinary limitation. When her running-shoed feet went briefly *en pointe*, the one picture was made.



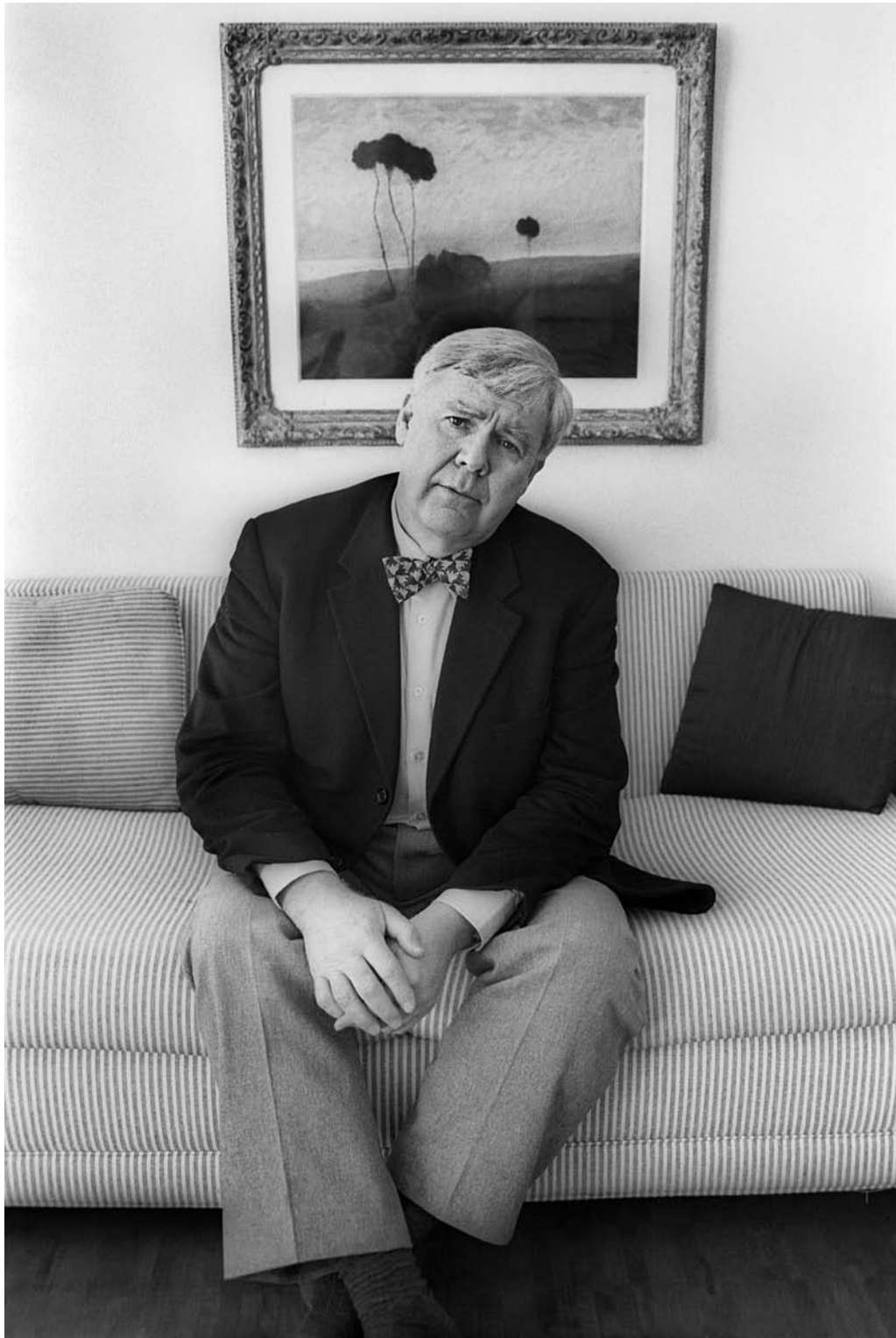
Bakhyt Kenjeev in his apartment on Park Avenue,
Mile End, December 2007

Bakhyt Kenjeev, whose parents were ethnic Kazakhs, had been described to me as one of the best living Russian-language poets, yet no local writers outside the community of Russian speakers in Montreal had heard of him. I had seen him briefly at a party attended by many Russians, and they moved around him in a curious way, as though his mere presence distorted gravity in the room. When I entered his apartment, in the early afternoon, he stood facing me with his hands on the back of a kitchen chair. “The first thing you must understand,” he said, looking over the top of his glasses, “is that this is a Russian household. We drink.” With that, he produced a tall, narrow bottle and three shot glasses. The third glass was for another Russian writer, who was late joining us. The instant Bakhyt tilted the bottle over the first glass, the telephone rang. He looked up, pretending annoyance. “That idiot,” he said. “He knows we are drinking and wants us to wait.” He was right; the other writer arrived within minutes. Throughout the afternoon, the Soviet Union lay just under the surface of every topic, whether it was language, art, or sex. Bakhyt took me through the rooms of his small apartment and displayed plaster busts of icons that the Soviets used to instil a sense of duty in citizens. One was the head of a soldier with notably bland features, who symbolized service and sacrifice. After showing off this sample of totalitarian kitsch, Kenjeev replaced it on his bookshelf with inexplicable, wry tenderness.



Eric Ormsby in his living room in Habitat 67 on Montreal Harbour, February 2001

Eric Ormsby lived in Habitat, the radical housing design by Moshe Safdie that was opened during Expo 67. It was a particularly cold day when I visited him, and Habitat, a jumble of pre-cast concrete boxes with exterior entrances, faced the wind whistling off the St Lawrence River and the Old Port. When I arrived, my shoulders shook with the cold, and it took me a moment to get my bearings, physically and socially. Eric invited me in and briefly introduced me to a jeans-clad woman with an eastern European accent. She was cleaning the kitchen and glanced up briefly to say hello before she returned to her work. I thought he said she was the housekeeper. When we sat down to talk, the woman came to sit close to Eric and affectionately took his arm. It wasn't until days later that I discovered the "housekeeper" was his wife, Irena Murray, Chief Curator of Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill University. Eric's worried expression may have mirrored my own perplexity about the nature of his domestic arrangements.



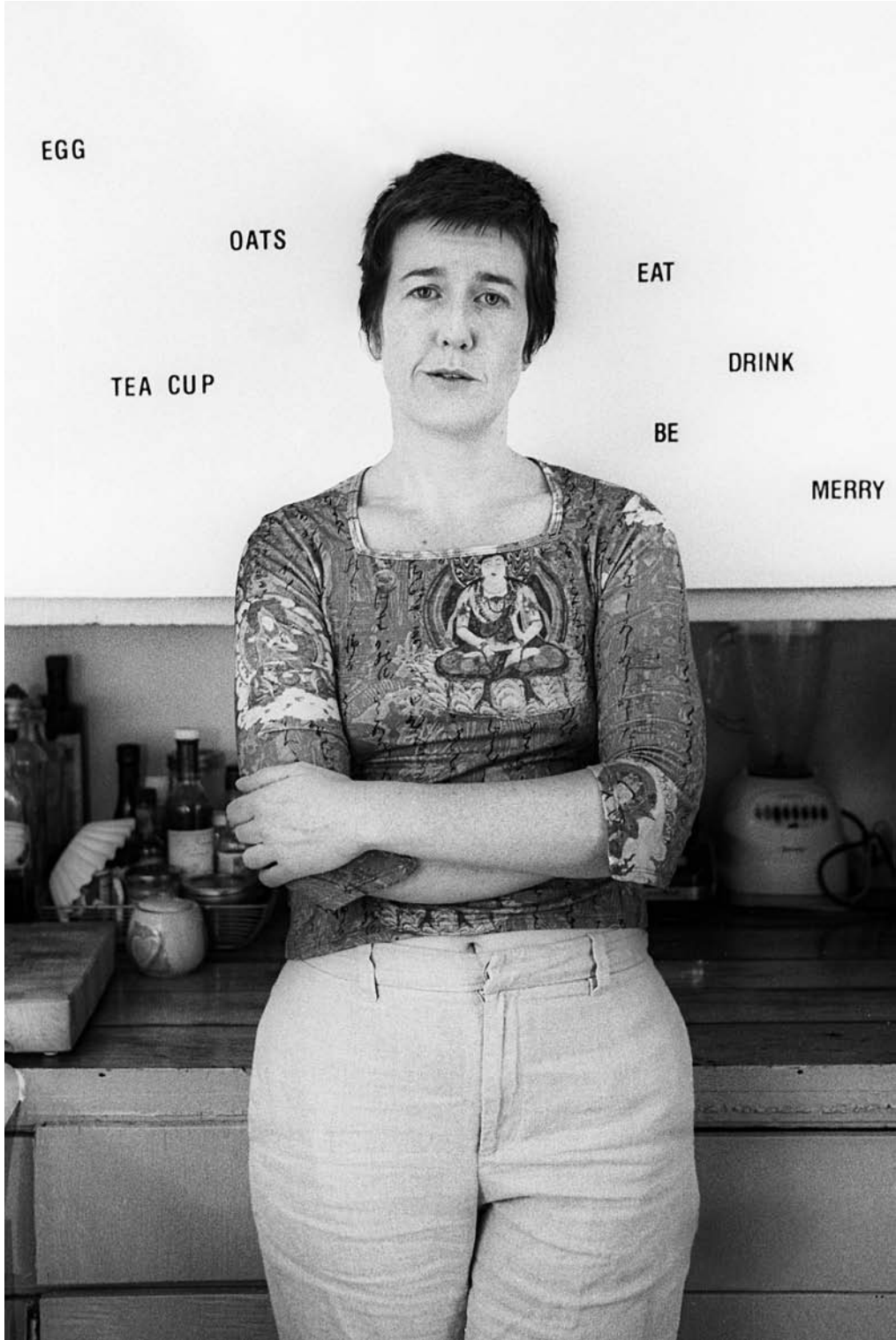
Heather O'Neill in her Rue St-Urbain apartment,
Plateau Mont-Royal, December 2007

Heather O'Neill lived with her twelve-year-old daughter in a typical Plateau apartment with small rooms branching off a long hallway that leads to a kitchen. The front room, Heather's office, held a cheval glass, an iBook with cycling baby pictures on the screen, and a drawing of the planet Saturn on a blackboard. The living room displayed quirky art, porcelain curios, and a television whose picture was paused at a screen promising the first three episodes of the fourth season of *The Wire*. Heather's daughter's room contained an extraordinary collection of dolls crammed side by side on a display rack. Golden ringlets, Heidi pigtails, Goth-black hair, and flour-white faces were pressed against a wooden rail alongside a cloth albino rabbit with menacing pink eyes. Heather herself was angled limbs, lively gestures, constantly shifting expressions, touches of irony, and very quick intelligence. For me, designing a frame using Heather and her home was almost too easy, and was accompanied by the humbling awareness that her talent for representation was greater than mine.



Kate Sterns in her kitchen, Avenue de l'Esplanade,
Plateau Mont-Royal, August 2002

Kate had recently returned from long residence in England, by way of the United States, but her speech was still marked by pronunciations that afflict Anglophones who spend years listening to accents from other parts of the Commonwealth. She was not at ease for much of the shoot, and her postures and expressions changed abruptly. My reflexes were usually a half-second too slow to catch them. The room she wrote in held a bed as well as a word processor, and when I asked her to rest on the bed, she became distinctly uncomfortable. She was at ease in movement, though, and we ranged from room to room, stopping only long enough for a snapshot with her husband, seated on a couch with ragged upholstery and half a dozen large pillows. When we wandered into the kitchen, she immediately saw my eye catch her playfully labelled cabinets (the worrisome combination “cookies/wine/ham” was just outside the frame on the left) and said, “Oh, no. Not that!”



EGG

OATS

EAT

TEA CUP

DRINK

BE

MERRY

Peter Behrens in an underground parking garage,
Rue Mackay, Montreal, October 1999

Peter was on the road. He seemed always to be on the road; it was his home as much as anywhere. His first published book was titled *Night Driving*. When he worked as a Hollywood scriptwriter, I saw him step out of his car on a visit to Montreal wearing a white duster and stride along the sidewalk like a character from Walter Hill's movie *The Long Riders*. We met this day in a Czech coffee shop to talk and, over apricot *kolaches*, I learned about his wife's new documentary film, his work on an indie Canadian film, the recent projects of his old friend and mentor, the writer Clark Blaise, and his plans for a novel about Irish immigrants to Canada. That novel became *The Law of Dreams*, and it won the Governor General's Award several years later. Peter once wrote, "The law of dreams is, keep moving." Even sitting face to face with Peter and photographing him, it was hard to escape the feeling that he was distracted, engaged elsewhere, endlessly travelling in his thoughts.



Yann Martel in Parc Jeanne-Mance,
Plateau Mont-Royal, September 2001

Yann shared an airy, high-ceilinged apartment overlooking the playing fields of a park. His roommates were other writers. Yann's room was austere. The advertising on wooden fruit crates that held a few books beside his bed provided the only colour. We talked about Montreal dance companies, spirituality, marriage, and the Camino Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage. He was fascinated by the idea of a pilgrim completing his long trek and burning even his clothes at the destination, being restored to the condition of a newborn. We left the apartment to shoot outside just as a light rain began. When Yann saw this image a few weeks later, he said, "I look a bit grim in that photo, don't you think? Isn't there one where I'm a little bit jollier?"

