

# THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL BUS

LOUISE BERNICE HALFE

A yellow caterpillar,  
it swallows them up.

The little brown ones their stained  
faces in the windows skinny and thick  
black braids pressing hands  
grease the glass.

On its back the caterpillar  
carries hand-sewn canvas bags.

Outside against the evening sun  
the mothers, the fathers,  
shrink.

They cannot look  
at the  
yellow caterpillar.

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The building is huge  
with long white empty hallways.

A child walks softly  
the echo runs ahead of her.

The smell of Lysol  
and floor wax  
overwhelms the memory of woodsmoke  
and dirt floors.

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At night the little ones  
press their bodies  
between cold starched sheets.  
Somewhere  
someone  
in the huge dorm  
sobs quietly.

The child  
clenches  
two purple  
suckers  
underneath her pillow.

She won't eat them,  
not for a  
while.

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They line up for breakfast  
and receive wonderful bowls of porridge.

She loves porridge.  
Her mama always made her porridge.

She looks up and sees  
her favourite brother.

Ivan's ears look like  
two gliding hawks.  
They've given him a crewcut.

Charlie the eldest brother  
is in the big boys' room.  
She doesn't see him  
and doesn't care.

Her eyes linger on  
Ivan. They smile.

She swallows  
the porridge  
that is stuck in her  
throat.

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Geesuz  
is always mad.

She sits too often  
in the confessional.  
She kneels too often  
in front of geesuz.

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The vision box  
collects people  
and makes them dance.

She turns the buttons  
and the dancing people  
turn into black and white lines.

She kneels  
in the corner.

The girl  
with the mean stick  
and fat mouth  
hovers near her.  
She's a  
huge night moth  
beating her wings  
against the dance.

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They've arrived.  
Wagonloads of  
mothers, of fathers.

The children have been  
berry picking.

Sister Treebow  
is like that girl  
with the big lips.

Sister's lips stick out  
further. The arrival of  
mothers, of fathers  
makes her madder.

The children  
stand around the corner  
of the building  
wondering whose  
mother, whose father  
was there.

She didn't want to hope.

Father Brown  
in his long black dress  
calls out names.

Times are scheduled.

In the bare parlour  
they sit,  
mother, father, Ivan  
and her big brother.

Their stiff hugs,  
she wants more  
but can't.

The stiffness stays.

HALFE

*The Residential  
School Bus*

The glass between the parlour  
and the hallway is marked  
with grease-stained hands  
and smudges of  
rain.

\* \* \*

The yellow school bus  
waits.