

## Fiction

"These are stories that stick — to the mind and to the heart — for these are people in the neighborhoods I know, those knocking themselves silly trying to figure out the next place to go while knowing, at the same time, that the next place is just like the last place: you can't outrun the self. Christopher Torockio has, in no small way, reassured me that the story has a new writer to serve."

— Lee K. Abbott

"From his first book on it's been clear that Christopher Torockio writes in the classic tradition of character-driven stories. To this end he's marshalled his considerable gifts: clarity of style, a keen eye for detail, and an ear for dialogue worthy of the stage. The stories in *The Truth at Daybreak* exhibit all these strengths and more, for as Torockio has matured, the structure of his stories has become increasingly complex and he's begun to utilize a sense of place to memorable effect. This is his best work yet, a beautiful and wise collection."

— Stuart Dybek

"It's not just the raw transplants to Christopher Torockio's coastal North Carolina who are in flux and treading the nervous edge of desperation. Even the natives are displaced and hoping their luck will change. *The Truth at Daybreak* is about that hardest part of American life—the second act."

— Stewart O'Nan



Christopher Torockio is the author of the novel *Floating Holidays* and a previous collection of stories, *Presence*. His fiction has appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Willow Springs*, and many other publications. He holds an M.F.A. from the University of Pittsburgh and a Ph.D. from Western Michigan University, and has received grants and fellowships from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts and the North Carolina Arts Council, among others. A native of Pittsburgh, he now lives in Connecticut with his wife and son and teaches creative writing at Eastern Connecticut State University.



Carnegie Mellon University Press

Christopher Torockio

CHRISTOPHER TOROCKIO

The Truth at Daybreak

# THE TRUTH AT DAYBREAK

STORIES

Carnegie Mellon

**THE TRUTH  
AT DAYBREAK**

CHRISTOPHER TOROCKIO



THE TRUTH  
AT DAYBREAK

ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER TOROCKIO

*Presence: stories*

*Floating Holidays: a novel*

STORIES

Carnegie Mellon University Press • Pittsburgh 2007

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The stories in this book previously appeared, sometimes in different form, in the following publications:

*The Antioch Review*, "Sayings of Confucius"  
*Denver Quarterly*, "The Distance to the Sun"  
*The Gettysburg Review*, "Beach Ball"  
*The Iowa Review*, "High Crimes"  
*The Laurel Review*, "Conservation"  
*New Orleans Review*, "Draining"  
*Northwest Review*, "Rust"  
*Passages North*, "Utility"  
*Salt Hill*, "Weedwhacker"  
*Sou'wester*, "Land of Canaan"  
*Tampa Review*, "I-L-M"  
*West Branch*, "Weights"  
*Western Humanities Review*, "Speaking in Tongues"  
*Willow Springs*, "The Posse" (as "Powers of Expression")

*For Halle  
and for Giovanni*

The author is grateful to Eastern Connecticut State University, Western Michigan University, and the Wesleyan Writers Conference for their generous support. And for the inspiration, belief, and friendship of Stuart Dybek, Chuck Kinder, Fred Leebron, Sharon Dilworth, Anne Greene, Dan Donaghy, Troy Fornof, Jim Ritchie, Susan Mazzei, and Dan Torockio.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007937638  
ISBN: 978-0-88748-488-9  
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Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

It looked...like a place where people lived—a place where the difficult, intricate process of living could sometimes give rise to incredible harmonies of happiness and sometimes to near tragic disorder as well as to ludicrous minor interludes...; a place where it was possible for whole summers to be kind of crazy, where it was possible to feel lonely and confused in many ways and for things to look pretty bleak from time to time but where everything, in the final analysis, was going to be all right.

— Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road*

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## SPEAKING IN TONGUES



We were working the bridge—the big one across the Cape Fear. It has a name—the So-and-so Memorial Something-something—but all I know for sure about it is this: when you're up there in the mornings the sun blasts in from the coast and sprays white hot tracers of light off those steel beams and off the little plastic guide disks in the blacktop and slams right through your skull. It fills you. And down below, where the river assumes a sort of reverse bottle-neck, widening as it nears the ocean, the water sucks in all that light, swallows it, until it's so full the color seeps upward and spreads across the surface, flashing orange and silver back up at the sky.

And I know the bridge itself is built for shit. The asphalt crumbles like clay. You could break it apart piece by piece in your hand, if you felt like stopping. We're up there all the time.

That first day of the Bridge Renovation Project she came by bright and early, from the south, from Brunswick County, driving a little Saab 9-3 convertible. Polar blue. Used, I was pretty sure, but still. The top was down and as we already had traffic backed up for a quarter-mile or so her inky black

hair lay calm across the curves of her shoulders. She sat with flawless posture in a little white silky sleeveless number, kind of tight through the chest. Her eyes were hidden behind a pair of black sunglasses—I couldn't possibly have guessed at the brand, though I recognized without question that they were the trendiest of that summer. She didn't fool with her makeup or cell phone, didn't fumble with CD cases. She had both hands on the wheel; two turquoise bracelets dangled from her left wrist, no rings on any of the fingers.

I was holding the Slow/Stop sign, a round metal sign at the end of a long iron pole—a duty I generally despised. I'd have much rather been running the blowtorch or applying the sealant, or even pounding away with the jackhammer. The other guys, especially the older ones, they liked holding the sign. They saw it as a sort of built-in, perfectly justified, under-the-table and on-the-clock break. Holding the sign made me feel pointless, but these men were sticklers on matters of decorum, and fair's fair: everyone got to take a turn with the sign. So, since I didn't like it anyway it had at some point been decided that I should take my turn first, when the sun wasn't yet high and heavy, so that the other guys could one-by-one take advantage of lounging through the sizzling afternoons.

She edged up alongside me and leaned back in her seat a little. She brushed a few loose strands of hair from her forehead with a just-waking-up sort of tentativeness. Then she turned to me. I realized I'd been staring at her and looked away quickly, tried to make eye contact with Harry, the elder statesman of our little troop that day, who was trying to appear busy adjusting the settings of the jackhammer's compressor. We didn't even have a need for the jackhammer yet. When I turned back to the woman her hands were in her lap. Her skin was tan and tight. The sunglasses hid her eyes but I felt sure she was still looking at me. On the off chance I was right I smiled in her direction.

"I'm going to quit my job today," she said.

The words were clear as day, yet I still felt as though they came from inside my own head. She shifted in her seat and leaned toward me, her elbow on the car door.

Up ahead, Gary was still letting the outbound lane of traffic go. I said, "Quit your job?"

She nodded. "Yes. How do I look?" She looked down at herself then back up at me and over my shoulder, across the river at the low-lying buildings of Wilmington. To me, from up on the bridge, especially in that early morning sunlight, Wilmington took on the appearance of a model railroad town: red brick, boxy, totally proportionate, church spires poking from the tops of trees.

"What's your job?" I said. I was wondering which of those glimmering buildings along the riverbank she worked in.

"My job? My job is nothing. It's nothing."

"Well—" I didn't know what to say to this. It seemed to me that any job that paid a person enough to drive around in this car and look as clean and polished as she looked was not *nothing*, and certainly was not something you quit. Before I could say anything more, though, she reached under her seat, hair spilling over her face, and drew out a worn manila envelope. When she straightened I saw that her sunglasses had slipped down to the tip of her nose, revealing brilliant green eyes with little flecks of yellow in them, like a cat's.

"This," she said, holding the envelope halfway to me, "is why I'm quitting."

I couldn't tell if she expected me to take it from her, to see for myself, so I made as though to reposition my grip on the sign. The sun was bright and constant.

"You don't want to know what's in here." She flapped the envelope around in the air a couple of times then dropped it onto the passenger seat, and as she did her foot must have lifted off the brake for just a split-second and the car lurched forward a couple of feet. "Oh," she said, startled. "Shit." She put the car in Park and sat back again. "Fucking shit."

Just then Gary flipped his sign around and stopped the outbound lane of cars. He nodded toward me. By the time I glanced back down she was in her driving pose again, both hands on the wheel. Her fingernails, I noticed now, were painted silver. I turned my sign around.

"Does this mean I can go?" she said, and gave a nervous laugh.

"Yep. All clear."

"Good." She put the car into gear and waited. "Great,"