

## Barry Dempster

### Ha Ha

Halfway to the memorial service: “Ha Ha!” scrawled across the dirty back window of a van – the shock of seeing God’s writing finger stiff as an erection. The whole damn city a sneer of *We’re still here and she’s not*. Coffee cups rolling in the gutters, crows spitting from telephone poles, wire mesh garbage cans leaking primary colours.

The sniggering van disappears and we slide into the parking lot like stage direction, empty spaces with their dark osmosis. *Crematorium*, now there’s a word from the dictionary of bad intentions. No way are we laughing this one off. The word *Entrance* glowers.

Scribble a little blue stain in the guest book, handle a hug or two, pat our pockets for a rescue of Kleenex. No wonder we feel so thready, so fly-in-the-web. The flower arrangements look like afterimages of fireworks, the minister fidgeting her cross, the half-hidden boom box aching Billie Holiday-minus-rehab.

Is this the best we can invent: a God who finger paints neglected vans, who hums huskily like heroin, who wads us up in his fist? “Ha Ha!” the wooden box of ashes shouts, echoing off the mint green walls, rocking us in rows of knees. We’d have to kill our brains to make this stop, this laugh track grief, this knowledge that the world is blithely carrying on.