WEST COAST **LINE** 70

FICTION?

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TRUTH IS TO FICTION AS APPLES ARE TO ORANGES

INTRODUCTION
MICHAEL BARNHOLDEN

If fact or truth is stranger than fiction, fact being an event or thing known to have happened or existed and fiction is an imagined event or thing then the fact or truth of fiction is that when what is imagined is written, that thing then exists as a matter of fact. This issue of West Coast Line is existential proof of that fact or truth. Twenty texts under the rubric of fiction fabricated from the same raw material: language, a complex system of communication in this case using the graphic signs of English grammatology—words, punctuation, syntax, grammar idiom and more. There are of course exceptions, translation, graphics.

Since that other genre definer space would not allow complete novels we have included excerpts. We have also included stories, micro-fictions and what can only be described as 'texts'. All of the invited submissions are in response to our call for previously unpublished fiction with the taxonomy left to the discretion of the author.

Like apples and oranges not all facts or truths are the same, nor are all fictions the same in either form or content. While we are no closer to resolving the troubling issue of fact versus fiction, perhaps we can suspend the debate long enough to look at the essential unarguable fact that all writing is a creative act. Words represent an event or thing by becoming another event or thing—the speech act, or in this case the written or graphic text: marks on paper. Perhaps by paying more attention to the text thing itself we can turn to other debates such as how can texts be the things they want to be? poetry or prose? fiction or non-fiction? given the contradiction absorbing ability of a genre that refuses to collapse?

Genre is most often used to exclude, requiring the invention of new genre's to allow for the inclusion of writing that no longer fits the definition. Creative non-fiction is as good an example as any. Neither fiction nor non-fiction the marketing department required a new genre to legitimize and hype a piece of writing that did not fit the rigid constraints of existing genres. So what are the uses of genre? Why do we delineate fiction and non-fiction? Does creative non-fiction mean to imply that there is such a thing as non-creative fiction? What about the shibboleth that there are only two genre's of any creative enterprise—good and bad?

The problem of 'fiction' is in fact endemic to all writing. Writing—'marks on paper' or the less restrictive 'marks on surfaces', a definition that allows us to include such forms as pictograms and petroglyphs or in the post modern sense graphic novels—is always a creative act, and a 'fiction' in the sense that the word tree is not a tree, in fact a picture of a tree is not a tree and no one would ever make that mistake. The picture is an image of a tree, the word tree represents a tree, but neither is a tree and no one would insist that it is. Even when the maker of the marks—writer, painter, photographer etc—becomes increasingly taxonomic: evergreen, cedar, western yellow, etc, still no one questions the fact that what they are dealing with is a representation not the object no matter how particular the description gets.

Yet we get all worked up when it comes to genre. "That's not poetry," or "that's not fiction" is the law of genre at work. To be subversive we should question just exactly who such exclusions serve both in terms of art and economics. It seems to me genre is most often used to exclude the 'subversive' in this case anything that breaks or even stretches the definition of genre.

Can fiction even be written under such circumstances? That question can be answered at least in part by the various texts in the pages of this issue of *West Coast Line*: writing must be written and made public, the shared creative act can be the contradiction that refuses to be defined and absorbed even if it is labelled: fiction?

WEIRDO IN SP

>> rosa REID

There was a weirdo in the park, mostly in the summer, off and on, no real schedule, no set time. No one called the cops on him, or beat him up, even just for fun. He was the 'one liner loner' to those who knew him well enough and just another weirdo to most everyone else. His mother had once told him he was 'too particular' about the clothes he picked out for school. "Perhaps" she'd said, pinching his chin, "you may be gay, little man." It was a long time before he knew what that meant but her words were directly to blame for his fear of wearing anything too smart, even from the thrift store. He takes his time rifling through plain old jackets, looking for a loose cut with knackered shoulders.

March 31, 1981, his mother collapsed in the kitchen and he found her there with her broken bowl and a puddle of milk with islands of Special K floating around her. She was conscious enough to tell him to get her an ambulance, call someone, do something. He ran out the back door, through the garden and made the squeaky gate swing back and forth. Mrs. Applegate called 911 right away and then huffed her way back to his house. She was wearing what looked like a knee length night dress and he could see all her folds under her big melon breasts. "Hurry, Hurry." She said, but it was she that couldn't keep up. That night he slept with Mrs. Applegate while his father spent the night at his wife's bedside, or down in the hospital cafeteria, or outside the front doors, smoking.

Mother was not half herself anymore. She managed to come home to sit limply in a wheelchair for another year, which seemed like a good arrangement to the boy, and then she had such a bad cerebral hemorrhage on April 4, 1982, she never made it to St. Paul's at all. An ambulance was called but it left the house with a hopeless cause, didn't really need its siren on or its focused tunnel vision. The funeral was dispatched and his father, never one to take anything too seriously invited a short little blond woman he'd met at a Steel Workers convention. He brought her home and soon after decided he didn't need a kid around. He dropped the boy off on his way out of town, with the blond in the passenger seat. At the blond's suggestion he stopped outside what looked like an old Women's Institute building and walked his son to the weathered side door, instructed him (soto voce) to tell someone in there that his mother had died and his father had abandoned him. He'd be all right. It turned out the building had been recently condemned and slated for cremation of all its contents, meth lab included. When no one answered his tiny knock knocks the boy cried and walked away in a terrified stupor. He sniffled and bawled two miles south-west and came to the skids. He hid out in a lane behind a dumpster and stayed put three days without talking to strangers. On the fourth day Legless Louie found him literally pissing up a wall and took him in, as a kind of assistant. Louie (Villeneuve) thought the kid would come in handy, running errands when he didn't feel like going out himself. But the cripple didn't give him more than a foamy in the hall outside his one room flat. Having a kid outside

his door meant the bums and stinking dope hounds wouldn't piss out there. All other things aside, Legless figured the kid would be safe with him, considering where he must have come from.

To the kid, bums and dope freaks were rancid monsters. He spent most of the next two years in the hallway, up against Louie's door, or sometimes in Louie's apartment, making the legless man a bologna sandwich, rinsing out his dark cup of tea, making him another one. If Legless was bored he tried to get the kid to open up, brought him story books, asked the kid to read to him or tell him about himself but the kid didn't know what to say. His parents were gone, he was lost. Grade two was now a blurry illusion and he didn't think he'd ever get back to school. He tried to forget his two friends, Joe McCarron and Gianni Simental. He tried to forget the little girls he knew, Melissa something and Jody someone. But he couldn't forget their cheery faces, the green lawns and wasted puddles of special K. Louie brought him one meal a day, just one, at bed time.

The weirdo started making his rounds of Stanley Park when he turned thirteen and life had already knocked the wind out of him. At eighteen, he had two missing teeth on the upper right and that doleful look of the long since abandoned. Every time he came to the park he tried to link up with that special someone that could save him from his life – baptize him back into the land of the living. Television schooled, street numb, he hung on to lectures delivered by leather lipped, moody sorts, 'everyone has a soul mate, everyone!' or 'you have to be open' or even 'seek and ye shall find,' 'One day at a time, kid.'

The park reminded him of his lost home in the suburbs. It had trees, and nicely carved paths, depressions where rain filled the earth, clouds that stretched for miles while the earth turned. He preferred it most when the air had the coolness of squeezed lemons, or a day when the sun broke through a storm and outlined details like a magnifying glass. He remembered those things in his bones and was sometimes surprised by the shiver and sigh he felt when his feet sank into the grass. It took him back to his yard where his mother and grandmother nattered about things, even the oak tree, how it made a mess in the fall, should be cut down.

It was May 20th and he was in the park, with dew on his shoes. People looked away as he approached, and politely, he ignored them. He stopped under the massive oak where three paths met. What if he took the wrong path and what if this hesitation made the right one suddenly void? He wrestled with his watch and it jogged stiffly side to side. It was always 8:00 o'clock. He forced himself down the path straight ahead, the one he pretty much always took.

Tucking a hand under his shirt he clutched his dry, knotted stomach, gave it a bit

of a rub and looked skyward, begged please, please, let me find someone to walk off with. He believed in skyward prayers, and truly thought they were never wasted. That was his grandmother's influence, 'a wee beckoning and thank ye' at bedtime, warm milk and oatmeal cookies. Sadly, the good woman had died six months before his mother. "To prepare a home for her," That's what his father had said, and the kid believed him.

On this same day in the park, a girl sat herself on the corner of a bench hoping she didn't look like a desperate little chickadee. She stroked the ground with her new red shoes, admiring how they were not too brilliant, not too plain. She tasted her cinnamon lip gloss, fumbled in her red clutch purse for her cell phone. Who would she call? She could pretend.

From a fair distance she reminded him of a squirrel turning something over in its tiny paws. He walked faster, gulping but never filling his lungs until half dizzy he blurted out,

"Is it me you're looking for?"

The girl looked up, contained her smile and put her cell away.

Her skin reminded him of his grandmother's fresh baked bread, and her hair was dark, loose.

"You look like hell." She said.

"I'm sorry." Not sure what else might spill from her slick lips, he added, "Very sorry?"

"That's okay." She stood up and wiped the wrinkles off her clothes, "I'm not too fussy."

He nodded as if he understood and accepted "One step at a time" echoing in his head,

"Do you live on the street?" she asked, "Where do you sleep at night?"

"Oh no, I'm at Louie's, got his bed now." He wagged a finger like a conductor pulling fine notes.

"I see." She started walking off. He paled.

"Are you coming?" She turned to look him in the eye, "I don't have anyone to talk to, do you talk much?"

He shrugged.

"I wish you did, I don't get along well with people." He could easily look over her head and avoid her eyes, but he did not. "Can you talk?" she asked again. He felt her cool breath slip under his collar. He tucked his hand in there as if to catch it or warm up the draft it left behind.

She waited longer than she wanted to, and then waited longer still, until, frustrated, she asked "What are you thinking?"

It was not a good question to ask him. His mother had asked his father that same question, many times. And many times, his father had replied, as he did now, with a touch of dare me in his voice, "The war in Vietnam."

She turned on her heels and walked away. He hurried after her, cleared his throat as if to speak, or at least get her attention. He wondered how much he would have to talk, and how to deliver his words, all at once and eloquent, not broken, full of uhs and yeahs like he was used to 'doin.' She wasn't that kind at all. He cleared his throat a little louder and she stopped.

"Ok" She looked at her watch. "The war in Vietnam is over. Long over."

He saw her jaw twitch ever so slightly, and she looked at him, one last time and turned away so confidently, it stunned him.

That was it.

He watched her until the morning sun and cedars took her from him then went straight back to his building, up the dark and dank stairs to his room. He didn't sleep in the hall anymore. Although he still called it Louie's place, Legless was dead five years now. Nobody had bothered the weirdo there, so he took over the mattress, drank from the tea stained cup and watched Louies TV up until three months ago when it died too.

The weirdo curled up and hid out in bed. After a few days he went as far as his front door, asked Fred Headbanger if he could scrounge up some food and went back upstairs. Fred was like the watchman, he knew what everyone was up to, coming and going. He sent Beauty out to stand in line at the food bank because he knew he'd come back with all the goods. Beauty preferred booze anyways and could survive without food for weeks so running errands kept him fit and hard as a pickled egg. Fred took a box of instant rice out of the bag before sending it up to the weirdo.

It took three months for the weirdo to get over finding the girl, delivering his one line, exchanging those few words and breaking up. Overcome. He was overcome. He

cried sometimes, wrapped up in his dirty sheets or even in the bathroom looking in the cracked mirror that reflected his missing teeth, two dollar haircut. He should have done better for himself. Gone to the police, a foster home maybe. He could have washed dishes, sold drugs, broken into cars. There was lots he could have done. Sometimes he trembled, broke out in a sweat like a middle aged woman.

When he finally stirred one morning and found he didn't feel so frightened or small anymore he washed up in the shared shower downstairs and got dressed. He put his empty wallet in his back pocket and went out.

He crossed over to the other side. He walked the high road, watched the middle class rushing around, stood on their streets, went into their malls, their coffee shops, came across a museum and went in as far as the ticket booth. He did the same at the library. He walked the high road until everything shut down for the day, and then he went home. When he lay down on Louie's mattress he took a deep breath, inhaled the rusty smell Louie had left behind and smiled.

The lights outside were blue and miserable as ever, there were no trees across the alley, no sky if he looked outside but he fell into soft green thoughts, waking himself up with a snore before he passed out for the night.

Fred Headbanger spotted him five dollars saying, "Keep it, don't worry about it." Which was nice of the bugger but the weirdo knew it was conditional to Fred never needing a fiver again. That's the way Fred was, but not only Fred, the whole lot of them. They shared if they weren't hungry or dry. He went to town again and stretched the five dollars over two days. The first day he had coffee at Starbucks, picked up a newspaper no one was reading and sat there for a good hour and a half. The second day he had a coffee and a doughnut at Tim Horton's and again picked up a paper to read. He didn't read well though and was more distracted by the conversations around him, people laughing, talking. Sometimes he stared too much and was quickly set straight by dirty looks. That made him feel like he was slipping off the edge of something, losing his balance and plummeting like Wile E. Coyote

The weirdo started frequenting those places on a regular basis, over and over until he was more than broke. He'd given Fred Headbanger his money back by pawning Louie's stereo. His cash now came from hanging out his hollow NY ball cap. Twenty-five cents here, fifty there. The reminder you can't stoop too low was when he sold Marty Flemming's coat after the paramedics had loaded him into an ambulance. Marty had been lying out there left for dead for a whole day and night, middle of winter. He was sure the guy was dead but he came back pinker than ever and knocked out his teeth. He didn't blame Marty, it was a fine heavy coat.

The weirdo finally asked for a job at Tim Horton's. After spending enough time there even the cops with their sugary lips and bullish shoulders didn't scare him. He just couldn't look them in the eye. Timmy's gave him a job cleaning up and sometimes helping out in front. Whenever he worked out front he felt like a citizen of the world, a hero of the hills, a climber of Everest. Day after day he left the skids and went to work at Timmy's. He even talked to people. Very tight lipped but his half smile was sweet and contagious. Everyone liked him. At night he dreamed of becoming the manager. The old farts on the street started to look at him warily as if he'd betrayed them, was not one of them anymore and resented the fact he was now a giver and not a taker. The chasm between them grew but they didn't jibe him about his new shoes, jacket, watch that worked. The weirdo's skin felt different. Since he bought himself a decent razor, it felt like Grandma's baked bread.

In the park, on the bench where the girl with red shoes had waited for her special someone, leaves had caught between the slats. Fallen twigs and mossy bits broke up the idyllic green, made a sweet mess of things. It was late morning, same time, same place, different state of affairs. The girl picked the leaves off the bench, gave it a swipe back and forth with a woolly-gloved hand and sat down. It was cold. Her long coat didn't entirely protect her from the coolness seeping through to her bottom. She looked down at her new boots, a lovely, dark red, like blood before it turns black, but shiny. That's what made the color acceptable, in her mind.

She waited for an hour, never warming the bench at all, it was like a battle between her body heat and the air below. It frustrated her. She recoiled her fingertips into the palms of her hands to keep them warm. With her collar turned up and her chin tucked in, her shoulders up to her ears, she hung in, bitterly, and finally left when every thread of her clothes failed to protect her.

Back in her apartment she turned up the heat and lay under her fringed throw, channel surfing. Her fish tank annoyed her. There was something too angular and cold about it. The fish were too wet, too flitty, too dumb. It was too close to the TV, a distraction. Why did she have fish anyways? She covered her head, turned on her side and tried to sleep. An undirected, hectic meditation led to frustration, swatting, throwing off the throw. She looked around her lonely space and as always batted two options around. Should she sleep in her double bed, or just camp out on the couch? Her shoulders sagged as she conceded it was a stuff your face, have a drink, kill the clock couch night. In that order she ate a limp chicken Caesar salad, washed it down with a big bulbous glass of chardonnay, turned the clock face down on the coffee table and got back under the fringed throw.

Off and on she thought about the weirdo in the park, but they'd never crossed paths again even though she'd practiced consistent timing. Thinking of him soothed

her like a rosary does a fearful sinner and it allowed her to find peace, slumber. His innocent eagerness, lack of ego, missing teeth, childlike hopefulness, bright eyes—if you managed to engage—and she had, would melt any woman's heart this far north. She drifted off.

In the morning she left for work and as usual went through the Timmy's drive through and ordered a double double. It's one of those strange things, even though he was in there, tying up the garbage, or wiping something down, they never saw each other, trajectories never intersected.

The weirdo's street family thought he was naive, innocent, not too bright, not tough enough for a woman and the girl's family thought she was off putting. Who would want her, she worked in a cubicle, lived in a box and was so straight she might as well go to church and sway side to side with the choir. She ate too much chocolate and washed it down with gallons of water. When she finished a bar she'd lie on the couch with one leg up the back and the other one on the floor. Her sister called her Chocolate Splits. Her brother was Banana Splits because he'd come out of the shower with no clothes on. She didn't like her family. It was made up of loudmouths and losers and her mother was the conductor. You all shut up now! Or else. Or else what? Or else I'll whip your banana you demon child. That's what she was like. Nothing fancy, but she did hold a degree in psychology and supported everyone including her wrinkled parents who lived downstairs. Good genes gone bad, none of her children aspired toward a higher education. They were content with what she provided and would leave behind once she died. Chocolate Splits worked in her cubicle and stayed away from everyone as much as possible. Her brother played a lot of tennis, tanned in the back yard and worked part time for a friend of a friend, at Silver Sands Kayaks. Her sister was by short measure, the only successful one among them, she had an office of her own and sold insurance. Chocolate Splits was the best dresser, most sympathetic and interesting one of them with an imagination that took her to places no one had ever been, that she knew of. That's how she ended up in Victory Square, dressed like a fifty's court stenographer and fidgeting in her purse for her cell phone again.

She was surrounded by lost souls, addicts, victims and victimizers, most of them looking oddly content. Some of them were curious about her, leaned their elbows on their knees, puffed on cigarettes and glanced at her sideways. Others didn't give a rat's ass and carried on, nodding off or talking to themselves. Some of them continued life in general which soothed her - they looked like country folk, chatting at a crossroads.

Hi Mike, she said into her phone, yeah I'm downtown, can you come and get me? I think this is Victory Square. I'm so lost, hurry okay?

Of course there was no Mike. She was looking for the weirdo and making herself

known to his extended family. Rumours would fly about a straight chick in the bunch, he would hear about her, by description, clothes, hair, red shoes.

A tall slim black man in a brown suit asked her the time and did she recognize him? Had she seen posters of him? No she said and shook her head so that her soft brown hair brushed her cheeks.

Ok he said, that's good. She did wonder about him though, he looked like he'd just gotten off the underground railway and didn't know slavery had been abolished. He smiled and looked away.

Three crack heads were talking shop, jabbing each other, laughing. A bag lady with an overloaded cart kept having to pick stuff up that fell off but going over the curb to cross the road a pair of shoes with the laces tied together and what looked like a radio jumped ship and she didn't bother to look back. Chocolate Splits was starting to feel comfortable here. She could breath. The air was foul, someone had farted. The black man smelled of old cloth. But here she was, scent au Khiele's soap and the whack of a hot iron and no one cared. Tomorrow she could appear in a long gown and still no one would care. She may get called crazy, but she felt it would be like a toss of sunflower spits, harmless.

She became known as Miss Goody Red Shoes, even on the odd day when she showed up in flowered gumboots or sparkling flip flops. People liked her, and started chatting her up. They teased her a bit. Can't stay here if you're not gonna share your crack, or, need some bad habits? Or, world driving you crazy? Sure you're not? She laughed sometimes, and sighed. She had friends, per se.

The weirdo had his own agenda and had learned to live like 'normal' people. He had a bank account, bought himself 'things' and took courses to speed up his reading, writing and arithmetic. He cleaned up Louie's flat and went on and on like that for a long time. Fred Headbanger watched the kid come and go and tried to figure out a way to cash in on the boy. He offered the weirdo protection, said for ten bucks a day he'd make sure no one broke into his room but the boy didn't fall for it so Fred Headbanger hired a druggy to break in and mess it up, steal 'things'.

It was another rough spot for the weirdo. He called in sick. He lay in his bed like Brian Wilson did and mourned as if he was in pain and he was. He decided this must be like being aborted or dropped off at a meth lab again—separation anxiety. He'd have to give up these four walls that had cocooned him, loved him. On the third day he hit bottom and rose up, took only his wallet and his clothes and left the skids.

At Timmy's he was not known as the one liner loner. He had to reveal himself as who he remembered himself to be, Dustin Weaver, son of Diane and Justin Weaver of

some street, somewhere in Vancouver, B.C. He couldn't remember the name of it and for the life of him, he couldn't find it either, no matter how hard he tried, on foot, or by bus. It too had disappeared.

He moved into a low rent apartment overlooking a small square of trees with an eight by six foot man made pond. He sat out there often because he couldn't bring himself to wander the park, revisiting that one encounter, that one stupid line.

DOWN DRIFT

>> SCOTT DRAKE

July 18, 1900 Canoe Pass, Coast Salish Territory

The sun funnelled into a single pinkish beam through the cloudline across the Pass and reflected off the rippling current in shards. With her calloused hands resting on her protruding stomach sixteen year old Maria perched on an alder bench inside the wood planked hut on the skow by the edge of the River. At her back, a pot of potatoes boiled on the smoking oven while she looked through the open door across the Pass to the opposite shore. Arina sat outside the hut on a wooden crate mending the linen nets in anxious anticipation of any news. The men had been on strike for two weeks and everyday the situation of the loose coalition of workers whose factory floor was the River itself faced new developments from unseen quarters.

The oak fishing skiff, its soiled sail tied through the mast hoops while a white flag, red number "25" sown into its center flew in its place, rounded the edge of Westham Island (the only land before the open waters of the Strait of Georgia) and made for the float on which rested the hut where the two girls waited at the edge of the dyke. Powered by a single rower whose oars dug deep into the River with a distant silence, the vessel skulked along the far shore.

"They're here," Maria spoke the obvious, "why they coming back? They s'ppos'd to be out all night I thought. No reason for 'em to be here."

"Hunker down there girl," the younger friend re-joined. "Keep yourself put. We'll figure this out." Arina shut the door to the hut so only a crack of the dimming light shone through and snugged up the wool shawl around her shoulders.

"Hey now," Maria called "what're you doing? It's too hot, keep that open."

"Quiet down in there."

"Shit," the pregnant girl sighed, but made no further effort to contradict Arina's command.

The men had left for Steveston earlier in the day to gather some news. Reports had it that the militia had arrested Rogers the day before on trumped up charge of shanghaiing a Japanese strikebreaker.

Looking for an update Marco, Nicholich and Anton headed into the hub of union activity for information. The militia camp around Georgia Cannery sprawled with dirtied canvas tents. Anton gave them the finger and shouted "traitors to the people" to the wind as they sailed into town. The trio didn't have to set foot in the union headquarters to get the gist of the previous day's events. The Japanese Benevolent Society was recommending that they accept 20¢ a fish and get fishing while the run was still on. "Fuck hell," Marco responded. MacClain was on the island and Rogers was in jail. The men hit a number of haunts, piecing together the story through its fragments, realized right quick that the place was disorganized without its leaders, that there had been a deliberate attempt to break the strike by taking out the leaders. The mainstream press claimed the strike was nothing but foreign agitation by socialist leaders who had nothing to do with the fishing industry. Word spread that the Japanese who by and

large didn't operate within the union were going to cave and so patrol boats heaved off to secure the waters around the North and South arms of the River. The men were going to join, but stopped briefly to chat with a Japanese comrade. From him, communicating in Chinook, they learned that it did indeed look like the Association leaders were advocating acceptance of the company's terms. There was enough opposition, Hideo, a small man with dark eyes and graying hair around the edges, told them, to hold out until Rogers had chance to speak.

Trailed by a company tug the three men plied the South Arm in zigzags until they moored at Finn Slough where they were greeted by a broad shouldered man with an unkempt beard. With a gruff voice that belied an unstated gentleness he offered them all rum from a stash in the back of a house at the edge of the mooring dock. The tug headed back to Steveston and the men lighted smokes.

The olive-skinned man with a heavy coat transferred one foot then the other across to the scow and roped the skiff to a pole. Immediately three men stomped out of the boat. None of them spoke. Arina stood by the edge of the skow and saw a man—blindfolded, bound, gagged—lying in the tank where on better days the nets were stored. She turned her eyes furious to Marco, who shifted sheepishly away, before glaring down the man with the heavy coat and beard, Anton.

"We can't just set him free," Marco almost pleaded.

Ignoring Arina, Anton picked up the thread. "Fucking rights we can't set him free. This fuck is ours." Arina didn't like him. He spent his life on the River, that she knew. He'd lay down his life for his comrades, that she knew. But he lived alone. Drank copiously. Slept with the Chinese whores. Worse he rarely looked her in the eye and on the odd occasion when he did, like the time she'd gone to his house with some eggs her father wanted her to deliver and she could smell the whiskey off his breath already, it was morning and she couldn't tell if it had been from the night before or that morning but he bade her sit outside his self-built shack that everyone knew leaked through the winter months and she complied and he told her how back home in Croatia, before he met her dad, he'd had a wife and a son and a boat. And when he told this story he looked her in the eyes, not with any sense of recognition, like she could have been anyone, but there was something dislodged in there, something so dark, so hidden that he neither wanted to express nor could find the words. She was scared to open the wound, even if it required cleansing, once released from its chains, she didn't know who or what would emerge and she almost got a sense that Anton himself was scared by what lay buried within. So that his eyes had this double sense, one intense hatred, and one heroic fear that kept the other in check with only the force of its will. It was that will, however, that Arina could never trust.

He continued, his charged voice low, sound carried the short distance upriver to the cannery. "You know damn well they started this. If this is a war like Rogers and MacClain keep saying and you, Marco, keep lecturing about, then that was the first fucking shot. That was a god damn escalation. We ain't talking arrests or nothing here. You know this

full well," the brunt of his words dropping on Marco.

"I know," Marco repeated.

Arina turned to Marco as he broke away from whatever spell Anton had cast.

"I hear you Anton," he started, "but you know as well as I do, this guy, this guy we got lying down there had nothing to do with this. He is a tool of the bosses."

"Bullshit, he was in the boat."

Marco dropped his head, brought his thick hand to his forehead and rubbed at the side as though the moral dilemma brought about a physical pain. "Either way, it doesn't matter. We can't let this go unretaliated. This is war, you know?" Marco, agreeing with Anton, spoke exclusively for Arina.

Arina moved towards Marco, sought to take him aside, speak reason to him away from Anton. The blood on his sleeve transferred to her hand and he winced.

"What happened out there?" she demanded. Her demand went unheeded as the men stomped over the surface of the skow. Maria shuffled inside the shack, and Arina, waving her arm, ordered her to remain seated. A dog barked beyond the aspens of the shoreline

"They came after us. We were fucking set-up. We can get them on this. I don't give a shit what they did with Rogers or all that bullshit, they came after us."

Arina whirled his back to Anton, "They'll say they were provoked. I don't know what happened, but they'll make up all sorts of lies. You've seen how they work, no? This isn't a public relations game."

"We don't know that this guy, has anything to do with it," Marco relented, his shoulders drooping but none of the tension dissipated.

"Which is why we have to strike now," Marco contended once again, the drag in his left shoulder more pronounced. "This fucking guy, he was fishing, he housed the fucking militia in his boat. Are you kidding me?" He faced downriver and launched a verbal attack towards the nearby Wellington Cannery in Croatian. Arina stiffened, grasping the edges of what might have happened.

"Wait, wait," she pleaded to Marco, approaching him with a hand on his sore arm. It was wet, but not the cold wet of the river, sticky and she drew her hand back, lost her train of thought. Marco didn't even look at her, supressed rage at his lips. Stained red, a bright red of vitality, a warm red.

Just inside the Reach, a lone boat drifted with net cast. They could see the workers bustling around the boat. Two of them, a puller and a navigator. They had obviously seen the Union patrol because they set their bodies into pulling up the net, fish and all the moment they appeared through one of the small channels inside the marshy islands. Nicholich pulled the oars and called for assistance. They could reach the strikebreakers if there were two of them rowing. The scabs had to dump that catch, grab the net if they could. Had to teach these bastards a lesson. If they break we all go down. Everything they've held out for up 'til now, gone. The canneries won't take us seriously, won't recognize the Union and no shit, when we can't even get together ourselves, why the fuck would they? We'll teach 'em though. Confiscate their nets, send

'em to their Benevolent society or whatever the fuck they call it, let 'em get 'em under control. Let these present bastards figure out who they wanna cross us or the canneries.

"Comrades, what are you doing? Please tell me you've heard about the strike," Marco called as they approached. He paused for effect but the two men kept about their business, their every movement intent on drawing in the entirety of the net, even if the fish were still tangled in order to make their escape. Even when it became clear they were not going to get away from the approaching patrol boat they wouldn't concede defeat. "Hey Brothers, I said." And still they didn't answer. "Did the cannery-owners commit to 25 cents and I didn't hear?" At this one of them men lifted his head in their direction, his eyes full of fear and he spoke but in Japanese so that no one aboard the skiff could understand what he said. "Shoulda hadda us one of them translators on the boat. How we gonna provide education if we can't even talk with 'em?"

"They should already know," Anton said. "You think too highly of them, you think you can appeal to class solidarity, but they have none. They don't listen to their own group, why they gonna listen to us?" One of the Japanese men began thrashing his arms with vigour.

"Look at the bastard," Nicholich chimed in, "still trying to tell us to go to hell, I bet. I hear ya fella," he yelled now in the direction of the fishing boat "we needa eat too, we got families to feed too, and we are shit scared this run's gonna end before we get to it. You see the difference between us and you is that you've chosen to break ranks, you've gone against the rest of us, and that puts our position in danger, don't you see? You ain't gonna listen, that makes you the enemy. I don't give a fuck about your reason, unless you turn against the owners we are all fucked forever. Now ain't that something to fight against,"

"Something to fight for," Marco supplemented. The man continued his fervent hand gestures combined with an utterance that none in the patrol could understand even as they pulled alongside the fisher.

The river quickened out to sea, the fire crackled in the hut behind her. The dog continued barking, but would not traverse the tree line and Arina wondered if something was happening on her father's farm. She wanted to run to him, drag him down to the water, even only as a witness. She knew it would be too late.

"What happened," she asked, quieter this time, both hoping for clarity and fearing its consequences. Marco opened his mouth, shut it again. "What are you going to do with him?" She swivelled her head from one to the other of the men. Anton busied his hands with the nets she had discarded upon their arrival. Marco stood unmoving, superficially inspecting the skow deck with his eyes. None would return her glare. She stamped her foot.

"They fucking shot me, Ar," Marco finally told her. "That blood you've got on your hand, that's from them. That's what it's come to. That's when we took him." His face empty, his towering body, the one that had seemed so monstrous when it first came after her with its caresses, so awkward and gentle, seeking support, almost staggering from the exertion of its utterance.

"Get him out of here." She tugged on the thick sleeve of his lame arm, dragged him

away from the boat, away from the door of the hut. "Why did you bring him here? You know they are going to come looking here. Fuck, fuck, fuck, what were you thinking?" She guided him without resistance, as though by getting him as far physically from the bound man in the net hold she would reach him, until his feet planted. She felt his callous hand through her shawl.

"Stop," he said coolly. "He brought this on himself. I know what you're thinking, but if we let him go, they've won. We can't let that happen."

What did he say? Did you even ask him? She wanted to ask, but the words wouldn't come.

Anton seized his advantage, "Look we're not going to listen to a fifteen year old girl," he leaped back on to the skiff, "you weren't there and you don't get this thing, this is beyond you. Besides this guy" emphasizing the word with his boot heel in the man's stomach, "this guy doesn't understand a word of English, we even tried goddamn Chinook on him and he don't get it. Probably faking it for all I know."

Arina balled her fists for a second only. Marco recognized the gesture, scanned the skow for blunt objects. "Enough." Gracing her biceps, he reiterated, "there is no other way."

"Well you should know this. Osaka came by today. Said that one of their reps had told them the Union came to an agreement, that everyone was going back out. That's what they expected. They've got some rats, the men are strong. That's what Osaka said." Anton was requisitioning supplies from the remnants of things lying outside the hut. Arina realized she had Marco all to herself. She wanted to hold his hand, lead him up past the aspens, down the road, out of this place, go live in the woods away from the industry and the river filth of the canneries, roll somewhere in the earth, build their own house, have babies who would run naked by a creek that rushed through trees the size of those that were boomed down the river, fish for themselves only and not the canneries, a place with no companies, no bosses, no wars…

Marco shook his head. He pulled his lame arm free and he wrapped them both around her, kissed the top of her head and then her forehead, his lips dry. "None of us wants this. But look they've taken Rogers and a bunch of others. Now they have guns."

"They are never going to trust you, if you do this. *Never*. They don't believe the charges against Rogers and there is no way Rogers will be convicted. But this…this goes beyond. You can't win against the bosses without them. Appeal to the Benevolent Association, get in touch with MacClain, let them all know what's going on. You'll only stop by sticking together. You guys can't patrol the whole river."

Anton shoved past Marco en route to grabbing a shovel that leaned against the west side of the hut. "Don't go soft on me now," he sneered. "You seen what they did. Don't think they'll do it again?"

Arina ignored him and he went back to his preparations. "They have way more than us, and you know that New West local is only holding out for British privileges. They don't care about us and if the Japs go back on the river, they'll be there, they'll bargain

in something, more licences for the Anglos or something, they'll be back on the river and we'll be the only ones holding out and the owners'll notice. Might not even take our fish if it comes to that, deny us licences."

"That's already been decided."

Arina rolled her head back. The last glitch of sun dipped below the cloud crowned horizon and immediately the air chilled. The fire smoked out of the hut. "You'll never win if you are divided," she kept at him, "that is company strategy, they feed off our fears." She spoke only to Marco. And despite the breath, hot with stale smoke, a tinge of whiskey to it, there was a distance she couldn't bridge like there was something else to the story. Some reason for his determination.

Sweat beaded off the scruff of his beard. She stopped talking. He was seven years older, could remember the old country and the Adriatic waters but not his father. Physically, Arina was tough. She carried more weight pound for pound, had higher stamina. Her upper body mushroomed into broad shoulders and thick arms and an undeveloped chest. But he was nearly a foot taller, had longer reach and she sensed he was becoming blinded by a passion induced by an event she couldn't fathom. There was no intellect to appeal to. She'd lost that battle. She'd felt the weight of his anger, worn its bruises and discolorations, and knew this was not the time to take that anger on herself. Let it feed elsewhere, she thought. Her own anger at seeing the man she loved, who'd been like a brother and was now a lover, reduced to knee-jerk reactions in order to satisfy an immediate wound, to seek vengeance at the lowest levels merely to regain a sense of lost power, that anger she stored, stored it up as fodder to use against the canneries. Her hope lay in the interval between the thought and the deed. She held his arm, a feeble attempt to restrain him from approaching Anton. She shivered (recalled her mother telling her that her mother told her how ghosts pass through us, try to communicate at moments of crisis when we shiver) and wondered if she would ever see him again after this night. Stunned by the thought she released him. An eagle flew overhead chased by a heckling murder of crows. A deep shadow passed and she felt the cold heel of the canneries crush them.

From inside the hut, Maria could only see forms shuffling across the skow. She tried to get up, but it was too much effort. She stayed on the bench, laid her palms across her belly and felt the baby kick. The heat from the fire made her dizzy. The kicking took her away from the hushed argument. Then came the cramping. She'd felt it before, it was worse this time though. Her teeth ground, eyes closed. She saw Nicholich flapping a sockeye between his legs, his tongue lapping his smiling lips. She strained to distinguish the intonations of his voice from the stifled sounds outside. Shadows on the skow dancing through the fire-lit cracks in the hut walls. The pressure was more intense, an internal vice grip wrenching her uterus. The pain blocked out the men, the outside. The baby stopped kicking. Her white-knuckled hands gripped the bench seat. "Arina," she called faintly. No answer. "Arina." She didn't know how loud her voice was, whether it even left her mouth. She tried again, her energy tapped. She teetered on the bench, heard

it creak like the maples in the west coast winds. Only the weight of her stomach kept her from landing ass up, head on the floor. She called out Arina's name, this time she knew she said it out loud. She waited for a response.

The dog barked in measured beats. She thought maybe she heard her mother's cow lowing. The cannery lights beamed out across the pass, but the machinery was at rest. Arina lost track of the argument, but the men seem to have come to a decision. Anton untied the rope that tethered them to the skow and hopped aboard. Marco took his time. He looked back at Arina by the edge of the River.

"We're gonna dump him on an island. Nobody needs to know. You don't need to know, just forget it. None of this happened."

She wanted to scream, claw at his face. But she wouldn't. In her heart she knew he was right. Something had to be done, even this minor retaliation. The man, she wondered, what about the man.

As if in response, Marco held her in his swollen hands, pressed up against her shoulders so she could feel herself squeezed, shrinking. "This is war. We didn't make it but we can't back down. Not now."

Her eyes teared, but she held them back so that the water blurred her vision. "Won't he just turn you in when he gets found?" Desparation.

"*If* he gets found," Anton sniped from the skiff.

She raised her middle finger from her upturned fist. The wind picked up off the coast, brushed through the aspens and rocked the boat slightly.

"Arina," he started slow, "Nicholich is gone."

Air caught in her throat. Something, she wanted to say something. Her eyes widened and without a sob a tear leaked out, following a serpentine path down her creased cheeks. She stared at the man she knew would one day be her husband, the man she'd known since she was first brought to this country thirteen years ago. Her teeth ground her silence.

As they pulled up to the storage skow, partially filled with red salmon, Anton hopped off and cut the line that connected it to the company tug. With his large knife he slashed the nets, thinking all the while of the work that went into maintaining the nets, the hours, the women back at Marco's waiting for their own nets to be sunk in the River once again. Marco rowed up to the tug where the Japanese man continued to gesture wildly with his arms, and shout out something that sounded like gibberish to his foreign ears.

Nicholich crossed over to the tug and pushed the man aside. Another man appeared from the cabin brandishing a pistol. A shot fired before anyone said a word, Nicholich grunted and fell into the River. Marco charged the man and, as another shot rang out, knocked him against the gunwale. There was a silent struggle. The Japanese man and his mate were flustered. The man who'd been gesturing wildly only a moment before jumped over to the smaller fishing boat. Nicholich bobbed to the surface some short distance down river and was gone. Marco brought his knee to the man's groin, and although he winced it didn't appear to break his resolve. The

short wince, the momentary break in his concentration, however, was all that Marco needed. An elbow to the face, the crush of cartilage gave way to a blood splash across the bow. With a final shove the man toppled.

The tug engine started and Marco dove off. He hit the cold River and for a second everything went black. He broke the calm surface in the wake of the tug. Anton called from the skow. Marco fought against the current and took hold of the severed rope that lingered still attached to the skow. He pulled his dead weight to the skow and Anton hoisted him up. They rowed to their own boat and Anton laid out the Japanese man with a jab to the larynx.

They tied the man's arms and legs with the nylon netting, gagged his mouth. In the silence of the river, the oars plunging into the unsettling calm, Marco wondered whether the man was trying to warn them.

" Arina." Her voice was strained. The pains were sharper. "It's coming," she said, barely aware of the inaudibility of her own voice. Her hands cupped the bottom of her stomach as though trying to keep the contents inside. She didn't want it to come out, not now. Not in the middle of a strike, not another mouth to feed. She knew they could get fish, but can you feed a baby fish she wondered. Well, she had milk. Her mouth taste like metal thinking about salmon. Her mouth was dry. She called out again.

Marco held the skiff with one foot on the skow. "They shot him," he said. "There was a fucking Pinkerton or militia or something on that boat, hiding, waiting. I don't know what these fucks were doing." He pointed to the bound man in the hull. "Honestly they looked as scared as we were. I wouldn't be surprised if they had no fucking idea. They set up Rogers like this though. Only this time they fucked up. They shot Nicholich. We can kill this guy. No one will say a word because they shot an unarmed patrol boat. I kept telling him he should learn to swim. Working on the River all those hours and not knowing how to swim, it's fucking crazy. They started shooting at us. We couldn't get to him.

"Get your father, tell him to gather the rest of them, tell them what's happened. They need to be prepared and we might not be back in time."

His dark, steadfast eyes looked beyond her, beyond the trees into the cultivated fields of the delta, even beyond that. Arina hoped he saw a brighter future. A place where they could live simply. Where living wasn't an unacknowledged war, where the workers didn't end up fighting each other.

Anton rowed the skiff out along the island side of the pass. Arina watched it disappear a few yards past the shore in the darkness. It would navigate the small channels between the marshes, away from the canneries. Their lookouts would be watching, but the River would cloak them, would drown their deeds in its flow.

"Nicholich," Arina heard from the hut. Shit.

"They left already, might not be back for a bit."

Maria called out his name a couple more times and it wasn't until Arina heard her own name that she heard the pain. She rushed inside, the heat from the stove enveloping her.

From between her legs, Maria felt a gush and a total loss of control. Water streamed down her legs to the floor. She started to cry, she cramped. Arina, Arina, I need you. She looked delirious to Arina. The words formed and she heard them, but she didn't know whether she only heard them in her head. A massive contraction. "Arina," suddenly lucid, "remember Jane, the town girl that your mother helped with her baby? What was that story, that she couldn't make milk? I think that's what I heard, is that it? Do you know that one?"

Arina stepped in the remains of the amniotic fluid spread out on the floor of the hut, nodded her head. Maria slumped frontwards. The younger girl carried Maria with her large frame under the shoulders to the straw bed.

"There will be time for that," she said, resting her hand on her bent knees. How many times had she slept there waiting for Marco to return, how many times had Maria slept in this same bed waiting for Nicholich. Maybe the baby was conceived there. She always wondered where they carried out their little tryst.

"I don't want to be Jane. I want to make milk, I don't know if I can. What if I can't?" Panic surged through her. "Didn't they take Jane away, where did Jane go?" She laid Maria on her back, felt the sweat off her neck, her eyes rolled back in her head. This can't be a good sign. Maria shot up "WHERE DID JANE GO! Why did she disappear?" she hollered and Arina hoped it was loud enough to attract some attention from the farm house. Arina tried to remember what her mother would do. She'd spent a lifetime in this situation.

"You had to breed another fisherman didn't you, Maria," she joked. Maria's pale face smiled, "what better place to be born than the River."

FILM

>> ERIC GIRAUD
TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL BARNHOLDEN AND TED BYRNE

Scene—on the deck or below deck—rail and dolly—no seascapes—back projection—translucent screen—shocking breaks in the flow of images: arrival on the docks—quick visit—white spaces—gaps—jump cuts—then departure—the supposed lapse of memory—where one learns later—that production on the docks—in the breweries from the nineteenth century on—is tied to the sale of children—boys—to the Italian communities—trafficking of all kinds—to pay for the return to their village—complicated stories—wandering tramps—the illusion of meaning—cut to the brewery—ownership of several restaurants—a morning jog in Central Park shadowed by a bodyguard—should we save the dog—the puppy—nice doggie—the bodyguard—a sign—recalls the sale of the boy ten years earlier—cut to the house—the lower garden—the American wife—birth of a son—returning each night from the restaurant—family meals in the dining room—trips to the ranch just outside New York—the elegance of the clown—the elegance of the tramp—the white skin of the Swiss—the ruddy complexion of the Italian—both straight and stiff but elegant—two walking sticks—the captain's hat—the three piece suit—the vest buttons—why save something useless—give up utility for beauty—the meaning of good and evil—solidarity and community—free enterprise for association—for territories—the boundaries of the frontier—the frontier explains everything that needs to be explained—but what really happened—the good ones never leave—what happened that day—the living room—the windows—the back door—the garden—the garage—the front door—the stairs—that which persists: nerves—suspicion—fear—a paragraph—cut—new scene—they'll wash him—shave—shampoo—do his hair—they crossed the Atlantic—they tried to reconcile what they saw with what they had imagined—there was nobody there to meet them—not by mistake—not from neglect—not to offend—not through carelessness—a good meeting—good for who?—good for these people—I'll be there all the time—the whole time—the first years were all image with no depth—films as flat as celluloid—there was no need to question them—everyone was happy—they'd made it—a little shaken—this isn't an opinion—no vision no lighting—it didn't happen immediately—perhaps there'd been an argument—a big blow-up—lots of noise—going on and on—many shots fired—bodies full of bullets—laying in very strange patterns—bodies jammed tightly together—like they'd been attacked by monsters—the goal is to get out—to find the way out—to fix the broken pieces—to recover what has been lost—what they came for—it's a program of saturation and acceleration—they'd already bathed before posing in the park—it's all Bachichine's look—a disease perhaps—no way to stop it—I can't remember the details of the costume—he loved costumes—she got sick and every thing came crashing down—he had her embalmed in a glass coffin—in a vault in the garden—no more need for bodyguards—no more stomach for business—breweries—the restaurants—Grock's music—their meetings—business—their Italian friends—arguments with the Irish—questions of territory—he doesn't know any more—now—which it is—or what belongs there—or what belongs to him—like an American—from now on—there's only one thing left to do—make the crossing again—only this time voluntarily—return leaving

the flower garden behind—the windows of the house—the front lawn—the center of the world—the evening—lying down in the grass—under the stars—the ranch in the middle of this desolate territory—the growing waste land—brief shots—constant changes in the scale of the shots—camera angles—a voluntary sickness?—more speed—more movement—manipulated by images—detourning the media—the structure that was—before the assassination—the assassination—after the assassination—there will be no reconstruction—no reorganization—simply the capturing of events—behaviours—costumes—hairstyles—it's like conformity and excess seriousness—that's what guarantees respectability—I won't be a slave to my grief—he wants to be happy in winter—its his nature—his engaging ears—flecked eyes—closed face—hard—a panama for the Italian—a captain's hat for the Swiss—his fortune—a world tour—broke—then another fortune—the chateaux on the French Riviera and the last days around Imperia—difficult to describe the physical presence—the superficial flatness of the characters—the dialogue—the speed—the first time he saw her was day time—they were seated on the ledge—on his return he suddenly remembered—it was as clear as a film and more alive than a photograph—he had it all but did not believe in it any more—success was something you were supposed to accept—something you were supposed to accept for love of money—no matter what they say—to do so was thoughtful and sincere and showed an exceptional decisiveness—the period—the meeting in the park—the pose—two costumes—two hats—the dark look and the serene look—the walking stick across his leg—the fold of the trousers—the watch chain—the short tie—with and without the waistcoat—the roses behind—the white hair—the black hair—a clown—a tramp—positives—he'd had his house—its grounds surrounded by trees—just like before when they cleared the forests and settled in the clearings—they were there before they had time to settle in—when he left he closed it all up—there were brambles in the abandoned garden—weeds covering everything—the gate to the vault was rusted—the windows covered—termites in the wood—a frozen photograph—they were both in the empty house—imagining the furniture—the plants—tables on the patio—the fence—the roses about to bud—Bachichine had gone again—the hardened look—years spent on the docks—in abandonment—he managed—in Italian—the accent persisted—the money was Italian too—they were friendly with him and he was friendly with them—the perfect resolution—the perfect black and white of it—one day we will be rich—it'll be simply irresistible—we will stretch out on the lawn—under the stars—night—side by side—forever—at the center of the world—you say what the whole world says—the husband's reward is his wife—it was useless to try and avoid it—it was fated—that's why—it was necessary to change—nobody wants to say that now—no more models—no more copies—speed is the key—a rain of arrows—jump cuts and tracking shots—the extension and contraction of time—tension and release—the long shot—the waiting—the endless waiting—the attack—the race to the docks—quickly getting into the boat—the emptiness of the crossing—a return saturating image with movement

from *THE RED ALBUM*[1]

>> GLORIA PERSONNE

1 The full text of this manuscript is being edited for publication by Stephen Collis and Alfred Noyes.

After spending an uncomfortable night in the Girona airport, Dioscoro Galindo took an early bus into Barcelona. He sat near the front of the almost empty vehicle, his head resting against the large window, vaguely aware of the landscape sliding past—farm houses, trees, ruins, a castle on a hill some kilometers across a long, low valley. Dio (as he was usually called) only came to (more or less) full consciousness as the bus wound down a long hill, past the Damm brewery, and into the city of his ancestors (this is what he told himself)—his first ever visit to the "old world."

Moments later he was sitting on a bench in a small park a few blocks from the bus depot, watching two children play. The ground was mostly dirt but there were some fairly new and brightly coloured structures for the children to climb on, which they did with gusto, their parents sitting on a bench across from Dio. Presently a large group of school children arrived and displaced the first two, or swallowed them up in their whirl of voices, feet, and hands. Dio absently tried to pick out the original two, but couldn't. Maybe he fell asleep for a few minutes, he wasn't sure, but suddenly he saw the original two girls, with their parents, surrounded by the school children and talking to, presumably, their teacher. There seemed to be some problem, and Dio had the impression the parents of the first two children were foreigners—they weren't speaking Spanish, anyway, and the teacher didn't seem to understand their complaint. The foreigner's children were visibly upset, crying or frowning, and the crowd of school children alternately smirked or looked concerned. Suddenly one of the school children produced a small plastic toy, which was given to the foreign girls, who were much relieved. The groups parted, the school children back to their games, and the foreign family to their bench, where they gathered suit cases and, with one last look around, walked on into the city.

Soon Dio moved on too, crossing a broad tree-lined avenue and strolling, his suitcase in tow, its wheels hopping the uneven paving stones, into the narrow streets of the Barri Gotic. He was also a "foreigner" here. A tourist with suitcase. Someone from the "colony" (he thought the foreign family were probably Americans, but wasn't sure). His thoughts trailed off as the narrow streets and shadows took him in and he wandered aimlessly, not even thinking of where his hotel was, or of the tourist map he's picked up at the bus depot and crammed into the back pocket of his jeans.

He could almost—if both hands were free—have touched both sides of the narrow street. Above him the balconies, similarly, almost touched, the laundry that hung from them billowing out so that a shirtsleeve on one side touched the hem of a dress on the other.

Every once in a while a small car came barreling down the alley, its horn blasting, scattering pedestrians into doorways. Dio witnessed a woman in a burqa almost lose a bag of groceries in one of these escapes, only to move on, unperturbed, after the car had passed.

In a small square dominated by plane trees Dio sat for a while listening to a fountain burble and watching a young waiter set white plastic tables and chairs outside

a restaurant while a friend smoked, leaning against a wall and regaling the waiter with some long, apparently humorous story.

When he came to a large square bright with sunshine in front of a cathedral he finally remembered the map and self consciously took it out, trying not to look too much the tourist, while groups of people around him spoke French and German and ate gelato or took photographs of each other eating gelato. Dio quickly located himself on the crumpled map (not too difficult) and, much to his surprise, found that his hotel was right on this square, directly facing the cathedral (which was shrouded in scaffolding, apparently undergoing a major restoration). He stuffed the map (half, and incorrectly, folded) into the outside zippered pocket of his suitcase and hurried across the square.

The hotel lobby was small and dark, with potted plants and a flat-screen TV. The clerk could not find Dio's reservation. He could tell by the way the clerk cocked his head and paused whenever Dio spoke that he was having an issue (or so Dio imagined) with his accent. Perhaps trying to pin where Dio was from. What does it mean to feel your language is not your language? The clerk was old, tall and thin, with a hooked nose, very severe and arrogant, and so thin and pale that he might disappear into the cracks of the white wall behind the desk, or get lost amongst the papers in front of him. Finally the reservation was found, booked under the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, whose representatives had taken care of Dio's arrangements (not altogether thoroughly, Dio was finding; who knew the airport he was flying into was not in Barcelona, but in an adjacent town, Girona?). Once this was resolved, the clerk's demeanor changed from condescending to grave, and he quickly had Dio on his way.

In his fourth floor room Dio threw himself on the bed without even looking around and began staring up at the ceiling, as though he had been eager to begin looking into its complexities. These consisted of 1) a single domed light, with the shadows of dead bugs inside it, and 2) a large crack running from the light towards the side of the room Dio had entered from. It was quite a long and deep crack—an earthquake?—and suggested something of the age of the hotel. Suddenly the entire hotel was divided in two by this vast crack, so that guests looked out from their rooms into a gap birds flew through and street noises entered and papers fluttered through the air, sheets billowed, and the clerk looked up at Dio from the lobby, as though to accuse him of creating this vast crevice in the middle of his noble hotel.

Dio awoke with a start and thought of his wife and daughters. He wondered if this was all just fatigue or the normal strangeness caused by travel. He had traveled before and not felt so…not himself. Once to Mexico, and twice to California, to visit his sister in Carlsbad and attend a conference in San Diego. But on his second trip to California, he remembered, he had a difficult time at the airport. Disgruntled customs officials with stern expressionless faces and holsters heavy with guns. Questions questions—what did his sister do in California? Nurse. How long had she lived there? Twelve years. Was she legal? Pardon me? Was she a legal immigrant, did she have papers? Oh, yes, she had married a Californian. A Chicano? No, no an American. Don Reynolds. And your

sister's name? Conchita Reynolds. Incredulity. No fucking shit, Conchita Reynolds? Yes. Is there a problem officer? And on and on it went. But this time—in Spain, the land of his forefathers and foremothers—it was a different kind of strangeness. A belonging-not-belonging. Well, maybe it had also been a kind of belonging-not-belonging in California, where so many of Conchita's friends were Chicano, and spoke a Spanish peppered with English Dio could make out only most of the time. But going to California had no flavour of "going home," as this time in Barcelona seemed to—though to a home he'd never even once entered, except in his father's stories and in old letters from his grandmother Guadeloupe, now long dead. Whose voice he'd never heard now filled the room saying Dio, Dio, wake up—your father sent you and you must listen to what I say.

When Dio awoke again he was sweating. His head ached. The blinds were drawn and the room was dark. He had no idea how long he had slept. The digital clock beside his bed read 4:02, but this didn't mean anything to Dio. Lifting his head he saw sunshine coming through the crack in the curtains. 4:02 pm. Still somehow meaningless, as he had no idea what time he had checked in, or if this was even the same day.

Opening the curtains revealed a view of the square and the scaffold-clad cathedral, standing as though it had been under construction since the beginning of time. Everything was bright in the sun and Dio squinted, his eyes adjusting slowly. He saw narrow streets striking off in many directions, and people—mostly tourists, Dio imagined—seemed to swarm everywhere. He followed one woman in a yellow dress as she wove across the cobblestones to the cathedral, stopped and turned at its steps, perhaps adjusting her hat or sunglasses (her hand rising, but being too far away for Dio to be certain of the gesture), then followed along its front, and turned into an alley at its far corner where she was lost in a knot of moving bodies.

The shower was cold, the water of an uncertain colour and odour. But it revived him enough to realize how desperately hungry he was. He dressed quickly and went downstairs with his hair still wet.

Dio quickly found a seat at one of the café tables outside his hotel. The waiter came to his table and Dio ordered some tapas and a beer, then stretched his feet out into the sun from the awning's shade. People came and went in the busy square. He wondered if Barcelona was always this crowded, or just here in the middle of the tourist area, or if there was some festival or something else afoot. A group of overweight people came up to the restaurant to read the menu. They spoke loud English, some of which Dio could understand, but he chose not to try to do so. His beer arrived and he took a long drink. He wished he had sunglasses—why didn't he have sunglasses? He remembered a rack of them he'd seen in the airport, a fashionable woman turning it round and round, shaking her head.

After his tapas he ordered another beer. Then he became aware of another man drinking alone a few tables away and apparently watching Dio. In a series of casual

glances, disguised as surveys of the square, Dio saw that the man was about his age, had a moustache and not much hair, and wore rumpled clothes. He looked like Dio must—tired, staring because there was nothing else he could do.

When Dio's second beer was almost finished the man called out.

Buy you another?

Dio looked around like he had not quite heard.

Buy you another?

Beer, asked Dio?

Yes, beer. The man smiled and nodded, holding his own almost empty glass up.

Dio wondered for a moment if the man was a con artist of some kind—a crook laying in wait for unsuspecting foreigners and naive tourists, or simply a pickpocket trying to lull and distract him—but he didn't particularly care much at the moment. He turned his chair a bit towards the other man and shrugged.

Sure, let's have a beer.

The other man got up from his table and came to Dio's, lifting his empty glass in the air again and gesturing to the waiter. His smile seemed genuinely friendly, and reminded Dio of a colleague from his office back home. He introduced himself as Leandro, and Dio told him his name.

You are not from Catalonia, Leandro observed.

No. South America.

Leandro nodded his head, but didn't ask for any more specific details. I have never been, he said. Once to Madrid. Once to France. Several times here to Barcelona. Mine is a small Catalan town, Alcarràs. I come here this time for my wife's illness. And you?

Dio wasn't sure if he wanted a full catalogue of his travels (which wasn't much more impressive) or simply the reason for his present visit to Barcelona. He didn't really want to talk about the latter, so he simply said, Business. Again, Leandro didn't seem to want to know anything more detailed. There was a long pause in which they drank and stared out into the busy square. Eventually Dio thought it polite to enquire after the health of his acquaintance's wife. Leandro nodded enthusiastically.

She is doing much better, thank you. Now I am waiting for her recovery, a few more days, the doctor says. Before, we were waiting many weeks for a diagnosis. First in Alcarràs. Then at the hospital in Lleida. And then here, at the big university hospital. Maybe you don't want to know, but it was the strangest thing. It began with a terrible headache—the worst she had ever had. So bad she could not get out of bed. Her mother tried some remedies, but soon we sought a doctor's advice. The doctor said migraines, and gave her something for the pain which had no effect. My wife is strong, and never sick. So we were much concerned. Her mother, who is always at our house, kept taking me aside and saying it was brain cancer, it was cell phones. Even though we don't have a cell phone! My wife would simply say, There's something wrong with my head. Something wrong. We went to Lleida, and there my wife went truly crazy. Shouting in the hospital, cursing at people who weren't there, asking strange and inappropriate

questions of doctors—I think it was doctors—who weren't in the room. She called me Filo and said, Get a hair cut.

Leandro laughed.

I have no hair, my friend, and know no one named Filo. She became frightened, staring into empty corners of the room, whispering. Her eyes, which I always thought were so beautiful, receded somewhere into her head, as though not wanting to see or be seen.

Leandro paused to finish his drink as the waiter brought two new beers. Dio wondered what he had got himself into, but with a full belly at last, and his third (or fourth?) beer, he didn't much care. If his new friend wanted to talk, Dio would listen.

She became violent, Leandro continued flatly, staring into the centre of the square. The doctor told me she was psychotic, or perhaps schizophrenic. In quiet moments my wife told me a small voice was talking to her, inside her, but she wasn't sure what it was saying. Baby talk, she would say. She developed a fever, then had a seizure. They sent us to the hospital in Barcelona, in an ambulance. She slept the whole way, and then for more than three weeks here. Coma. Her eyes would open, but she would not respond to any stimulus. Not even a sharp needle. I was sure she was gone for good. Prepared myself at last. Mourned the fact that she had not been able to have children—something that made her mother furious (her mother had eight children of her own—but my wife was the only daughter). The doctors, however, remained very curious—like my wife was a great mystery they must solve. They asked me many questions about my wife, the history of her health. What was this scar from? Had she always had this mark on her calf? Had she always had headaches? Nothing seemed to indicate what might be wrong. Scans, spinal taps. Nothing conclusive. White blood cells, they told me, indicated possible encephalitis, a brain inflammation, but they could find no cause. They wanted causes, above all. Believed in causes. A doctor would propose a theory (herpes—I would frown—lyme, syphilis?), but the other doctors (there were many, now, all so curious about my wife) would shake their heads no, no, no, nothing to indicate that.

Leandro took a long drink. His pauses were becoming dramatic, and he seemed to enjoy his role as storyteller. Dio wondered if he had been lonely all this time in Barcelona, with no one but doctors to speak to. Presently he began again.

You know, I have learned a lot about medicine through all of this. The doctors would speak, and then later, I would go to the internet café, and use a computer to look up the things they had been saying. I understand things about the brain I would never have thought. You know, the cells in your body are renewed all the time, they die and are born anew, so in terms of what you are actually made out of—flesh and bone—you are not the same you as you were five or ten years ago. Literally. Not one cell. And in the brain, even faster—not the same brain it was, maybe days, hours ago. Proteins dissolve and new proteins form. Now, how do we remember anything at all? Forgetting, that I understand. Especially now. But recollection, that's a mystery. You know—how hard

would it be to break and replace a pitcher and not spill any wine?

Anyway, out of desperation they did a CT scan of her whole body, and found a cyst on her left ovary. It is known as a teratoma. That sounds like the name of a Spanish town, but it means monster in Greek. This teratoma is small and smooth, like an olive, on the outside, but inside it may have a variety of cells and tissues—even growing hair and teeth. That's the monster part.

Leandro paused, smiling, to see how this sunk in. Dio nodded, frowning.

One doctor was convinced this was the culprit. The little monster was killing my wife. Ovarian teratoma encephalitis, that was her diagnosis. (This doctor was a young woman, and beautiful, from Madrid.) The little bastard had grown some primitive brain cells (primitive was what the beautiful doctor called the cells), and my wife's immune system had mistaken these for foreign cells and sent antibodies to destroy them. These antibodies then went on to attack the same kind of cells in my wife's brain. Can you believe that?

It's incredible, Dio agreed.

Incredible. And I started to think, if you can believe it, that that monster is the closest we will ever come to a child of our own. And my wife's body wanted to kill it! Because it had a brain. Or at least brain cells, however primitive. Would it have had thoughts? Feelings? Memory even? I wanted to ask, but didn't. The doctors cut it out, and my wife regained consciousness. Now she can go home in another day, maybe two—completely cured. I couldn't bring myself to ask—I wanted to, some strange enemy within me wanted to ask—if I could have the cyst—you know, like tonsils in a jar. A memento. To remember our little monster. But I couldn't quite say it. And the beautiful doctor was so pleased, so excited, she really wanted to get a good look inside our cyst—Let's have a look inside this guy, she said—so what could I say—No, give me the monster, I want to keep him!?

Leandro stared into his beer. Dio shifted uncomfortably, starting to think about his bed, the crack in his ceiling, his appointment tomorrow.

It's an interesting story, anyhow, Leandro said apologetically. It raises so many questions for me. For instance, what do you think makes us human?

Dio shrugged, I'm not sure I understand your question.

What makes us different from animals? I'm not a religious man—really, not much religion in my village since the Civil War. Darwin, from what I hear, is right. We are animals. We eat and shit and fuck. We want to reproduce ourselves, feed our young. Then die. How are we different from animals? Animals don't build hospitals, or cut each other open to remove rogue cysts. They don't have complicated names for their problems, or scientific literatures about those problems. They eat and shit and fuck and die. So, in part it's language, right? That we name things and make those names our problems. But then I read on the computer about a dog who knows 300 words. There are 300 things his owner can name, or actions he can command, and the dog knows and goes to get the thing named or perform the action commanded. 300. And that's not

all—a parrot I read of, it said the parrot was smarter than the president of the United States! A joke, but the researcher, she's in Buenos Aires, reports that the parrot can express all sorts of desires and feelings, and understands inflection, so the same word can be made to…to mean something else. Like the bird really understands language, how sound and meaning go together. Amazing.

I think…I think it's that we think of ourselves as human, Dio offered. Leandro nodded. That we, you know, think we're human—a member of that species, an example of the category. That we're special and stand apart, or have a mission or a cause or purpose. Whether we do or not. Just that we think that, and think—like you said—What makes us this and not that? I can't imagine sheep thinking about being sheep, or dogs thinking, wow, it sucks to be a dog, I wish I could have a beer and go to college. Only humans imagine what they are, generally, and want what they don't have, things that go beyond mere survival. Desires. Imaginings. Dio paused, his hand counting things off in the air. At least, that's what I think.

Good, Leandro nodded again, good. Very scientific. Darwin. I love science. At home, I build things. Mostly furniture. I work with wood. Sometimes plastic and steel tubing (that's when I went to France, to get the tubing in my uncle's truck), but mostly it's wood. One has to be scientific to make a chair come out right, or a table keep your cups and pictures from falling over. Measurement and design. Exactness. Occasionally my wife has found popular science magazines for me at the grocery store and I read them and I think. But it's only the past few weeks I've been using the computer to read and I can't believe all the things I can read about science there. About time and the universe and how small and insignificant it is to be human and how the earth is warming up or how they built the tunnel under the water to England—that I would like to see. Do you have a computer Dio?

Yes. One at work and one at home. The home one is mostly for my kids. And my wife uses it too.

Leandro nodded. She must be a smart woman, like the doctor from Madrid. What work do you do?

I work for the government in my city. Urban planning. Mostly I work on green projects—parks, and bicycles.

Bicycles?

Yes, bicycles. Improving bicycling by designing paths through the city, greenways for cyclists—and pedestrians too. There are too many cars in my city, and the pollution and congestion is terrible as a result. So we want more people to ride bicycles, and for that we must make bicycling easier, safer. It's for the environment—global warming, like you mentioned—and for improving lifestyle and fitness, like it's better for you to exercise on a bicycle than to sit in a car all day.

Your city must have a very liberal government. Socialist? No doubt. They care for people, and even the earth. They think scientifically, and that's good. We have a socialist government here in Spain once again too. But, not much changes in my town.

Dio smiled. Things change slowly in my city too. The government calls itself socialist, but…I'm not always sure what that means. We have had right wing and left wing governments, but as you say, the difference is not always discernable at the local level. Usually what changes is how the government talks to other countries, to the United States, and the oil and mining interests.

Yes, that's important too, Leandro nodded enthusiastically, taking his next beer from the waiter. The café was crowded now, and the square still filled with people and tourists and vendors and performers. Even more people than before. Somewhere there was singing—a choir, perhaps, Dio couldn't see through all the people—but somewhere across the square there was singing, and occasionally applause.

To talk to the United States in the right way, Leandro continued, that is what our good governments do.

Dio and Leandro fell into silence, seeming to have exhausted their conversation. They watched the crowd going past, and the other patrons in the café, many of whom were foreign. Leandro leaned close. This is what I love about the city. He gestured around them, speaking in a hushed voice. So many foreigners, like yourself, people from all over, the whole world, as though sending representatives here to Spain. I like that, like you said, members of the species, examples of the category Human. It makes me feel scientific, like gathering data or something. Observing the characteristics of this animal, Man.

Dio nodded again, but Leandro shrugged, sitting back, and seemed a little uncomfortable for the first time. Then he suddenly took up another topic.

There is a town, in America, that was a mining town. Coal. And at some point a fire began in the coal, far underground. I can't remember how—I read about it on the computer—someone made a mistake. Negligence or some human carelessness no doubt. But the fire has been burning there since the 1960s. Sometimes the ground caves in, and smoke comes out of gardens (where the vegetables have been cooked in the ground) and from under sidewalks and collapsing streets. The sides of hills. Like they are living in hell, you know? Then of course they had to begin abandoning the town—only some old folks did not want to go, so they have stayed in the smoldering ghost town, alone and watching it fall into ruin. Coal fires burn slowly underground, where there isn't much oxygen. They think, the fire might burn for another two or three hundred years. Can you imagine? Three hundred years of burning! The earth on fire for whole lifetimes, while people walk around above wondering what souls are being tortured beneath their feet—what sins are being expiated. As I said, I am not religious—it is an opiate, right—but it makes you wonder. The strangeness of ordinary things. The horrible and amazing strangeness of what really does happen.

Dio did not know what to say. He thought about the fire burning underground, year after year. It made him think of end of the world movies. Tidal waves. Deserts where cities once stood. It made him sad. He didn't like the idea of empty towns, of places fallen into complete ruin. Abandoned places. Ghost towns.

Leandro sighed. I have kept you too long friend. He stood, downing his beer, and took out some Euros. But it has been good to talk to someone, and you have listened well. I thank you.

Dio stood too, and they awkwardly tried to insist on paying for each other's drinks, Leandro finally winning the argument by insisting that it was his country, and he had to be a good host to the foreigner. They shook hands, Dio wishing Leandro's wife well, and they parted.

Back in his room Dio resumed staring up at the cracked ceiling, as if his day and the strange conversation with Leandro had been a mere interruption of this more important work. He dozed and dreamed, and in his dream he was in a car driving through some city. Steam or smoke rose from manhole covers. Leandro's little monster was in the seat beside him, all teeth and hair, giving directions. The little monster began to talk like one of Dio's own daughters, about school and a play or something, about playing chess against a robot or computer which always won, no matter how hard the little monster tried, smoke coming out of its mouth in the effort, and then the creature began to berate Dio for driving a car when he could easily be walking or taking his bicycle. All these cars, it said, each with its solitary driver, burning for hundreds and hundreds of years the last drops of oil, and what are you doing about this problem?

HALLELUJAH MICHAEL

>> JULIANE OKOT BITEK

She called him Hallelujah Michael, insisting that both Hallelujah and Michael together was his name. It never occurred to her that together, Hallelujah and Michael made for a strange name. His father, however, insisted that his name was Okwera, Okwera Michael, after him. He never told his son that Hallelujah was. The way she told it, it wasn't an option.

She'd been looking out the window from the restaurant where she had been waiting for Michael to join her for lunch when the name came to her. On the other side of the street, a circle of vultures across the rubbish heap suggested that they were waiting for something to die, something of flesh. Some of them landed briefly, looking at a spot, then rose again to join the flock seeming, as it were, to update the rest of them. She watched bits of plastic bags rise in the air while others attempted to fly away in the breeze, only to be anchored down by the weight of rubbish. She saw discarded newspapers and cardboard boxes flap about, rise some distance into the air, and then settle back slowly on top of the heap. She watched the housewives toss their household refuse in tightly-tied black plastic bags and spit as they walked away. She saw workers from the alleyway at the row of restaurants with their filthy stained aprons and buckets of slop add to the mound that grew and settled, grew and settled, as if there was a throat at the bottom that swallowed it all. She saw the trucks back up a metre, two, into the folds of refuse, open the backs and belch out the city's garbage before the drivers took off again. The woman included this detail every time she told this story. All this she saw in silence, protected from the powerful stench outside by the perfectly clean windows of the restaurant.

Michael had insisted that this was the place to meet for lunch. It had the most delectable nyama choma. She'd acquiesced, not because she was particularly fond of roasted meat, she wasn't; and not because he had any kind of charm on her, she didn't think he had, but there she was, and he was already a half hour late.

Michael had folded her into his wing when she'd arrived, first seeing her right in front of the hostel, the map of the city in her hand and looking every bit the stranger she was. He was on his way home but had taken a moment to point out that the hostel she was looking for was right in front of her. In a moment, she'd given him her phone number and insisted that she buy him a beer, something, anything to show her gratitude. It was as if Michael was the first person she'd met since she left the airport, who'd seen that she was there. Everyone else seemed to be engrossed in wherever they were going and in whatever they were doing – just like at home. So much for the friendliness of Africans that she'd heard so much about. And then Michael appeared. He'd walked her right into the hostel and made sure she was settled before he went on his way. He also accepted her phone number and promised he'd call. And when he called he volunteered to show her around the real country, just as she'd hoped he would. She wasn't interested in just the animals, she'd told him. It would be good if she had a safari at some point before she went back home, but for now, she wanted to meet real people, interact with real people, and eat like the locals. So here she was, waiting for Michael to arrive and waiting to try the delectable nyama choma when, as she tells it, she thought she saw Michael at the doorway.

"And all of a sudden, I thought, Hallelujah, Michael's here,"

And just as suddenly, there was nothing at the door, not a shadow, just the lingering echo of the two words in her head—Hallelujah Michael, Hallelujah Michael. To hear her tell it, you'd think it was a moment that echoed from the beginning of the world.

The vultures seemed to circle slowly, lower and lower into a spot at the apex of the garbage hill. The woman recalled Kevin Carter's Pulitzer prize-winning photograph, the one of the little Sudanese girl hunched over, while a vulture stood close by, waiting and Carter'd waited too, to get the perfect shot. That child, she thought, probably died of starvation, and Carter, who chased away the vulture and then smoked under a tree, went on to win awards for this picture and fleeting attention it drew from the rest of the world. That a child could suffer so much was a crime, she decided, as the vultures hovered, waiting, waiting.

"And then," she exclaims in practically every telling, "something in the pile moved. Something moved, I swear, as if it was turning over and it wasn't the flying plastic bags and it wasn't the paper. Something definitely moved."

The woman tells how she squinted her eyes to ascertain that she wasn't imagining the whole thing. Everything seemed to be the same. The scene reverted back to the way it had appeared the whole time she'd been looking. She stood up. There were some children playing ball barefoot, not far from the dump. Maybe they'd kicked something into the mound, but their play continued, unbroken by the need to rescue their ball that seemed to be homemade and tied with jute. She couldn't hear their shrieks or laughter inside the restaurant, but she could see that they were having a good time, fluid in their movements, whether they were scoring a goal or high fiving each other.

Hallelujah Michael started up again in her mind like a chorus, getting louder and louder, becoming most deafening when the vultures all alighted and stood. She thought her ear drums would burst and she clutched at her ears, but it was all in her head, louder and louder. She stayed standing with her hands to her ears, still alert, looking out through her lashes. She was now like the vultures on the garbage heap that now stood in a circle. What were they looking at?

Then suddenly she was flying out of the restaurant and rising higher and higher, until the city below lay out like a flower.

"High up there, I could see everything. Through the roof of this one house, I could see the table laid out for a meal in a house. I could see the single bright red pepper on a saucer next to a plate of deep fried tilapia, and a separate tray with a steaming mound of posho and a colorful bowl of katchumbari with red onions, red and leafy tomatoes, and coriander leaves."

As she hovered high up there, she saw a man's hand reach out and pinch some posho away and dig a shallow hole into it, and then hide it in the palm of his hand. She saw him use his forefingers and thumb to pick up some katchumbari and then raise that to his mouth and tuck that into his cheek. She saw the man tear of a bit of the tilapia, breaking some flesh and the crunchy skin, all salty and crispy. She saw him lift that to his mouth, too, and then bite off the edge of the hot pepper. The man closed his eyes in appreciation. From up there in the sky she could hear the man calling:

"And how am I supposed to eat without any water here? Woman, I don't have all day! I'm due back in the office at two!"

"Coming!"

A woman's voice answered from the kitchen. A voice, but no face, no details—nothing. The flying woman didn't think about why she could not see the woman whose voice called back from the kitchen.

"And then boom!" she'd say dramatically, pounding one fist into the other to make the point. "I was diving fast, fast! And there I was, right in the middle of the garbage heap with my high heels and everything. I can't explain it, but I swear to God, I was there."

That part, she claimed every time. Other people swear it, too. How could she have ended up there, right there, where her weight, slight as she was, might have had her at least knee deep in the muck?

As she landed, she always told, the birds rose up about her and flew away. A piece of plastic fluttered about her feet tickling her ankles. She looked down, felt herself bend down and scoop up something. She heard a cry, she doesn't know of what, but there it was, and it was clearly a cry. All the chorus in her head stopped except for a single one, a man's voice, that announced—Hallelujah Michael. The next thing she knew, Michael was standing at the bottom, all the way down. He called to her.

"What are you doing there? What is that you're carrying?"

Michael sounded far away, although she could hear and see him clearly. She looked at what she had clutched to her chest. A small fist pushed out from the thing she was holding. She reached out let it hold her little finger. There was a strong tug inside her belly button, as if something was yanking it towards her spine. She felt a little faint but caught herself from falling and stood with her legs apart for balance. It seemed to be a long way to the bottom of this heap.

"I thought maybe because I was standing on top of the garbage, but it wasn't that."

She looked again. There was a baby, his mouth tightly clenched around her breast.

"A baby!" she called back at Micahel, as though it was the most natural thing to do. Having never breastfed any child, she was shocked at the strength of the pull at her nipple, and how it seemed, for a brief moment, that she was linked to this child at her breast by a river that coursed through her and into him. What? How? And then Michael's voice interrupted her thoughts:

"Come on down!" he called, gesturing with his whole hand. "How did you get up there? It's not safe!"

There were a few people watching now. People would tell this story privately and separately for years, after seeing her there, on top of the rubbish heap in her high heels and everything. They stood there and spat at the smell but remained transfixed by the spectacle. There were housewives who couldn't just toss the garbage and go home. They stood there, with their hands at their waists, waiting to see how this could inform the gossip when they got home. The skirts of their dresses flew about their legs, mimicking the empty plastic bags that rose and fell about them. Two sullen restaurant workers, who'd

stolen another cigarette smoke break under the pretence of going to pour the slop out, also stood there, taking long drags. They'd already forgotten that their supervisor had noticed how often these two guys poured out the slop. The super was consulting the wrist watch to see how long it would take this time, as the young men took a drag of their fags. He was the one, for years later, that could confirm that all this took place about two thirty on that Wednesday afternoon in September.

The restaurant workers had decided that this was far more interesting. It's not too often that one encounters a woman breastfeeding on a garbage heap, a white woman in high heels at that. It was not going to end well. How would she get down?

Michael took a few steps to try to meet her, but he seemed to sink into the muck. He stopped when he got ankle deep into it, his good shoes and the bottom of his slacks completely covered in the muddy slime and dirt.

"Exactly how did you get up there?" he'd asked, frustrated that he could not get up there without looking like the complete fool that this woman clearly was. Michael had been delayed at home, his wife taking forever to serve his lunch. When he'd finally found his way to the kitchen after hollering for water for what seemed like half an hour, we walked into the kitchen and found her holding the bottom of her dress to her face, as if she was wiping away tears.

"What's the matter?" he asked, half irritated that she seemed to be taken by something other than his needs. What could it be at this time of the day?

His wife hadn't sounded upset when she'd answered him back, but truthfully, he couldn't tell. He guessed, perhaps, that she was looking for attention, spoiling for a fight, holding back on a simple glass of water. Maybe she had a sense of what he was actually up to that afternoon. No. It couldn't be. He always needed to finish his lunch in good time because he had to walk across the railway tracks and into town for his afternoon stint. She knew how important that he was punctual at the office. Surely she understood that. Never mind that a white woman was waiting for him at the outskirts of town, just after the train tracks. It wasn't that far actually. After he'd eaten and called out for water, he'd sat there waiting and dozed off and then woken up with a start. He wiped of the drool from the side of his mouth and swore. The posho was dry on his hands and he'd have to change his shirt which now felt damp with sweat under his arms. Michael had rushed into the kitchen to wash his hands. He hoped that the white woman would still be waiting for him. He'd promised to show her the real country. Real people. And there was his wife now, with her face covered by her dress.

"What's the matter?" he'd asked, not really interested.

"I don't know," she kept saying. "I don't know where she is."

"What's going on?"

"She's not back yet. She hasn't come back."

"Who hasn't come back?" Michael asked, starting to feel really irritated. Clearly something was wrong, but he didn't have time for this. If his wife could be straightforward, then all this would be sorted in a minute and then he could leave with no drama. A woman

was waiting for him. A white woman was waiting to meet real people, interact with real people. She wasn't interested in just animals. "People too", she'd said. "Real people."

"She's not back yet." Michael's wife kept repeating with her face hidden in the hem of her dress.

"Ah!" Michael responded in consternation. He had no time for this, whatever it was. He poured himself a glass of water and downed it in what seemed like one gulp. Gwach! Gwach! Gwach! he swallowed as his Adam's apple bobbed up and down his throat.

"I'll see you later. I can't be late for work. You know that." He'd follow up later. He didn't have time for this sort of woman stuff right now.

And now Michael was at the bottom of the garbage heap watching the white woman holding a baby in her arms, her petticoat exposing the trace of her thighs as the skirt of her dress wrapped the child. Her face was glowing and her hair blew about her face. She walked down as if she was floating, not even thinking to watch her step. In front of her and behind her, in fact, all about her, the plastic bags and paper rose and fell. The vultures were gone now. In a moment she was standing next to him. Michael pulled her dress down, to cover her exposed legs and reveal a child at her breast. There it lay, the dark of his cheek in contrast to the exposed mound of her white breast and the pearl buttons that a moment ago were done up except for two at the top. The child's lips had covered the whole areaola of her breast and its cheek hollowed and relaxed as it swallowed the milk hungrily. The woman looked at the child with the same wonder that everyone about her looked at her. The baby had tight black curls on its head that trailed in a fine down along its ear, like the trace of a future beard. The baby looked healthy enough, had folds of fat beneath its little chin, and the hands and arms were fat and pudgy. The child was completely naked, and the woman pulled her dress up again to cover the child when it occurred to Michael that he knew this child. He knew this child with its eyes closed and focused on breastfeeding, enjoying it, as it always did. Michael knew how this child would sometimes turn his body into his wife's body and clutch at the top of her breast. How his wife would reach for the child's hand and let it hold her little finger. Michael knew this face. He knew this hand. He knew this reach. He knew this child with its eyes closed. Michael had kissed this cheek a million times.

Now Michael could see his wife standing by the kitchen door and murmuring something about someone not being back yet. Surely, his son was at home with his wife and young woman they'd recently hired to help in the house. Surely this was some other child. Okwera, his own son was at home. His wife's voice nagged at the back of his head. She's not back yet. The vision of his wife, standing with her face in her dress, suddenly became really disturbing. He'd dismissed her with "Ah!" and then downed a glass of water and left her right there.

"Okwera," Michael said, looking to see if the baby would turn at his voice, at his name being called. The woman said "Hallelujah Michael" naming him to make the voice in her head come true, and to name the child at the same time. Both swear that at that moment, the baby released his grip on her breast and looked—at him, Michael said; at her, she insists, with every telling.

STEPHANIE

>> GEORGE BOWERING

I have been advised that before I tell you what Stephanie did to me and maybe why she did it, I should tell you about her, describe her, I guess.

Well, I wonder whether you remember that girl from your high school class, the one with the height. I mean she's as tall as you or just about, or at least it seems as if she is, and everything she has is long. She has long arms, sort of thin but still the kind you imagine sniffing and kissing and maybe later having around you, or maybe even earlier. And similarly her legs, they are long and a bit thin, or at least from the knees up they seem to be almost as narrow as they are from the knees down. You know what I mean, eh?

Just a little bit of light, light, downy hair on the backs of her arms, such as you might not notice unless the sunlight was just right. Skin takes on a beautiful light tan in the summer, totally even, not a freckle in sight, not a scar, no marks at all, just a hardly discernible drift of faint hairs on that skin, which I know you could not feel with your sensitive fingers.

I have to admit that I have always liked long narrow arms on a woman, starting with on a girl and going on till there's probably flesh hanging off her triceps. I have noticed in the nice weather that women blessed with those long thin arms with a bit of tan to them seem to like to wear white sleeveless shirts or blouses or tops or whatever they are calling them at the time.

"What are you looking at?"

This is a girl with long thin bare arms in science class, ninth grade. I sort of knew later that she'd enjoyed having them looked at, but I was pretty dumb about such things in grade nine. I knew the valence of zinc and the principle of photosynthesis, but I didn't know much about the way girls' minds worked. I made the mistake of thinking that they were just like our minds. I am puzzled by things like that. In the last day or two I have talked with two women who have never been bothered by the fact that they don't know which way is north. I'd go nuts not knowing. Or people who see French writing on packages and aren't curious to know what it's saying. Can't imagine looking at words and not trying to read them.

I think that Stephanie knew which way was north, pretty sure she knew what blé entier is. That's not important here—we are focussing on her arms, her arms and her legs. But now I am thinking: I wonder why I started with her arms when it came to describing her. I get the idea that before I tell you what she did to me and why she did it, I ought to describe the woman. But no one ever told me to start with arms. I don't imagine that very many people in a similar situation would start with arms. Probably most people would start with the face and hair, maybe. A guy that's a tit man, as they say, might start there, but how often that happens I couldn't say. Or if a woman has gigantic ears, maybe there would be a reason to start with her ears—but then there might as easily be a reason to end there, after a kind of climactic buildup through the rest of her features.

Or, yes, what about hair? If I had been trying to capture the beauty of Stephanie's

hair in, say, 1885, I might have proceeded this way. Her face had the usual fulness of expression which is developed by a life of solitude. Where the eyes of a multitude continuously beat like waves upon a countenance they seem to wear away its mobile power; but in the still water of privacy every feeling and sentiment unfolds in visible luxuriance, to be interpreted as readily as a printed word by an intruder. In years she was no more than nineteen or twenty, but the necessity of taking thought at a too early period of life had forced the provisional curves of her childhood's face to a premature finality. Thus she had but little pretension to beauty, save in one prominent particular—her hair.

Okay, I actually started with her height before I got to the long narrow arms. Or at least the idea of height, not her height particularly, but women and girls of a certain height. When I see a short guy with a tall woman I often think what a lucky son of a gun. Well, you can just imagine. Stephanie, as I said, was just about as tall as I was, and I had to stand on tiptoe to kiss her forehead. But as well as long arms, tall girls have big feet, and I have never seen anything particularly good about big feet. I suppose that there are men who salivate over big feet on a woman, I mean speaking as a figure of speech. My buddy Willy was always in favour of muscular legs on a girl, and I myself have always taken an odd pleasure in looking at slightly too thick ankles. But big feet?

Especially in those slip-on shoes. No, sir.

Okay, Stephanie's feet were big, or let's say long, maybe long and narrow, or rather narrow for their length. Her hands were kind of big too, which I didn't mind at all. She had long long fingers, and I still imagine them holding me by the bare waist. She could also easily wrap them around my neck, which she did more than once. Sometimes I would put my palm against hers and see that her fingers were a little longer than mine. Once she tickled my palm with her long narrow forefinger, or rather its pointy fingernail, and I came really close to you know what in my shorts.

Long nose, I guess. Long thighs. Long back. Beautiful suntanned naked long back. I used to enjoy kissing her vertebrae, or rather the skin over her vertebrae, didn't matter which direction, one by one. Long tongue. Nice long neck.

I can only imagine those things now, after what has happened. I want to get to that, but from what I have heard, the story won't make any sense unless I describe Stephanie for you. If you could only see her the way I first saw her. It was my first day at the creek, you know, where it slides out lazily after passing under the Union Street bridge? There's a picnic table there on a bit of lawn over the creek. I had been thinking for some time of taking my lunch down there and eating my egg sandwich in the October sunshine. It was that same sunshine that made it hard to see Stephanie that

first time.

She was pushing her bicycle toward where I was sitting, just unwrapping the cling stuff from my tomato sandwich. The sun was behind her and so low that I couldn't even tell at first whether it was a man or a woman pushing the bicycle. She was so tall, you understand. But when she got to where I was sitting, and leaned her bicycle against one end of the picnic table, I saw that hair. It was mixed with sunshine when she pulled off her helmet and shook her head, sunshine and silk looking the way you wished the creek would look instead of just sliding along flat.

She was wearing the tightest blue jeans I had ever seen up till then. If she had had anything on under those jeans I would have seen a line made by elastic or cotton. When she sat she sat on top of the piano, next to my sandwich. I was eye level to her chest, and thankful for the warm October weather. All she had over her breasts was a confused bit of cloth, I don't know, some kind of rayon, maybe. I was not thinking clearly, and I thought that my eyes were in trouble.

I remembered pretty well exactly what my creative writing class on description said:

Tips on how to use description as a tool to add depth and texture to a piece of creative writing.

Description is a useful tool for bringing a story to life but should not be overdone. Here are some useful tips which can improve anybody's creative writing.

Ditch the Mundane

Don't use bland descriptions such as the dog was brown or her hair was dark blonde. Introduce depth and texture by saying the Labrador was the shade of melted chocolate or her hair was the colour of caramel fudge.

I don't know. I have never wanted to eat a dog or even Stephanie's hair. But these creative writing teachers know what they are talking about. A lot of them have published stories or even books.

So all right. Stephanie's hair was the colour of caramel fudge. It was also the color of caramel toffee and caramel ice cream. When she put the fingers of both hands in it and sprayed them apart, her hair seemed to fling light from itself, a kind of caramel light. Or more like butterscotch light. Or are they the same thing? That's one of those things I have always wondered. Like groin and crotch. Are they the same thing? When I was reading sports magazines as a kid I would find out that Kyle Rote or Hal Newhouser or someone had a groin injury, a pulled groin or something, and I didn't know where your groin is. I figured it must be that connection between your shoulder and your neck. Mine was often sore, and in fact it's sore right now.

I just looked back and saw that I have her sitting on the piano. I must have meant the park bench, because that's where I was at the time. I could easily go back and change that, but I kind of like the piano idea. It was a gleaming black baby grand piano, rubbed at the corners so that a kind of warm brown showed through. The brown of a dog. I was sitting on the piano bench, my short fingers spread out on the

keys. She was sitting on the piano, her long naked legs crossed, her diaphanous skirt hiked so high that my heart skipped a beat, and so did my short fingers, turning the tune, "They Call it Stormy Monday" it was, into a kind of rebop exercise.

She laughed the husky way she had of laughing, which was always a surprise, because her speaking voice was gentle and pretty high pitched. I guess she sounded a little like Marilyn Monroe, but without the determined ditzy colouring. So now she laughed without constraint or exaggeration at my awkwardness on the keys. I could have stopped and dramatically put the cover down, but I played instead, my heart beating as if it could get out of its cage. I played another lovely standard, I don't recall which, but I will bet that it was "Just the Way You Look Tonight." I had Helen Forrest in my mind's ear, but Stephanie's long naked legs in my body's eyes. I have hardly ever in my life wanted to do something more than I wanted to put my hand on a long whitish thigh right then. But you know me—I did no such thing.

I didn't know how to stop this, but she took hold of the situation, bouncing down off the piano and pushing her bicycle up the grass slope to Union Street. Those were the tightest jeans I had ever seen up till then, which was the mid-eighties, if you think that is relevant. I know, I know, relevant to what, m'sieur.

Those jeans were tight as the tissue wrapped around a human heart. That sounds good. And we don't ask whether it is right, because it is a simile, which we make in order to "cut through logic into the core of the experience". Her stretch denim-clad legs were as long as the distance between your heart and your heart's aim. Maybe that's a conceit. I have never been able exactly to figure out what a conceit is. I think it is a kind of push-the-limit simile. Well, I am not supposed to be talking or rather writing about what I am writing, but rather to prepare you to understand what it meant when Stephanie did what she did to me.

She was so far away from me now as I put all my lunch garbage together, but I can tell you—her eyes were as green as the floor of the forest east of Massett on the north shore of Haida Gwaii. People always come back from Haida Gwaii and tell you what a magical place it is, and never give you any real description of the place. The fog is spectral, the moss is magical, and so on. Her breasts moving loosely inside whatever that silky stuff was were like the promises your parents always made when they were urging you not to grow up so fast.

I'm no fool. I know that similies are like any other lies—fun to believe but suspicionable. I also know that anybody's description of anyone or anything is just like that, just one angle. I decided to ask other people how they would describe Stephanie.

"Generous. A very generous person in her own special way," said her friend April. She looked thoughtful while she was saying it.

"I'd say voluptuous is not too strong a word," said Polly Simpson, a woman who just came to town a year ago but made friends with Stephanie in no time. "Yes, I have never said that about anyone before, but I have to say Stephanie is voluptuous. In a

good way."

"The first word I would come up with would be haughty," said Dana Simpson, Polly's little sister. "Something like haughty."

"Cold and unapproachable." Those are the words of Stephanie's kid brother David. David is twelve years younger than his sister. He was, we all figured, one of those accidents, a kid born long after the family seemed complete.

"Very courteous. Well-spoken. I'd say polite and caring." So said Michael Venables, her film studies professor at Langara College.

"Kind of disturbing," offered Marlene Simpson, Polly and Dana's mother. "I always felt a little creeped when she was over here with the girls."

I asked about ten other people, and I always got the same thing—abstract words. Sometimes contradictory ones, as you see, but always abstract. I don't know why it is that when you ask someone to describe someone they always come up with abstract words. Amazing. Tolerant. Awesome. Beautiful. Thoughtful. If the person you were asking about had a 44-inch bosom, they would say friendly or cheerful or stingy.

So abstract words don't seem to do the trick, the trick being to describe someone to someone else. And similies don't really do it, either. So what will do it? I go back to those simple things. Stephanie has long thin arms. Her teeth are closer to white than to yellow. Her hair is usually a half-tamed brownish blondish pile on her head and shoulders. Her chest moves around when she walks in high heels, shoes I believe to be a terrible torture for women but which push a woman's thighs forward and make her chest waggle. In theory I am against them.

But I saw Stephanie barefoot more often than I saw her in high heels. And thank goodness, because when she was barefoot she was a tad shorter than I am. Not that this mattered, considering what she did to me. Last winter her feet were tanned until late February. My own feet were tanned till late December in a pattern that resembled my favourite Merrill sandals.

Actually, with all that stuff about the bench that was a piano for a while, Stephanie sitting on it with long legs and later walking away—with all that stuff I was slipping into, I don't know, narrative, too soon, because I am supposed to be establishing something by describing my central character. Okay, in real life she is just Stephanie, the woman I love, or rather loved, I should say. When I come to telling you about her, she gets to be a central character. According to the creative writing teachers, you give your central character a lot more description than you give to the other characters. She's a round character, someone said, as opposed to flat characters. Like 3D, I suppose.

Central. If you stop and think about it, that seems like a funny word, central. Like everything that happens happens on all sides of her. Now, if the purpose of describing her is to prepare us for understanding what she did, does it make sense saying that she did stuff to and about stuff on all sides of her? Do you see what I am getting at? Or does it matter? I could just jump ahead. See that? Ahead, not in all directions. I could

just jump ahead and tell you what she said when she picked up the telephone and called that auctioneer. Maybe I should just sort of hint at things like that while I am trying to fix Stephanie in your imagination.

Oh, there's a phrase. Fix Stephanie. We will verb that noun. Okay, I'm sorry.

We both used to sweat like horses when we made love. I could feel the sweat in my hair and the small of my back, but it was Stephanie's sweat that I loved. By the time we got it going she was shining all over. I would say glistening but that sounds like a word you'd expect too easily. I looked up at her face and the roots of her hair, that glow I wanted to consume. I saw the light on her perfect breasts and knew that nowhere in the world would I ever see anything so lovely. I have seen the sun rise on Bora Bora. I have looked at light coming through the Hope Diamond. I have seen the grace of Donatello's hand in the wood of his Magdalena. Wonderful. The sweat on Stephanie's breasts, or should I say Stephanie's breasts with her sweat on them, in the light that came on a December morning through our bedroom window.

And then to look and see the sweat on her thigh, to feel the sweat drip from her breast to land on mine. I may be trying to describe this person to make her a character, but I can't describe Stephanie sitting on me, covered with her sweat and maybe some of mine.

I love that shine. I can't help it. I loved it when Stephanie came home from her run along the beach and up our street. She'd come in breathing hard and glimmering. I had to follow her into the bathroom, and I didn't care whether I got asked into the shower with her, as long as I got to see that sweat on her skin. She'd be all wet coming out of the shower, too, of course, and while that was pretty nice, as you might imagine, it was a far cry from Stephanie and her sweat.

Afterward, in the king-size bed Stephanie would lie on her back, her arms flung out and her feet far apart, and I would get an erection again just looking at her. The bed would be shining too. It was made of beautiful brown wood with wide panels at the head and foot. These I would polish just about every day. I kept my chamois and the tub of furniture wax in the en suite, and most days after I had brushed my teeth and combed my hair I would take rag and wax and chamois to the lovely cool wood for a while.

You know when that bed looked really lovely? When it was dark outside the window and there were four or five candles burning in the bedroom, and this was terrific even before Stephanie came up to bed. Even if she didn't, as a matter of fact. The soft light that came off the wood could not have been created if it were not for the deliciousness of the wood. If I was alone and naked in that candlelight I wouldn't really have an erection, but I would feel a stirring, that's for sure.

It wasn't just the bed, either. I used lemon stuff from a spray can on the dining room table, next to the bed maybe my favourite piece of furniture. It was black in places, brown in other places, carved shapes in the top, not images but patterns, something Japanese, or maybe Korean. I made love with Stephanie on top of that

table just once. She was gorgeous in her sweat and I dined on her with the scent of lemons all over. But after she went up to her room to work, I got out the cloth and wiped that table dry and then I polished it till you could have seen it shining from across the street.

And there was the neat old Oriental chest of drawers. Oh, we kept an odd assortment of things in those many little drawers. It stood about as tall as Stephanie or me, and it had two sets of little drawers, about ten on each side. Batteries, candles, scotch tape, business cards, a couple of Oriental fans. I'll bet I wouldn't be able to remember all the things we kept there if you gave me all afternoon. But stuff in a little drawer can accumulate dust and grime and so on. So just about every day I would empty one or two of the little drawers and wipe the scissors clean if that's what was in there, make sure all the candles were facing the same way.

Then I'd get a soft rag I used to use for cleaning my eyeglasses, and get at the wood on the inside of those little drawers. Do the corners with a Q-tip. Then a bit of spray polishing. I always felt good when I had refilled the drawer and shoved it into place. Every few days I would polish the exterior wood. The chest of drawers stood in the corner of the dining room, with a rich shiny wooden Buddha on a piece of lace on top of it. The glow off the nice old Oriental wood—if this chest of drawers had been a person I would have kissed it then. Well, I did once or twice.

So I miss those things. Where has it gone, the visionary gleam? Didn't someone say that? I am not claiming that a nice clean polished table or whatever is an act of poetry. The question is: what about that act of Stephanie's? Was that poetry? I think it might have been, at least according to her. Poetic justice, maybe? I'm getting silly here. But listen: if what she did to me is poetry, I will stick with prose. As soon as I can do it, I am going to tell the real story, but as I was taught, I have to start by giving you Stephanie's character. As soon as I can get calmed down a little, I will describe that beautiful rancorous woman.

TWO STORIES

>> DONATO MANCINI

SHORT POTATO

Ok, this kid's about 15 so you know he's getting the hormones on, the hormones are really starting to howl and then at last it's summer and school's out so when he thinks of the beach and all that tan flesh like a buffet he can barely keep his beer tent down. So he starts going to the beach every day, to learn the tricks. He's being all "Here I go, ladies!" with winks, but his bait's no good—he's a scrawny kid—then after only a few days you know he's gasping.

He asks a friend: "I want to catch chicks' attention, I want to bag chicks at the beach for real." His friend—this guy's a bit older—is like "No problem J_____ all you gotta do is take a nice big russet potato see and put it in your shorts and then go walking along. The babes'll wanna gnosh that starchy thing, brother, carbs or not."

And this seems such good advice to the kid he's up all night. Next day he does what his friend said: goes down to the steamy beach but now when he's changing in the hut after peeling off his Reese's Pieces T he slips a long potato into his trunks, adjusts it so it sits right - though he has to guess how it looks he has no mirror - and confident goes peacocking along the hot sand, his whole aroma: "Come and get it!"

They pay attention alright but not in the right way. The bikinis the tits the legs the skin the thighs the bare feet the knees the hair, all are pointing at him not drooling, they're laughing mocking. Obviously he's mortified, obviously he feels like a salted slug. Eager weenie shrivels to the size of an almond Cheerio.

So he goes back to the friend angry sort of but mostly just cut down. "Man I did the potato trick like you said, they totally laughed their guts out." The older guy thinks about it for a sec over his dealcoholised Löwenbräu. "Oh you bonehead," he says. "Put the potato in the *front* of your shorts."

TRIBUTE TO A REMARKABLE CAT

Yukon Cornelius, or Yukon, better known as "Yukie", my beloved cat, you left this world for the Rainbow Bridge on Friday afternoon.

You were the lost kitten I rescued from the old mansion on Rue Trébanier when I was just a pup myself. I couldn't resist your sad eyes when I found you, pleading with me to give you a little love. I carefully carried you, your tiny head sticking out of my jacket, back to our house. You were loaded with fleas that already started to chew on me by the time I got you to safety.

Still holding you, I cleared the kitchen sink and got a couple bath towels, I spread one on the counter. After making sure the water wasn't too warm, I put you under the stream and poured blue dish soap all over your matted black fur to lather you up, and rubbed it in good. You didn't fight or cry or anything. When I rinsed you off you went limp as a blob in my hands.

I thought, "Oh my god, I killed this poor little thing, this tiny little kitty." I gently placed you on the towel and used the other one to carefully rub you dry, whispering, "Come on, kitty, don't die on me. Please don't die."

After what seemed like an eternity your eyes trembled open and you said "mmrrgrhg". I hugged you to me, so glad you were alive I almost kissed you to death. You slept on my yellow bean bag chair that first night (you peed in it too, Yukie, but I forgave you). You looked so perfect in a little ball, clean and fast asleep. For nights after that you slept in funny places like the bathtub while you were trying to find your perfect spot. When you got big enough you slept in the bed with me.

It took me a few months to get a name for you. I didn't want to give you a boring one like Blackie or Robber, or a Frenchie one like Maxou. For a long time I changed your name every day – Softball, Orphelin, Jungle Bum – none of them seemed right. (It must have been confusing for you Yukie, I'm sorry about that). In December, we were watching the great cartoon "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer" together, when Yukon Cornelius, one of the most important characters, fell down in the snow and gave such a big YOOOHOOOO, that I laughed and hugged you. You'd grown so much stronger since I found you, getting healthy on warm strawberry milk and mushy cat food, but you were still so clumsy. I knew that would be your name: Yukon Cornelius, eventually shortened to Yukon. When I found out later in life that you were a girl it was too late, so I started calling you "Yukie".

The house became your paradise. On some days you'd follow me everywhere. You would

wait outside the shower until I finished, then get in for a quick drink of fresh water, or lick some straight off my ankle. When I got older and moved to my own place, you'd do it to my girlfriends too, Shawna especially. And she was ticklish so she'd laugh and laugh and laugh. You also tried to sleep with us under the covers and snuggle down behind my back. But because Shawna was allergic, I had, against my heart's wish, to say "No".

In the mornings, when it was time to get up, you'd give me a gentle paw on the cheek. If that didn't work, a little bite to the end of the nose. Sometimes you'd sit on the back of the sofa while Shawna and me were watching some TV and nuzzle your head into the back of my neck.

You were there for me when the hard times came, too, Yukie. I remember the musky smell of your fur as I buried my nose in your belly when I cried. I remember you washing away my tears with your tongue.

O Yukie. Picking up your cat hair before was a chore, now I break down whenever I see any of it.

As you entered your senior years, you got into "snuzzing". I'd give you a vigorous rubbing up and down your bony spine, and you'd bonk your nose into my eye socket repeatedly, in affectionate thanks. After loosing a few teeth, you tended to drool when we snuzzed, but I didn't mind. That's what friends are for. You were a goofy but loveable kitty, an angel and a klutz.

One day you sneezed and some blood came out.

The vet told me you had a tumour or a cyst near your brain. She could not operate on it, but she said you might live for many more years. After that, you began to sleep more and you ate more, and made a bee line straight to my lap when I came home after work. Usually I forgot you had anything wrong. There were days when you would seem disoriented and sometimes your bum would run, but your pleasure in life outshone.

Early last week you really started to go. Your favourite food in your life's twilight was balogna. You just adored balogna! But suddenly you didn't want to eat any more, not even the best balogna. I insisted, I even tried to feed you little pieces from the ends of my fingers. Three days before you went away forever, you finally ate some strips I left in your bowl.

Over the next couple of days you got worse and worse. You started walking in circles for no reason. A lot of blood came out of your nose, leaving some spots on the carpet that I can't get out. By Friday morning you were staggering and lurching, and I noticed your

right eye had collapsed, so I called-in sick to work. I knew it was the end.

Friday afternoon. You managed to walk to the bathroom to do your kitty business, I left you to your privacy. But you didn't come back for long while, and I found you lying where you had fallen in your litter box. You were too weak to get back up, and "mrrgghrrmr-ed" pathetically. Your other eye was collapsed too, you were jerking your left paw. I took it in my hand to comfort you.

Just after 3:00 p.m, I felt your spirit pass out of your body.

I'm sorry you died soggy, Yukie, I could not stop the tears from my eyes without the rough napkin of your tongue to wipe them away. When I cleared your place today I found those three strips of balogna hidden under your placemat. I guess you hated to think I was worrying about you.

Jon Bon Jovi probably didn't think of a cat when wrote "Thank you for loving me", but it is so fitting. Although most cats get nine lives, you went for eighteen. I thought I was loosing you on the day I brought you home, but you let me know you were a fighter and a lover and more than anything a survivor. You lived for three fulfilled years with your tumour or cyst and you didn't complain once. I feel so hollow without you.

I just hope you are somewhere good now, roaming the grassy hills, or basking by a heavenly fireplace, warming your bones.

Forever yours,
Jessie

MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE

>> RON SAKOLSKY

I didn't recognize her at first. Blue hair, sure, but her face seemed starker, more gaunt, and she looked like she hadn't had a good meal in days. I poured the boiling water into the coffee press, and bid her sit down at the kitchen table.

"So what's up? You wanted to see me. Your call sounded urgent."

She seemed pretty distraught. I poured us some coffee and waited for her reply.

"No, not urgent really, it's just that… that, I think I'm being followed.

"Followed? Were you followed over here?"

It had been a little over a month since Fran and I had crossed paths at the pirate radio station benefit. She was new in town. We had only had a brief conversation afterwards, but we'd agreed to keep in touch and exchanged contact info.

"I think that I gave them the slip," she replied with a nervous cough.

"But who's following you?," I asked, now noticing the worn lines under her eyes that hadn't been there when last we had met. It looked like she hadn't managed to get much sleep in quite awhile.

"That developer and his goons," she stammered.

"Whoa, back up a minute here, what developer?"

"You know, that guy Lane Bradson."

"Bradson, but isn't he supposed to be the good guy, the green developer that the newspapers are always praising as a fuckin' saint? You know, Mr. Sustainability."

"Yeah, that's the guy, except that he isn't such a saint."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I found out some shit about him that's pretty damaging, and he knows that I could blow his whole gig here in the Valley if it ever gets out."

"It must be pretty juicy. How did he find out that you've got the goods on him?"

"It's my own fault, Josh, I didn't realize that he was SUCH a creep. I told him what I'd discovered and thought he'd actually do something about it before it was too late. I thought that maybe he just didn't realize how ruthless his business partners were being at the construction site. I guess I was pretty naïve. There's such big bucks riding on this development deal."

"C'mon, Fran, don't be so hard on yourself. It's not your fault. You were just giving him the benefit of the doubt."

"Josh, there's an indigenous burial ground right where his damn sustainable development site is located. He knows about it, but he's not telling anyone."

"That land he's developing holds an attraction for me that is about more than just its beautiful setting in the mountains. I knew from the first time I went there that it was a place of deep spiritual energy. I feel so lucky to have experienced it even if only for a couple of visits. I went up there a few days ago to commune with the place one final time, and to do some photo documentation, before it was all developed out of existence. To my surprise, the excavation had already begun and I saw lots of evidence of previous Native habitation and lots of ancestral artifacts that had been partly unearthed just laying there in a big pile where the bulldozer had unceremoniously dumped them."

"I couldn't sleep all night. Then I went back the next day at dusk and it was all gone. Not only that, but the ground where the pile had been was all covered with fresh earth and smoothed over. It was as if I had imagined it all. If I hadn't taken some pictures the day before, I would have thought I had lost my mind. Josh, he's seen the pictures. Now he wants them; he wants them really bad."

"Holy shit, what an asshole," was all I could muster. I took a deep breath, looked down at my coffee and realized that I had been so engrossed in Fran's story that I hadn't taken a sip. I now put the cup to my lips, but the java was lukewarm.

"And that's not all Josh, he's a total imposter. He talks so green in public, but the only green that he really loves in his heart of hearts is the color of money. You know what he said to me?"

"No, what?"

"He said that he'd buy the pictures from me, and then he gave me a conspiratorial little wink as if that's what my game had been all along. He made it clear that he'd take care of me if I kept my mouth shut. He leveled with me as one conspirator to another. 'Just play ball with me,' he said, 'and you'll be sitting pretty Francine. We both know that all this sustainability stuff is just a ploy to get the public to accept more development as inevitable. So I always make sure to include a bit of green-tinted window dressing with every project. Hey, you can have the contract to take the photos for our upcoming "listening to the land" sales brochure if you want since it's obvious that you really have a feel for this particular piece of real estate."

"Before I could say, no way, he continued without a pause, 'I'll keep you in mind as a photographer on future development projects too. Do you do website design? Let's face it, Francine, sometimes we just have to act pragmatically and do things that the public wouldn't approve of if they knew what we were up to. They don't really want to know anyway. So I just spin it with a sustainability label. Sure some might call it greenwashing, but John Q Citizen just wants to feel psychologically okay about development. He wants to believe that we can continue to increase the amount of development by leaps and bounds as long as we're smart about growth, and maybe the community can even get a few green amenities out of the deal. That's what it's all about really—self-deception. It's a classic case of mass denial. We developers are only doing what they want us to do. Are you with me on this Francine?' he said with a cynical smile.'"

"When I told him that I needed some time to think it over, his smile quickly changed to a frown. Then, he gave me a suspicious look, like maybe he had misread me, and now knew that I saw right through him; that I wasn't buying his line. 'Alright, just call me in the morning,' he said as nonchalantly as he could manage under the circumstances.'"

"Of course, I never called. Ever since, I've been followed everywhere I go. Then, last night when I came home after work, I saw that my files had been ransacked and left in a shambles on the floor as a visible warning of what would happen to me if I didn't

cooperate."

"So, he's playing hardball now. Did he get the pictures," I queried.

"No, I have them in a nice safe place where he'll never find them. I'm a little nervous about staying alone at my house though. Can I sleep here tonight on the living room couch, Josh? I'm really in need of a good night's sleep right now.

"Sure, Fran, mi casa es su casa."

After Fran went to bed, I mulled over all that she had said in my mind for a couple of hours until my reverie was abruptly disturbed by the sharp sound of shattering glass as a brick came flying through the living room window carrying a note with my name on it that read, "You're next, sucker!"

Upon hearing the loud crash, Fran was awakened only a few short hours after she had finally fallen asleep. Wide awake now, she let out a scream as a piece of flying glass rushed by her head with an ominous hiss.

"Josh, I'm so sorry that I got you mixed up in this mess. Really!," she said looking visibly shaken.

I gazed at Fran intently, feeling deep respect and a growing affection for her. Angry as hell, I shouted defiantly to no one in particular, We're gonna fight those bastards! They're gonna be sorry they ever fucked with us! Then, as the gravity of the situation kicked in fully, anxiety surfaced along with the rage. Involuntarily, we both just broke down under the stress of the evening's events, cried together, and then rocked ourselves to sleep in each other's arms. We awoke at dawn, still curled up together, squinting tentatively at one another in the jagged light of the sun coming through the broken window pane.

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It was shortly after that night that Fran and I went to jail for a 15 year stretch for burning down old Bradson's ski resort. It was during the period that they called the Green Scare. The prosecutor had said that we were ecoterrorists in court even though no one got hurt. Of course, it was Bradson and his corporate buddies who were the real terrorists. It was those guys whose wings should have been clipped, not ours. The government just wanted to make an example out of people like us in order to prevent others from taking direct action against the ravages of development, but it didn't work. These days development and mining operations are under widespread attack everywhere.

Funny thing, with climate change and all, we haven't had any snow on that mountain in years. Guess that jerk Bradson never had a chance with his ski slope.

Laughing to myself, I started to fix dinner. Frannie would soon be returning home from her stint at the community garden, no doubt famished as usual.

TRAGIC

(EXCERPT FROM NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS)

>> SUZETTE MAYR

The important thing about five-year-olds is that they don't notice if Colette's hungover or wearing the same clothes she wore yesterday because she fucked her head off all night in the back of Bowser's Bar and Beanery or ended up on a downer from the coke she scored on sale from the school janitor, and why let a sale go to waste? As long as she draws with coloured chalk on the board, and the Elmers glue in the 25 bottles isn't too dried out for gluing uncooked macaroni noodles onto construction paper, five-year-olds think she's tutti frutti just fine cutey.

So what if this morning she had a little vomit crusted in the ends of her hair. She could see it in the floor-to-ceiling mirror on the wall at the far end of the room when she dumped her coat in its proper pile behind Roland the hamster's cage, redolent with the smell of cedar chips and Roland pee. All she had to say was,—Here kiddos, here's some crayons, cut up this construction paper into your favourite part of the human body. Toes, knees, eyeballs, pinky finger. Whatever body part you want. Then glue these cotton balls onto your body part for special effect.

- Special effect, squeak the kids in almost-unison. Oh she loves the hell outta them.

The little kids turning red in the face from clicking the blunt scissors open, closed, open, closed as the dull blades chewed the paper, the cotton balls sticking to their wet little paws, and furry masticating jaws crunching dry macaronis.

It's easy for her to just turn her back, peek into her scallop-shaped mirror, and pinch all those vomit crusts out one at a time. Easy peasy. The antique sterling silver mirror with its seed pearl trim a gift from her ex-husband—Colette stole it from his mother's jewelry case. His fucking fossil mother so rich she wouldn't miss a lil' ol' mirror, antique or not, amidst all the pearl chokers and diamond brooches in the shapes of cats.

– Spencer, she barks at a little boy in green and orange tartan pants, spikes of orange hair to match (fashion victim!) who is bouncing on his knees, dropping and rolling in time to some fucking inner rap beat—don't let Paloma pick your nose, please. Paloma, you're not allowed to pick Spencer's nose. No one is allowed to pick anyone's nose but their own.

– Not Aunty Brenda? asks Paloma.

– Well your Aunty Brenda. Sure.

– Aunty Brenda digs out my ears with her fingernails. She has the longest fingernails in the world. Longer than daddy's pecker. Mommy says—

– Does she. That's great for Aunty Brenda.

Colette pulls at the tip of her own nose, not picking it exactly, just checking for crusts, the inside still a little bit numb from last night's party. The night before bursting into this morning. She pinches her nose. She fiddles.

– Does your nose hurt? asks Cassidy.

– It's really long, your nose, says Paloma.

– You have a goober, says Thelma.

Colette will be 51-years-old the day after tomorrow. Is it true your nose grows when you're old? She checks sideways in the mirror. She doesn't look a day over 30. 32 tops! Genes from her mother's side. She is aging like a black woman. Thank god.

Cosmopolitan says 50 is the new 30. 30 the new 20. The 20-year-olds she works with, those bitches Alyssa, Aviva, and Sidra, they're in their 20s but they are as exciting as bridge-playing retirees in their 90s, Alyssa with her piddly engagement ring, diamond no bigger than the pinhead she is, Aviva with her 5-year anniversary trash zirconia ring, Sidra with her gut full of fetus, pushing her tumour stomach around the lunchroom—donate for the bridal shower; the baby shower; a present for Aviva's lardy, grimalkin baby Lorelai. All bitches. All of them. Bitches and their spawn.

With five-year-olds, Colette can pick up a book, any book, Dumpy La Rue, Junk-Pile Jennifer, The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales and as long as her voice is gooey with expression, as long as she makes it rumble, and tinkle and screech five-year-olds love the hell out of her. Even though she was so busy licking sea salt and tequila shots off the chest of a topless transman last night she forgot to buy pipe cleaners for the kids' stick-men project today.

– Scooch your cooches into your proper squares, she says,—and I'll read you kiddos a story.

The bobbling, 5-year-old's oversized heads, all shiny and cleaned of birth scum. The kids plunk their little asses down at Colette's feet, each bum in a different coloured square on the carpet, Spencer in his demented hey-watch-me pants on purple, Paloma with her corn rows and pulling her skirt over her head squatting down on fuchsia. Cassidy giggling into his fists as he twists onto turquoise. Round Thelma sprawled at the back, feet climbing against the bookcase on no square at all. Thumb nudging her mouth. Paloma's finger nudging her nose. Perfect. Colette doesn't mind kids who can walk. Can talk.

She can pick up a book, any old book, how about this battered old one here, and before she begins to read she tells the kinds how much she likes boats, she is one day going to arrange to steal her dentist ex-husband's boat and sail away on a joy ride south to Latin America, the Caribbean—Some boats are called yachts, she tells the little kids in a deep, scary voice,—Luxury crafts smaller than 40 feet are more commonly called –, she shoots her voice up high as Tinkerbell,—cabin cruisers!

– Yot! hollers Spencer, stop-drop-and-rolling.—Yot! Snot! Snot yot! Yot snot!

– A mega yacht, she screeches over Spencer who has been arrested midroll by what looks like a bedbug crawling out from under the edge of the coloured carpet,—refers to any yacht above 100 feet and a super yacht refers to any yacht over 200 feet!

– 200 feet! shout the kids.

– But I only gots two feets, whines Paloma.

– But all together we have 44 feet, says Colette.—That's almost 200, right?

She can tell the kids are buying the boat story and it isn't a story at all—no plot, no dialogue, just a character named Yot—but they do give a rat's ass because they're hanging on every word. She opens the book and reads out loud in her best poopy-sounding voice,—Roll a ball of dung / Any kind of poo will do / Baby beetle bed.

– Any kind of poo will do! giggle and chortle the kids, Thelma kicking her heels against the shelf in rhythm.

Already two of them are stroking her legs; combing their bitty fingernails, catching the smooth planes of her nylons, and her voice magic like a dime-bag of pot. Cassidy with a thumb in his ear, his other hand in his pants. Paloma trying to pick Thelma's nose. Spencer has stopped his gymnastics, has pushed his way to the front, caressing the pointy toe of her high-heeled Jimmy Choo shoe with his nose-picking finger.

Kids she doesn't mind. It's babies she loathes. It's the adults she works with she detests. Even now after 20 some years of teaching five-year-olds, she can't stand all the cow teachers she works with and their mooing mouthfarts about children, grandchildren, cottage repairs, 10th anniversary dinners with their pablumy husbands whom they fuck because they have to, having signed a wifely contract. And now there's a new crop of baby lampreys sprung up, so young they still have gills, yammering on about yet another fucking baby shower, the 20-year-old Woman of the Hour in the teacher's lounge pulling up her tenty maternity blouse with her tiny penis fingers and scratching her protruding naked freak belly with its parasite poking out a foot or a ginormous head—Can't you see I'm trying to eat! Colette might say, her vitamin pills halfway up to her mouth, and the room will fall silent, the women staring. Her waking nightmare a baby shower where she's invited—they stopped inviting her to baby-related events a long time ago—where the baby actually shows up, another pink and blue-eyed gonad ball squinching its bow-shaped, obscene little mouth while it sucks at its giant slug-mummy's tit.

Her job brims with women who whine and grab like the children they teach. 5-year-olds, 7-year-olds, 10-year-olds in the bodies of 20-30-40-75 year olds, all thrown together in a bubbling cauldron of elementary school bitches. Like Eloise, Grade 6 teacher who's running a losing white woman's race with old age, her face spackled with peach foundation stucco.

Eloise who used to be Colette's friend until she became an Assistant Principal, sailing her big ass covered in cashmere late again for a meeting, gunning right by the empty chair beside Colette and seating herself as geometrically far away as possible on the other side of the table. Eloise's ass is so big it looks like a zeppelin flew up her asshole and got confused. Eloise's ass so big it almost matches her swelled head, ego the size of Toronto, New York, Tokyo. Eloise sitting on her

green square, on the farthest edge of the carpet away from Colette as possible. Eloise in her pink, ruffly coat, face baleful as a peony, smelling strong as one. Toilet water, Colette likes to refer to Eloise's perfume. Ruffles shimmying up the front, blooming up the sleeves into a final ruffle collar clutching at Eloise's saggy old douche-bag face.

Back when they were friends, before Colette clued in she isn't allowed an opinion independent of Eloise, Eloise gave Colette a tube of L'Oreal Revitalift Eye Anti-wrinkle & Firming Cream as part of a Christmas gift. Colette, fifteen years Eloise's junior.

– Just joking, said Eloise, back when she was still speaking to Collette. Back before Colette burst out at one meeting in Eloise's classroom decorated with mangled construction paper turkeys and blobs vaguely shaped like autumn leaves, Colette standing, her face leaned into Eloise's like a frothing junkyard dog's,—Eloise?

– What, Colette? Eloise's second chin gleaming.

– Shut your Venus Fly Trap.

Which was what every other cow in the room was thinking, their tails swishing to bat away the flies.

Eloise blanching, her face contorting into Munch's Scream,—You wouldn't even have this job if it wasn't for me! she howled.

– Which you've been reminding me of for the past twenty-six years! bellowed Colette.

– Anorexic freak!

– I fuck your husband!

– You wish with your bony ass!

– Ladies! shrieked the principal, her plastic earrings clacking.

After that outburst, Colette snorted a line of coke in a bathroom cubicle while her drug-dealer janitor stood watch, mopping the same square of parquet in front of the bathroom over and over again, Colette's brain hosting another gorgeous burst of cocaine insomniac orgasm gorgeousity, and at lunch time in the Kingsway Motel down the street she fucked Eloise's accountant of a husband Sean with a genetically modified carrot up his ass. They had 20 minutes. She pulled the carrot from her purse and fucked her contempt for Eloise into Eloise's husband's splotchy ass in the beige little room with the mauve splotched drapes, the inside of the ice bucket dusty, the mirrored closet door angled ajar so she could watch the whole shebang in a play by play.

Colette rode Eloise's bland little Sean hard on the squeaky motel bed. She liked him better when he had a beard—his naked little face without a chin, crumbled with exertion, with manic determination. Like a fetus squishing down the birth canal. Like an embryo, eyelids wrinkled tight, mouth squashed in an O.

Sean a drab little chartered accountant who likes to match his tie to whatever concoction his wife is wearing. Eloise a giant banana: Sean in a yellow tie. Eloise a clump of mould spotting a wedge of cheese: green and orange polka dot tie. Colette's the best thing that's happened to Sean. He tells her, tells her about Eloise's crying jags, how she'll put her favourite song on the stereo –

– What song? asks Colette, slapping his sloppy naked pancake bum once, twice, the skin blasting red with her palm print, and Colette salting away this piece of information for future use.

– 'Unloved', Sean pants.—Jann Arden. She puts it on the stereo and then works herself up until she's blithering so hard she gets the hiccups.

In the old days, Sean gasps to Colette, he would stay with Eloise, hiding out inside the pantry, resting against the shelves Eloise packed full of canned peaches and cherries and beets and sour pickles, handing her handfuls of Kleenex, carrying the soggy pile to the trash. Now he just yanks out the vacuum cleaner and trots after it into distant corners. Mowing the dirt on the stairs leading to the third floor.

– You like to vacuum? Colette sneers. Multiple orgasms bring out the worst in her.

Sean fingers his spent penis.—It cost $600. We've got to get our money's worth.

– Oh, a Dyson.

– Huh, Sean grunts.

– A Dyson vacuum.

She pulls out the carrot partway.

– Yeah, Sean gasps.

– You don't even know what the fuck that is, do you? Do you? You spoiled, entitled husband. Go fuck a rock, says Colette, yanking out the carrot and flinging it onto the pile of bedspread.—Go fuck your wife.

– Colette! moans Sean, flipping over.—Kiss me. His penis curled like a fiddlehead.

–I don't kiss a mouth that's kissed Eloise. I'd sooner kiss a dog's arse.

– You're making me crazy.

– Yeah, she says, and bouncing to standing on the bed, kicks him the ribs with her pedicured toes. He sighs. Rolls on to his stomach and starts to pant.

– Get back to work, she says.

Tomorrow, she'll read the kids the story about the carrot chased by a rolling cabbage. These kids. The only people who truly understand her.

SINGLED

>> CARELLIN BROOKS

I have something to tell you, he said.

We sat on the couch. It was the second time. The first time hadn't worked out. We'd parted. There had been a quarrel, then and afterwards, about whose fault exactly. That there was always a quarrel, that such quarrels were endemic and immutable, no consolation. Not to me anyway, nor I suspected to him. Not that I pretend to know his mind, not now.

I'd waited six months, after that first time. Six months off and a week back on. In the interval I had begun to meet a lot of them like me. This was a choice, I recognized, like despair.

I found them by advertising. We met cold, strangers. Even without any prior communication I would have known. There were certain indelible signs. We did things automatically, almost by instinct. Holding out a hand for caution, arrest, in stead. Lifting up our shirts without looking. Uh-huh, we'd say abstracted, listening vainly for the thread of another conversation. The tightening of our lips, brief but communicative, whenever we mentioned him. The faint aura of bitterness that clung to us.

Uh-huh, I said, as if I knew what was coming. And my offspring came to me and, sensing my distraction, set up the usual clamour to be fed. I lifted him into my lap and listened as I unbuttoned my shirt.

I've been seeing someone. Since May. It's serious. At least I hope so.

Why didn't you tell me?

I didn't have time.

I waited.

Okay. I wanted to be sure. About how I felt about you.

And now you're sure.

That's right. I'm sure. We stared at each other, strangers, only my son's noisy suckling between us.

When he was sated, I stood up. Saw him out. This time, I vowed, would be the last.

We burned, one and all, to tell our stories. How he had left. What he had left behind. What he had done that was so intolerable that we were glad to be shot of him. The stupor into which he smoked himself each day. The criminal negligence with which he left the door open in the daytime. His willful ignorance, in sum, of consequences. He was a good man, we'd say, but. The "but" required some explanation, paragraphs of it that we delivered breathless. We desired, you see, to explain precisely what we'd done to try and fix it, and why we decided it was past fixing, and we knew from experience that we didn't have much time. Interruption a given. We wanted absolution. Someone else, a stranger but (stacking the deck) one like us, to say we had done right. Given all we could. All anyone could be expected to give.

I met a lot of them in restaurants. At home someone had to forage for meals and

clear the scattered crumbs afterward and that someone was always us. Restaurants offered the promise, however illusory, of relief. Certainly if our offspring made a mess, which they did, we might have to clean it up, but if we merely stood and scolded them in dreary voices and made half-hearted attempts at containment the staff might take pity on us, do it themselves. There were even waitresses who took babies on their rounds, picking them up without a word, bringing them walkabout the circumference of the room. Our favourite waitresses.

There was trouble at home. Our children were to blame. They threw things all over the floor and we either ignored the mess and had to clean it up later, after they went to bed, or we made them do it themselves, like the books said we should. The books had no advice regarding the second act, a banshee screech of protest that no doubt brought neighbours to walls and ceiling, wondering what sort of animal we kept. We wondered too. Were all children like this or was it us? In the backs of our minds was always the fear of the Absent Dad. Our boys would grow up and join gangs for the authority and our girls would lie down for any passing baritone. We were always looking for men, not for the obvious reasons but so they'd chuck the children in the air, fill the air with bass tones, slake their invisible need.

He phoned me again and again. I want to see him, he said.

I agreed. I had always agreed with him. Because of his air of authority, his assumption of control? Or was it simply the span of his shoulders, the physical fact of him? Maybe I agreed with everyone, although I wouldn't have said so, wouldn't have called myself an agreeable sort.

I could pick you up, he said.

No.

You could come over for lunch.

No. Wondering what he was playing at.

The mothers sat in the back rooms at restaurants if there was one, because it was bigger and you could park a stroller without people constantly tripping over it or trying to squeeze by. There we entertained: a dreamy, late-morning succession of off-menu snacks, the single egg or sliced focaccia. The drinks, slowly cooling, some of which we sent back. The supplements on the sly, banana or goldfish crackers. Our complaints about the charges. Three-fifty for milk? Look, gesturing at the full glass, as if the restaurant could take it back and resell it. His small pursed mouth.

It must be hard for you, I said to one of them, a Filipina. Not being the nanny.

She never called me back. Most of them didn't. Our meetings were inconclusive at best. Even I couldn't decide what I wanted exactly. For us to band together like refugees, or rise and use our collective scorn to wither the uncomprehending? Should we agitate for childcare and funding, or merely meet and seek solace? Perhaps we should become lovers, eliminating the men who had been the problem. No need to apologize to each

other for spilt milk, stained sheets, the rising whine outside the door.

Another one invited me to dinner at her place and I was ecstatic. We ate with plates on our knees, movie blaring. She told me she had been accepted into a single mothers' program. But don't you think, I paused, you'll have more skills than the rest of them. Saying the wrong thing, my specialty. She, like me, was unfazed. Sure, but.

What was it we most required, in our desperation? I used to think it was merely someone to utter the formula: you go, I'll stay with the baby. Later on I thought it was sex we needed. A body not our child's. Differentiation. In the beginning nothing mattered but sleep and food. It kept changing, that was the trouble, and you couldn't keep up. There was always another ailment or a new food issue, and the broken sleep that you suspected everyone else had fixed long ago. In the night you heard the call, Mommy, Mommy, and you cursed and went because there was nobody else.

Finally I explained as best I was able. You can see him, I said, but I'm not here to be your friend. He nodded slightly. I had never been afraid of hurting his feelings and I wasn't now. My disinterest, in this case if no other, was entirely convincing. The boy needed him, after that first year when we'd all been together. I could protect my boy, if not myself, from the inexplicability of loss.

My childless acquaintance, unlike the other mothers, was openly skeptical. You're seeing a lot of him., hm? So, any news? they asked, avidly, each time I returned.

It's for the boy, I said sharply. He's seeing somebody else, I repeated. They nodded, humouring me.

As for me, I saw myself remaining alone, and my acceptance of this alarmed me, if only in the abstract. I was putting my life in order, I told myself. Why keep the timesheets from 2007? I had been distracted, I decided: it was his fault, he took too much, as I filled my recycle box again and again.

How would you even date, I asked another mother. None of them seemed to hear what I was saying, in the cafés with their high ceilings and the light pouring in and the noise of other peoples' heedless conversations. Our offspring were always about too, wriggling and reaching, teetering towards some terrible catastrophe you could have prevented had you been watching instead of selfishly promulgating your own goals. Strangers loved to explain this to us, and to our children. They lived to caution our offspring, since we were obviously too derelict to do it ourselves, slumped in our cups.

She explained as to how she had a lot of help, her son's father and then her own parents. She told me one of the guys she was seeing had a toddler of his own, and a similar arrangement with his ex, the boy's mother. Our arrangements were byzantine, I saw, piling ever higher in new encrustations and permutations, the threads that connected us multiplying with each coupling until the whole structure inevitably toppled. My own life was complicated too, by my design no doubt although it always seemed something that had fallen on me from above, a hurtling safe in a cartoon. I suggested she

continue seeing both her new lovers without telling them about each other. The father of her son had done the same thing to her while she was pregnant. Pass it forward. Havoc, my specialty.

"Careful." "Dangerous." "Oh, don't do that, you could get hurt." Our babies weren't to explore the escalator, with its slippy loop, or walk with glasses in their uncertain hands at gallery openings or run even on the sidewalk, where they might fall off. In vain we thanked the strangers, assured them the children would be fine. They went away plainly skeptical, visibly wondering how children would live to adulthood with mothers such as us. We wondered too, come to that, but we had learned not to air our doubts, certainly not in public.

That rash isn't going away, I told him over the phone. I have to take the baby back to the doctor. I could have pretended I informed him of this as his right but that wasn't true, since the child wasn't even his. He had children of his own, grown ones, so he'd agreed when I explained my scheme. I meant to order this one from a catalogue, couriering the other half in via test tube. The glass warmed and handed to me just before insertion. The jovial, slightly smutty doctor. A stranger's baby, the near certainty of a boy.

The odd part was his sense of palpable continuing ownership. I could have resented it but truthfully I found it comforting, even the insulting parts. There's such a thing as soap and water, he told me now. I let the silence stretch out.

The truth was I wanted someone to talk to about the boy, someone who cared as I did. The truth is I was lonely, alone with the child.

Always our children had to be nicely dressed in matching clothes, unstained. We inspected them regularly for drips and smears. We could not afford, as could coupled parents, to allow them to remain unkempt. Because the critical strangers who accosted us were right in a way. We were broken. We suspected this, and that only our children, their continued survival and passable condition, made us legitimate.

Being poor was a hazard of our state. Even as I filled them I railed at the intrusive subsidy forms for this and that, the ones that made us list emergency contacts and their relationship to our children (I hesitated after his name and finally wrote Lukewarm), submit contributions before we even knew if we were approved. No personal cheques, please. Nobody else got that we had to take our children everywhere, whether we or anybody else wanted them or not. The bus was a luxury; sometimes we pushed the stroller for miles instead, losing even more weight than advisable in the process. I stared at myself in the mirror. Fined, yes, but also drawn, and the deep particoloured wells under my eyes couldn't be denied.

Our economy was variable. A cup of expensive coffee, a glass of cheap wine: these were essentials, mainly because they staved off our current circumstances and enabled us, however briefly, to return to our past selves. We dreamed of last-minute deals at all-inclusive resorts, cheap holiday cruises with their free restaurants and included

baby-minding services. We imagined ourselves walking away from kiddie clubs shedding unfamiliar relief, and terror. I can do anything. What do I do now.

A little solidarity. A union. Maybe that's what I was after. Because even the ones who had held onto men, the supposed solution, didn't seem terribly happy either. The tightening of the mouth that came with his name, our symptom, was not unique.

Don't you think, I asked him afterwards, that what you did was completely reprehensible.

It's a grey area, he said.

I soothed myself imagining his future, lonely and toothless. I'm sorry, he would say when he realized, I made a mistake, can you forgive me? But in my imaginings I never did.

When I'd been pregnant I was always looking at other pregnant women, expecting to see a sign, a secret smile or a nod. Even people with the same kind of car did that, waved and smiled. We're in this together. But in fact they passed me mostly without looking, leaving me bereft.

I came home to find the one with the love life in my bed. I wish I could say she reclined in a silken teddy, begging to be unwrapped parcel-style, all ribbons and bows. Actually she was fully dressed but for shoes, heavy-lidded, her boy sprawled next to her. You could sleep here I said, halfhearted, practical.

I have trouble sleeping anywhere but my own place, said the mother regretfully, letting her glance linger. I'm tempted, she added. I poured her into a cab, her child heavy and unresisting while I struggled to buckle the seat. I was always being undermined by my own impatience, an undercut ladylike quality that dissolved with the sight, I was sure, of my bottom or legs as I lifted a toddler or fumbled with straps. You could not be refined and practical at the same time, that was the essential problem.

On the first day of the year I brought the boy to meet him but he was never arrived. I was ready to throw it in, then. If you don't even care. Later he phoned, reminded me: he'd set the time for an hour later. I remembered our conversation at lunch, the one lunch a year I told myself I'd allow. Our order stacking up at the counter. Communion, however fractured.

After she left, I went to bed alone. In the middle of the night the boy called for me, and I fetched him and fed him; a rarer thing now, then in his baby days. I scolded myself while he applied himself with sleepy concentration, first one breast and then the other. No wonder he wakes up, if you feed him two days out of three. What you need to do is be consistent. Face it: I was the one who needed discipline, order, routine. He would thrive anyhow.

Sometimes they would reveal themselves suddenly, in the midst of something entirely unrelated—setting up a table, plugging in a computer for the presentation, putting out the cups and the tray. We got it out in hurried broken sentences, our needs, we knew, being so overwhelming & unseemly. Do you share custody? Such embarrassing

baldness! But we were frank, we had learned long ago not to flinch, our children had taught us this by their productions over which we were supposed to exclaim in delight, not disgust, lest we damage them irreparably. So I would say yes, sort of, and with this dubious pledge of allegiance out would come the story, bit by bit, like those deposits I shrink from describing.

He came away from visits with my ex furnished with new tales of the blue car, the doorman's birthday. Clutched in his hand a small tsunami of nuts in a thin filmy bag. I pried them from him, wrestled the giant stroller onto the bus. Nuts, nuts, he piped endlessly, until I gave them back and inevitably he scattered them on the warm vibrating floor. I picked them up then one by one, took the bag away. Nnnuuuuttts, he howled, the angst of a lifetime albeit one measured in months thrown into that single word, the despair, the railing at an indifferent God. His back arched and tummy exposed, that cream-coloured curve buttoned at the navel, where we'd been joined. Where I had poured into him all that he was and would become, through no volition of mine, unless you count the opening salvo at the clinic.

The sobbing then. Other passengers averted their eyes as from some crime in progress. I set my mouth. It was always we who were to blame. They were only children, they couldn't be held responsible, with their few words and poor impulse control and inability, like psychopaths, to foresee consequences. They depended on us for everything and we were weak vessels, always cracking into shards. Even an onlooker, a neutral observer, could see that.

I thought perhaps my own kind would save me. Women, mostly childless, with rough-cropped hair. Some I recognized from years or decades earlier, nights in boxy apartments, inconclusive dates. We gathered in a room, listened to the speaker. History, said the author of the new book, a man who had been a woman, is important. We must remember our pasts, he counseled us, he who had come from another country entirely. My boy was industrious: he pulled rubber boots askew, rattled the empty hangers on the coat rack, dragged the plastic recycle bin over to the entrance to root through its contents. Can he stop doing that, hissed a woman who wasn't even one of the organizers, it's incredibly distracting. He needs something to do, I snapped back, you tell me how else he should occupy himself, staring round at the blank walls, the audience doing its best to ignore us. . Finally I gave up and left, bitterly inveighing against the childless, their entitled incomprehension.

So what constituted my own kind, after all? My draggled compatriots, our clothes always slightly askew from being tugged, our eyes always shifting down or to the side to assess the latest catastrophe or demand? Yes, you can have a cookie, here, have the whole bag, watch Dora until your eyeballs dribble out of your head. But it didn't matter how lax we were. What they wanted was us, wholesale, and they wouldn't rest until they got it: our attention, our undivided regard. Then they could ignore us, settling to their incompetent work: milk scattered on the floor every time he sat with the cup, lifted the

spoon to his mouth.

They were better than us, that was clear. They repeated themselves for our benefit, patiently; they were overall far more patient than us, at making themselves understood. We pulled them this way and that, shouting: now quick, come on. Up steps, out of chairs, into elevators with doors drifting shut. We wouldn't have been surprised if it came out one day, that yanked arm, left dangling in our grip.

As for us we were partial. We admitted it to ourselves, this crime, just as we admitted regretfully that we saw the best and worst of them. We were arrested, not by a concerned citizenry but by the circumference of limbs, their gaze, their indelible attraction. And sometimes they surprised us too, came and put their chubby arms around, patted us consolingly in the manner of adults. Mommy, said my son confidentially. Explanation, definition, his everything.

Mommy, mommy, mommy. Another momentary apocalypse, stuck toy or a shoe he couldn't for a moment get free. Help you, he cried, repeating what I said to him: do you want me to help you? What do you say, I asked him for the three hundred millionth time. Do you want to go back to bed, my own tone toughening to leather as his rose in familiar whine. A sour bouquet, a corked bottle, a dish you long to send back but don't dare.

So maybe it was him after all. Linked not by blood but by the year we'd shared, baby's first, sweat and milk and blood and the heedless wetting of the sheets and pad beneath as we rode the rim of the mattress, one on each side, into sleep.

Desperate, I volunteered for a worthy cause. I could expense a sitter, perch at a boardroom table behind a nameplate. There were a dozen of us and nothing to single me out from the others. The director of a program for lone mothers came to talk about the need for housing, ask for help. She wore a long cream-coloured coat. I had once tried to join a group run by her organization for women like me. They stared at my entrance, then ordered me out, the baby still half-turned from his carrier. It was possible only for short periods to forget that I was two things: the adult and this other, split open.

I caught up to her on the way out. I have concerns, I said. We stood beside the elevators talking. She took my name, promised something would be done. I savoured this, even as I remarked internally on the clean coat. My own, I knew, would never look like that. It was smeared with dirt, indelible, from my offspring's shoes where he begged to be picked up, held to my heart.

How impossible it was for those like us to remain unmarked, I understood now. How unrealistic of us to expect to pass as human. This then where I was claimed, the smear and dribble that marked me as his own, as with all of us, taken. Hostages, from so far back we could no longer remember if, in the beginning, we had smiled and gone along, nodded all eagerness, taken that step. If we had been willing. Not that it mattered, not now, not anymore. Broken, like horses, bent to their will, as we bent them by degrees to ours.

AN EXCERPT FROM:

OBLITERATING HISTORY

—A GUITAR-MAKING MYSTERY, DOMINATION & SUBMISSION IN A SMALL TOWN GARAGE

>> JEAN SMITH

NEW YORK CITY, 1999

A well-respected carpenter—a Broadway star in his own right—Frank MacLean has a skill that he turns into real money. He builds the sets that the rest of them frolic on. For aspiring actress Carol Withers, Frank is a relief after the succession of flakes and fools she has dated. Frank takes her to his favourite restaurants—Indian, Ethiopian, French, Spanish—and on weekends, they do things that Carol had planned to do as soon as she moved to New York, but never gotten around to in ten years. They go to museums and gardens, bookstores and jazz clubs, and Frank tells amazing stories that capture her imagination in a way that it has not been captured before.

"There was a guy who used to run a dry cleaner in Greenwich Village," Frank starts. "He came to a restaurant I used to go to, a pizza place really, although I never had the pizza because they burned the crusts and I just don't think pizza is the thing to have in a restaurant. If I'm going to have pizza, it's because I'm extremely hungry and pressed for time. Not in a restaurant, no never. Not me."

Carol laughs at Frank's strange idea about restaurants and his pizza theory—when and where it should be consumed. He amuses her with his funny stories and he enjoys her reactions. She doesn't question whether the things he says are true. There is usually someone doing something absurd, and Frank tends to place the people in a reality they share—some place in New York that he and Carol have visited together, possibly even that day—making the story believable, in a sleight of hand kind of way.

A guy who runs a dry cleaner in Greenwich Village—what's not to believe? Often the story doesn't get beyond the character and the setting before Frank is using what he's just created as a platform to give his opinion—something that has been bothering him, like the burnt crust of a pizza in a restaurant. How can one mention the crust of another man's pizza as a significant problem without a construction to hang it on?

Frank feels compelled to invent just exactly enough of a story to exhibit his assertions, complaints and observations. To Frank, telling stories feels like his hands are on wet clay. Watching Carol's beautifully responsive face, he can increase a certain type of pressure and the clay rises skyward allowing him to make the contraption tower above them, or, conversely, if a story falters, it ends up feeling like a saucer or a plate.

The truth seems to be separate from the grandeur of the telling, thinks Carol, and since the stories are about people she doesn't know, or has never heard of, it doesn't really matter about their truthiness. They're just stories and Frank seems to need to tell them. That's the reason for the thing—fun and enjoyment—not in trying to sort out whether or not these things, the things he talks about, are true. Carol thinks of Frank as a writer without paper, a painter lacking canvas. He needs to make up stories and it's harmless enough that he tells them to her.

"You're going to turn into a smoked meat sandwich if you're not careful," Frank says. Carol has spent far too much time working in the deli, dishing up potato salad and slaw. Telling Bruno that she wants the weekend off to take Frank to her hometown of

Nazareth, Pennsylvania means she'll be called in for fewer shifts during the week. That suits her. It feels like her time in New York City is coming to an end. She'd played the back half of a hippopotamus named *Pamplemousse* in a play about a dwarf who held up a bank. She'd been the voice of a marionette whose strings became so entangled every night that she had to adlib a concocted story to make it seem plausible that a seven foot tall ballerina had become immobilized two feet above centre stage, missing its cue to pirouette and dance, to wait for a stagehand wearing a headset to come out and clip its strings, freeing it to fold clumsily over his shoulder, to be carried off like a drunken sailor. Carol is nearly ready to admit that she isn't going to make it big on Broadway.

Carol has a romantic notion about showing Frank the house she grew up in. They drive past 1453 Cherry, slowing, but not stopping; she doesn't want to disturb the long-time tenants. Carol and Frank share a sandwich at Gordon Café on Main, where Carol worked as a teenager, and then, as an after-thought really, she asks if he'd like to take the guided tour through the Martin guitar factory.

"Sounds interesting," Frank says. "If you'll pardon the pun."

"I didn't have you down as a take-a-tour kind of guy," Carol says, sliding her huge sunglasses down over her beautiful green eyes.

"Are you going to eat that pickle?" Frank asks.

"The pickle is totally up for grabs," Carol says, looking for the car key in her purse.

"Most families in town have earned their livelihood here at one time or another," Carol tells Frank as they park the rental car in the guitar factory lot. "At least, that's what everyone said when I was growing up."

The last tour of the day gets underway as their guide talks about the impact the factory has had on the town's economy, but Frank is hardly listening. Until now, hearing Carol's childhood memories has somehow prevented him from what has now taken hold of his imagination. His mouth is slightly open as he watches the workers behind the Plexiglas—cutting, bending, gluing and clamping wood into fabulously shaped instruments to be shipped around the world to make millions of dollars in the hands of musicians who capture the hearts of their fans. Frank is completely astounded by this revelation and how he has allowed Carol's dreary accounts of life in Nazareth to prevent him from thinking about the guitars—about the wood. The bending of the sides, the fretting of the necks, and then to the final stage of production—listening to how the wooden structure sounds in the hands of technicians who have never been on stage or might not even know how to play a song clear through. These men and women, slovenly by New York standards, sit in isolation booths wearing old plaid shirts, sweatpants and ball caps, listening to strings vibrating in the bent wood chambers positioned across their thighs.

In the gift shop after the tour, Carol slowly turns the postcard rack, allowing the images to take her back to childhood. Some of the photos are classics from another era.

Removing a card that shows Main Street in the 70s, she looks for Frank. Expecting to see him flipping through a book about the factory, she spots him at the front desk, pen to paper. She slides the card back into the rack and goes to see what he's doing.

"Honey," she says, pulling on his jacket sleeve. "Come and look at postcards with me."

"In a sec, honey," Frank says without looking up. "What's the address of the house you grew up in?"

"1453 Cherry. Why?"

Frank continues writing. Carol looks over his shoulder as he completes the final section of a job application form.

1453 Cherry Street

"Carol, you must learn to stop defending yourself when you bump into your aunts," Frank says.

But Carol can practically hear them tsk-tsk-tsking as they roll down the aisles of Resslers Market, trying to bump into her while she tries to avoid them by only doing half her grocery shopping and rushing to the express check-out before they can circle their buggies and jab the air with their thick index fingers, muttering—*Verna-Lee's last days, last days, last days. The service, the service, the service. Against your mother's wishes.*

"Maybe it would help if you came right out and admitted that you made a mistake, that you regret not being there," says Frank.

And she does. Not just for the funeral, but for the months prior, when her mother was ill and could have used a hand around the house. Maybe Frank's right—if she could tell them she made a mistake, maybe they would stop their campaign of incessant muttering.

Carol frequently asks Frank why he's on their side. Sure, she understands that he likes a well-made pecan pie as much as the next guy, but doesn't he see that she doesn't want her aunts dropping by? Even if he doesn't understand why, can't it be enough that she just doesn't want them coming here?

"After all," says Frank with the kind of half-baked logic that drives Carol up the wall. "It was their house too."

"Yes Frank. I know that," Carol says with great restraint, her left eye starting to twitch. "And that's exactly the point. They will never let me forget that they grew up here. That they believe it's their house. Not mine."

"Carol MacLean for 12:30 p.m." Carol says, using a matter-of-factly voice, thinking she should be more business-like or at least more mature. Maybe I should forget about youth, she thinks. I'm forty-fucking-two.

"Have a seat Carol," the doctor's receptionist says.

Or she could start going by her middle name. Pam. *Pam* sounded young. Younger. *Carol* had always sounded too old. Too serious. For god's sake, all you need to do is put a

"d" on the end and there you have it.

Carold.

Maybe I should have kept the name Withers. Maybe marrying Frank wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done. Pam MacLean—one last crack at youth, she thinks.

Carol flips quickly through Architectural Digest while she waits for the receptionist to call her name. Before becoming a homeowner, it would have been Elle or Vogue, thinks Carol, pausing to look at narrow French doors leading out to a brick patio in the narrow space between a house and the neighbour's fence. After Frank finishes the den, she wants him to renovate the garage. They've agreed to turn it into a rental unit even though Frank really isn't keen on having strangers living in the backyard, but pay increases at the guitar factory are few and far between.

The caption under the photo of the brick patio—*you can have it all.* No one else in the waiting area, Carol rips the page out of the magazine, folds it twice and slides it into her purse.

"We could try Zoloft," her doctor says, uncrossing his legs to roll his swivel chair over to the cabinet on the other side of the examination room.

"No," Carol says, afraid of what it means. Unwilling to be that person.

"You'd be surprised how many people find Zoloft helpful," the doctor says. "It can be very good for stress, anxiety, OCD."

"OCD?"

"I'd say you are prone to a touch of obsessive compulsion disorder," the doctor says. "Do you ever leave the house and feel a strong urge to go back to check on something? The stove, an iron left on? Something like that?"

"No, not really."

"Do you notice that you think about anything compulsively, over and over? Like an address or a schedule? Anything like that?"

"Colby, Druis, Eartha, Edna, Erma and Verna-Lee," Carol says.

"OK," the doctor says, looking at Carol over the top of his glasses.

"Who are they when they're at home?"

Carol, stunned by the doctor's question, breaks into tears. Sobbing uncontrollably, she searches her purse for Kleenex and the folded magazine page pops out, landing on the well-worn linoleum tiles between them. The doctor picks it up and asks, "Putting in a patio, Carol?"

"Yes," Carol says, recovering. "I need the photograph so I can count the number of bricks."

"OK, that's OK Carol," the doctor says, comforting her. "Who are the people you named?"

"Colby, Druis, Eartha, Edna, Erma and Verna-Lee?"

"Yes."

"My mother and her sisters. My aunts." She starts sobbing again.

"I think Ativan is going to be helpful. I'm going to give you a prescription for six pills and I want you to take one when you feel this sort of anxiety or panic coming on. I am going to give you one now so you can see how it affects you."

"Thank you," Carol says. She tucks the magazine page back into her purse.

"You may find that you don't need to be taking the Ativan at all," the doctor says. He rolls over to the sink in the corner of the room, pulls a paper cup out of a dispenser, fills it with water and rolls back to Carol.

"Here," he says.

"Thank you," Carol sniffles. She takes the tiny pill.

"You may find exercise extremely helpful in relieving stress," he says.

"I just joined Curves."

"Good," the doctor says. "It's an excellent program for middle-aged women."

"Middle-aged?" howls Carol.

Carol turns off the ignition, puts the car in park and just sits there. She rests her head on the steering wheel until she hears the frozen peas thawing and shifting in the grocery bag in the back seat.

"When did I even start buying frozen fucking peas?" she says out loud. "Christ, I'm middle-aged and pathetic. A cliché. I'm a total fucking cliché."

She swings open the car door and steps out onto the driveway wondering if Frank thinks of her as middle-aged. *And this is my middle-aged wife Carol. She used to be an actress.* Or maybe he'd say—*she worked at a deli when I met her*.

Carol lumbers halfway over to the front steps of the house. I'm one hundred and ten pounds, she thinks. How can I possibly feel this heavy? It's like I'm made of wet laundry.

"Need a hand with the groceries honey?" Frank says from the top of the steps.

"That would be great honey," Carol says, shielding her eyes from the way too bright sunlight.

"Anything the matter, hon?" Frank says bolting down the steps like a man half his age. Where does he get that kind of energy, wonders Carol.

"Actually. Yes. The doctor gave me an Ativan and I don't think it agrees with me."

"Ativan?" Frank says, returning with all three bags of groceries. "What for?"

"Because I'm old," Carol says and begins to cry again.

"Oh dear god, Carol," Frank says impatiently. "You're not old. Let me put these away and I'll bring you a glass of water."

Carol crouches in the small patch of shade on the front steps. Tucking her knees up, she examines her toes, the toes of a middle-aged woman. Her shins below the capri-length gingham trousers are smooth, freshly-shaved, but something about her legs lack the glow of a younger woman's skin. She extends her foot, twisting the leg back and forth to see what other people, younger people, see when they look at her.

Frank returns with two glasses of water. He sits beside Carol.

"What exactly did the doctor say? Why did he give you Ativan?"

"Oh, I don't know," Carol says, allowing her leg to drop next to the other one. "I told him I'd joined Curves and he said it was a good program."

"OK, so that's a good thing, right?"

"He said it was good for middle-aged women."

"Oooooh, I see," Frank says. He sips of his water. "And how old is he?"

"The doctor?"

"Yes."

"He's young and stupid," Carol says.

"What he meant is that it's good for women older than yourself, middle-aged women, but he's not saying you're middle-aged honey. You're not."

"Anyway, that's what he said and I got upset and he gave me an Ativan which I don't think is very helpful."

"Come here," Frank says, sensing the drama is over. He puts his arm around her, giving her a squeeze, wondering how she had aged so quickly in ten years. She'd gone downhill fast after they moved to Nazareth.

1453 Cherry Street, Nazareth, 1956

The Withers of 1453 Cherry were evolving into a family divided, not by bedroom walls and who bunked with whom, but by intelligence. When Verna-Lee, the youngest, turned five, she was lauded a genius of staggering magnitude based on her uncanny aptitude for logic. She'd scored very high on a state-wide IQ test and gone on to be evaluated by researchers interested in the specifics of her intelligence. 1956 would, in some circles, come to be known as the *summer of artificial intelligence*. With a research facility in the works at Princeton University, Verna-Lee was of special interest to those involved in the science and engineering of making intelligent machines. The news reached Nazareth by way of the *New York Times*, and the reporters at the *Nazareth Item*, resenting finding out anything about their townsfolk in this way, set aside space to deal with the Verna-Lee Withers story, to culminate in a front page article two weeks hence—once they'd gotten to the bottom of things over at the Withers' house. For those two weeks, cub reporter Donald Lambert, a bespectacled, earnest young man, pounded up the front steps at 1453 Cherry on a daily basis to get statements from family members, during which time, it seemed the whole town was writing letters to the editor, discussing what should be done about little Verna-Lee Withers, the five-year-old genius in question. Everyone had an opinion. The ball really got rolling when someone stuck their oar in to say that her family, the Withers of Cherry Street, wouldn't know how to conduct the upbringing of a certifiable genius if their livelihood depended on it—which it did. From there, Verna-Lee Withers quickly went from general oddity to public property—a potential source of income for the town. There was great speculation on how Verna-Lee could start producing revenue. Logic became synonymous with fortune-telling. Suggestions, mostly sideshow in nature, were

tallied by the radio station until a cry went up for a referendum. Yes, much of the town believed there should be a vote—what was the most profitable fate for their five-year-old girl-genius. What, logically, was to become of Verna-Lee Withers?

It was mid-summer and the Withers girls, aged five through fifteen, would most likely be home, unless they'd gone, as a group to the swimming hole down past Meyers' farm on the other side of the highway. When Donald Lambert began his mission to reveal the powers of Verna-Lee Withers to the town of Nazareth, Pennsylvania and beyond, he himself was only seventeen and a recent graduate of the high school Eartha Withers attended.

It was not entirely young Verna-Lee that propelled Donald to arrive at the Withers' and connect his index finger with the doorbell. He was smitten with eldest sister, Eartha, a beautiful blonde with delicate features and big green eyes. Deep within Eartha, the sentiment was reciprocal, but she wouldn't have dreamed of letting Donald Lambert know that. Eartha, at age fifteen, was the most thoroughly educated of the Withers family and very protective of her family's privacy. When the doorbell rang, it was Eartha's voice Donald heard inside, yelling *I'll get it* after which she pounded downstairs at lightning speed to slow considerably before opening the door, gradually, feigning disappointment to see Donald, pencil behind his ear, notepad at the ready. Beneath her cool veneer, her heart was skipping and jumping to its own teenage beat.

Donald's editor had bestowed the assignment on him—complete with title *The Making of a Genius, the Verna-Lee Withers Story*—but everything about Verna-Lee had been revealed in the first interview, in the doorway and on the top few steps. The entire Withers family was in attendance, except for Verna-Lee, who was having her afternoon nap. The photographer took a roll and half of black and white film while Donald asked each of them what had been different about Verna-Lee's experience in the Withers' home. The sisters had all said that Verna-Lee had her own room and a name that began with a letter from the latter-half of the alphabet, but beyond that, there wasn't anything different about her.

Verna-Lee, it seemed, possessed a mysterious skill called logic, which had something to do with coming to conclusions based on facts. The sisters by now, armed with a rudimentary understanding of logic, were involved in speculation. If Verna-Lee was smarter—and the only thing different about Verna-Lee was that she had her own room, it followed, logically, that if any one of the sisters had been given her own room, she too would have been a genius. This created no small amount of tension in the home.

Prompted by his editor's insistence that there be some sort of a comment, a quote, from Verna-Lee herself, Donald kept coming back, asking Eartha tedious questions about her youngest sister, knowing full well that she was not going to allow him to have one minute with Verna-Lee. It just wasn't going to happen.

The stories appeared daily in the newspaper and Donald described Eartha, the eldest sister, in great detail, with increasing fervor. Through his eyes, the town learned that while Verna-Lee's great gift was intelligence, Eartha's gift was beauty. By the

end of the first week, her eyelashes evidently curled the exactly right amount, up and away from her translucent green eyes. Halfway through the second week, her slender nose was sprinkled with the perfect number of mid-summer freckles from days at the swimming hole, lazing about on the flattened grass of the shore watching her sisters take turns on the rope swing, splashing and screaming as they plunged into the tepid water.

For the final article of the two week series, Donald decided to bring his little brother Norman with him, to see if he could gain access to Verna-Lee, to get some sort of usable quote.

Narrow, diagonally striped tie and dark blue suit jacket over his arm, Donald unbuttoned his white shirt at the collar and walked up the front steps at 1453 Cherry Street. Norman lagged behind wearing more practical attire—t-shirt and shorts. Donald rang the doorbell, but instead of hearing Eartha pound downstairs to greet him, Mrs. Withers came to the door with the telephone receiver pressed between ear and shoulder, its curly cord pulled tight. She was wildly stirring chocolate batter with a wooden spoon in a large glass mixing bowl cradled in her arms.

"Back in a jiff, Eleanor, the reporter's here again," she said into the receiver. The dense clunking of the wooden spoon against the glass bowl of batter did not cease while Mrs. Withers quickly said, "They've all gone to the swimming hole down past Meyers' farm."

She managed a shrug in that direction, but of course the Lambert boys knew where the swimming hole was.

Donald and Norman headed off and when Donald heard the girls screaming and splashing, he decided to approach without letting them know he was there. Poking his head up from behind a fallen birch, white bark peeling in wide sheets, Donald saw Eartha sitting on a blanket with Verna-Lee tucked right up close, her big sister's body providing shade in the record-breaking heat.

Eartha was wearing her version of a Rose Marie Reid bathing suit she'd seen in an ad in Vogue magazine—*the hourglass silhouette does so much for every figure. Under its shaping influence your waist is whittled and your hips go into hiding*. Using the extra black and white cow-printed fabric her mother had bought for curtains in the kitchen, Eartha copied the design, but once on her sturdy frame, Eartha's swimsuit sagged where it was meant to whittle and where she had hoped for hips in hiding, she'd ended up with excess fabric bunching up, drawing attention to her derriere.

Donald, slumping down behind the slender birch, flipped open his notepad and began to describe the scene, to give his final piece in the series the colour he hadn't managed to catch on his visits to 1453 Cherry. Norman, having read stories about birch bark canoes, was busily stripping the tree, intent on launching his vessel within the next half hour. The three girls between Eartha and Verna-Lee's ages were non-descript; in Donald's notes they took turns, over and over, on the rope swing while Eartha and Verna-Lee sat on the blanket, but he didn't want them to just sit there. Donald wanted

a scoop. He wanted to impress Eartha, but he was running out of time. Donald sweated, waiting for something to happen, but nothing did. Verna-Lee occasionally fidgeted, Eartha shifted position. Donald sat, knees tucked up, leaning against the now entirely peeled birch tree.

"Norman," he said to his little brother. "I have a special assignment for you."

Leaving the pile of papery white bark, Norman came close to Donald to get the details.

"You're going to go and talk to Verna-Lee Withers, Norman. You're going to be the man who gets the scoop."

"Not on your life," Norman said, and returned to canoe building.

Donald, well-versed in dealing with little brothers, promised a week's worth of trips to the drug store soda fountain and before either of them could say Bob's your uncle, Norman had plunked himself down next to Verna-Lee on the blanket.

The next day, the story ran on the front page as planned, the last in the series, but nothing had happened at the swimming hole to warrant the feature position. The headline was conjured long after Donald had typed up his story and left the newspaper office, to wander home wondering about sunstroke and dehydration. He was as surprised as anyone in town to see the 48 point type across the full width of the paper, piling up in three banks down the left hand side of the page.

Biggest Withers Girl Provides Shade for
Genius
Baby
Sister

It was very unfortunate that the unrelated photo beside the Withers' headline was a Holstein cow at the Pennsylvania State Farm Show, its prize winning udder hanging heavily between awkwardly splayed hind legs. Sure, the photographer had wanted to get a shot without a lot of flies circling the cow, but it was a farm show after all and flies were part of the deal.

Donald had written about the cow print bathing suit and, not knowing very much about girls or fashion, he'd gone too far in describing how the suit hung, draped and spread, and how Eartha's body provided ample shade for her sister. The quote Norman was sent to get appeared at the end of the article, with Verna-Lee saying, "I like chocolate ice cream very much."

Eartha hated Donald Lambert, the Nazareth Item, her ample body and Verna-Lee. Logically, it was Verna-Lee's fault that children Eartha had never even seen started calling her Bertha and then Big Bertha. Eartha's sisters—Colby, Druis, Edna and Erma—responded to the crisis by accompanying Eartha everywhere. They went to the movies together, the five and dime and the drug store soda fountain. The sisters formed a flanking unit to protect Eartha, maligned and mocked. Group suffering manifested in a campaign of over-eating through which there was an unspoken intention to control their own bodies, to protect themselves from unwanted attention.

In high school, Verna-Lee was regarded as a freak of nature due to her extreme intelligence, which she was smart enough to downplay beyond the classroom—around boys at parties and dances. She was also a very attractive girl, but everyone knows you can't be both smart and beautiful, so Verna-Lee's blossoming good-looks were, for the most part, ignored. Complicating matters, Verna-Lee was more sexually inclined than most girls her age—decidedly more sexual than the smart girls allow themselves to be, and in some instances, more sexual than the girls who are talked about Monday mornings; girls called *sluts* and *guttersnipes* because they engaged in some form of sex, defying an entrenchment of codes—religious, legal, moral and ethical. Even though the sixties were rolling right along, gathering steam around the country, in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, sexual promiscuity brought shame and disgrace to families and when the people of the town thought about promiscuity, they thought about the behaviour of girls and women—not the behaviour of boys and men.

Pregnant at fifteen, it was understood that Verna-Lee would quit school to stay at home with her baby and that her parents would have to help. People—family, friends and nosy Parkers alike—had a pretty good idea what will become of Verna-Lee Withers. Not much. Nothing good. That was a given, considering the situation.

Verna-Lee had no intention of marrying Norman Lambert. She liked Norman very much, but she was fifteen and there was no reason to thwart her potential by becoming legally attached to him, or anyone else. To Verna-Lee, an anarchist and an atheist who rejected the philosophical fervor of the capitalist state, marriage was illogical.

Logic arrived in the form of an invitation to participate in research at Princeton University for which she was to be compensated with more than a token amount. It was logical that Verna-Lee would learn to drive the family truck to make the seventy-mile trip to Princeton once a week while her mother watched baby Carol.

Leaving Nazareth at 7 a.m. Tuesday mornings Verna-Lee was back for dinner with $140 to show for her intellectual efforts, and a stipend for gas and mileage. At sixteen, Verna-Lee made more in a day than her father made in a week at the quarry.

In 1970, when Carol was three, Verna-Lee put $18,000 cash on the dining room table and bought the house at 1453 Cherry Street from her parents. What Verna-Lee hadn't anticipated was the wrath of her five, unhappy, overweight, unmarried sisters, who had, de facto, lost their inheritance—the house at 1453 Cherry.

SCAR

>> KATHLEEN BROWN

BUFF

Two girls walk in highway mirage through heat's hot basin, cross the field towards the lake. The July sun's nictitating sizzle captivates the day. Two girls: blazing cream and polished ochre, teeth white horns flashing between the ripples of their laughter. Hair: short red static and long black whorls. By Bec's side, Suna's hand clasps itself, considers empty form. Bec's hands are pocketed in her overalls: private clouds. Their ankles wobble and knock as they captain uneven ground in worn runners. A shiver creeps their tans when an arm or a leg strays, brushes against the other's body. A stumble and hand lands on lower back, woops; knee meets calf mid-trip.

"The veins in your neck are sticking", Bec says to Suna. Suna turns to look back at her, notes how Bec's hair is catching fire in the light—it must be noon. The atmosphere compresses, wraps warning around them in a low-pressure cocoon. Rain slithers behind the eyelids of palpable. "Out. Puffed up. They're like worms."

Suna feels the approaching storm in her pulse. A sharp knife of bluesky cuts clouds. A starling calls out: catch in the throat. Birdsong obscures the corner of a déjà vu unraveling. She looks at Bec, has the desire to be held by her tall, thin friend the way that water closes over a diver's body.

Bec's long fingers, froggy and slick, trace Suna's pulse. Suna holds Bec's hand against the quaver on her neck. Bec's mouth: an earnest, unpredictable line. Her tongue has licked toads.

The girls keep walking, and when they reach the lake, they stop. Bec takes Suna's hand, licks the palm and sticks it, gummy, on her own neck. Her grin capers: "No pulse. I'm a ghost." Suna presses her hand into the dull thud on Bec's neck.

"Liar." Suna drops her hand, Bec catches it, birdstone. Their held hands: two-step nervous, clutching a plighted coil. Friction and static are slow dancing teens between them. Suna's hand: sweaty hover in Bec's grasp, velvet over bone, or bone laid bare, coursing. Something in Suna's face splits and fractures, something falls away in Bec the way antlers fall away from a buck's head, and the body becomes assailable.

Bec exhales. She blushes as she flicks off her Cons, maintains her winning RedRover grasp on Suna. Suna flicks off her Biway sneaks, and toes the water. Relief! from the heat and from the brink of their hiding, seeking. Suna smiles at Bec, Bec wound up and brave, her steady fuse contagious.

Bec's body: dandelion milk, white pepper, a boy's with crabapple breasts. The taste of her skin: surely cayenne. Suna could be a small woman at fourteen. Bec shrugs off the straps of her overalls, pulls off her tank. Suna, glancing away, observes how Bec's left foot holds her overalls and frees her right foot to move out of them—a deer's limb in a tentative line for the water.

Bec never wears underwear, always swims naked. Suna wants to want to be naked too, but. Suna is afraid of her body. Her body has been all claws and blood and howls this summer: brown teething flesh surfacing. She slips into the water without her t-shirt, her bra still on, her jean shorts ballooning.

Each strand of Suna's long black hair repels itself, tenders in the water as she submerges her head in the lake. She breaks into air, her hair clouding, chiming around her. She could be a small dark bear, moose calf. Bec is a beluga, spy-hopping: white, squeaky contortionist. Her body: comfortable under pressure.

Bec swims to her, Suna's hair enfolds Bec's body like the taste of bitter sumac buds seals itself on the tongue. Mid-afternoon froths at the mouth, sears. Suna and Bec practice their perfect gaze, float in the middle depths, tread lake, breathe through the nose. The sun on Bec's hair is a compass they read to reap the length of the day.

BUFFeted

Eyes closed, in the lake's current, I try to breathe underwater. Murky light warms my skin, dulls my hair to chestnut. Suna plunges through the water's sealing, swift to lakebottom. I feel the heavy punch in my lungs, the urge to surface. I am cold. I keep kicking, afloat in the middle depths; revel in my mutiny against the unconscious breath. Suna swims to me, her black eyes warm stones. I want to hold her stone eyes on my tongue, to swallow. Eyes: heat in my throat. The water hums electric, the current from her body: waterburn. I convulse in my mania, unbreath:violence. Her black dream snaps and coils in the water, envelopes us. Her hands pull my lips apart, she herds diaphanous, gauzy yolks from her mouth to mine, guts me, yanks me up into the scar of light.

The day snows particles of light: scintillant photonic ashes scatter. Illumination on our afternoon overexposes the shore trees. I squint and tread, shiver, feel as though wet feathers trace the palms of my feet, wet feathers stick my mouth shut. If the lake released her drowned dead: decomposing fingers would trace our heels, brush our calves.

I gaze at Suna through the nictitating quaver of the afternoon and her black eyes coalesce into one black lake. In my chest: a raw buzz. Anything I could say to her is gauzy tar, meshy webs—my mouth is an ugly hoof. My lids clatter closed.

This morning was the same as every other morning for the last two weeks. Our walk like every other walk: hot, dry, anchoring the summer in sepia memory before we trod the moment. The lake, Cassidy Lake, like no other lake in this part of New Brunswick—quiet, hidden—Lake Anywhere, Lake NoWhere.

Suna from the cottage up the road: lies in the ditch everyday, picks at the loosestrife and blows the fluff into the breeze, stands and bows like a clown in a silent film when I ride by and drop my bike in the ditch. "Bec from down the way", she says. The dust on my cuffs sticks on my hands as I unroll my overall legs at the side of the road. She saunters to my side, we go: to the field, to the lake.

This morning, like every other morning: she loops her arm through mine and I am like the tall boy who walks her to church on Sunday. It makes me so giddy I could pee myself.

At the lake we play a game. We pretend that I drown and she brings me back to life.

Then Suna sees the boy.

BUFFALO

Tall grasses tickle as we skirt twayblade, endure thistles' tender scraping, weave through deadfall. I crush their stalks any way I move, but Buffalo is unobtrusive, even though he is so much animal. Buffalo and I walk in tandem. His thick sunhappy hide ripples just under my hand when I lift it to his side.

I am the only eleven year old boy I know with a uniform frequency.

The sun is hottest on my shoulder blades, through my cotton undershirt, and my hair burns my hands when I put them on top of my head to walk elbows out. I never sweat. Buffalo doesn't sweat either. He quivers and shakes to jettison the dust and the flies, his steady left horn to my right, yellowed like a coffee-stained tooth. I grab it when I want him to look at me with his sanguine eye, my face in bloom in the centre of his iris. He snorts, warns: a whizgigging chortle. I wrap both palms around his horn like it's a monkey bar. Buffalo jungle gym! He lifts me off the ground, tosses me gently to the side.

Every day we walk like this, the two of us inventing each other as we go.

*

When we see the big wide lake black and blue ahead of us, Buffalo peals and rumbles like a great whale. The biggest fish in the lake feels it in his swim bladder.

The thing is: he is not really a *buffalo*. He likes the water, so I call him my Water Buffalo because we spend a fantastic amount of time in the lake. Technically he is not a *water* buffalo, either. Sometimes I call him Whale!Buffalo because his humped back echoes the arching backswell of a great winged rorqual. Sometimes I call him Lily.

In actual fact, he is a *North American Wood Bison*.

*

In the lake my brown skin is polished browner, my palm in contrast with the clear water cupped in my hand. The water is bruise-blue over my thighs. It is a black hole where my feet shuddle and peffle over the chasm that is the fathomless depths. *I* fathom them though, below. When Buffalo dives, he disappears into those depths, save for his two yellowed horns. His big air bubbles gallop up to the sky: his own diaphanous herd. I am caught up in the centre of their swirling, seething revolutions.

Sometimes (when I am in a trusting mood) I dive, and swim into the fathoms, my hands prows, or arrows. The Buffalo dives too, deeper, and rises underneath me, his rough furry crown a platform for my hands. Marine stampede! He launches me into air: I am a dragonfly, arms wide, and when I crash back into the water that is a true-born. Air born, like my grandmother says the birds are.

Underwater, I swim for a way before I come up for air, and Buffalo doesn't know where to find me. Buffalo treads his hairy, skinny legs in the water, his heavy head a wide plain, his eyes chocolate alarms. "It's ok Buffalo," I call. "Boo." He snorts swift, swallows water, sprays me: his nostrils are blowholes misting water, Whale!Buffalo.

Buffalo and I don't swim in our clothes. We never have. Lately I consider clothing, however. Because the girls from the outskirts have been coming to swim. Red. And Black with her, dancing; long curly dream.

*

The Buffalo disappears when the girls get in the water. He is very shy. Without him, I am nervous.

LOst

They are aware of another body splashing in the water, diving and kicking. A great beast: wild, cooling. They see a boy's flexed feet break the surface, then legs, then his naked torso: pushed out, flung, suspended over the lake. His hands appear last, prows off the bow of his body. The world inside out, reversed: the sky a lake for a moment.

The moment whorls. Gravity chalks the boy's body. Muggy humidity skims their perspective; he appears to stand upright above the water as his acceleration slows. He slips into the lake, thin feet first. Before the water closes over him, he catches Bec's eye. Sees her, and she shies.

The girls watch the boy tread water in the brooding violence of the impending summer storm. His laugh, a loud throaty toss, rolls out echo. Suna wants to bronze his brown skin with her tongue. Bec holds her breath, submerges into outer space, inner atmosphere. The threat of storm stalking lifts leaves, presses gold into the edges of the shimmering vision of the tree line Bec sees with her open eyes. Bec: streak of underwater lightning.

Suna watches thunderheads. Drifts away from Bec's side: backfloater, starlegged. Decides to peel away her shorts, her bra. Lets them sink, lets her body out to play. The lake sleeks her skin, animals her body as she swims towards the boy.

LOSStt

In the heat your long black hair sets the water on fire, trails behind you, thick fur. Your eyes black stones, mouthed. My skin moths. The storm through your wrist. The storm through your neck, snaking subterranean, teething on your hollows.

The longer I stay under without breathing, the more bad inside me dissipates and disintegrates in the pressure. Rescue my pulse from this diffusion. Don't swim away from me.

FOLLOW

"Hold your breath", the boy chatters at the girl with the long black hair. They tread water in the middle of the lake. Their heads submerge. Two concentric ripples appear on the surface, converge, and continue on to opposing shores. The storm sees the brown bodies of the boy and the girl are two curved buffalo horns, glowing, in the dark watery head of the lake.

"Catch me", gasps the surfacing girl. She dives under. Her long black dream curls and swirls around her, darts in and out between their legs, growing. It encircles the boy, a dark crop branching in the water.

He dives below her. When he looks up, the sky light is filtered through a million tender roots. He pushes them aside to reach the surface to breathe. The mossy webs tug

playfully at his knees, clutch at his wrists. He is pulled under, becomes a claw, bared at the receding light. He finds a foothold on a rock or what feels like a rough furry crown. He launches, repels through her hemming hair. Heat on the water wobbles, he scrapes her tender froth sleeking, Up! in the

sowing, crop

up

drawing, in the

OUT

gasp IN IN

the pTHRuSTmping

alveolar cavities. pried

lung surface, bloodmagnetized

Mouth meets filter, scAIRs. Tenuity palms delicious violence.

On the shore a red haired girl stands in decay. Rumble of thunder bolting her ankles. She watches Suna playing her new game, Finders Keepers.

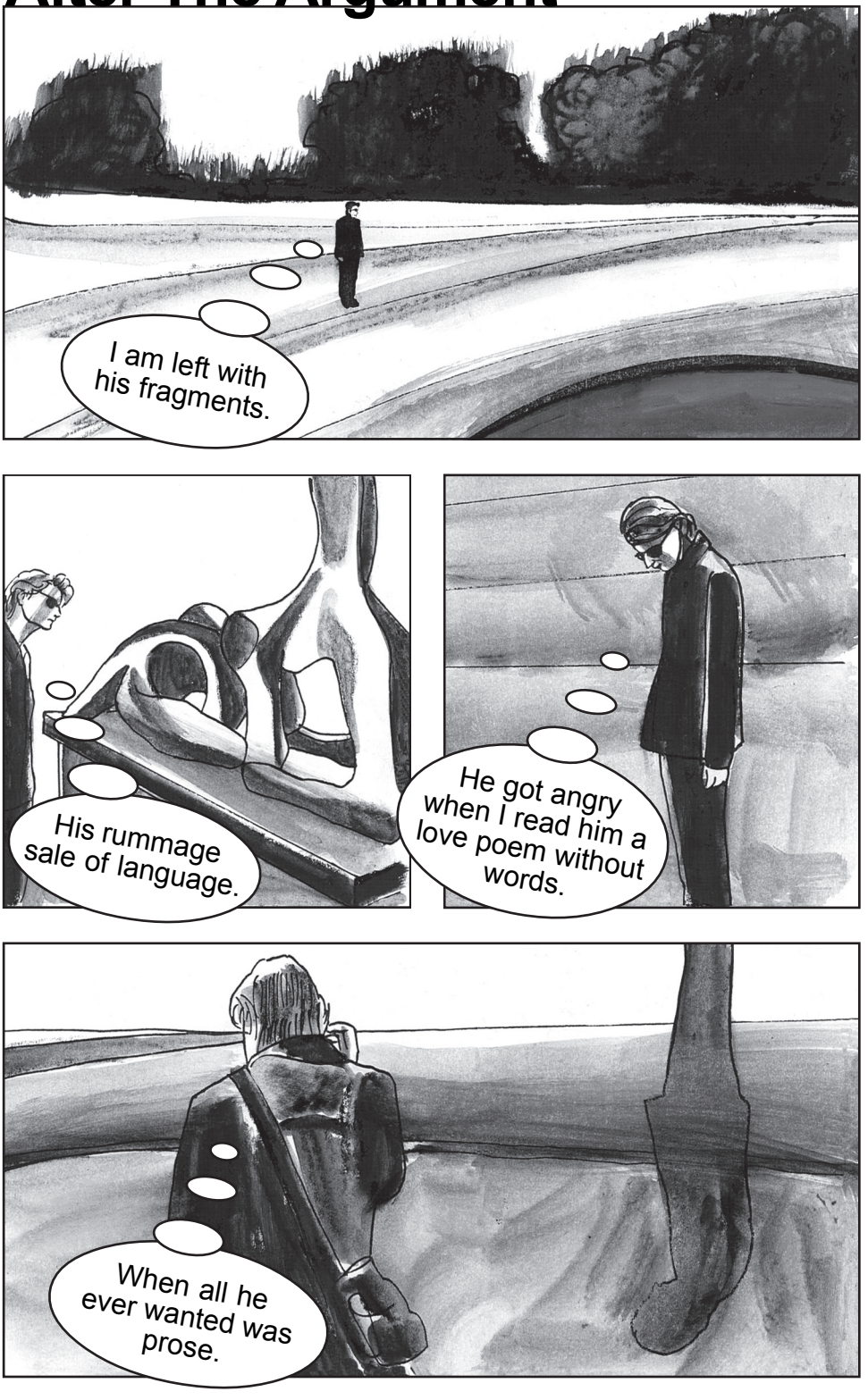
Bec is an antler falling through the soupy miasma of loss. Buffalo hides and go seeks from out of the fathoms: pale horns, thick coat gutbellows. Flashes filter, bones snap the sun out with the sound a hawk makes as it splits open aqueous. Buffalo plowing, ploughing the concrete surface of the lake as the lightning reveals. His head raised, his hooves churn froth, bubbles.

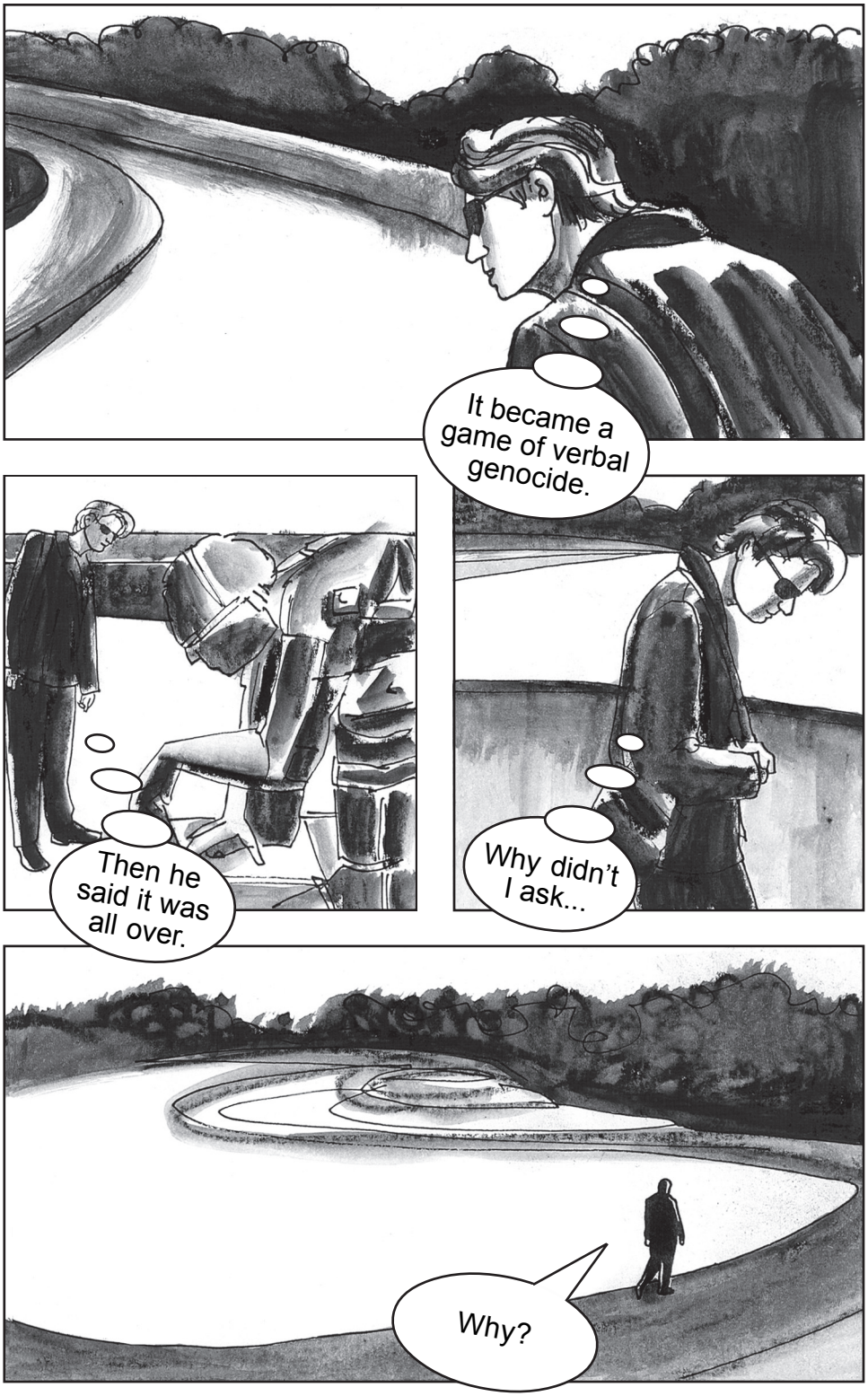
Bec, wrapped by her own wet arms, compresses time, folds into future versions of her self. The afternoon dims. A wood bison swims towards her, weaving through tender patches of waterwillow. Dark green plants, dark black hair. Bec, patch on the shore, overexposed. Thick drops plop on the water, dimpling the grey sky's reflection. Bec plays tug of clothes with her overalls, dust turning to mud where the denim brushes her wet skin. The storm peek a boos, breaksaway.

The bison plods through the shallows, each hoof suction cupped by muck. Bec holds out her trembling hand, conjuring the animal from the water. She wraps her palms around his horn, looks at herself in his iris. Blooms. Breathes the sweet thistle scent from the Buffalo's wide, wet nostril. She grabs fistfuls of his fur, hauls her body onto his humpback.

Bec: a slit of skin closed over the afternoon. Her legs hang on either side of the bison's hushing bulk, her feet: bare, like fresh scars. Found breath lost, her pulse battered out. The rain steadies rhythm on the bison's humpback while the two of them invent each other as they go.

After The Argument BY DAVID LESTER




It became a game of verbal genocide.
Then he said it was all over.
Why didn't I ask...
Why?

from THE BAD ARTS

>> AARON PECK

August was one of those friends I couldn't decide whether I liked or not. But I'd known him for years, and I spent quite a bit of time with him anyway. August and I were both writers, art writers specifically, so we had that in common and we could talk shop. We were drinking in a bar that he described as 'vintage Expo 86,' because it hadn't been renovated since the mid-eighties. Our friend Michael, who wrote for *The National Post,* had been encouraging August to write for more mainstream publications, and August was telling me how Michael had gotten him an assignment. At least you'd get paid more, Michael has said to him. And besides, Michael continued, writing for larger audiences would be a good challenge for you ("someone once told me," August paused to sip his drink, "that my own *politics were suspect* because I was friends with *bourgeois writers* like Mike. Vancouver is where fake socialists go to die"). But the thought of being paid more, I can only guess, did appeal to August. Michael had told August he could introduce him to the editor of *Passages*, a travel magazine based out of Vancouver. The production value was high and its demographic was the kind of people who lived in downtown condos. Thanks, Mike, he acquiesced. Besides, Michael continued, I'm about to quit my job so if you want me to give you the "in" right now, I can. August looked at Michael. This was the first time he'd mentioned anything about quitting his job. Michael would tell us later that he wanted to become a 'postconceptual artist.'

Michael had introduced August to the editor via email the next day, and August pitched two articles: one about real estate in the Okanagan, the other about Fes el Bali. Much to his surprise, the editor replied within a day accepting the pitch. However, the article would be about the real estate boom in the Okanagan Valley, focusing on the rise of boutique wineries. Now months later, August had failed to finish the article. An on-again, off-again affair had ended abruptly when August discovered the woman (or rather *girl*, for she was much younger) started seeing someone else and neglected to tell him. The unexpected shock of the way the affair ended exacerbated what was already a frustrating writer's block. Even after he returned from the Okanagan, the article floated in front of him like a jellyfish in an aquarium, just out of reach. It was two months overdue.

I had been thinking a lot about August (I'd heard he'd given up on the article, but I hadn't asked him about it), when Michael texted to invite me to a party. I hadn't been outside in days, already stuck in early winter doldrums, so I accepted the invitation, simply out of distraction. After we got there, I had gone off to get myself a drink, and when I returned I found Michael talking with August, who, it seemed, despite his self-professed hatred for these events, attended everything. By this point, his relations with Michael were tense. In general, August seemed awkward although I faired no better. A lot of guests, he felt, looked askew at him, or rather us, either because he was, or we were, unrecognizable or because, he said, they considered him, or perhaps us, unimportant. I was less insecure. I simply disliked the events because I didn't know what to say. August would become progressively drunker as the evening continued. Since all three of us had

graduated from the University of British Columbia together a decade ago, Michael had become a successful journalist, writing for national newspapers, while August and I only published in smaller 'critical' journals ("wallowing," as August said, "in the provincial avant-garde"). I was surprised when Michael offered August the break, and he furthered that bewilderment when he informed us that he was leaving journalism to become a 'postconceptual artist' ("when he offered to help me out I was bit taken back. I wanted to say 'no,'" said August, "but my shifts at the library had been cut in half. I was burning through my paltry savings, just on rent. But what does 'postconceptual art' even *mean*?"). And so, as I mentioned, August had accepted the offer ("they pay over a dollar a word," Michael had said to him, "and most articles are fifteen-hundred to two-thousand words, though they may start you out on a smaller assignment"). I kept running into August long after the deadline had passed; I never brought it up.

The party, for an environmental design magazine, was happening in a hotel in the West End. I scanned the crowd. Michael had already moved on and was talking to Karen Phillips, whose first novel, *Gone*, about the missing women in the Downtown Eastside, had charmed national radio ("a book about a serial killer should be uncomfortable, not assuage feelings of guilt," August hissed in my ear). I watched Michael and Karen chat—chat, indeed, being the operative word, for even at a distance their conversation announced its frivolity. She giggled, tapping his arm. He took a piece of sushi from a passing waiter and popped it in his mouth. I walked closer. They were talking about Karen's vacation plans to London. Michael noticed me: you know Karen, right? Yes, I said, we met a few years ago. Right, I remember! Hey, would you find it too forward if I asked you a personal question? We were just talking about sex, and I'm curious about something. What would the age of your hypothetical 'first child' be by now? Phillips had a reputation for non-sequiturs of a personal nature. I tried to suppress a rush of blood to my cheeks. Uh, about thirteen, I guess. How about you Michael? She smiled, pleased. Fifteen. Interesting, she said. Oh I was just joking, she brushed my forearm. We were actually talking about London. I found a plausible excuse to leave the conversation ("I'm going to go get another drink; do you want one?") and left. Their conversation reanimated. So where are you staying? I heard Michael ask as I walked away.

Both literary events and art openings are similar in that they are insufferable without alcohol. At least this party had an open bar. An elder poet once told me that all he expected was one nice meal paid for a year. I leaned against the bar and ordered bourbon. I didn't know *any* of these people.

If, as Aristotle claimed, the purpose of friendship is goodness, I wondered what I was doing here, or what, for that matter, these events were for at all. I excused myself for some fresh air and exited into the alley. A light winter rain was falling, and I stood under the canopy of a huge cedar tree. The subdued voices of the few remaining smokers

mixed with the patter of rain. The persistence of trees this size in West End alleys was one of my favorite features of the city, one of its distinguishing urban traits. I wished I were a smoker, or had some other functional reason to be outside, so as not to look ridiculous, lurking in the shadow of a huge tree. The smokers, I gathered, were discussing a new green building workspace that had opened in Gastown. In the arts, one is never supposed to be obvious about networking, because it is considered gauche. But these events, which were some vague hybrid between meeting and party, became the only event in the so-called cultural worker's life, the main way people interacted or exchanged ideas, while, at the same time, the field became more professionalized; these spaces—whether an opening at an art gallery, a reception, an event for a new publication, or even standing under the canopy of a cedar in a West End alley—become a kind of work, a kind of work that could not articulate itself as such for fear of breaching rules of etiquette. It was as if two different spheres of life, the social and the professional, the public and private, had become superimposed, the way a painter might cover an earlier composition with a new layer of paint, the traces of the previous still visible through the second surface. As such, events like this were complex, even more so to negotiate. First there was the practical 'work' aspect of the evening, the one everyone indeed acknowledged, the fact that we gathered because of a shared vocation, field or at least aspiration. This acknowledgement was complicated by another fact: the fact that most people knew each other so that a complex web of associations, affiliations, acquaintances, friendships and romances governed the event. All of these were more generally subsumed by the term 'friendship'—"we're all friends here," so that the professional world absorbed the social. There was no escape from work, in the same way there was no escape from capital, the work world just visible beneath the social. I noticed the painter Emma Brown, who must have been here to support one of her students, join the smoker's circle. I had written about Emma's work, which I liked, although I didn't know her very well, and I went over to talk. Soon I was back inside the party.

Michael and I were standing in a crowd. Tony, that portly architecture critic, approached us, a champagne flute in one hand and pamphlets for a recent exhibition he'd curated in the other. He passed us each a pamphlet. It's for a show I'm curating in London, he declared. I'll be there for two weeks, and then I'm off to Dubai. You should talk to Karen, Michael added, because she's going to London too. Then Tony moved on. Michael again raised his eyebrow at me. I could see him eyeing Karen, who had already been approached by Tony and were in conversation. I needed another drink. I saw August in a crowd of people. His gestures had become loose. I heard that after I left he had threatened to throw his shoes at someone during a joke that had gone too far. Apparently, he had even taken one shoe off and wielded it like a club. But before that, he was telling jokes, commanding a crowd. He and Michael didn't speak for the rest of the night. I walked up a flight of stairs to the bar.

From the mezzanine, I espied Michael through a banister, talking to Karen. Michael was a friend, and I respected him as such, even if I was jealous of his success.

There was no point in being derisive simply because I could not control myself. At times it strained our friendship, probably inexplicably for him, unless of course he suspected my jealousy, in which case, I could imagine, he was condescending to me by suspecting me of being jealous, which of course in reality I was. But if he suspected as much, I figured it was because he thought himself better than me, and I would not stand to be condescended like that, and, well, we would, of course, have to fight or become estranged, or perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself, and it was unfair not to tell him what my issues were. Why had he helped August out and only invited me to a party? Most of the time, we were on good enough terms that such tensions were minimal. I was standing in a crowd of people, feigning laughter, more nerves than affectation. And now as I saw him through the banister, he had somehow thwarted my jealously. He was laughing. Again I walked toward him. I tried to open my mouth, but nothing would come out. I wanted to say something to him, to thank him perhaps, to say that what he had done for August was a good thing, even if he didn't finish the article, I don't know, to say something, to make him aware that his friendship mattered to me, even through the muted jealousy, but I could think of nothing—I wanted to, I began—and then fell silent. He raised his eyebrow and smirked. What are you smiling at? I asked. Oh nothing, he continued to smirk, it's nothing.

PERIPETY

>> TED BYRNE

1

I set out from home one morning not knowing where the day would take me. My indirection was deliberate. The previous night the caretaker had announced, despondently, that we don't know half of what we need to know merely to get by in this world. I went to bed wondering where one might gain the other half of knowledge. Momentarily, my wondering became a delirium of division within which I briefly drifted, before plunging into sleep, inadvertently having counted myself, by fractions of knowledge unknown, into an unusually deep slumber. After a seemingly dreamless night, I awoke with a single thought : "from others". I remembered Ibn Arabi's peripatetic interrogation of the saints, which had inspired an earlier fugue, long forgotten until now. This while I spread a tablespoon of Seville marmalade on my toast and listened for the stovetop espresso maker to clear its throat. The marmalade, the memory of Andalusia, where I'd never been, and the sudden aroma of arabica helped me identify my present mood, or rather state of mind, which I have always—based on superficial readings in psychology—characterized as "borderline". In such states—infrequent I should add—my perceptions become unusually perspicacious, and significance is overtaken by meaning. As I finished my small breakfast, a familiar voice on the national radio advised me that the war had not abated since the formation of the provisional government; that the steel mill, where I operate a crane, was still threatened by closure; that the anticipated rain had not begun to fall; and that traffic was moving swiftly on the expressways that circumvent our city. Only one of these things did not matter to me. I decided to take my heightened senses out into the Sunday morning stillness and see what might occur.

There was no one on the stair. I was relieved, despite the purpose of my adventure, for I was anxious to breathe the morning air. It was early, in fact earlier than I would normally rise even on a workday. I could hear Mr. Orsini—a carpenter, funny to say—snoring through his front door, or rather through his buccal cavity, the *sound* of which cut easily through those two inches of wood. Above the rasp of his snoring I could hear an unmodulated electric hum. He must have fallen asleep on the couch. I could smell the nasty aroma of over-fried eggs, but could not pinpoint its source. I wondered if smell is less directional than hearing. One of the innumerable things I did not know. This reminder of my ignorance did not dishearten, but rather encouraged me in my project. It was not that I thought I could fill such vacancies by simply asking around. It was only that I felt engaged, and mildly surprised that my enthusiasm had not yet waned, as it tends to. It was regrettable, and I regretted the fact, that my undertaking had no topic, no singular or even general realm of inquiry of the sort that motivated the Andalusian, or even the pilgrims of Christian literature, who now came to mind, but I felt that, perhaps, even without destination or guide, a question might take form within the broad general sentiment that inspired me, the sentiment that the known was immensely smaller than the unknown, not the half of it after all, but an infinitesimal fragment which I could not

quantify, or which, at least, my arithmetic endeavours had not arrived at before sleep. I remembered the crackpot inventors of my childhood in the East End and nominated myself crackpot philosopher, right there on the front steps where I had arrived without incident, pleased with my progress. A singsong voice sounded somewhere close by, mocking me. "What now little man?" I grasped the ball of the newel post, the nearest fixed object. A flood of reference assailed me. It was the voice of Pinocchio, his first utterance from within the uncarved *pezzo di legno*. I lifted my hands in horror. "You are old, father William," the voice advised, now clearly from within my cranium. I grasped the ball again, more tightly, maintaining my balance on the edge of a chasm, taking the side of things. It was the familiar, the homely, the feminine. I was filled with calm. I thought I might lift the object high and kiss it squarely on its dependable circularity. Too many books, too many late shows, I said to myself, giving my head a shake. A momentary itch made me tense my sphincter. Piles. An occupational hazard. I resisted the temptation to scratch my ass, there on the front steps in the splendid, muted morning light. My dignity addressed me. The sky was gray, the air cool before a rain that may not fall.

My feet were light on the pavement. I counted my steps, trying to synchronize them with my breath. When this failed to calm the stable of mentation, I resorted to another exercise, one that I call finding a way through the maze, and which others may call thinking. It doesn't matter where you start, the only rule is that each item in the series, each turn of thought, must retain a relation to all of those that preceded, and yet never cross paths with itself. This game is always short lived in the absence of writing, mnemonics, or a more elaborate rhetorical structure, but it amuses me. More often than not it puts me to sleep, which is its usual employment. Sometimes I deploy this procedure in the form of a dialogue. For example, on that occasion—and this, of course, is not an authentic example, being as I am, momentarily, in the throes of writing, nor is it pertinent, but rather impertinent, since I can no longer recall the details of the play—I may have suggested to myself, as a provocation, that fear was at the root of my present predicament, and not levity, not the lightness that now infused my waking thought, its simplicity and forwardness, nor the lightness that had equally overtaken my corpulence.

But why draw such a finite emotion out of an empty day yet to be filled with worship or companionship?

One looks to the underside of things as a kind of ballast. And besides, levity is not the absence of fear but its mask.

The same could be said of courage, but if one is spurred by fear, one is moved only by courage.

Let's say they act in concert, but not in harmony.

And so on.

Hardly a block from my doorstep, assailed by the thought that I'd forgotten something essential, no doubt the instigator of a word or phrase occurring in the game, which thus, ricocheting, opened a breach in the game itself, I fell out of my labours and into my surroundings. Rather than becoming a momentary obsession, the forgotten was swept away by the unremembered, the utter unfamiliarity of this pavement, with its bits of aggregate, of pebble and glass, of these trees leaning toward me, of these houses, that godforsaken sky. I looked across at the slate roof of an early Victorian building, and along its edge I saw the finely articulated division between infinity and the content of our dreams, between sky and roof edge, light and lit.

2

The thing that happened with my head wouldn't a happened if I hadn't a bin so stubborn to let that blasted thief go. Or so I'm told. I don't remember. He mighta conked me with a block a wood or a hammer or it mighta bin more like an accident fallin an hittin my noggin on one a them darn rocks. The rock garden was my idea. I saw it in one a them magazines from England. The wife was all crazy about it but she didn't have to carry them darn rocks down from the creek. After that I had these awful headaches like somethin was pressin hard on my forehead. I couldn't take the least bit a sound, or light from the window, or anybody touchin me even on the foot. And I'd forget things. Not things like where did I leave my umbrella, but things like where do I live. Or I'd black out again like I did when I hit my head. I'd be in Palm's saloon maybe an couldn't figger out how I got there or where I'd bin since I left the market. It worried me a bit because a workin with knives. I didn't tell anybody because you know where that gets you. I just thought I'd wait an see if it got worse or if it got better. Sometimes it was kinda funny, like somebody'd say Did ya think about that offer I made ya an I'd say Yeah I thought about it long an hard – have you given it any more thought yerself? Or the wife'd say I was a sore loser and I couldn't even remember what game we was playin or if maybe she meant I'd given in to another of her crazy ideas like the rock garden an bin grumblin about it. Or no that was my idea but it might a bin hers. Another thing is I'd get mad at any little thing or other an wouldn't even know what I was riled about I'd just be shoutin an swearin sayin damn an hell an gettin everybody upset. One time the neighbours even called the police cause I was yellin at the wife an started throwin things an makin a ruckus. I never hit her though. They say there's some things even a crazy person won't do because a his morals. But I do believe I killed Nelson Mills even if I don't remember it. It's bin told t'me so many times now I almost feel like I do remember it. I sure do remember what I was mad about. The justice of it. And I do remember even pickin up one a my big Sheffield knives an thinkin

I'd kill the son of a bee. And I remember the long walk up Queen Street in the afternoon. It was strange because it wasn't dark. But I don't remember the murderin part. Not that they're wrong to say I meant to do it. I just don't think I would of if I was in my right mind. I showed Dr Workman some a the books on phrenology an even though he seemed to think the same as me he wasn't about to hear any scientific talk from a butcher.

3

The redirection of my gaze was accompanied by the sensation of a wing passing over the strings of an instrument, soft and tonic, followed by a voice pronouncing, in a descending tone, the words : "The Penultimate is dead," in such a manner that "the Penultimate" ended a line, and "is dead" was detached from this fatidic suspension, uselessly, in the void of signification. A few steps down the street, recognizing in the "nul" sound the taut string of the musical instrument, which had been forgotten, and which glorious Remembrance had surely just visited with its wing, or with a palm branch, finger on the artifice of mystery, I smiled and implored my intellectual impulses for an alternative speculation. But the phrase returned, virtual, disengaged from any anterior descent of feather or frond, heard now through the voice, until, finally, with its proper articulation, it pulsed with its own singularity. I continued on (no longer content with a perception) reading it as a line-ending and, once, as an experiment, adapting it to my own speech, and soon pronouncing it with a silence after "Penultimate", finding there a painful joyance : "The Penultimate", and then the string of the instrument, stretched and forgotten on the "nul" sound, undoubtedly broke, as I added like a prayer : "Is dead." I had not abandoned my attempts to return to more productive thoughts, making the submission, to calm myself, that "penultimate" is the technical term signifying the second to last syllable of a vocable, and its apparition here but the unsuccessfully abjured trace of a daily linguistic labour by which my noble poetic faculty, weeping, suffers interruption : but the very sonority, and the air of dishonesty assumed, in haste, by this facile affirmation was itself a cause of torment. Seriously bothered now, I resolved to allow those sorrowful words to wander freely on my lips, and I continued on murmuring, with a susceptible tone of condolence : "The Penultimate is dead, she's dead, surely dead, beyond all hope, the Penultimate," believing that I could thereby satisfy my inquietude, not without the secret hope of entombing it in the amplification of psalmody when, horror! – from a readily deducible and nervous magic—I felt that I had found, my hand reflected in the window of a shop in the gesture of a caress that descended on something, the voice itself (the first one, which undoubtedly had been the only one).

But where the intervention of the supernatural irrecusably installed itself, together with the beginnings of that anxiety under which my spirit, erstwhile master, agonizes, was the moment I saw, raising my eyes, in the block of old brownstones I'd instinctively

entered, that I was standing before the music shop, old string instruments hung on the wall and, on the floor, yellow palm branches and the wings, buried in shadow, of ancient birds. I fled, a bizarre soul, condemned to mourn the inexplicable Penultimate.

Sources: "The McConnell Case," Joseph Workman, MD, *Canadian Journal of Medical Science*, March, April and May, 1876; "Le Démon de l'Analogie," Stéphane Mallarmé, 1864.

from LIKE GODS

>> GEORGE K. ILSLEY

1) RIMBAUD'S NEW BOOK

the inspirational energy of black holes
on a stage falling, hitting bottom

Wolfgang's new book is a new book every time he describes the project.

Wolfgang explains that his new book is built from the many threads of a convoluted story. The fabric of Vancouver is fascinating, Wolfgang says. Hard to explain. But that convoluted fabric is why the Vancouver that is given to us is not the Vancouver that used to be, or the Vancouver we think it is. Vancouver wants to be world class and it is world class but what it has is world class sleaze. Vancouver is a city built on vice just the same way the port of New Orleans was built on drugs and sex and the profits of sin. Vancouver is the New Orleans of Canada but does not get anywhere near the recognition that New Orleans gets despite a similar accomplishment as decadent hotbed. A sin city. What Wolfgang calls Vancouver starts with the words "The whore of the Pacific Rim … ".

Wolfgang is seduced by obsessions. He cherishes his "Rimbaud moments." He romanticized the allure of dangerous antics, the glamour of living hard and dying young, blaming so much on Rimbaud's dubious influence. Rimbaud's early acclaim illuminates Wolfgang's many lingering failings. A Rimbaud moment is when destruction beckons more powerfully than determination, when the slippery slope glistened, as if glazed by the drippings of good intentions. When shooting your lover is a sweet trick, and ultimately moving, but not fatal. When the addict says yes please now and made perfect sense. Because now is the only time. You are only young once. Party on. Party like a hard verb run into the ground. Dropping beat from overuse. There was a flare of streetlights streaking across the sky, or else Wolfgang simply fell down. He doesn't remember exactly how he got there, but he hit bottom. And he hit bottom hard, although not that hard, as they say, because he was still alive. At least that much. Still alive. He was alive although he said that sometimes he wished he wasn't. Being alive and being sober is something that Wolfgang obviously thinks he has to mock. The cure for sobriety is a seriously cynical fucked up sense of humour. Being alive and being sober barely registers on the Rimbaud Scale of divine decadence which used to rock Wolfgang's aspirational universe, and rock it hard. Wolfgang claimed a 10 year overall average on the Rimbaud Scale of seven out of 10 for pure debauchery, nine out of 10 for shameless addiction to deadly intoxicating substances, and 10 out of 10 for the sordid fucking poetry of it all. Yes—the 1990's.

There was no talking back at Gay AA, so people do not comment on the drama of Wolfgang's monologue. Some theatrical presentations are much clearer to the eye than others, and maybe because of the natural-born storyteller in Wolfgang, the storyteller who would not shut up, as it were, even here at Gay AA he was clearing putting on a show. Drama is inebriating, a contact sport. Activates our empathic systems. We feel for others. We feel their pain.

Even cynicism has feelings.

There was a rule at AA: No hitting on the newcomers.

Rules like this were never conceived as applying to Wolfgang. Rules were for dead people, people choked to stillness by inhibitions. Rimbaud hit on newcomers, and later confessed in large lurid detail. Going out in a big way is not rewarded in the program but sick self-destructive types offer a deep reflective kinship. We all know how sick we are, and we are all very sick. There is so much pressure on the gay alcoholic to be hugely dramatic, especially when one instinctively achieves high production values and can only aim higher, can only keep raising the bar. Or lowering the bar, as it turns out. Lowering the bar and playing a kind of gay limbo, which is not gay, and not a limbo but straight down to hard impact. Luckily, Gay AA is ultimately extremely accepting. Keep coming back. Fake it till you make it. Let go and let god.

Rimbaud re-invents himself and is never sent to de-tox. Rimbaud never held hands in a circle and recited the serenity prayer. Rimbaud was a teenage sensation and then turned his back on poetry. Rimbaud was a fuck-up, a prodigy, and a survivor. A dragon-chaser shot twice by his same-sex lover, once in Paris and once in Brussels, who forgave everything and then turned his back on love, on artistic aspiration, on transcendence, declaring the irrelevance of poetry and poets, and saw a future in arms, not words.

Wolfgang has yet to repeat the success he achieved with his first silly little book, *Hugging Without Ecstasy,* and admires (with a feeling akin to nausea) the charming brutality of Rimbaud, the decisive giving-up. Yes. Why write another word?

Why indeed.

Wolfgang makes a hollow, aging Rimbaud. Rimbaud was the name of the addict inside Wolfgang. It was so plain to see that in him, and this helps others to imagine their addicts and see how they tried to take over and make all the decisions in exactly the wrong way. The group provides the mirror, and helps the individual find the self. Recovery is all about sidelining the addict, and recovering oneself. And finding the connections one has to the world.

Whenever he was feeling Rimbaud, having a Rimbaud moment, Wolfgang was apt to explode. Passion was volatile. Unpredictable. Also there is a sense of entitlement, nurtured by the frustrated dreams of youth, that inhibition normally keeps in check.

Rimbaud had no inhibitions. Inhibitions destroyed freedom and Rimbaud insisted he was free to destroy and free to walk away.

There is a certainty in youth who are free from inhibitions. The certainty of youth fuels the sort of divine optimism that inspired brashness, and enables the fruits of brashness to be accepted with an understated, concentrated, grace.

Concentrations of youth are startling because they are alive, and they look alive, and like any living energy field aspiring to become a black hole, all becomes One.

Rimbaud means always starring himself.

Rimbaud was always on the stage, always full of aspirational energy, always on, and

possessed of the charm and the power and the glory turned others on, and then—he left them wanting more.

He walked away. And became an arms dealer in Africa. But that is another story. Rimbaud the arms merchant in the horn of Africa is not the same Rimbaud as the Rimbaud who overshadows Wolfgang.

Rimbaud who walked away (and spent years in Abyssinia before ending up dying young after all) is not the Rimbaud who inspires Wolfgang.

In his sprawling unpredictable obsessions, Wolfgang on one day might be full of Charles Richter, of the eponymous Richter scale, and dire predictions of earthquakes and devastating tsunamis. Or Wolfgang could be all Tesla this, Tesla that, Tesla and Turing and the invention of the modern world. Now Wolfgang is suddenly and rather unexpectedly very enthusiastic about the metaphoric implications of the golden age of Christian nudity in the U. S. of A.

Somewhat surprisingly, the golden age for American social nudists (who were, by and large, upper middle class and Christian) was the 1930's to the 1950's.

In a blur of magic realism, research into Richter and public nudity begin to converge.

Charles Richter turns out to have been a nudist in California, and his particular brand of public nudity was not confined to camp. His free range nudism was found outside at night near his home, in the moonlight, wandering through the hills of southern California.

Charles Richter is connected to the story of Vancouver because of earthquakes and the Richter scale. The golden age of public nudity is connected to Vancouver only tangentially, because of the famous "clothing optional" beach in Vancouver, but as Wolfgang emphasizes, even a tangental reference is enough to tell Vancouver's story. If you bring enough tangents together, you form the shape of the circle where the tangents all meet, a circle on a map indicating a metropolis above a certain population here on the west coast of Canada.

A circle on a map and a convoluted fabric. A concentration of earthquake denial, and Wreck Beach nudists sprawled in the sun, tanning for the tsunami. Gay addicts holding hands in a circle and asking for wisdom.

Vancouver is the city in a circle.

A treeless rain forest formed by the touch of tangents.

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2) IN THE PROGRAM

the meaning of *always*
on a *day to day basis*

They say you always have a drinking problem. You can be sober for years and still be an alcoholic.

It's hard to hear sometimes what they say in the program. It is hard to hear when it seems too familiar, or too clear, too full of meaning. Gregor had counted on all his problems disappearing—if he quit drinking. It took a while and then he finally did quit. But instead of being behind him, the problems were all still with him. Not in the past, not left behind with the bottle, but a day at a time still with him.

Gregor had expected to quit all his problems at once. He quit drinking and yet, this is when his problems really began. They took on new strength. He removed booze from the balancing act and nothing else stayed in place. Drinking had held it together, made everything workable in a fucked-up way. In the upside down alternate universe without alcohol, things fell out all over. It was like stumbling sober—and clearly seeing how badly you are walking. Stone cold sober, alone in his stillness, Gregor finally had to deal with all the noise he had been drowning out. Had to deal with relentless battering waves of shame and hopelessness. Had to deal with all the rawness and soreness and awfulness fermenting in a toxic shame spiral.

And so Gregor dealt with all that stuff, all the toxic self-talk, and dealt with it, and dealt with it, and now his problems are worse than ever. Which brings us to where we are now.

For a while there it seemed like Gregor had been sober a long time already. But now, coming up to five years on the 20th of August, in the year 2000, it doesn't seem very long at all. Five years is such a short time. For what's important, five years is nothing.

It feels so funny to say. Two thousand.

Time is so flexible and even how you feel about it is flexible. This is why a day at a time is actually very helpful. Just for today makes all other thoughts about time irrelevant.

And so this time Gregor has been sober, one day at a time, good days and bad days, for five years now. And five years does not seem long at all any more. The first five years, as they say in the program, is just the beginning. You see, when Gregor first went to Gay AA, shaky and scared, really scared, it was Wolfgang who took him under his wing. It was Wolfgang who reached out, who acted as a temporary sponsor, who insisted Gregor phone him at any time. They talked for hours. Wolfgang was an anchor, a lifeline, a godsend. Wolfgang was solid and supportive and truly inspirational. He was the best cliché at exactly the right moment. Wolfgang reached out and Gregor was steadied and saved. Saved from what he was becoming, and saved from the denial of what he was.

Gregor's life turned around.

Then, just like that one day, they flipped.

Wolfgang went out, as they say, out of the program. He picked up, as they say, he picked up drugs and alcohol, and then it was Gregor, ironically, who was strong and sober and reaching out. It was Gregor who caught him after he fell and dragged him out of the clinging debris. It was Gregor who inspired by example. Who was talking the talk and walking the walk.

This pattern asserts itself and becomes the new normal. The first thing that had happened, Wolfgang as nurturer, was a total fluke but it was like cement between them. Wolfgang did help Gregor quit drinking. Wolfgang was instrumental in Gregor achieving the first 90 days, and the first 90 days are a seed crystal everything builds on after that. There is no doubt that Wolfgang crystallized Gregor's sobriety; a contribution as unmistakable as the one Wolfgang makes to his own on again off again recovery.

Wolfgang and Gregor have stepped into a pattern that seems like it has always existed.

Gregor is a caretaker, and Wolfgang is a crazy maker.

Gregor is a wounded healer and Wolfgang is a drama junkie.

Gregor needs someone to take care of, and Wolfgang just needs.

Wolfgang goes in and out of the program and this drives Gregor nuts.

Wolfgang loves the drama. Wolfgang cannot get enough drama. Fuck-ups have drama. A strong steady recovery is deadly boring. Boring and really kind of depressing on a day to day basis. Because nothing suddenly happens.

Wolfgang goes out and comes back. At least he keeps coming back. He has a relapse and then he comes back and swans about in the pink cloud and feels absolutely alive with the sense of possibility. Tingling all over from the concentrated hopefulness of that pink cloud. It is all very excessive, what Wolfgang does, and does so much of, in his own special and unpredictable way.

This is called research, exploring the drinking life and watching how far it will take you, going out and doing some research. Until you finally learn what you need to know.

Wolfgang agrees it is research. The bars are full of people, he says, who love to talk. Bursting with ideas for the book they are going to write. This is where Wolfgang gets material. The difference is, Wolfgang actually sits down and writes. He fleshes out these ideas. This is not stealing, Wolfgang emphasizes, because none of those drunks sprawled in the bars are ever going to do anything except talk about writing. Every drunk has a project they talk about but never lift a finger toward.

Aren't you also one of those drunks in the bar?

Gregor, Wolfgang says after a moment. Gregor—the difference is, and you are forgiven if you cannot see the difference, but the difference is that there is a difference.

At least I am forgiven.

Yes. You are.

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3) POETRY v. EARTHQUAKES

Charles Richter, the scientist, finds himself unable to predict when a poem will happen

Charles was known at Sunshine, the popular nudist camp in the hills outside Los Angeles, and yet he was not really that knowable. He was transparent and open, straightforward—and yet opaque.

What was known was confusing. Charles did something at that Caltech institute in Pasadena. He was a scientist, some said a physicist, although few at Sunshine agreed on what it was a physicist did. Richter did something with numbers, and was widely rumoured to go nude *au sauvage,* not just at camp. He worked with numbers, and waves, and was comparing earthquakes to decide which ones really were the big ones. He said his field was paleoseismology, a geological subspecialty, the study of ancient earthquakes, but combined with math—and that made it physics.

Charles Richter talked a lot about earthquakes, was studying the records and reports and comparing this big one and that big one. Loved talking about some place called New Madrid, in the Mississippi River Valley, and always said to expect the unexpected, which he claimed was good sound math. He could also talk a lot about the reasons why it was better to be vegetarian, which he said is just plain good sense.

Some people don't understand vegetarian any more than they speak physics. Charles wasn't married either, and this was at least potentially the problem at Sunshine.

The problem was that Charles was rumoured to be a womanizer. In fact, if you can believe what you hear, he walked naked at night through the hills of southern California reciting poetry. The reputation alone was enough to cause trouble. People wonder when they hear about poetry. Science is one thing to overlook, but poetry another. They wonder how he got the reputation, what was really true. The poetaster scientist. Women especially are prone to be touched by the thought of poetry in the night time, and tame nakedness in wild places. The sun shines all over at Sunshine, and women wonder how much about the physicist was true. Women wonder about womanizers. But this one seemed oblivious, most of the time, in person, either the oblivious scientist or the oblivious poem-quoter … so how exactly could he have been a womanizer?

It was a mystery how whatever happened happened. A mystery to Charles at least, because what suddenly happened each and every time was something that a woman did. She touched him and said yes. That was how it always happened. It was women who made Charles a womanizer, obviously—he could never have achieved the distinction all by himself.

Charles did not talk about women or brag about his accomplishments, and pretended to be naive, which was easy, because in a way he was. But he attracted attention at Sunshine, because he went for long walks at night. And the poetry. A poetry recital could turn into quite the monotonous fountain of words. He was a womanizer without being the least bit seductive, and that made women who were normally immune to womanizers

reach out to him, and pull him close. These women, normally immune, wanted to feel what he was made of; and so, without being seductive, he became extremely touchable. He was a paradox, and a paradox is attractive even if you can't understand why this is so.

Charles talked poetry and he talked physics and some people did not find his plain words any easier to accept than ideas about numbers or waves. There was an order of magnitude to his opinions as well as to his relentless math. The magnitude showed in the way he walked naked, outside all boundaries, not just at Sunshine, but also many places where he was really not supposed to be naked. He walked naked at night through the hills of California. With coyotes and bats. And moths. The San Andreas fault purring at his feet. A whisper of night wings overhead.

He wished, he said, to define the essence of poetry. A scientist starts with an analysis of pertinent variables. Richter approached poetry as if it were another kind of physics, an encoded equation of portents, tension, and resolution. All variables free to be substituted at any time. If the equation works, the poem is right.

What makes a poem a poem then and what makes an earthquake happen? These are the concerns of the naked scientist as he strode through the quicksilver hills, a eucalyptus tang in the night air. There were definite equations for patterns of things (a portent = ominous + foreshadowing; geology + math = physics). But in the big picture, what were the deciding variables and how did they interact? Poems can be worked on and worked on and never become a poem. Much work can be wasted in poetry—despite what Newton ever said about the conservation of energy.

Earthquakes at least can be counted on to eventually materialize. Earthquakes happen all the time, this is what Charles keeps telling people at Sunshine, when not talking about poetry or math or speaking vegetablist. Earthquakes are happening all the time, they are always happening, a little bit each and every day. And then what happens is that all of a sudden we see the earthquake. We notice what has been happening. Suddenly that half-inch a day shows up on the surface, and this piece of the world trips up and to the north twenty feet, and that chunk goes south.

We say, wow, an earthquake. But really underneath the earth has been moving all along, and we are just now noticing the earthquake reach the surface. Underneath there is always movement. Yes, in a poem too. Underneath there is always movement, even if we can't see it. Today.

Subtle movements are hard to measure, but not impossible. Buried tensions add pressure, also difficult to calibrate, both in terms of energy potential and possible impact on a range of targets. All those who have staked their careers on predicting earthquakes have been made to look foolish. Predicting a poem is equally perilous.

The physics of poetry is something Charles Richter prefers to think about late at night, naked in the not-quite-darkness, the moan of coyotes filling the false dawn.

4) GOING OUT

to go out and come back
the cycle of life flushes clockwise

Wolfgang says going out is better than just giving up entirely. Wolfgang says he is going out every chance he gets. Wolfgang says he is never going out again. Wolfgang claims not to know why he went out when he did. He doesn't know what happened, at that time. Life is unmanageable. Whatever it is that takes him over. It is all unmanageable. He accepts that now. He really does. This time for sure he really gets the message.

Wolfgang couldn't possibly pay attention to all the rules in recovery circles. Some rules are way more convenient to ignore. "No dating the newcomers" made no sense to Wolfgang. From either side of that fence, it made no sense to not be hooking up with at least some of the more attractive newcomers. Wolfgang was himself repeatedly a newcomer, sort of, and if he embraced restrictive guidelines he feared he would embrace little else. Besides, dating newcomers is how he met Gregor. That's how it began, even if that is not where it went.

The irony here is that Gregor is now sober, and has been since they met, and Wolfgang is still doing crucial research in the field.

Wolfgang goes out and then he comes back. He goes out and comes back. Going out and coming back. It is what people do. The program stresses that spiritual recovery is a path, not a destination, and this approach helps people not feel like such fuck-ups when they fuck up.

Wolfgang hits on brand newcomers, and talks a mound of shit. Of course, shit stinks uncontrollably. The bad example, the forced cheerful thrust at self-destruction, can be an object lesson, serving to reinforce conviction instead of leading the wavering astray. You never know what will happen or why. So many went out and came back according to fleeting whims of mood and personal drama. Wolfgang was nowhere near so egocentric as to imagine he had any influence in these matters. No, don't be ridiculous. In fact, Wolfgang had to assert himself to even be noticed, to make any headway against the extreme numbness of newcomers.

There is nothing sadder, Wolfgang would say to some pale creature with redeeming attributes, such as a fine brow or cute ears, but for the moment vulnerable and downcast, flat-eyed, looking both bloated and drained, someone with precious few days of withdrawal from their drug of choice, long horrifying hours where sober feels like nothing but emotional pain without emotional painkillers, Wolfgang will tell these guys, these scared, fucked-up, fragile, weeping sores, yeah, there's nothing sadder than a bunch of sober fucking drunks.

Sometimes, Wolfgang would nudge, an undercurrent of excitement lifting his voice, it just makes more sense to drink. Doesn't it? Sure helps the time go by. Otherwise, you keep coming here, you'll just end up becoming some kind of alcoholic. A sober fucking

drunk.

Look at them! With a graceful swoop, Wolfgang's backhand dismissed the room.

Wolfgang mocked the program, when he went. If he showed up, he mocked. Attending meetings gave him the ammunition he needed for proper mocking. When he was going out, there was no need to put down the program. It was not worth the attention. He was having too much fun to even think about those sad-sack losers at Gay AA, who can't open their mouths without spewing pus everywhere. Wolfgang was having way too much fun to ever think about those depressing pus-sacs. He was having all kinds of fun. Hysterical fun of the nature where he wakes in the stairwell of a building in the West End streaked with puke. His puke probably, all down his front, but maybe someone else's puke, he really didn't know. No wallet, no money, no keys. No memory. Hilarious. Wolfgang was going out and having so much fun he couldn't even remember big chunks of it.

And yet he denies—to this day, he denies that he ever has blackouts.

5) BELIEVING v. FORGETTING

A Vancouver clear cut
flood-planed landscape of denial

Wolfgang does not mention it as much as he used to, but his first book, *Hugging Without Ecstasy*, an edgy short fiction collection featuring the club kids of some unnamed west coast North American city, was a minor sensation in certain small circles who pay attention to such things as edgy short fiction by unknown authors. Reviewers amused themselves—momentarily—with variations on the word "rave."

Wolfgang's new book is about something different every time Wolfgang talks about it. And talk about it he does.

His new book, today, is loosely based on Charles Richter, now famous for the Richter scale, and his experiences as a physicist, a nudist, and a womanizing vegetarian with Asperger's syndrome. This new book is part of Wolfgang's dream. This time around, he wants to write something specifically and definitely about Vancouver. The structure and content of this dream novel is subject to constant revision and the necessary stretching. Research, even accidental research, keeps uncovering new things to include. Or to at least reference somehow.

The best thing about Vancouver is its history, Wolfgang declares, provocatively. People say Vancouver has no history, but that is so not true. The history of Vancouver is short and dense. The history of Vancouver is largely about forgetting and moving forward.

Yes, we keep forgetting where we live.

This is where Charles Richter comes into the story, even though he has the slimmest physical connection to Vancouver, because earthquakes too are part of Vancouver's history, but a part that is much overlooked. Vancouver's history is one of earthquakes, floods and fire. Any city that burns to the ground in forty-five minutes one morning is off to one heck of a start, in terms of establishing itself as a phoenix-like monstrosity that destroys the past and builds in the ashes.

When people on the west coast talk about earthquakes, they think California. They can name the San Andreas fault. But when people talk about earthquakes who know about earthquakes, they talk about Alaska 1964. The Good Friday earthquake in Alaska 1964 qualifies as one of the biggest since scales fell from the eyes of earthquake researchers such as Richter, and Mercalli, and others whose names never took root.

There is always a dispute of course about how big any particular earthquake might be, but by all accounts Alaska 1964 is one of the biggest. It was a monster. The resulting tsunami struck far down the west coast, and in the middle of Vancouver Island, took out the government docks in Port Alberni, at the head of Alberni Inlet, 35 miles up the fjord. Incredibly, no one was killed in British Columbia, but California was not so lucky. Crescent City, California was built on a beautiful cove, a site which native Americans, having lost a village in a previous disaster, called "the land of the sudden waters", and

deemed unsuitable for housing. The tsunami from the 1964 Alaska earthquake destroyed 39 blocks of Crescent City and dozens were killed.

So there is Alaska, and there is California, and what is right here in the middle? We are asleep here, asleep in the land of denial, stretched out along the ribs of the San Andreas. Not all fault lines have names people. The Lower Mainland is asleep on a delta of dreams, resting on sediments brought from somewhere else and left here, a whole sprawling blight built on the silt of wilful blindness and hopeful delusion.

Vancouver is a world class city living out the last days of civilization and rushing to catch up with the rest of the world.

As a lens to view history, Vancouver becomes whatever it is that Vancouver is becoming. Do you see?

No, I don't, Gregor admitted.

Wolfgang sighed. "Maybe I should just stick to nudists."

"Vegetarian nudists."

"Yes that's right. Vegetarian scientist nudists."

Wolfgang always has new projects and Gregor only listens with half an ear. He has learned not to invest too much in Wolfgang's enthusiastic outpourings. Even though Wolfgang's enthusiasm, by its very nature, demands participation, Gregor only feigns interest. Wolfgang's enthusiasm was of an experimental nature, where it was essayed and presented before a lurking and cynical observer, a participant who taints the sample and judges the result. Wolfgang had the capacity to dismiss his own ideas, seemingly at whim. So. No matter what Gregor affirmed, fault could be found.

There are always faults, and they are not always where you think they are.

Eventually Wolfgang becomes enthusiastic about a new project.

This week, nudist vegetarian womanizing scientists. Next week, the prototype eccentric B.C. politician, Amor de Cosmos, who was born William Smith in Nova Scotia, changed his name in California, then moved to Victoria and founded a newspaper advocating controversial notions such as representational government and Confederation with Canada. Amor de Cosmos is the person who brought democracy to British Columbia, Wolfgang says, and that one detail explains so much about politics to this day.

And then next week, one might expect to be regaled with an overview of medicine wheel teachings and the new urban shaman tradition.

With a range like that, you would think that someone like Wolfgang would be open to hearing almost anything.

You would be wrong.

POWER

>> RENEE RODIN

For as long as they could remember they knew that they'd been adopted. When they were teenagers their mother had told them the only reason she hadn't been able to get pregnant was because she and their father had never slept together. She whispered something about a "physical problem" and the subject was never mentioned again.

Melanie and Harrison had met in their early twenties in Vancouver at an insurance company where she was a secretary and he was bookkeeping to put himself through school. Each had been the only child of elderly parents all of whom had passed away and a few months after they began dating they eloped.

The only thing the couple ever fought about was having children. Soon after they got married she went on a campaign to adopt and the more Harrison balked the fiercer she became. They squabbled for months. When she said "people who aren't related love each other enough to get married. What's to stop us from loving children who aren't our blood?" he gave in.

It seemed like only a blink from when they applied to an agency to the time they adopted two -year-old identical twins. Eve and Amy bonded so quickly with Melanie they mirrored her expressions and began to look like her. Harrison grew a foot taller he was so proud of his new identity as a father.

Now a tax accountant Harrison was made a partner at a prestigious firm. Eve and Amy were sent to good schools and luxurious summer camps. Melanie and Harrison had limitless patience and energy for the girls. The couple did everything within their power to keep angst far from their family's door.

From the beginning Eve was more assertive and outgoing than Amy who tended to be withdrawn and fearful. Her immediate response to any setback, no matter how small, was to burst into tears. No one knew who was born first but Eve, always the one to defend Amy in minor schoolyard altercations, was perceived as being the older sister.

By high school Amy was frequently caught playing hooky and breaking every rule her liberal parents laid down. Because she appeared contrite and begged for forgiveness at the drop of a hat it was hard to stay angry with her. She just managed to squeak through school and with a lot of tutoring was eventually accepted into the same university Eve was at.

In her third year she dropped out to marry her psychology professor. They had four kids in rapid succession and Amy took refuge from the daily grind of motherhood by hitting the bottle. After their divorce her ex-husband applied for custody of the kids. Amy's visits were erratic and when she did show up she'd be hung-over and maudlin which

confused the kids. They didn't know how to make their mother feel better. When their father re-married a childless woman who was thrilled to have a ready-made family Amy stopped visiting all together.

Eve's star kept rising; She thrived on her work as a civil rights lawyer for which she was receiving a lot of recognition. Her husband, who Eve thought was brilliant, had yet to make a living from his paintings, but he built a studio at home so he could also look after their two sons while Eve was at the office.

Amy's life was filled with crises and alcohol. She ricocheted from one abusive relationship to the next, relying on Eve to bail her out emotionally and financially. Melanie and Harrison were on their way to participate in an intervention to get Amy into rehab when they were killed in a car accident. Each of their daughters was left with a large inheritance.

Eve put hers into a college fund. Her sons were talking about going to graduate school. She was beginning to feel the strain of being the sole support of the family and was considering cutting back on her workload. She and Amy had been given the exact same amount of money so the playing field was now level.

Whenever the twins had expressed interest in finding their birth mother they'd always been stopped by Melanie's wistful smile and comment "Aren't I enough for you?" After she died and betrayal was no longer an issue they almost simultaneously began to talk about finding their biological mother.

All they knew was that they'd been born in Abbotsford. Within weeks the parent-finder they hired had located someone who could possibly be their mother. She was still living in the same area, less than two hours by car from where they were raised.

With great trepidation Eve called and asked Bess a few questions. She not only knew all the answers, she even volunteered details about them such as that Eve had a prominent birthmark on her back and that Amy had a scar under her chin from an early fall. Eve said "we went nothing from you but can my twin sister and I come visit? We might be your daughters."

They met a week later in the trailer park where Bess lived. From their startling physical similarities there was no doubt they were related. They wept in each other's arms while Eve's husband videotaped the emotional reunion. Bess looked far older than her sixty-eight years—she had recently nursed her husband, their father, as he lay dying from cirrhosis of the liver. The couple had never had other children.

After the initial euphoria died down, Amy sat down beside Bess and clutched her hand. Eve, who'd begun pacing, yelled "What the fuck was that about, giving us up when we were already two years old?"

In flat tones Bess said that she couldn't bear to have her daughters raised by her and their father, both of whom were only eighteen when the girls were born and already alcoholic. She wanted a decent chance for them and was encouraged by a social worker who told her it would be an act of herosim to give the twins up. But she and her husband never got over the pain. She learned to cope with it, he drank himself to death.

Living only on her old age pension Bess seemed almost destitute. Eve knew she could easily help her out but even thinking about it constricted her airways. She couldn't wait to get away from her.

Amy, who'd been working at the same Women's Shelter she'd once stayed in, had held on to a fair amount of her inheritance. She quit her job and moved into the trailer with Bess with whom she decided to share her money. She figured it would last them about a year.

Though she'd previously get in touch only when she needed something from Eve now Amy emailed her weekly to describe her daily adventures of shopping and cooking with Bess and their evenings of line dancing and bingo at the local community centre. Amy told Eve it was as if a piece of her had been missing until she met her birth mother, she now felt complete for the first time in her life.

Eve was resentful that Amy could be so happy with Bess. From the time they were toddlers Amy and Eve had been each other's best friends, they'd even invented a secret language to speak with each other. As adults Amy had always turned to her with her troubles and now it was if Bess was benefiting from all the work Eve had done to take care of her. Just as Melanie had wanted to be enough to the twins, so Eve wished she could be enough for Amy. Though another part of her was glad for her and relieved she no longer needed to feel responsible for her sister.

Because she was so conflicted she began to see a therapist who specialized in sibling relationships. He told her Amy must have always felt like the underdog, that she had

been left in the shade of Amy's light who had everything she wanted, a stable marriage, children she could relate to, a satisfying career. And that Amy finally had something she thought Eve might covet, a relationship with their birth mother.

When the therapist suggested Eve pretend to be jealous as a way to bolster Amy's ego she stormed out of his office. Her contact with Bess and Amy remained polite, perfunctory—it was as much as she could muster. Amy's emails were becoming less childishly boastful and more thoughtful. She was beginning to ask real questions. Eve wasn't sure how to respond.

About a year after Amy had moved in with her, Bess called Eve to tell she was going to have to ask Amy to find her own place because the trailer they were in was simply too small. There were no vacancies in the park so Amy would have to move quite far away. Bess was worried about how that might jeopardize her newfound stability. Amy had been going to a local AA group and had been dry for months. She'd begun seeing her own kids, now grown-up, trying to make amends for having abandoned them.

"Surely you can tell how happy your sister is with me, for the first time in her life she feels she has her real mother. And that's enabled her to become a proper mother herself and probably a better sister," Bess half asked, half stated.

Bess told Eve the only way she could continue living with Amy was if they had a bigger place. She'd heard about a good deal on a condo and wondered if Eve could buy it for them? "It would mean so much to the both of us," Bess appealed. "And I'd want you to have the honour of telling Amy that now she and I can live together permanently."

Eve's alarm bells had been going off from the minute she'd picked up the phone and heard Bess on the other end. She knew Amy's money was just about to run out, if it hadn't already, and she'd suspected Bess was a viper from the first time they met. Still Amy had transformed remarkably and sharing her suspicions about Bess with her might send her spiraling backwards.

Eve couldn't wait to talk to Amy.

MR. YUNIOSHI

>> KEVIN CHONG

Mickey Rooney
Westlake Village, California

January 28, 2010

Dear Mr. Rooney:

I hope this letter finds you happy and healthy, surrounded by your lovely eighth wife, Jan, your eight surviving children, including the Reverend Mickey Rooney Jr., and your friends and admirers from around the world. It is inspiring to read that someone entering his tenth decade on earth continues to lead such a productive life—not only in acting and voice-over work in features like *Night at the Museum* and *Lady and the Tramp II: Scamp's Adventure*, but in your devotion to animal rights and your church.

Mr. Rooney, I am well aware that you get a lot of unsolicited correspondence, which might mean that letters go unopened or read only by an assistant or maybe Jan, but I am writing with a kind of blind faith that my missive finds its way to you. In part, this is because I am not only an ardent devotee of your work, but someone who shares a (dare I say) remarkable link to you.

I am the grandson of Masaji Yunioshi, whose essence you so masterfully bottled in the 1961 classic, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, directed by Blake Edwards. Growing up in Richmond, Canada, I spent hours with my grandfather, who passed away last year at the age of ninety-seven, flipping through his scrapbooks that included his on-set photographs with you, Audrey Hepburn, and George Peppard. Those occasions were especially memorable for me because my father—my grandfather's son—had forbidden us from discussing the film, so the secrecy with which we watched the film strengthened our familial bond. I will always remember that moment, sitting on my *sofu*'s lap, when I first pointed to that picture of the two of you in matching kimonos.

"Sofu, is that your brother?" I asked.

My grandfather chuckled. "Yes, in a way. He's an actor. He played me in a movie."

"Who is Tiffany?" I squealed.

"There is no Tiffany," he barked. He was often affectionate, but never less than stern. "The movie was about Holly Golightly."

"Who is she?" I asked about the capricious young woman played by Hepburn, who lives in a Manhattan brownstone with my grandfather, played by you, and the character played Peppard.

"She was like a courtesan."

"Sofu, what's a courtesan?"

"She was like a geisha."

"What's that?"

"She helped lonely men feel better."

"Oh," I said, and then, hoping my grandfather wouldn't lose patience, I asked another question: "Why was she so special?"

My grandfather sniffed and then offered this puzzling remark: "They talked about her as though she were a cat who never came to you. But, really, she was like a dog that walks on its hind legs when no one else was around."

Starting after my tenth birthday, I watched the film hundreds of times with my grandfather, who lived with our family and was responsible for looking after me when my parents were running their restaurant. When you appear in the film's first scene after the credit, yelling at Audrey Hepburn for waking him, I instantly recognize my grandfather's shambling gait, his crossed, short-sighted eyes. "*Miss Go-Rightry, I must plow-test*," you assert forcefully, before Hepburn calms you down by half-promising to pose for your photos. It strikes me as amazing that, as a Caucasian, you could so fully inhabit a Japanese character.

Later on, as a teenager, I would read the memoir that *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was based on, but I couldn't enjoy it as much as the film. Maybe it was because my grandfather was, as you know, a movie buff and photographer that I've always preferred image to the word.

Mr. Rooney, did Yunioshi (as I will refer to him) tell you he moved from Okinawa to Canada with his family as a seventeen-year-old in 1928? It was only a year before *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson, another favourite of my grandfather, became the first "talkie" box-office success. When not at school or working at a local cannery packing tuna, my grandfather devoted his free time and spare money on the movies—perhaps even seeing you as a teenager in the Mickey McGuire movies.

Around the time of his death, my grandfather would talk energetically about his own acting ambitions. As a young man, he won raves in a high-school production of the *Merchant of Venice* as Shylock; to the dismay of his father, he also took singing and dancing lessons. (Clumsy as he was, he was better at the former.) The "acting bug" bit him hard. Without a word to his family, he hitched a ride to Seattle and took the Amtrak to Hollywood.

After a year of auditions, Yunioshi's acting career had, to an immense disappointment I know well, amounted to a non-speaking role in a musical based on the life of Marco Polo and a walk-on part in the *Willy Wong* films, a Charlie Chan knock-off. It was the star of Willy Wong, Olaf Reicher, who suggested he find work behind the camera.

(Mr. Rooney, did you ever meet Reicher before his body was found in that garage with his male appendage stuffed in his mouth?)

"You don't think I'm much of an actor?" my grandfather asked Reicher, trying to hold back his tears.

"You're a good kid," Reicher suggested. As my grandfather recalled it, he was sitting in his make-up chair, as the whiskers were taped onto his face and his eyes were taped back. "Your name's a mouthful, first of all."

"Yunioshi?"

"There you go. It sounds like you're choking on taffy."

"I'll change it, then."

"See, you could do that. But the bigger problem is your look."

"My look?" Yunioshi asked.
"Yeah, the way you look and the way you act are completely different."
"How so?"
"Hey, that was the name of my character name in *The Bamboo Follies*."
"But the way I look?"
"See, you're a real swell guy—a real boy next door. You need to find yourself a very good dentist and some contact lenses, maybe take some dance lessons to improve your coordination."
"I already took dance lessons."
"All right, then, but my point is you look kind of different. Like someone with a hidden story."
"Mysterious?"
"Yeah, that's right—foreign."
Reicher suggested that Yunioshi go into photography—going behind the camera but still staying within reach of Hollywood—and placed him in contact with a photographer who needed an assistant. It wasn't too long before my grandfather, who was a devoted subscriber to all the "picture magazines," was an accomplished photo-taker in his own right!
Still, Yunioshi was haunted by his inability to become an actor. I like to think of your performance as a kind of "make up" for his disappointment. The memoir from which the film was adapted only made glancing mention to my grandfather, vastly reducing—perhaps out of jealousy by the author—the part he played in Holly Golightly's life. Your Mr. Yunioshi, while brief and played for laughs, restored some of that prominence, and through your performance, my grandfather became a part of our collective "dream world." Sitting on his knee, my grandfather fondly recalled the week you spent following him, mimicking his movements and gestures, and the afternoon the two of you spent at Belmont Racetrack.
"Everyone knew him," my grandfather told me. "And he would tell everyone we met, 'I'm playing this guy!' He would sign every notebook or *Racing Form* that was passed to him; shook everyone's hand. We were treated so nicely and given the best table in the club. When I saw the prices, I ordered the cheapest item on the menu—the chicken salad sandwich. Mr. Rooney shook his head and ordered two steaks for us instead. 'It's on the studio,' he told me."
As Yunioshi delved further into his story, I looked over his shoulder in case my father appeared. He, sadly, would forbid any mention of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in his presence. The movie, he said, was a shame for our grandfather and a disgrace to our family. Like those groups that have recently picketed screenings of the film, they misunderstand your performance, mistaking close observation for caricature, homage for ridicule, a performance for "yellowface."
"As we watched the horses race, I wanted to know about his roles, the actors he played with, but he insisted that it bored him," my grandfather continued. "He wanted to know

about me instead—can you believe that from Mickey Rooney? He asked me about the part of Japan I was from; the proper way to bow to an elder."

"'Do you know origami?' he asked me."

"'No.'"

"He tore out a page from the *Racing Form* and began folding it carefully until he had made his own paper crane. This was years before origami became popular in the west. The people in the tables around us, who'd been watching us from the corners of their eyes, began to gawk openly and they clapped loudly as Rooney lifted the crane in the air. The paper bird was so beautiful that I thought it would start flapping its wings."

One reason why my grandfather never chose to write to you was out of his feeling of embarrassment over the path his life took. His family had been left impoverished from the wartime internment. After fifteen years of magazine photography, working extensively for long-defunct glossy magazines like *Movie Story*, *Collier's*, and *Photoplay,* he returned back to Canada and ran our family restaurant, which he named Hollywood Fish 'N Chips. He kept his profiles of ingénues like Rita Hayworth and Katharine Hepburn, with his accompanying portraits, modestly tucked aside in a steamer trunk in my parents' attic.

He married an old family friend who worked without complaint by his side for three decades. My own father recalls that the house he grew up in was poorly heated, with brown drapes and brown carpeting, and the smell of canned soup always in the air. After my grandmother died, he only reluctantly took Yunioshi into his own home. Early into this new arrangement, I remember walking by his door as "Moon River" played over and over again from his record player.

"Take your sofu out for a walk," he says.

I knocked on the door. The record slowed to a halt on the turntable. Through the door, my grandfather insisted he didn't want to walk. The music started playing again.

My father was displeased. "Tell him that I insist he take you for a walk."

When I relayed this message to him, my grandfather told me, through the closed door, to wait for him outside. Several minutes later, he came down and we trudged silently to the park. It was a drizzly day and neither of us had brought an umbrella. Still, we did not want to turn back and risk upsetting my father.

(At the risk of "oversharing," I have to say that my father is a tyrant—without a sensitive bone in his body. Years later, the most difficult moment in my life would be when I confessed to my father that I'd left school to become an actor.)

When we arrived at the park, we stood underneath a giant cedar tree to stay dry.

"Why do you like that song?" I asked him.

"Which song?"

"The one you keep playing."

"Why not?" my grandfather asked. "It's not as though I like it."

The same impatience my father felt toward him bubbled inside me. "Then why do you listen to it?" I asked again.

"I'm used to it."

The next day after I returned from school, I found my grandfather's turntable and speakers on my bed. Because I had no records, I placed the equipment in my closet.

This was months before I'd seen *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. I don't think he yet trusted me not to tell my father, but when he did watch it with me, playing a carefully hidden VHS copy of the film on an afternoon when my parents were working, we found something in common—a shared love to go with the common enemy that was my father.

About fifteen years after this first viewing, my grandfather was placed in a nursing home. By then, the dementia had made him difficult to manage and, because he was rapidly losing his memory. In the visiting room, I would sit with him as he reminisced in his bathrobe about his days about his days in Hollywood and New York. He would still be talking when the nurse came to wheel him back to his room.

"*I protest*," he would scream. "*I protest!*"

He died peacefully last summer after a short battle with pneumonia. The funeral was short and quiet; as I delivered the eulogy, I glossed over his brush with fame out of fear of my father's wrath. In the receiving line outside the funeral home chapel, our family welcomed only the familiar, aged faces of relatives and old co-workers except for one black woman in a dark sleeveless dress that she wore over dark stockings and a wide-brimmed hat.

Her features were not quite as delicate as Audrey Hepburn's, nor did it seem, even in her youth, to have been someone who was as slender. And, well, she was *black*. But still, even well past her seventh decade, her posture was straight as a stalk of corn and she carried herself as though a set of klieg lights were aimed at her.

"He was my old, dear friend," the woman told me, gripping my elbow for emphasis. "At my age, this sort of event should be *de rigeur*, but each farewell tears a new porthole in my heart."

I wanted to ask her more about my grandfather, but she insisted she was too weak to attend the reception. Instead, she requested I call her a cab: "That's customary in this part of woods, I assume?"

"Yes," I said, reaching for my smartphone.

"What a dear man," she said, clasping my free hand in hers. "He took such beautiful, beautiful photos. *J'adore* those images we created. You should have seen me then."

"I'd love to ask you more about your friendship," I told her as the cab approached. "Do you have an e-mail address?"

"Darling," she said, as I helped her into the cab, "I've had a lifelong aversion to any such type of address. At this stage, I do believe it's inadvisable for my well-being to change course."

Among my grandfather's belongings that had been willed over to me was his copy of the *Breakfast at Tiffany's* soundtrack, a trove of photographs including some risqué shots of a young, dark-skinned woman on a divan, and an address book that contained your name. I've written to you in the hope that my recollection of my grandfather, after so many years, might come as a welcome surprise to you.

I'm also writing because to seek a favour. You'll see in the demo reel I've enclosed that I am a serious and committed thespian, a screen and stage actor with credits on the *X-Files*, a speaking part on *Battlestar Galactica*, and extensive in countless independent and student films and plays.

After a reaching an impasse in my career in Canada, I plan to move to Los Angeles this spring. By achieving my own personal goals, I hope to fulfil my grandfather's long-ago aspirations. Mr. Rooney, because of your profound relationship with Yunioshi, I write hoping that you might be able to offer some kind of professional assistance, possibly a "connection" at a studio or a talent agency.

I am currently unrepresented.

Your Sincrely,
Adam Yunioshi

THE GUIDE TO ALTERNATIVE THINKING

>> JACQUELINE TURNER

3.

It isn't that the adhd makes him feel crazy, not at all. For James, the focus just keeps shifting and repeating fast in tones and resonances. Like he'd be talking with his friends at the left corner of the cafeteria and his mind would flash to the impending radiation cloud due to arrive from Japan any moment. He'd listen about Katie and the bikini videos she was posting on facebook, but the cloud would come over his mind again. He'd text his dad, r u sur and his dad would text back a crisp yes meaning he was monitoring through sites on the internet, the precise movement and dissipation. His girlfriend, another Kate, comes over wearing his sweatshirt. He lurches and leans into her but his mind flips back to the cloud. Kisses her and back to the cloud.

5.

Cindy and Derek trade off driving in Beisker. Cindy got her class 1 giving up her job at Strathmore Elementary and Derek wasn't exactly thrilled. He liked being alone on the road and found that now Cindy took up all the mental space in the cab so that those long lingering thoughts his mind could extend out and follow for so far and so long that he was surprised when he was already approaching Winnipeg just did not exist anymore. And being a passenger didn't exactly sit right although it was nice to look out at the expansive prairies in the moments when Cindy wasn't planning their retirement, speculating on possible things they could do in the future, and continually asking him what he was thinking. It wasn't clear, so many thoughts at one time it was always difficult for him to isolate one line of thought and give it to her packaged in the way he knew she wanted. His mind was too jumbled to answer this seemingly simplest of questions.

So when he sees the birds falling one three ten in a field to the side of the road ahead he has no words but holy shit. Cindy shouts what what what she has to watch the road. Gear the fuck down and she does. He wants to cry stepping out of the cab and over to the field. Christ. They lay in piles here and there black and black. So many so many. What the hell his brain racing through possible causes but coming up blank and again blank. Cannot make sense of what he is thinking now.

6.

Leona drives her parents to series of medical appointments, then again her pregnant daughter-in-law for ultrasounds, and worries about James and his brother because they are both always so tired. In the garden, her mind relaxes wanders while she makes purposeful movements worries that a bear might show up but generally her brain free to just not think. She wonders about the effect of radiation on plants but not in a concise way more as something happening somewhere to somebody else. She saw real things happen working for hours on a guy in emerg only to have him code out. Motorcycle accident. No James you are not getting a motorcycle. James inside busily researches Navy Seals recruitment requirements determining that they do take some Canadians who fit certain criteria. When his dad told him there would be people yelling at him in boot camp 24/7 James said he didn't care. He knew the way his brain worked. He actually liked to be told what to do.

10.

Cindy looks out on the expanse of yellow now that Derek is driving tells him that canola used to be called rape seed. So weird about those birds. What the hell was that about? She keeps asking this question even though they speculated on every possible angle concluding that it was likely some kind of crop spray or freak weather event as the radio says. A cloud that brought the whole flock down. They went through all the possibilities again though. Going over and over the image and their first reactions again and again on the trip from Beiseker to Kindersley where they would stop in quickly for coffee with Cindy's aunt even though they were behind schedule because of the birds. They planned to make up time beyond Saskatoon and since they both could drive there really was no need to stop much. Derek gasps and Cindy looks up. A bird hits the windshield and Cindy starts crying now.

11.

She is well into the fourth chapter writing forward without editing or fact checking she'd do that tomorrow when the artist/landscaper appears at the sliding glass door with the latex paintings. She lets him in and spreads the three on the chaise looking at them from above. The sprawling sage green word real- across one was pretty ironic and she likes that. He had seen the image text work through the window last time and had decided to take on that strategy he says stroking his pointy beard and saying more about how the use of text pushed his creative practice further. He read Deluze's *Image Text* in one sitting and then proceeded to riff off the word real. These were the results he thought were the most successful, that succeeded within the constraints he set out for himself. She takes down the flower painting that came with the house and holds up the real latex work in the blank space. What do you think she asks the pointy beard landscaper painter. He grins hard. Yes, he says yes.

13.

Her previous book *Diary of a Shy Person* sold well enough for her to get a second book deal. She blushes at book signings and somehow that makes her all the more real. It's like her awkwardness helps sell the book. Videos on YouTube, clips on Audioboo show the tremulous start to her voice which then rises to full confidence. The arc of the journey she is trying to inspire right there in the sound of her voice. That book was written like a diary detailing a series of anecdotes that seemed real enough. They were based in the realness of how she felt, the details didn't necessarily hold though. Mostly the book was against SSRIs and she hit the medical circuit for awhile talking to healthcare professionals about the down side of making shy people more outgoing. She followed the evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson's argument that the world was divided into sitters and rovers. In studies of fish, the rovers were easily caught but the sitters were impossible to reach lurking back in the depths. Turn everyone into a bunch of rovers and we'll all be dead was a tag line from one of her speeches.

14.

James checks his phone, no messages, checks it again, nothing, again and Ms. Bell says put it away or I'll take it. I need the calculator says James I don't have another one. Just the calculator then Ms. Bell sighs turn the sound off otherwise I'm taking it. They both know parents complain if a kid's cellphone gets taken away. Parents need to be in touch. For safety. Like during the lockdown. Turned out it was only kids with camera tripods pretending to be guns. Can't be too careful is what the teacher said, but she wasn't pissing in a Tropicana bottle locked in a smelly classroom for four and a half hours. James' mom would be happy to get her hands on his cellphone. He knew she had looked through his old one so he made the code invincible this time. He is amazed she never asks for it though and that his parents keep paying the bill anyway. He would punch a hole in the wall if they even touched his phone now. He knew his parents were kind of scared of what he might do. When he was mad his brain fired up and even he didn't know what might happen in the end.

15.

Cindy and Derek stop in Winnipeg at Super 8. They usually sleep in the cab but it's hard to have sex in there and sometimes Cindy wishes she was home in their own bed the lavender duvet she picked out and her head pushed into one of the decorative pillows while Derek thrusts from behind. In the motel the smell is always stale and the windows won't open and Derek always lies back with her on top doing all the work his hands on her breasts working her up and down. She knows not to ask what he is thinking and even her mind wanders back to the birds and the weight of the one she picked up before wondering what might be crawling on it so like the light feathery weight of Derek's cock as she worked it now with her hand right before putting her mouth on it and hearing him finally groan.

16.

She looks across the room at the triptych of sage coloured reals along the wide end of the taupe wall. He helped install them after mowing the lawn since she was useless with a hammer. Her rolling table and typewriter face them. She bangs out a haiku—it was her rule to only write haikus on the typewriter—otherwise she is not hipster nostalgic for the device and prefers the ergonomic relationship she has with her laptop. She contemplates writing 500 words on him for artforum and offers to help him with a grant application. He says no though. Just that. No. And back into the yard, tugging slightly on his beard the sweat still fresh on his wife beater.

LANGUAGE KILLER, QU'EST-CE QUE C'EST

>> ASHOK MATHUR

He doesn't remember when he began to hate language so much. It may have been on its first introduction, that moment when sound gives way to sensibility, when aural takes on an aura all its own. Or it could have been in grade school when he saw this newly found dreamscape butchered by malingerers who could not thread two thoughts together let alone two complex sentences. Or perhaps it was the hateful verbiage spouted off when his father, too afraid to use his fists, pummeled his mother with words and spittle instead. But what he fails to remember he makes up for in promise, and he swears by the first word that he will have the last word when it comes to language and all who parlay it.

It was as a child that he decided that fire did not really combat fire, and so too words could not destroy words, and he resolved to investigate other means that could bring language to its knees. Not good enough to out-vocabularize another, no, he had to dissect and dismantle and decimate. Words had to end up bleeding on the warehouse floor, gouged of their insight, expunged of their musculature, and exsanguinated of any life force coursing through putative veins.

And so, as a young man fresh with a college diploma and four-star rating into any pre-university program of his choice, he set out to debunk the mystery of verbs, nouns, prepositions, adjectives of all kinds, adverbs that modified nothing, and conjunctions that quite simply failed to add up.

"I am become death, destroyer of words," was what he wrote in lipstick on the bathroom mirror one morning after too much liquor and the misfortune of waking up next to some young blonde thing who couldn't get it in her head that the sounds coming out of her mouth were tantamount to the shrieks of the damned in some not so far away inferno. She wouldn't stop talking, from the moment she degrogged and figured out she'd been had, or rather, he'd been had, because the truth was that both of them had slaked their thirst after much too much thirst-quenching at the Water in Hole, the university drinking establishment that had at least the decency to use a space to displace a gerund which in turn no longer required an apostrophe, itself an apostasy of the highest order.

"That doesn't make sense" she gurgled, her hair falling in a manner that would be seen as fetching were it not falling after a night of unbridled plasticine sex with neither participant brave enough to call for a referee's decision and get it all over with. "How can you become death?"

He stared at her, still holding the now-mushed lipstick holder like a bulbous pen, amazed that this grotesque beauty before him, disheveled and smelling vaguely of barley and distilled potatoes, would rather question his grammar than the fact that he had obviously gone into her personal things to find this instrument of deathwriting.

"I mean, like, you can become dead, I suppose, but that's the same as just dying, isn't it? I suppose you could say 'I have become dead' but then you have to wonder who's writing that, eh, like if you're dead, you can't write 'I'm dead' now can you?"

He wanted her to leave, to edge herself out of existence, to time travel to the point of her own conception and double-wrap her father-to-be's penis in a leather harness and ultrathick condom, to vanish in a wisp of smoke or with a giddy nod like Barbara Eden did in *I Dream of Jeannie*, but most of all, he just wanted her to shut the fuck up, to put those words of hers into a vacuum box where no one can hear your scream. But he just stared at her, the bloody nub of a lipstick holder pinched between his fingers like a spent candle.

She continued to prattle.

He continued to stare.

Words continued. And she didn't notice and he didn't care for this a bit.

It was some weeks after this moment, what he referred to as the words on my mirror are hell incident, that he decided to seek professional help. Someone who could help with his fixation on such word hatred. He was still a registered student even though he never attended classes and only the occasional pub crawl which had led him most recently to the bar, the blonde, the bacardi, the brew, and making a glob of artificial colour into a ballpoint for reflective purposes. So he sought a counsellor. The trouble was he wanted to find a counsellor who didn't talk that much, who, if only this could be, shared his despair of language. He asked the receptionist for a counsellor who was reserved when it came to language. She misunderstood and assigned him the counsellor who specialized in second language concerns which often affiliated with cultural disaffection and loneliness. This counsellor herself spoke english as a fourth language, having been brought up in two distinctly different tongues and managed to learn a third in a country where her father was posted as a diplomat before finally learning english by the time she was nine. So, unfortunately, rather than being a destroyer of words, she was someone with a despicable fondness for language, putting them both on the wrong foot as far as a counsellor/client relationship went.

"I hate words," he told her the first day.

"Words can be your friends," she retorted.

He stared at her with a stare not unlike one he delivered to the alcohol-infused blonde wearing clothes from the night before.

"I want to kill words."

"Words have done nothing to you. What are you really angry at?"

He shrugged.

"Is it what words can do? Or what they fail to do?"

He shrugged again, more emphatically.

"Tell me what words mean to you."

But this was exactly the problem. Words didn't mean anything. They were filling in the gaps of beautiful silence. They grated on the membranes of ears that could reverberate to the hum of wind on a still day. They didn't even have the good grace to space themselves so that one ended and the other gave it some time to begin. There was no listening between words. And he wanted them dead.

"I want them to eat their own larvae. I want to see etymology beget entomology. I want to see the mashup of letters into an alphabet soup of incorrigibility. I. Hate. Words."

The therapist stared at him. Then she looked down at the notes she had written, one wordscratch at a time. Violent outbursts. Unchecked emotion.

He realized she wasn't really listening to him. No one ever listened to him. She was, instead, checking out the words she had written. He had no recourse. He stole over to her as she read and reread her notes and gingerly plucked the page from her. If she seemed surprised she did not show it. Nor did she register anything more than a flicker of concern when he began to push the paper into his mouth, masticating mechanically, ingesting the entire page, words and all. If you can't beat them, eat them.

It should have been no surprise after the word-eating incident for the visits to begin. First, from a social worker associated with the university to perform what appeared to be a threat assessment. Then from a very dreary and weary looking detective who seemed outrageously bored as he warned of repercussions, legal and otherwise, that could come from uttering threats. He tried to explain to the dullard of an officer that far from utterance, his interest was in an ouroborosian finality, a consumption that consumed itself, attaining the last word by ensuring it was the last word to exist. But that just bothered the cop to dismay and he flipped the notebook closed with a derisive finality and thumped out the door with a warning to just stop what he was doing or he'd be sorry. But he was already sorry, even if he did not feel that such was worth saying.

The final visit was from a clergyman who seemed to make it his business to get into that of others. This man of the cloth brought with him far too many textual examples to convince the lost man-sheep that all could be found again with the right misdirection and a chasmic leap into an abyss with the deep-seeded knowledge that there was an originary mission. He could have almost bought such fishing tackle from the zealot had it not ended with the expressed necessity of believing in words or at the very least believing in the word from above, and that is what truly drove him to distraction. Had he the wherewithal, he would fullmouth frenchkiss this mountain of a man and incisorly extract the tongue that dared to make such monstrous claims, but at heart he was not a violent man and besides, he realized that such a literal amputation would do little to stem the metaphorical flow of verbiage. And so, he sat silent, rocking slightly to feel the molecules of air pushed back by incursions of skin, but saying nothing.

And it was then he realized that if he could not quell the useless barrage from outside he could at least still the pandemonium of alphabetizing nonsense from within. Beginning this was easy, for it was a simple act to not speak, an actless act of sorts, and while its affectation attracted more than its fair share of confusion from various interlocutors who demanded a like response to their own mindless twitter, most were at least partially satisfied that his apparently random gestures constituted a nonverbal communicative strategy. It became a game for some, to have him speak, as if he were a stoic beefeater rendered mute and still by a history of ritual. But it was no game to him, and his gestures were not of a kindly kind, intended as they were to dismiss the gnattish inquisitors and will them into a from-his-sight disapperance since the hope of drilling them into present silence was a trenchantly impossible one.

But it was still not enough. Unspoken words were still forming incessantly over psychosomatically-imposed dysarthiatic tongue and teeth, and while breath and lips never expunged these as sounded orbs, their madding sounds nonetheless rang as gargantuan churchbells within his cranial cavity. Words had to stop, not just in airily expulsion, as sputum spat into the surrounding ether, but in veritable formation. Inner stilling. He imagined horizons beyond words. His mind's eye saw the unchiseled blankness of a smoothed tombstone. He cast his thoughts on meditations that surpassed wordsmithed imperatives, where mind meets matter and immediately knows, unmediated through syntax. He desired nothing but prelinguistic purity. He found flashes of this but those sunbursts were always anchor-dragged back to oceans of slurping, slurring soundscapes, inescapable. His release, always momentary, bookended by words pulling fore and aft. If only he could pluck out the instruments of his voice, pierce the drums that allowed vibrations to recur as recognized sounds, and still the juices that incessantly shaped flash into thought into word.

There had to be a word for enough. And there was. But that was not enough in and certainly of itself. When they finally found him, he had conundrummed himself into a state of disrepair, lousy with language, and babbling like a newborn. So far from odious absentia, he was, instead, a tower of insatiability. Language spewed from him, spiting him, biting back with ludicrous, luscious, lacivious presence, unavoidable and uninterruptible. Curled into a foetal mess, he poured forth biliously and with abandon, words now uncluttered by forethought or by anything remotely resembling a presence of mind. If he still hated language, he could not remember when that detestation began, or where, or if it had always or never been.

This is what he would tell you if he could.

FORBIDDEN THINGS

>> JASPREET SINGH

Because he is still alive I cannot fully reveal B's true identity.

The fact is that right from kindergarten onwards my friend took chutiya unpopular stands, and quoted wisecracks without revealing the source (for instance, 'where off one cannot speak, one must be silent'). From kindergarten to grade ten we sat next to each other. For years our fates remained handcuffed. We learned to swim in the cold bluish lakes the same day, cycle the same day, we learned to write the same day. The coincidence connected to writing is permanently embedded in my mind, and muscle memory. Now that I think about it, this one coincidence braided a special connection between us, a double bond, or even a triple bond. But what we did with that weapon (of writing) is a different story. I began dreaming of becoming a reporter or a sort-of-a-journalist, and B excelled in Greek symbols or equations. He was good at maths. Fucking good. Sometimes he would simply draw sketches and whatever object he focused his attention on revealed itself more intimately than its counterparts in the real world.

On the slopes of a small mountain stood a small building, perpetually unfinished, our school.

"You over there. Stand up."

By the window the teacher (with big breasts) stood holding an insane cane. B looks out the window during punishment. Down in the valley there are trees bigger than the red woods and smaller than Japanese apples, plums, and apricots and there are battle tanks, too, and neglected ancient monuments. So much history—it is difficult to breathe.

"You?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Stand up."

She, Mrs. Pandith, paced towards B's unsteady chair.

What is the significance of the Mughal fortifications done in the sixteenth century?

Mrs. Pandith rarely asked an original question. But he failed. I still recall the ostrich sized zero in red ink. And I could not help but laugh 'reading' his response. With a thick pencil he had sketched 'Religion X' like a giant fork and 'Religion Y' like a knife. Somewhere down the line he drew the red fort.

After high school we obviously lost contact. But sheer coincidence brought us together in Alberta. Early this year I flew to Fort McMurray to write an article on Tar Sands. Running into him at that remote location was the last thing I expected. B was sitting all by himself in the local pub. He had the same youthful face, whereas I seemed to have grown old at an accelerated speed. Fuck, he said. What a coincidence! He worked as a senior engineer now in Husky or Shell, one of those companies. What brings you here?

What the fuck drew you here, bud? I would have preferred if he had used that old mode of address. Dost or yaar. 'Bud' doesn't carry the same gravitas. My response was not entirely honest. He didn't know that I had become a proper journalist. Tourism, I began. The Tar Sands are fucking beautiful and with my Canons I would like to immortalize this landscape. For my sake and for the sake of posterity I would like to shoot some pictures, and if they turn out any good, enter in a competition. Fuck, he said. Bull shit, he said. Then you have just met the right man!

B phoned his secretary and took a day off from his oil company and together we did a helicopter tour. To this day I carry the roaring sounds in my ears. From high up we marveled at Burtynsky's Tar Sands. The toxic tailing ponds resembled a sublime work of art. And the dead and dying arboreal forest with all its dead and dying birds looked stunningly beautiful. A poet ought to have accompanied us, she may have invented new metaphors, doubly so. B put his arm around my shoulder after I took hundreds of pictures, and both of us marveled at the beauty down below.

Later in the evening B and I met in the same pub. He drank three or four beers in quick succession. Just like old times. For a change even I ordered alcohol. Conversation became loud and more and more jumbled. The cuckoo clock in the pub was the only object that looked out of place. B and I did some catching up… what struck me was that both of us were reluctant to share our time in North America, but felt more at ease talking about our childhood years… and as time passed in the pub we grew more and more nostalgic, the noise level kept rising, and our needless nostalgia kept swelling. I don't recall now how we zoomed into our old school or our teacher, the significance of that fucking Red Fort, I said. B laughed a belly laugh. So much time had passed. In Fort McMurray it was possible to laugh because the past had acquired a different consistency. Fuck, said B and laughed.

We roared with laughter that day as well when the teacher rang the bell. It was all coming back to us now. Carrying a 'satchel' (for that is the precise word), we ran down the steep hill, past the half crumbling structures built by the Emperor, past the Butt Bakery. The sky was ribbons of red and filled with flocks of curlews, but the loudspeakers said: curfew, curfew. Dense smoke rippled through the bazaar. To this day I remember losing track of B, the empty road, the sudden tear gas canister.

"I recall trying to locate you, I screamed your name, but a soldier kicked me aside."

B finished another bottle. "Don't worry, bud." He had been listening to me patiently. Fuck, he said. This beer tastes of Bitumen. The water, too, tastes of Bitumen, I said. The air smells of dilute Bitumen. One day we will all die anyways, he said. So what is the big deal? No big deal, said B. Don't forget we lived in paradise then. Fucking paradise. More beautiful than the most beautiful parts of Europe! Death and beauty are a big deal, he said. That day I stopped laughing because I thought you died in a beautiful cloud of tear gas.

B tapped his glass with the tips of his fingers. He always had the flair for the

dramatic. *That day* I sobbed like a child, he said. But you were a child, I protested. Of course, bud, but I didn't think of myself as a child. And neither did you. B banged his fist on the table, disturbing half-melted candles, and cutlery. After losing you in plumes of tear gas I felt like fucking crying, he said. But I didn't. Reality always follows its own sad logic. My friend and my upstairs neighbor is dead and gone, I thought, said B. I stood outside 'our' house. Slowly, I gathered courage, decided to tell your mother the sad news. But then just like that I changed my mind. *I did*. I sat on the big rock in the lawns instead and started watching the flight of birds. I still remember that flock of startled starlings. On the upstairs balcony *your mother*.

"Your place is locked," she (*my* mother) told B. "Your mother has gone to the market to buy bread."

"Not there," he almost cried.

She beckoned him upstairs. He would not budge. But hunger melted his stubborn mind. Climbing up the steep stairs, B thought his own mother was going to die, just like his friend had died. The crowd of voices within him was growing, he told me. He heard his mother's piercing voice ringing in his ears.

B's mother allowed him to talk to the neighbors (i.e. my family), to drink water at their place and to accept cookies, but she forbade him to touch 'their' food. *We don't eat their cooking and they don't eat ours*.

But why?

They belong to a different religion.

Do you think I am making this up? Do you? In Fort Mac there is no need to make up, said B. Everything is real here and raw and basic and transparent. I still recall her hands, warm and very moist and slippery. Hands that made forbidden food. Her kameez smelled of a wild onion, he said. What looked like prayer beads from the ground was actually a string of dried chilies. Your mom urged me to play in the drawing room, but I followed her to where pungent puffs of vapor were rising from the karhai.

B was silent for a while and wiped condensation off the tall glass. Then he took a big swig and tried to get the attention of the waitress.

"Strange, the beer has never before tasted of Bitumen," he said. The scantily clad waitress was flirting with a man in a cowboy hat.

"Ya Khuda!"

Your mother screamed those two words. Jokes apart. Not sure if she was angry or being polite. Outside the wind had grown so strong, it forced open the fucking kitchen window. I tried shutting the window. I failed, said B. Your mother knew how to shut it and succeeded.

Then it happened.

I was extremely hungry, he said.

Your mother sensed it, and your father marched in from the other room. No hello to your mother. Thick, distant man he was, clutching a fat book. The cover said: *Manto's*

Partition Stories. "Is the feast ready?" and your mom (like a machine) set the table and served tiny amounts of food to her man and her two daughters.

"Is our boy not back from school?"

"He is not coming," said your mother.

"So why is this boy back?"

"Our son is staying with my sister today. He called me."

That was a fucking relief (said B). I didn't investigate further. But I was relieved you survived.

Imagine me sandwiched between two pretty girls (your sisters), who stopped giggling only when your mother stared sternly. Hot steam, rising from the dishes, resembled the tear gas canister.

"What are we celebrating?" asked your father.

"Death."

"Why are you scaring the boy?"

Your mother passed me a plate of walnut cookies, and water, and on my own I recovered the box Ma had packed in the morning.

"Why are you not eating?"

"Can I try your fish?"

Perhaps aunty said 'no' because the portions were very small. But I hated Mother's cooking. Same thing every day. Excess potatoes. Don't forget, The forbidden always tastes better. I felt like tasting the fish and I was deadly hungry. They were all eating, and I sniffed the delicious. I stared at your mother's fingers. Just once, I promised myself.

"May I?"

Silence.

Like a wild dog I ate the thing (only half) but my belly swelled tight with fucking happiness.

The scantily clad waitress appeared at our table finally. B checked with her why the beer tasted of Bitumen.

Bitumen, she said. What is Bitumen?

Forget it, he said. Please bring us nachos.

As she was leaving he added. Nachos and another beer.

Which one?

Bitumen.

"What was I saying?"

I, too, experienced a brief memory lapse.

"You heard the black motorcycle. From the balcony you saw your parents."

Yes, I jumped down the stairs and even forgot to thank my hosts (your parents). This is the first time I saw my parents holding hands.

"Did you go up on your own?" Ma asked (said B) while unpacking the khaki bag. Unlike other times the bag was not even half full. No bread, and only two eggs.

"No, Aunty insisted."

"Glad she did so. Why don't you write her a thank you note?"

I didn't want Ma to know the details and now I was feeling sick. A big cockroach was growing inside my treasonous belly, which had consumed forbidden food. Your food. My blood was turning dark… What followed is so difficult to describe.

Why don't you imagine the rest, said B. The imagined story will be better than the real one.

Listen, I said. I could have done that imagining elsewhere. Why do you think I came all the way to Fort Mac?

But you were not looking for me. At least that is what you told me.

Forget it. You are right. I had no clue you were here. But now that we have met, it would be a pity you didn't tell me the complete story.

Stories are never complete, he said. One needs a lot of steam to dig them up, and one ends with poisonous tailings ponds.

Bullshit, I literally yelled because the country music in the pub was loud.

What B told me was easily the most tender and poignant thing I heard so far.

Everything happened in my absence. What happened was perfectly 'ordinary' and became an event for B, and became a memory for him. For me it was only now becoming an event.

This was the situation. In his father's room the black and white TV was on. He sat on the edge of the bed. B's father (smoking a cigarette) said: this is happening in a foreign country. Then the show was interrupted by news. Millions of people were out on the streets. The German wall looked exactly like the ruins in his city… Father unlaced his muddy black shoes and covered him with a warm sheet. Then he really fell asleep.

When he woke up the fallen bodies were staring at him. Father looked scary even before moving his tongue.

"Did you get the report card?"

B rubbed his eyes and ran barefoot to the kitchen, and Ma told him she was soon going to serve potatoes.

Papa repeated at the dining table. "Did the teacher return the paper?"

Just then a savior pressed the bell. But when Ma opened the door he heard the voice he really didn't want to hear. He fell on the floor and crawled under the table.

A draft of wind entered through the open door. The neighbor (my mother) followed his mother to the dinner table. Her footsteps made a deafening sound.

"Join us," said Ma.

The neighbor moved closer to the empty chair.

"For two minutes only," she said.

Under the table B noticed Ma's stained sari fluttering and Aunty's salwar making movements too. He paid attention to their shoes. Ma's were different from Aunty's shoes. Aunty's were pointed at the front as if they were little knives. Her socks: thin

bones of a fish.

"Did he bother you?"

"No, no, he was very obedient," said Aunty. "I came to give you his lunch box, your son forgot it at our place."

Now he knew it would all be revealed. And there would be no leniency. The neighbor had the big proof, she had witnessed it all. Your boy ate our fish, she would tell Ma, and then there would be tension.

He didn't want to be alive anymore. He wanted the heavy tabletop to fall on his head. He looked at his face reflected in the spoon, which was still in his hand. He turned the spoon and looked again. His face was upside down.

He heard the sound of the neighbor's footsteps. Then the thunderous slam as the door shut behind her, and the sound of artillery firing in the mountains.

"Instead of giving your Aunty a thank-you note, you hide under the table," said Ma. "What kind of a boy are you?"

Then she laughed.

"Other children are different!"

But she said it so nicely, as if nothing had happened. She was not mad at him at all.

He moved like a worm to the edge of the table, there was so much dust (and so many dead moths) on the floor, then stood up slowly, still afraid, and sat in the chair, and only then noticed the dreaded lunch box. It was shining and looked freshly washed. The metallic lid, separate from the empty container. He took a deep sigh. His life had been spared. Nothing had changed. The neighbor, he knew for sure now, had removed food from the box. Now his parents would definitely think, yes, he ate Mother's lunch.

"I am not hungry," he announced.

Then he ran to his cold room, barefoot, and began writing. Two days later, said B, during a brutal police firing, along with twenty-two animals, twenty-eight migratory birds, a hundred-and-thirty-eight people died. Their faces looked sublime and beautiful. You know and I know who those people were, and to this day they still stand in my way. "Please forgive me," he sobbed. "Forgive me," said B.

The waitress appeared again to take last orders. A new day was about to dawn in Fort Mac and the smell of Bitumen for some unknown reason was fucking strong.

"But how does the story really end?" I asked.

"As long as I am alive it doesn't end," said B.

"Don't be so sentimental" I said.

"Go to hell," he said.

THE MOON,

THE CAT AND THE DONKEY

>> ERIN SOROS

We called him Moon and Eight Ball and Pinball, his head so bald and shining that no name would stick.

You remember Moon. He'd come to the BC coast with plans to make enough money to buy a house. Moon was one of the hardest working chokermen this camp had seen. The other loggers marvelled at how much his head would sweat when he worked. His baldness stuck out of his blanket when he slept and we'd take a bit of charcoal to decorate it with a smiling face. When the steam donkey rolled over to crush him, all that had escaped was his bald head and it was screaming. Moon's body was under the machine. He had fallen into a depression in the ground, a natural grave that was deep enough to keep him from dying but not deep enough to keep him alive.

The steam donkey was three tons of metal pressing on his lungs. Together not a hundred men could lift it. We were twelve men; we were fifty-six total in the camp; we were an hour away from the closest bulldozer, the bright yellow Caterpillar that worked the seaside boom. We wired for the Cat.

Moon moaned and called out for help as if he trusted that we could.

Off me, he said, off me.

Please he cried in a voice smaller than a child's. He knew just as well as we did that our bodies would be as useless as sticks.

We tried to help. Three men walked toward the donkey to press their hands to its hot black weight. They shoved and swore and stopped and told Moon he was alright, he was alright, and then they started again with the strained apathy of a man running for a streetcar he knows he has missed.

The Cat is coming. She's on her way

We kept making promises about that damned bulldozer although we knew she'd never make it before the donkey had pressed the air from his chest. There was nothing left to do but stand beside him and listen to him breathe.

He'd last a good half hour.

Moon of double plates of roast beef, Moon of card tricks, Moon of harmonica, Moon of farts.

Moon the chokerman.

Each of us was one-hundred and fifty to two-hundred and fifty pounds. Twelve men together with no use.

We waited.

We stood with our hats off like we would stand at a funeral.

Time pressed on Moon's chest. The donkey sunk its weight slowly the way the season shrinks to winter, the day narrowing as the sky inches closer to the earth, and we could no more light the donkey than we could fight the growing dark.

Even after he stopped breathing, we waited, standing around him, still dumb as sticks. Holding our hats we looked at the hat that had fallen off his bald head, the way it landed upside down to collect rain or money or blood.

We blamed the damned machine, we blamed the woods, we blamed Mac Blo and all its dirty bloody cash that tempted us to this hill, but it was time itself that killed him. The slow weight of the donkey needed time to press the air from his lungs and the Cat's yellow optimism needed time to reach us. If we could have toed a boot into time—that miserable cog of minutes—to stop it from rolling, rolling, if we could have blinked to freeze the frame just as a photograph stops a man mid-smile, mid-breath, holding him alive with his axe or his saw, if we had anything stronger than a man's power against time we could have kept the air in Moon's lungs.

DO WHAT YOU LIKE

>>LAWRENCE YTZHAK BRAITHWAITE

I sure am a needin' me some woman love. (let's rock)
– gene vincent

creek creek creek bang bang
creek creek creek
bang
bang bang bang bang
ah
bang
creek
creek
...baby
creek creek creek creek creek
bang bang
omph
ya

he wished he'd been o.d.'d at birth. now, he was a youngman with a gloopy bundle wrapped in swaddling cloth. he just wanted to bitch slap the world and rid this place of the pair shaped flat eyed broads, who had just handed him his kid, who had no hopes left and lived like unpaid whores in the desolation of the better angels of the westcoast.

a many a time he had walloped his sheba in the belly so that it'd abort the thing before it came conscious. Abortions and preemptives. Murder and pulling creatures like tadpoles from tunnels of love that a dick struck till it bled. This was what was the beginning of a merciful relationship centered on the brutality of love and the obligation of pity what made it all hard to cry on any day.

aah boo hoo—it was close to sounding like her split and near death and him close to cumming that night in his camper. It echoed in an audio caught in the front cab—jetted out to bounce off the ash vault, along side the kid's clogged wind pipes, with shure 55 mics clutched by rockabillies in loose fit wranglers and polished creepers who were not too shy a akin to devland with his tats refined along his arms and body like an oil based dutch masterpiece which almost shimmied in the starlight. he was walking in a slow 4/4 box step outside the camper, in the parking lot, polydirecting the fumes from his marly's, when the ladies popped open the back doors and called him in to see them wrap the bundle in clothe and hand him to his sheba, what was only's mom now, and scowled at only's daddy who was just a boyfriend up until then.

he felt that days like these should make bad memories on a toot. to devland, who was sober, sitting in the front seat, now, stroking back the sides of his red hair and chain smoking cool like lucky luke with a bawl bulldogging him, the whole ordeal was a no big booshwash. baby only's life was no more than a bowel movement to him—stressing out the van with shit and blood and taking up this ride from work. he had to give up a days

fucking mission up island for this and had to hand it to this woggy crew too. he just said boo to the blues of it all like a fools grip and smashed the day in its toad like flabby kisser.

So the music rang to the poetics of war and the promise of the good life sang to tell the tale of what we held in the tattooed arms of men who would be boys—the little girls who cried like babies as they got dug out and spewed or kissed them under bridges and would pass like a swoon. only's daddy and his sheba took refuge in a broken house come near queen st in this place called new palestine. devland drove his camper while only grewup and raised a backyard full of dogs for 3 letter men and jews who were taking over hoods and building condos to dodge the niggers and chugs, and what more than that, he had one pitpull hotpepper fed and closeted trained for his cousin, shamus, what come to love the attraction of dark skin and the violence of decadence that it promised.

he grew into a pale skin sketch of his daddy. At this age now, he spent his time in abuse. his room transformed into a complete study of abyssinia. he was laying on his bed listening to zazou's first evening with his eyes open taking aim at the ceiling. This was his time with travel—flanked by boxing his mom btwn sessions with his daddy and dodging the po and the city who spent moments to moments coralling the hood on bikes, souped up rides and in animal control cruisers.

Only's lil cousin had moved in with them once in awhile—a neorelative—who pumped his juice into a paki girl from round the block. Lil cousin smiled and always waved at the darkie what came to visit the couple next door. Only would live like most with a smirk at the sight of the crow—while cousin wondered why the boyfriend bothered to learn to play guitar but never had a beat you could spit to. What's the point of the acoustic? It couldn't jam signals like he did bitches. He had no calves too.

Only's other time was spent in helping raise the dogs for his daddy with his mom. otherwise, he was running with his bro fear and other works and thinking on the deserts of the sahara and reading viruses set to colour on foo scap while emptying himself into that split. It took plenty completely. his study. The first evening. Sinking in her was like the opening of a vowel. his jane's name was susan. Only's head was filled with many schemes and things—she was more on than in it when time came to replace the illumination target of his fist firing hits off in the highlands.

She saw devland get out of that camper. only's daddy had drove up in his vanagon to pick up another switch puppy for a couple of queens in james bay. He went past the kids who kidnapped dogs as companions then played in the sun in the streets and begged the neighbours for broken walkmens. she still liked when he came by sometimes. he

walked like a french kiss sent across a café house. she still could know him from blocks away on foot—he still stroled to a psychedelic bop when he came toward the place she stood and what held the dogs in the backyard beyond her. she had become a pairshaped lady with most of love dropped out of her. those legs could barely hold her anymore. life had become a major iron deficiency caused by a brutal period with no sense of nutritional suppilments—you could tell by her wired barely kept hair and that the eyes weren't yet flat but more centered on a tear caught in a draught. he still fucked her once in awhile. she thought their life was sworn to have been like a religion. she was always afraid that she'd become one of those spandex ladies she seen shopping or sipping cider in navy pubs as a young girl.

– how they doing –

– good, one looks like she's pregnant. should know for certain in about a couple of weeks or so. I could take her to the vets but I know how much you hate…

– about 2 week? swell –

but with a rocking daddy like devland, she figured, who breathed a conformation ceremony of psychedelic blues, she surely figured and would have bet her life, a swell cool even when he leaned back waiting for the streetlight to change, she could have sworn she'd be betty page forever.

only came passed his mother from out the house with a pooch under each arm. devland took them off him and eyed him that he should follow him to the camper and they left her as she turned and contained a controlled waddle back into the house.

the dude next door, he saw the transaction btwn only and his daddy and he whispered to the darkie over a fug saying;
'…that kid is bad…'

the house down the block on bay…

'…I saw him hit his mom…'

the house down the block on bay held only's lil cousin who was buck nekked in a bed, at this time, his minibike lowlow crashed on the floor, with this 13yr old paki chick he went to school with laying next to him. he loved her for the moment of spurting without knuckling off. she had gained him into it swell and he held her like containing a disaster. Her parents where at work and his was done for now. Something in the cereal for the girls these days—their racks were so much bigger than the girls who covered the wax of blindfaith. Only's cousin had a 7.7 dick—real cool and thick—the size of what people once said nigger's had fucked with—and he was becoming so popular that some haters was calling him ginger. He shared one thing with that family from straight up to metaphorically—he kept the rhythm and beat up many a galamity into submission

and that was plane to see. The paki girl was wrapped around him with her hand cupping his resting dick and balls. brought into experience she lay there; wanting more of his jetliner and to make him her habit—figuring she keep longer—add some respectability in her life; bagging a jet black haired cousin of a brown headed aryan who swaggered the blocks in a red jersey and oversized ballcourt shorts—the true son of a desolate rockabilly, in a hood dedicaded to the beast of blues—they cuddle over what was butta and chatted over pillows about what they don't like
what they do
they don't like abortion
murders of kin
they don't like some of her friends—they kind of jelly of him.
—he likes her head
the way she stares cross eyed
    and toads over his lollipop and that baby she can ride
she likes the skin and the tone of his voice
    he like her d cups—there's no confusing her for boys
and that she ain't flat and them babies bounce back pretty
don't make him brail for the likes of that tittie
he humps his flow into her caramel limo
he's got endless gooey for her diddy
1.2.3.4.
it was stat. not made for fluffers or beat down whores. He grabbed a handle and road her fat city. shaytan in a western—pride, hypocrisy, sloth, gowness, envy, love excessive, lust, depravity, disobedience—shaytan in a western. Sonic stolen after a bloody fucking and wetness. Internal qibla level stanzas of misdirection. It was not for the weakened or 21 navyboys in fudge bars too scared to kill an arab for a canadian—government—who would talk about it while absorbed in coke dreamings of 3ppcli mercenaries shooting pakis and banging somali teens with angel lust. It was just the plane truth at stake here. Like those who shoot loads like salt like tears. Deep skinny dipping in the water hitting bottom resembling a black and blue explosion becomes a bigger splash.

His cousin stroked her skin like he was painting it for art class. She wiggled as he hardened in her hands. He turned to press her down into the mattress and he saw his bike, a torn up manga comic book on the floor and fantasics and men resembling the initials of radical black men ready to die for lost causes and the ill perfecfion of islam. And he blew away satan and slipped gently creeking into a rhythm.

    Let me step into the stanza and recite you letters in notes you will never figure
    Watchez for the water
    We'll settle this mystery

Thrown a body of death away from victoria
This the message of what happened to a daughter
What's you like?
h..oh
What's you like?
h..oh
What's you like?
h..oh
What's you like?
ah
h
What can we do to enjoy you?
The corpse who fell blind in the ocean—
Broken legs and eyes popped like cherries—death by water and the dying equality in amerikkka.

lycanthropes battering vampyre like empires
children ganging up and beating the flesh at night

Only had long legs, not much to say about calves but big feet and mitts with one massive surround surface callous serving as the default knuckle. He had passed the pups to his pops; affirmed then nodded to fear who signalled the jane into the backseat. He walked over to the car and got in with a show of force and flop and stretched his legs then pushed back the car seat into susan and groaned. she cussed. him and his bro booked for this day.

the paki girl was split under him. she looked up at him fully toady. shamus was quiet in a stopped motion. he was blowing away soon. So his mouth was agape and his eyes watery and focused in capturing a better thought. could be a pop a dew to her chin. she'd drip pop what he liked. the way he liked. to do a do the way he liked to. his paddy was pressed down by his abdomen and belly—stopped in motion between him and her shaved puss and crotch so his boutabust head poked out with a drop of fluid unbreakable. He looked down from her face and almost popped when he saw the sight of the pash of her tits bellied up poking two berries.
– do what you like –
she believed

He and his people had been done wrong in bad deals from split ass and real estate to grows and, in the meanwhile, the blood lines was decomposing. devland settled the pooches in the rear and they chirped along with violin solos over downbeat guitars and palestinians and pakis yearning to sing the blues in mission city.

and the jews and the switchs and the niggers and darkies
and the chug and yids and the nigs and the dark lies
and the pakis, dames with flat eyes
and the dead chugs and the niggers who are cock suckers
sodomizers of niggers sucking white dick like jews
and the switchs and the navyboys
who dream of mercanaries
and the babys dreaming of daddies shot by iraqis
after the damage done by saudis doing shooters in strip clubs owned by israelis.

ah mami

– trala lalala trala lalala... see that black dude comes around next door? my buddy fucked him up so bad a few weeks back. scored off with this game and shit –

– no shit. couldn't defend his stalk –

– ah, he ain't no fucken humanbeing, bro. he's a total switch –

only drank a beer jamming the bottle kneck down his guzzle—pulled and spewed and chuckled as he drove down the pat bay highway to elk lake with his bro and his jane, sweet susan, riding in the back.

Slam

The seat goes back.

– WOULD YOU STOP DOING THAT? FUCK! –

– trala lalala trala lalala, do you remember that, fugly? –

Collaring a nod in the ground. gonna be driving the stakes deep in the soil to make the earth sigh and loosen. The tires grinding her into submission.

– fucking siiiiiiiiiiic –

only sticks his head outside the window and hollers at a asian kid;

– hey aho, find someone to fuck you uet? [gobble gobble]

he turns to fear then looks back at the asian and says to;

that's him dude. ya seriously, there's your fantasy, fear.

ali feg G on the move. watchez lé friar tucky bitchy me no likey HAHAHA—he turnes to his girlfriend and;

devland is at the beach a year before only was born. He had completed his taskings in the streets bylaw of droit de seigneur. He stood whiping his dick off in the kitchen of his volkswagon vanagon poptop camper. devland looked across at his sheba and knew he had done it. He just knew that last one blew a whole right through that jelly. 3 very long slow jams and 1 slam too much. She was going to be spewing in a week or two. He turned round and held the rag in his fist and asked her;

– can you find your way home –

– well? –
– well what? –
fear was laughing.
– well what? –
– after, can you find your way home from here? –
– LICKEY SHOT, man –

pow[gh] pow [gh]
– then for sure don't be fucken gunnin my dad you lil sko –
– Pa'TING –
– your little cousins so much nicer than you –
– suuuuuuuWWWeeeeeeet susan, you think with your pussy like shamus thinks with his dick. but he got that toad doing it better … i see, school HAHAHA –
– do whatever, man –
– jelly, suuuuuuuuuuuWeeeeeeeeeeeeee, aho –
– fuck, the skanky paki bitch –
– i'm more reliable –
– you say something you fucking sko? you guys, nobody gafels my old man –
– chill out, only. you know what I think? that paki chick?
She is pretty but she's a bopper –
– she's a bobber. there's your fantasy, fear. back there—the chinky. back there –
– I'd never get my dick back –
– look I thought there's shit to do today isn't there, only –
– ya you do, susan. one being don't go dissin my people –
– huh huh, watchez lé, susan, héhé –
– I can find my way back home –
– where the fuck are you going, susan my sweet? where the fuck she going, only –
– we were suppose to be at the otherside, right –
– we thought that it was better … fuck it –
– no no no 'fuck it'. no fucking way sko. what the fuck man. bitch this, fear –
like a catholic at an alter they let say it aloud.

His cousin had cum for the 4th time in her. His mouth was moist with fluid goo like he had greased it. His eyes were still drouzy from the weed madness. He licked her batter and flapped her fan then he kissed her on her cheek. She layed back and cousin was about to croach over her but she said he had to meet some friends by the creek.

did we first tuck it in there? was it under the bridge there or did we just kiss?

… in shadows she stroled with friends.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Erin Soros publishes poetry, fiction and non-fiction, with stories produced for the CBC and BBC. At the University of East Anglia she teaches psychoanalysis, literature and human rights (sometimes at the same time). *Morning is Vertical*, a collection of prose and photographs, is forthcoming from Rufus Books, 2012.

Jacqueline Turner has three books with ECW Press: *Seven into Even* (2006), *Careful* (2003), and *Into the Fold* (2000). She reviews for *The Georgia Straight*, and teaches at Simon Fraser University and Emily Carr University of Art + Design. She was a poet-in-residence at the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts in Brisbane, Australia.