Four wings, eight legs, motionless torso.
Great turquoise eyes. Compound. Such other-
worldly lines to fix you with.

—J. MARK SMITH

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On our website

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The Malahat Review congratulates
the winners of the 2017 Long Poem Prize

JOHN WALL BARGER

and

DÉLANI VALIN

Barger's "Smog Mother" and Valin's "No Buffalos" were chosen from six finalists, drawn from 169 entries, by this year's judges, George Elliott Clarke, Louise Bernice Halfe, and Patricia Young. Read the two winning entries inside this issue and interviews with the authors on our website.

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TIM BOWLING Utters Oaths
GENA ELLETT Talks to Her Father
MARK JACQUEMAIN Island Hops

40TH NATIONAL MAGAZINE AWARDS
Gold Medal
40TH NATIONAL MAGAZINE AWARDS

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congratulates

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Gold Award
Essay
for "A Mind Spread Out on the Ground"
in "Indigenous Perspectives"
#197, Winter 2016

ELYSE FRIEDMAN
Honourable Mention
Fiction
for "Seventeen Comments"
in #195, Summer 2016

LINDSAY NIXON
Honourable Mention
One of a Kind
for "Windigo"
in #197, Winter 2016

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE
Honourable Mention
Poetry
for "Othello: By Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade"
in #195, Summer 2016

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The Malahat Review
Defining excellent writing since 1967

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MATTHEW K. THIBEAULT
DÉLANI VALIN
ANDREW WACHTEL
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The Malahat Review
University of Victoria
Box 1700, STN CSC, Victoria, British Columbia V8W 2Y2
Email (queries only): malahat@uvic.ca
Phone: 250-721-8524; *fax:* 250-472-5051
Website: malahatreview.ca

Twitter: @malahatreview • *Instagram:* malahatreview
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University of Victoria

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AUREL SCHMIDT

Fly Face, 2006
Pencil and acrylic on paper
15 in. × 15 in.
Collection of the artist

MARK JACQUEMAIN

Island

For a long time they barely saw the man who bought the island next door. He visited haphazardly, one or two weekends a month, and did repairs on the sagging sun porch on the far side of his cottage. The echo of hammering across the water was the only sign he was there. In August, he turned his attention to the dock and Joe and his mother could watch him work from the window above the kitchen sink. He wore just a pair of torn jeans—walked right into the lake in them—and his wide pale back reddened beneath the sun. Joe's mother stood at the window long after she'd stacked the dishes. She mixed their last can of pink lemonade, set the pitcher and two glasses on a tray, and—instead of bringing a glass to Joe—said, "I'm going to say hi." Joe watched her row over in the tin boat; when he looked up from picking dried worm off the fish hook he'd found, his mother and the man were drinking lemonade together on the rock.

Later in the month, the man returned, in a new yellow cruiser. He waded across the shallow marshy channel that separated the two islands and presented to Joe and his mother a bowl of just-picked blueberries. Up close, he smelled like Mr. Garfield, Joe's teacher from a few years back, who smoked when on yard duty. He lowered the bowl to Joe and winked, said, "Poison," and Joe, knowing better, mashed a handful into his mouth. Joe's mother invited the man to dinner that evening and for the next several hours she was coiled in anticipation as if he were some big-shot celebrity. She dust-busted the couch, chopped a salad, shook a bag of Cheezies into a bowl (also their last). She had a violent go at Joe's hair, a towel-dried tangle this deep into the summer, and got him to him restock the outhouse with toilet-paper rolls. He dumped them in a messy pile he knew would aggravate her and one separated from its brothers

and rolled into the hole, dropping down onto the glistening mound of sludge. He peeked, staggered back coughing.

His mother had combed out her own hair and put on her bright orange sundress, but when the man arrived she was nearly as sombre as the time she made dinner for Henry, the Cree man who ran the taxi-boat service. She apologized about not having wine and seemed not to hear his offer to show her his new boat. Joe receded into that comfy zone where he ranked superhuman powers. (Tornado. Ice fingers. Jedi.) Until, to get them through the dinner silence, his mother shared the humiliating tale of the lemonade stand Joe had set up on the dock when he was little—"It was very sweet; my mom and I were his only customers"—as if lemonade was the only common subject between them.

The man—Stuart he'd said his name was—waded back to his place and returned with beer and a pack of du Maurier cigarettes and she cheered up enough to let him know she thought it a disgrace that he flew the emblem of the Buffalo Sabres from his flagpole, and not the maple leaf. "It's so ugly," she said, and he smirked and explained that he was the team's equipment manager. "Have to stay loyal. They pay the bills."

Joe didn't like the way Stuart looked at his mother, but this new information raised the man somewhat in Joe's esteem. He asked if Stuart got to travel with the club, if he'd been to Montreal. Stuart said sure.

"New York?"

"Uh-huh. I was at Madison Square Garden one time when the circus was in town. That place is immense." He said he wandered through with some of the guys and got lost. "We might have had a few 'pops,'" he winked. "I end up in this big dark warehouse-sort-of-room and I hear this breathing like there's a monster in there with me. Turns out it's one of the elephants from the show! Scared the living piss outta me."

Joe laughed. And, though he could see his mother thought the story embellishment or showing off, she laughed, too, tolerantly. Stuart said, "Shit, Ellen, you have a nice smile."

She looked not embarrassed but disappointed by his forwardness, and Stuart suddenly seemed much younger than her. He made a fumbling attempt to push past this—apologized for swearing in front of Joe. "What about your flag? RCAF? Your father fly in the war?"

"Yes."

"Yeah? Mine was army—Italy. Did yours make it?"

She nodded. "But he came home with TB and never got better. He died up here, actually. My grandfather, too. Heart attack. Grandpa built this place in 1914—that's how long we've been here. They found him in his fishing boat in Lost Bay."

"No shit. Lost Bay. You can't make that up, can you?"

He apologized again for swearing but she didn't notice. She'd had enough to drink—Joe could see this too—that she wanted to tell more. "That's not the half of it. I had an uncle go through the ice near Minnicog. My mother loves to say that the men are cursed in this family, at least up here. I tell Joe, if he's not *very* careful all the time, we'll have to sell. He doesn't like me saying that."

It was true, but Joe was used to it. He was used to her talking of the men in the family and making no mention of his father.

"But so far he's been pretty invincible," she said.

It was humid, the bay dead still. She suggested they swim and in the water she seemed a dozen years younger herself. Joe and Stuart dove for beer bottles while she floated nearby with that lazy breaststroke of hers. They watched Joe cannonball off the little rock face known as the Mountain—a name his mother and grandmother had used and he'd adopted. They awarded him scores out of ten like Olympic divers; then they forgot about him and he imagined he was leaping from the cockpit of a burning-up snowspeeder.

When he woke the next morning, his mother wasn't in the cottage or anywhere on the island. She rowed the tin boat back before noon and made pancakes.

Joe didn't think of the man again until the following summer. A week into their first stay his boat appeared on the horizon, though Joe heard it before he saw it. He charged down the trail—pausing to crush in his palms the crowns of half a dozen goldenrod, smearing the pollen on a lawn chair—and clambered up the Mountain to look. The bay's long fingers reached between the islands. There was no sign of a boat. Then, a speck of fluff. A toy with little figures on it. It veered between the shoals, and abruptly slowed, its bow rearing up like a bathing moose. A thin woman in the back lost her balance and wildly flung a rope toward the dock, which splashed in the lake and began to sink.

Joe watched them disembark. Stuart, in a plaid shirt, half-buttoned, flung two suitcases on the dock and helped the woman with the wobbly first step. Her hair was choppily cropped, like David Bowie's. There was someone else with them—a girl, spindly inside the baggie Disneyland T-shirt she wore like a dress. She refused Stuart's offered hand and climbed out of the boat herself.

They vanished inside the cottage and Joe sat, scraped the lichen off the rock with a stick. Flakey lime-green. Tough ochre stuff he couldn't budge. After a while, the woman and the girl came out and wandered a little. The woman went back inside; the girl descended the hump-back toward his island. He wandered that way, in roundabout fashion, behind the outhouse and over Egg Rock. She paused when she saw

him and then continued to the water's edge. Her utter lack of expression, her shielding blonde bob and military erectness, evoked the hard angry plastic of one of his G.I. Joes. "How do you get across?" she said. "Can you walk?"

"Yeah, it's not that deep."

She seemed uncertain so he took a few steps into the water toward her.

"See?"

Horsetails sagged. Bullfrogs burped at each other like old men.

She raised her eyebrows as if annoyed, and tiptoed in. "Ugh, it's slimy." She stumbled and lifted her T-shirt, revealing purple bikini bottoms.

She made it to the bridge. The derelict wooden half-bridge built out from his island ten feet into the shallow marsh—before ending abruptly, at the halfway point, overtop a carpet of lily pads. A pail stood at the end and a net hung from a pole wedged in the planking. She climbed ashore—legs silvered and dripping—and peered in the pail. "There's baby fish in here."

"I know. I catch them," he indicated the net, "with that."

She stepped carefully onto the bridge. "Why's it only go halfway?"

He shrugged. "The ice took it out a couple years ago. We used to know the people over there real well, but there's been a bunch of owners since then."

She sat, feet reflected in the glassy water. She took hold of the planks beneath her and shook the bridge so it wobbled. He squatted where he was on the rock.

When he looked back at her she was trying, awkwardly, to dip a toe in the water. "Don't do that, you'll scare them off." He walked out next to her so the bridge slouched to one side and pointed out the flashing swarm that hovered over the net. "Watch out," he said, and tenderly gripped the pole, yanked the net up.

Dozens of minnows, shards of sunlight, flip-flapping frantically.

"See?" He carried the net to a flattish shelf of rock and set it down. He gathered dripping handfuls of the tiny fish and dropped them in the pail.

"Do you keep them?"

"Keep them? No, I use them as bait."

A few of the minnows had wriggled free of the net. He brushed them toward the pond with his fingers. One, powdered with dirt, barely moving, he smushed into the rock with the knuckle of his thumb. She looked on with a displeased face.

"It's hard to get them all," he said.

Later that afternoon, Joe and his mother rowed over in the tin boat to say a proper hello. His mother had been abuzz since their arrival, curious about Stuart's guests. She wondered if the woman was "a new one or an old one," adding that it was nice that he had *some*one. "I think he gets lonely." She was largely talking to herself but took Joe's hand on the path. "And looks like you'll have someone to play with. Other than your mother."

Halfway over they realized the yellow boat wasn't there; a breeze was up and they mustn't have heard it chug off. But they beached near the dock and climbed the humpback to the cottage. It was the first time Joe had been here in two summers, since Stuart bought the place, but it was familiar. The huge deformed pine tree and scatter of juniper and blackened flat rock where fires were lit. The cluster of boulders like sentries along the path to the outhouse.

The cottage itself was dim and musty and not at all what Joe remembered. He loitered by the screen door while his mother and the thin woman talked. On hearing that Stuart had gone back to the marina to get firewood, Joe's mother relaxed and made herself at home, helped open windows and sort the dishes. Joe snuck glances at the girl, who slouched in one of the kitchen chairs eying the floor with what seemed a grossed-out face.

"We have plenty of wood out back. He just likes to drive that stupid boat," the woman said. Her name was Marlene. She was pretty up close, if not dramatically so, her hair less raggedy. (Maybe the boat trip had done that.) "If he's not driving it, he's *polishing* it. He washed it once in the driveway, already, and he was at it again today at the marina."

"Sure," Joe's mother said, "men and their toys. But you must enjoy it."

"Jesus, did you see when we got here? You notice my sea legs? I almost fell in the lake."

Joe's mother performed a chuckle but leaned away. The grace of it made the other woman seem almost clownish.

"Well, we just came to say hi and invite you over for a drink."

"Tonight?"

"Sure, whenever." She turned to the girl and, in that matter-of-fact way she had with kids, said, "And if you like, Laura, you could row back with us and Joe could show you around."

The girl popped up in her chair. "We'll just walk over."

"Hey," Marlene said.

"What? I know the way."

She rose, tossed a glance at her mother, banged outside. Joe and his mother exchanged a look of their own; she nodded to indicate that he should go. He joined the girl on the stoop, but she was off at once and he followed her down the path to the marsh, wildflowers swaying at

the passage of her stick legs. At the water she hesitated again and he led the way across. He marched her past his cottage and up the Mountain and down the slope to the island's eastern peninsula—a tiny horn of rock, separated now that the water was high by an ankle-deep canal—and waded out to it. Two haggard gulls flew off but a third, just a humped tuft of feathers, did not. He approached and nudged it with one of his toes. It was dead. He retrieved a wand of driftwood and used it to flip the carcass over, this way and that. It was stiff like shirts left to dry on the line, a dull black eye and yellow grin.

"Gross," she said.

He hoisted the bird up and returned to the island proper, closing its perimeter—the territory of which he was king—and arriving at last at the nook beneath the Mountain's overhang, and his driftwood lean-to. He knelt, flung the gull ahead of him, beckoned her to follow. "Come on," he said. There was really only room for one and she had to squeeze in. "Careful," he said, and made a little gesture to indicate his collection, neatly arranged in crannies: fish skulls, shells and knobs of bone, a broken lure still clinging to a bit of line, an intact crayfish, cattails puffed out to seed like marshmallow on a stick.

"What's all this for?" she said. The question oozed disdain, but she stared at him, awaiting an answer.

He noticed in that softer light that she was pretty too. And this irritated him.

"Nothing," he said, and, inspired, thrust the gull at her, squawking. She stared at him, thoughtfully, and crawled out.

Stuart returned and he and Marlene waded over in their bathing suits. He brought beer again; they all swam. (Joe noted the wisp of dark hair emanating from the edges of Marlene's suit, and kept his eyes averted.) Then, while the adults drank and talked, Joe and Laura lay on their sides on the warm porch and played cards—or, rather, she submitted to the hands of Old Maid he relentlessly dealt on the damp towel between them. She was either woeful at the game or indifferent and ended up with the bitch every time.

Now and then Stuart came out to smoke. "Jesus, you've gotten bigger, haven't you?" he said once to Joe, the sort of adult small talk that could be humoured only when no other kids were around. Joe merely nodded. Stuart went back inside and Laura mocked him, his unsteady gate and the perplexed look on his face as he paced with his cigarette when down at the shore. He was drunk, and as evening came on, a seamless grey smothering the sky, he grew drunker. They stayed for hamburgers and he took charge of the grill, managed not to burn anything. But he was surly during dinner, muttering under his breath.

Ignoring this, the women talked like old friends.

"Stu thinks I should do my beautician training."

"I just said that cause you like that stuff, Marlene," the man sighed.

"What about you?" Marlene said, and Joe's mother said she was between jobs, too. She told them about leaving the college where she'd taught history. "I was distracted by the divorce. I may go back or use this break to finally start my PhD. The worst part, honestly, is that I can't afford this place. Joe's father gives me almost nothing. And that's not to mention the upkeep. With the wind out here you need a new coat of paint every couple years, new shingles."

"Well, Stu can help you with that stuff, can't you, baby?"

"Sure," Stuart said. He backed out his chair, stood, produced a cigarette. "Sure, you just go ahead and offer my services. Not like we have shitload to do next door."

He clattered out to the porch to smoke.

"Don't worry about him," Marlene said, "he's wasted."

The women cleared the table and Joe and Laura took their pudding cups to the couch, Laura luxuriating over the last bits she could get with her fingers. They heard Joe's mother ask how long Marlene and Stuart had been together and Marlene reply, "Couple years. On and off."

"Oh. I didn't see you out here last summer."

"No, last summer was bad."

Laura met Joe's gaze and stared back hard as if to say, Don't you pity me.

From outside drifted the stink of cigarettes, the sound of waves licking the rock. She lifted a framed photograph from the end table, lay back on the arm of the couch, and held it to the light. "Who's this?"

"My grandma," he said. His grandmother as a child, in white shoes and a checkered dress holding aloft a pike nearly as long as she was. He meant to say more, recount the night his grandmother cudgeled a rattler with a rock on her way to the outhouse. But he was staring at the fine hairs on the line of her jaw.

He saw her again when the three of them returned in July for a longer stay. He schooled her on which berries were edible, which not. He took her snorkelling off Whale Island where a sailboat lay on the lake floor, pocked with mussels. They dragged an old sheet of plywood from under the cottage and erected a precarious addition to his lean-to.

When it rained they lay on the floor and listened to baseball on the radio. His mother was a fan and looked up from her Marx reader (always open in the same place) before pitches.

One hot afternoon, Stuart let Joe and Laura lie around on his boat, jump from the back platform. "Who needs a beer?" he'd joke. Or, "I'm

not seeing any swabbing. Didn't one of you promise to *swab*?" Laura, golden hair stuck to her shoulders, ankles hanging off the side, giggled unreservedly. Joe had to fake a laugh. He noticed for the first time how handsome Stuart was, in a wolfish way. Unshaven, shirtless, black hair slick with sweat. Though Joe hardly glanced in his direction.

Stuart returned to town and the women drank wine together and complained about him, about men in general. But he surprised them the next morning with cans of red paint and announced that he intended to put a couple coats on Joe's cottage. He was in buoyant spirits. "Early Christmas present," he said, winking at Joe's mother. "We all pitch in, we could have her done in a day or two."

Marlene didn't help, but Joe and Laura did a little with the rollers. They made a race of it and messily stained the rock, as if with blood. Joe kept at it even after she left for lunch. He'd almost completed the west wall—he'd had to attach the roller to a broom handle to get the high corners—when he decided to demand lunch of his own. His mother was up on a ladder out front, grinning, and Stuart stood beneath her, a hand on her bare calf. He saw Joe and removed his hand—it left a red print. "Got you," Stuart said, but sort of as an afterthought. Then he said it again to Joe, with a shrug, "Got her."

Joe's mother's face had gone severe. Stuart sighed, brushed off his jeans, and sat on the steps. He glanced at Joe and a thought seemed to bubble up. "Hey, what do you say we take the boat out tomorrow, real early? Drop in a couple lines?"

Joe looked to his mother. She descended the ladder, saying, "We're going in to eat, Stu."

"So," he said to Joe once she'd gone, "tomorrow."

The next morning, they puttered over to Lost Bay, just the two of them. Stuart said just enough to create the mystique of great fishing prowess—said he did the bass derby and had won prizes. His tackle box unfolded in a series of miniature terraced shelves, each with four compartments, and each of these containing a marvellous lure. But they got few nibbles and within the hour he grew sleepy and gave up casting. "I'll man the net," he said, and lay back, cupped a beer in his lap, contented himself by beguiling Joe with dirty limericks. One whose opening couplet featured a lass from Regina.

"But you're not ready for any of that yet. You don't have a girlfriend, right?"

"No."

"But you like girls, don't you? You like looking at them." Joe felt a flush explode across his face. Stuart let out a cackle that echoed down the bay.

The see-saw call of an ovenbird in the bush paused, resumed.

"Don't worry, they like looking at us too. Won't admit it but they do—that's how you know a chick's into you." He craned forward so the boat tipped and the beer in the neck of his bottle sloshed into the lake. "There's other signs and whatnot you can pick up with a little practice, but this one's sure-fire. You got to do like this," he turned from Joe and turned back quickly, "and then you'll catch them."

As advice, it wasn't much. But Joe was emboldened by it. That afternoon he dragged his inflatable rubber raft out from under the porch—it was fuzzed with a membrane of dust and old cobwebs—and washed it off, blew it up, took Laura out in it. A breeze was up, scarring the bay with white, and they rolled low in the water. The raft was too small for them and her legs got entangled in his. He was fervently disturbed by this. And by the spray of freckles on her nose, the way her hair curled about her brown neck. The purple triangle of cloth below her life jacket. She gazed soberly out over the water, so he could look.

He beached them on the south shore of a tiny island out in the bay and silently guided her over the sparkly black rock, hot underfoot, marred by globs of gull shit. His cottage wasn't far off—just there, perched on his island's ridge like a houseboat on a whale—but the lake was between them and the landscape here so foreign that he felt isolated and free. They sat together in a sparse stand of blueberries and he popped berry after berry in his mouth—then put his hand to his throat and tilted sideways. "Poison," he gurgled, lying prone while she shook and kicked him, giggling as she had on Stuart's boat.

When he opened his eyes she sat cross-legged across from him and was gazing at him serenely. "What?" he said.

"Nothing."

He remembered what Stuart had told him and looked away, looked back quickly. She was still staring. But now her expression had changed to one of bemusement. "You have seaweed on your face," she said.

She screamed with laughter. She leapt to her feet and he ran after her.

Stuart dropped Laura and her mother at the marina the following morning, the yellow cruiser bearing the three of them off, without goodbyes. Later that same week, Joe and his mother took a taxi boat to town and got groceries and wine, a new bathing suit for her, Band-Aids for his scuffed ankles. They were late getting back and Henry, who ran the taxi boat, scolded them for cutting it so close. The boathouses dark out in the channel, the pines like hanged men pointing them home.

They had a feast of hot dogs, potato chips, and ginger ale—two cans each.

In the ensuing days, he rowed his raft out into the bay, pretending himself castaway, all alone, days at sea. But as the week wore on, he spent more time floating near the dock, dropping a mask over the raft's bow and peering down at the lake bottom, glancing every now and then for the sign of a boat. He caught his mother doing it too, just standing at the window.

One morning, beneath a drizzly sky, they listened to the royal wedding on the radio, his mother frowning as Lady Di said her vows. "She's too young," she muttered, and peered at him quizzically. He thought about this—the look she gave him—as he struggled to sleep that night under the rain's erratic patter. Then forgot it. Then a sound at the window: a soft tapping. He got up on his knees and shifted the curtains and Laura was there. Her face pebbled by raindrop shadows. She spoke but her voice was lost. He tried to open the window but couldn't. Her hair was a dark cap, her lashes stuck together. She made an oval with her lips and pressed against the glass, pushed through, and her lips met his and their tongues touched.

He woke to voices. Murmuring from the other room, the shifting of bodies. His mother said distinctly, "When do you have to get them?"

"Friday. They've gone to see Marlene's parents in Windsor."

The gusting rain blotted them out. Then his voice: "Not sure why you can't admit it."

"Admit what, Stu?"

"That you had fun."

"Stuart."

A silence fell between the gusts, but it was a taut silence, a full one.

His mother sighed, a noise of censure. She said, "You should go," and Stuart muttered something, and the screen door clattered.

Stuart picked up Laura and her mother two days later. Laura had a new fishing rod and all week she and Joe caught sunfish off the bridge. They made a game of dropping toilet paper rolls into the outhouse ("stink shed," she called it) until one wedged atop the shit-pile like an Oreo cookie in a scoop of ice cream. They hunkered down in the lean-to and did pencil sketches of his collection. Hers, accomplished, almost lifelike. His, alien beasts made of crayfish pincers and trout jaws.

One evening, they were listening to *Monday Mysteries* on the radio when Laura mentioned that Stuart and Marlene were fighting. The dented Chinese checkers board was between them on the couch and they played and whispered—"She's been crying a lot"—during lulls in the program. Then the radio began to muffle with static. They noticed the wind, the anxious lake. A bank of clouds had rolled in and the sky

was a curdling green. Laura thought she should get home but Joe's mother recommended she wait it out. "We're safe in here," she said, and told the story of the three men crossing from Penetang in a storm. They ran up on a shoal, got stuck, and tried to pass the night, waves shattering against the side of the boat. "In the end they freed themselves and made it here. We'd all gone to bed. Joe, my mother, and I. Then we heard this knocking and I thought, 'What on earth is that?' I went to see and there were these three guys shivering on the porch."

She laughed. She raised her head and listened. "Did you hear that?"

The windows moaned and hissed. Wails ran through the rafters. Then, to their great alarm, there was a knock at the door.

It was Stuart. He staggered inside, drenched. "I came to get her," he announced, without looking at anyone in particular. "I've been *sent*. So," he nodded at Laura, "let's go."

"God, that's funny," Joe's mother said.

"What is?"

"Well, we were just talking about how we never get knocks at the door and then here you come knocking."

He glared at her. "Ha, ha."

It was clear that he was drunk. Joe's mother made a comment under her breath and he stiffened. "What did you say?"

She sucked in a breath, about to answer. But something caught her attention. She cocked an ear and they all listened together. Beneath the percussion of rain came a distinct skittering across the roof. "There is it again," she said.

"What?" he said, but she silenced him. She took a step toward the window, and gasped. And there was a sharp thunderous *whoomp* and the radio and several books burst off the shelf. She fell two steps backward and she and Stuart swore together. Laura jumped, tipping the Chinese checkers board, scattering marbles everywhere.

"It's okay, it's fine," Joe's mother assured them. She stepped outside to investigate, letting the storm in as she went. Gusts riffled the pages of the dislodged books, rainwater puddled on the floor. Stuart cursed again and followed her out. Joe and Laura approached the window. She pointed, and Joe saw the big plywood sheet from the lean-to drenched on the porch. The wind had picked it up and flung it against the cottage.

Joe's mother seemed not to have noticed. She was shouting at Stuart, voice lost in the wind, hair torn in all directions. Beyond them, as Joe and Laura watched, the rest of the lean-to was torn piece by piece from its perch. Like a special effect in a B movie, shadows hurtling in slow-motion out of the dark. The dead gull fluttered on the rock. "Look," said Laura, as it was snagged by a gust and sent flying off

too. They returned to the couch but now she sat close against him. The warmth and substance of her, that fresh sunlight smell.

The rain lasted two days. It fell like machine-gun fire across the bay. He played hands of spite and malice with his mother, disinterested. He lay in bed and carved his name in the wall with one of his father's knives. His mother came in and spoke to him in a voice harsh with love and seriousness. "I don't want you going over there for a little while. Not that you'd want to, in *this*." She glanced out the window. "Promise me, okay?"

He nodded. She smoothed the bedspread. She smoothed his hair against his head, and he let her. "I don't know. Maybe it's time for a change."

He sat up on the pillow. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I don't know what it means. Maybe nothing. Maybe we just need a good night's sleep and things will look different tomorrow."

But the next day things looked the same. And when Laura came to the door he found himself saying stuff he didn't want to say. She asked if he wanted to come out, eyes wide, as if suspicious of what his answer would be. "I can't," he said.

"Why?"

"I just can't. It's raining too hard."

"Not really. Not hardly at all."

"Well, I just don't *want* to. Okay?"

With a sick gut he watched through the window as she dragged home in the drizzle. All afternoon, he imagined her over there, standing back from the window, nervous of it waking again into a storm.

The next morning he woke to a breathy crash of waves, sunlight on the quilt. He got himself a bowl of cereal and ate it on the porch. The sky was clear, the wind was up and rattled his pajama bottoms. Power lines twanged and gulls flew backward. He returned inside to change into his swim trunks and when he came out again he saw her descending the humpback, her loping steps. She reached the marsh and paused on the other side. He met her there.

"Hey," he said, but she just nodded. The wind danced a loose strand of hair across her lips. He thought he should say something more but before he could get his voice she sighed. "We're leaving. God, I don't even understand what's happening. It's like they hate each other. He's making us take the taxi boat. I don't know if we'll be coming back."

He squatted and picked at the lichen. He wanted to tell her she was, that it was all going to be okay, and looked up with the words on his

tongue. But she was staring at him with such ferocity that his breathing paused. For a moment all they did was look.

Then her mother came out on the porch and called for her. "I should go," she said.

The boat arrived soon after. He stood at the kitchen window and saw Henry receive their suitcases and help them down from the dock. His mother came to his side. "What's going on?" They watched together as Henry butted his cigarette on the dash and chugged off backward. Laura looked toward the window, turned away.

He wasn't sure who to hate. His mother was the only one there. "Joe," she said, but he pushed past her, banged outside. He dragged his raft from under the porch, carried it to the lake, shoved off into the frothy green surf. He dropped his head and leaned into the rowing, the oars striking little popcorn sprays of water. He was way out, bouncing in and out of the troughs between the waves, when he heard the shouting. His mother, down at the shore, a miniature, wind-tousled version of her herself. She glared out at him, waved. The lake struck fierce and foamy around her, the sun on the wet rock almost blinding. She cried out again, her voice a thin, distant animal peal. He dropped his head. His shipmates had all drowned; only he'd survived. A month of drifting. When he looked up, she was still there, waving, shouting, but now there was no sound. Only then did he row back to her.

TWO POEMS BY LENEA GRACE

Auld Lang Syne, etc.

In Montreal you ran shirtless and sweating,
over the mountain—under a cross,
the city's proverbial eye in the sky—
it was summer and you had been drinking,
escaping the home and garden police of Westmount,
high pressure systems swelling, engorged—

a shared troposphere, the anticyclone of designer tiles
and kitchens, business trips and $9 loaves of bread—the organic
zeal of a woman in her forties. She's got books on the bedside,
texts on polyamory and it's freaking you out.
You went vegetarian, yes, but shared interests are not a pre-req

for marriage—at least, this is what you say
over dinner in Toronto. We won't hold back
and you never have—tonight you delight me with isms
(I can't let you get away) with. Has it been seven years?
I like your beard.

You remember the slag and I don't remember your car,
an old Nissan Stanza in gunmetal—but poetry is dead
and you can't smoke in the Townehouse anymore.

You once told me the most beautiful things
you'd ever seen were two hippie girls dancing
in the rain downtown on a McGill lawn,
breasts soaked in the gentle tropics of September
(but that was before) you had children.

So gimme a lovepunch—
drunk on papadums and beer, gin and tonics
at a dive on Bloor St. in winter, in the stretch
between Christmas and New Year's—your trip
to Cancun with your wife looms, childless (I am)—
for the first time in so many years.
You are 42 and I am 35.
I won't ask if you are happy.

Farmhouse–Side A

I wanted to tell you about the organ
in the corner, dust and piano books—
oak shelf of cassettes lamped in dark light—
a warm night in Orillia with my friends.

I wanted to tell them about you
and I did, over homemade pizza and fire,
Emmylou on stereo surround—1976
hovering in 2017's ether, quilted
in a cosmic fog—harmonies lilting,
skipping the stairs two at a time.

•

Tonight we drive through the old talk,
through Waylon's thick—velvet
night drive, the thick— and cut through quick,
fast forward to the part of the tape
where I tell you how to love me.

ROBERT HILLES

Rabbits along the Highway

That hurry that dash
The heavens but clouds
And stars a notion of
No
Please be
The way forward

They hide in wet grass
And brush
Are tempted to move but don't
That much they have learned
And know
Part of that chemistry
We claim to know but don't.

MATT ROBINSON

Against the Opposable Thumb

Briefly unhinged at some pivotal juncture
of a late summer's football-matched
pratfall, this thumb's now a cranky old bugger—uneasily
angry and warily perched on the proverbial porch
of my damaged right hand. Bruise-bloated; arthritic
and swaying; prone to fits of distemper. Barely
able to grasp a mere semblance of whatever
sly, rumoured rhetoric at which its stick has been shaking,
it longs for a line drawn in the sand that slips through
its neighbouring digits' failed clutch. This dull ache's the new face
of what passes for real flexibility in a suddenly post-fractural
world; how our grasp on reality's set, and then loosed,
grudgingly. A trumped-up indignant, it's opposed, constantly—
aches to say, in the morning's damp cool
or each evening's close, clammy heat:
Take a hike. Take a seat and watch the world burn.
Yes, this knucklehead seems at once to know best, or know
nothing; or, ape just as much. A nouveau, bespoke, hipster-maker
of handwrung once-fists, of faux-wrought A-OKS–
we just hope its signed puppetry's shadows
are—in some guise—in the end, no more or no less than
a good ol' pick-me-up, an innocence
mimed. Just vaudevillian gestures towards our
coming to grips. Only another nail chewed, chewed,
eschewed, and then spit.

Name on the Mailbox

Even after all this time, the battered tin mailbox
at the end of the long lane still bears
the name of our ancestor.
The cedars along the narrow track reach for my car,
brushing, catching, scraping. Grass trails its long fingers
along the undercarriage, a hollow sighing sound.
My father, my brother, never really
owned the farm, that's it. The farm
owned them, tugged at an unseen
part of them, though they worked elsewhere.
The farm cost both their marriages,
inveigled both into her valleys, her fast flowing waters,
her forest knolls, her layers and layers of
leaf bed, her sweet spring syrup.
I edge the car past the place where
pussy willows still show their soft catkins in spring,
past the big maple where the well used to be,
up the rise to the low stone fence
in front of the house, the front door we never used,
the door above that opened into nowhere.
The gate to the outer yard is open.
For a half-second flash, I see a stranger, an old
stooped man with white hair.
He turns, he wears my brother's face.

Words Fell

Words fell from the highest branches
along with the apples, our father up there
shaking and shaking, words and apples
hitting the ground with discrete thumps.
The new sun barely topped the high trees
of the nearby woods; my brother and I on our
knees in the dew-wet grass
separated the bruised from the unscathed,
placed them one by one in bushel baskets,
the apples, red on one side, green on the other,
the words spittle-shined.
Half-split by the fall one word
spilled its seeds, hard and sharp,
but the worm held back; from within the word's
flesh, it moved its eyeless front end
as if to speak.
Before I could stop him, my brother
stretched out his arm, grabbed the half-
split word, swallowed it whole
and that
was the beginning.

ROBERT FINLEY

The Beech Tree

We spoke so little while we worked, the work itself a voice between us. In the still, early hours, we put on bent backs like the hill and with spade, or rake, or pry-bar, block and tackle, went about one thing or another. Neither of us gardeners, we worked within the presence of a garden whose care had fallen to us. Our hands numbed by the turning season, the sun fell across our shoulders; how we loved that work, the slope of the land down to the water, the violet light at morning and that tolled the evening in, the task unfinished until tomorrow. The place was always beyond us, our understanding narrowed to the work's small compass: our blunt fingers in the earth, the dull clink of steel against stone lifting into the leaves above us. And all the while, the trees whispered their green meanings, each to each, in the soft five-lettered alphabet of their insistent speech; auxin, ethylene, cytokinin… and the garden filled with all the words for longing and belonging in languages far out of reach: the keening of the lily and the rose, the lilac's shining scent, the peony's communing with the ant, chamomile and spirea with the bee, the measured nastic gestures of branch and twig and leaf.

We had no words to describe it, as perhaps we might have, had our claim to it been longer or our language for it older. Only our dumb work within it; or to observe the rippling, brushed gently by a hand of wind, of cypress next to cedar next to feathered hemlock and green yew; or that where the hemlocks grew the world seemed older, wiser, sadder. The place was always already someplace else, somebody else's when we stepped under the oak tree's lintel branch and into the garden. The trees had for a long time been on the move: pathways, fences, foundation stones, hearths, houses, roads, and rights of way appear-

ing and disappearing around them in the time-lapse magic of the city's archival records laid one atop another. And it goes on without us too, for a little while.

A garden is a place apart, the word itself a fence post from Old English *geard* for a fenced enclosure. A garden is a place apart, but in and of the world it refers to and enacts. The hedgerow invaded by the vine. Forsythia tumbling down the hill. The rose that climbs and clots the hydrangea tree. The blackberry and plum full of wasps. The incremental shade. Each thing attesting to the gardener who was there, but also to the garden's constant urging into disrepair. So that the gardener's intent—marked, say, by the copper of the copper beech, the magnolia outside its natural range but in full fleshed flower backed by a south facing wall, the rhododendron, apple, cherry, plum, their clocked blossoms arranged so that every morning of spring and summer the eye falls somewhere—so that the gardener's intent, with time, becomes more gracious and complex: the fussy borders of annuals let go, the plotted view planes tattered or obscured by growth, the flagstone paths crammed with grass, the grass itself a parliament of violet, strawberry, clover, chamomile, dandelion, moss, and thatch.

Not things, but things in relation make the garden.

The place grew up within our ignorance, not wild but with the wild in it, not under but with our care, full of sinew and flex and its own intelligences. Our work that day was on the hill below the house within the oak tree's full acre of green shade. At dusk you'd said, "Perhaps that's enough. If you're free we could come back to it tomorrow." And I looked up into the branched vaulting of the cathedral space that housed us where we dug and said, "Ah, yes. Good." Our breath just then gathered up into the last long inhalation of the trees before nightfall, our very words drawn down and fixed in the one slow vowel of the oak tree's forming rings, a caught breath, a breath caught and held for a long moment, a deep astonished "O," greening into what's around us. We were gardened too, while, unaware, we gathered up our clattering tools, glad and bone weary, to head up to the warm lit house for supper.

What did I learn there, beside you? To do physical work every day. The beauty of the lever, the purchase, and the machine. To speak no ill. To keep up with regular maintenance. That difficulty is a deep well from which laughter can be drawn up. To be faithful. That character can speak when speech fails. To find a moral compass. About working with things. The pace of it. The heft. The charm.

These last days I look down from your high windows here, not over the garden where we worked, but over the treed city that contains it. The view is breathtaking: out across the leaden water and over the

whole peninsula, the green streets of a grey city, from the rowing clubs on the opposite shore to the universities and hospitals, to the Public Gardens and the Park, to the port on the far side, and all the way south to the broad harbour mouth. All of it is mapped and held within you. Later the lights of the city come on street by street. The crepuscular glow of the container pier shows in the eastern sky. The bright points of the harbour buoys repeat and repeat their green names and red through the long night. At first light a low compacted cloud cover has moved in and seems, from this high vantage, to slope down and fall away to the far horizon. It brings with it a sense of vertigo. Discrete columns of rain touch the city here, and here, bend leaf and shatter peony. The city waits. I do. You. "My life is the gardener of my body," says Yehudi Amichai. Death, of course, is that gardener too and tends its own branched forms and rhizomes… here, a little pain, and here… to flower within us and turn our breath sweet and leafy as a garden.

•

Our hearts beat where light lingers on twig and leaf, a green assaying of everything we've known or loved. The leaf, as though it grazed our lips and blew into our mouths, breathes into us and all our kind, a subsidiary function of its vast economy of surplus, its magic trick of turning sunlight and CO_2 to living tissue. I keep samples from our garden in this, a kind of press book, an *hortus hymelius* or winter garden of pressed leaves and flowers: from the woodlot by the house, lilies of the valley that have lost their scent; forget-me-nots from the cupped hands of the hill; palms of five-fingered white pines and two-fingered red; the soft early needles of the solitary hackmatack, a girl's gloved hand pushing through the sleeve of her rust coloured spring coat; the oak, and the maple next to it; locust; yellow birch and silver; knotweed; apple, plum, and cherry; a birch leaf pulled from a whorl of autumn air one day when the wind's untuned rattling had put its metal edge to the afternoon to remind us of the end of things; a mountain ash; the shining lilac with its secret spaces; spirea, leaf and flower; feathered hemlock; barbary; hydrangea in its climbing form and as a standing tree; rhododendron; cypress, yew, and cedar; moose maple, its outsized leaf folded to fit in; mungo pine; dutchman's pipe; Virginia creeper; weigela, holly, viburnum; elm and elderberry; rose; forsythia; day lily; hosta; peony; black spruce, fir, and juniper. A leaf of copper beech collected at midsummer retains an inky purple that looks like it might stain my finger and my thumb where I pick it up. To "cultivate" strikes its root deep down into the Indo-European *k'well*, which means "to turn," or "circle," movements echoed in the action of the spade or

plough. It also means "to walk around," "sojourn," and "dwell," words that flower into the bell-shaped words "for now."

I was a child asleep in a room high up in this tree's branches. My mother closed the book she had been reading in her voice that sought out all the rhythms; my father played the *Nachtmusik* in the room below; and you turned out the light and pulled to the door to the workshop down along the hill, its sharp concussion sounding through the garden in the still evening air. Mother, father, stepfather, fast friends from childhood in this city, your garden here in this sheltered nick of cove, this niche. Breathing out, a child's sigh settling into sleep, the beech tree took us up as we took the music up. Breathing in, windows opened into the double darkness of night falling through its black branches, its black leaves sighing all around the house, the eaves, its roots wrapped around the house foundation stones, it carried us through each night of those years, those few years, its sweet clear breath in our throats, our branched lungs, a blazon, filled up with it.

•

At this hour, deep within the beech tree's shadowed centre, sparrow, nuthatch, warbler, chickadee—chickadeedeedee—bright keys at the door between day and night, between night and day; and then, farther off, crow and jay, the hinge.

DÉLANI VALIN

No Buffalos

I

I'm capital-M Métis. The proof:
official cards, forms, anatomy.
High cheekbones, dark hair, Red
River veins—sanctioned subcutaneous

topography. Is there an ideal?
It's not me: I called my mother's
mother Grandma, not Nohkom.
And she told me of being cold

in Meadow Lake, school lunches
clanging frozen in tin pails, sharing
shabby rooms with brothers,
praying, and growing up motherless.

What about our history? I glimpsed
it in fifth grade. Power-point
presentations of figure-eight flags, fiddles—
men shot and hanged. Couldn't identify

with violent static slides. Instead
I memorized names like Dumont and Riel.
Got the grades, let go of the Sash
and the Scrip. Moved on, Batoche blip.

II

When Grandpa was alive, he rented
a modest doublewide in a trailer park
off a hustler-held, crime-lined
highway. He filled glass dishes

with candy for our visits. Grandma cooked
stew in the bleached-white kitchen. Cousins
in the living room compared each others'
features. Who's pretty? Who's *Indian*?

She's got Native cheeks. I flattened them
with clammy palms. Slathered on
the makeup, Fair, Pearl, Porcelain. Bullies
in highschool taught me Cree was still there.

Ethnicity checklists assured constant
presence of well-meaning, white education
assistants. *You're Métis? You need a tutor.*
You're struggling. You're distant. I was

reconciling my awkward appearance
with pictures of smooth-faced ancestors.
At last I let the sun pick a tint and daydreamed
of embedding beaded flowers in my skin.

III

I rented a room in a dank Vancouver
basement: iron bars on tiny window,
narrow twin bed, perpetually dirty
dishes, gloom-mute roommates

too morose to speak. The landlord, film-
school professor, lived upstairs: *no talking*
after eight, no guests, no burning—what is that,
sage? I smoked a thick Romeo y Julieta

on the eve I moved away. Crossed the country
with my boyfriend, leased a Montréal
apartment. Exchanged English pleasantries
and French profanities with my neighbour—

a fist-bumping septuagenarian who claimed
he drank whole cans of maple syrup straight.
Rats and roaches skittered in our kitchen.
Câlisse! Calvaire! I've never lived on grassy

plains. Carpets of canola, dollops of clouds
in a too-vast sky: prairie provinces are an ellipses
connecting the concrete cores I've called home. Where I live,
tall glass buildings shape the days. There are no buffalos.

IV

Styrofoam packs and blood pads,
plastic wrap pulled against refrigerated
flesh: pre-seasoned, dismembered
pigs glisten. I'm standing on the edge

of the aisle, far from the abattoir
where workers dunk still-alive swine
in vats of boiling water to shed hair
from their skin. We do away with the eyes.

Stroking the beaver-tuft trim
on moose-hide moccasins gives me visions
of my own skin slathered in my brains,
stretched in the sun. Muscles wound

into sticky sinew. Liver wrapped
in parchment paper and tossed
into a freezer. There are no
gentle bullets. The only blood

I drink drips from blackberries
picked behind seedy strip malls. I eat
soup with corn, squash, beans.
Vegetables are easier to mourn.

V

June outside the hospital pavilion:
someone funded a new wing. We're dancers
on demand: we Métis and a group of First
Nations people from Cowichan.

I'm twelve. Wearing a choker, bright
red skirt over crinoline, a garter
grown-up enough to make up for
misgivings about pigtail braids that frame

my too-round face. Best friend's a blonde Mi'kmaq
girl who wasn't the *right* kind of Métis
for an official card, but good enough to dance.
We hold hands, demonstrate the Red River jig,

Drops of Brandy, Rabbit Dance. Shuffle
through the steps, hear the instructor
joke—*it's Métis cardio*—as she invites
the clappers in the crowd to join us.

A Cowichan boy cuts in, stumbles,
shouts over the fiddle. I accept
the compliment, cough, thank
exertion for masking blush.

VI

I feel guilty about struggling
with my duality. Hungry for
stereotypical narratives of helpful
Cree women voluntarily teaching

European men to survive the freezing
plains. How old were my mothers
when they were wed? I can't
reconcile the cavalier, colonial

manifest-destiny of male ancestors
with my hypersensitivity. Was I born
out of violence? Ask Kisemanito
or count beads on the rosary.

Get over it, says the anonymous
Internet commenter on the CBC.
Should we forget Road Allowance,
Rooster Town, getting by on roasted

gopher meat? I won't make peace
with the past. Can't bifurcate
my history. I can only collect
my Elders' memories and write.

VII

I was in a French program in high
school. We used government funding
for a field trip to Saskatchewan. Toured
tiny St. Denis, population thirty.

Me and my friend were restless,
bored with teachers' authority. We ran down
a dirt road, past a buffalo ranch, through
a grove of twisted trees. We rested in an

abandoned farmhouse full of porcelain
cups and calendars. Respite from the buzz:
mosquitos and too-chatty classmates.
Almost missed the bus to Batoche.

Neon-green grass, bullet-pocked white church.
I imagined what my ancestors might
have copped to in confessional. Was it worse
than running away on field trips and stealing

cigarettes? In the cemetery I stared at my great-
great uncle's grave. Later, my mother opened
a textbook about Métis history, showed me a picture
of his gunned-down corpse. *Donald Ross. Say his name.*

VIII

I take my medicine. As a child I used chicken soup,
fizzy ginger-ale, saccharine bubblegum syrup.
Now, I swallow Ativan, Klonopin, Effexor—chemical
compounds that keep me from death by shallow

breath. I've been reading what my ancestors
have known for centuries: the benefits of rat root,
rosehips, seneca, sage. Harvesting rhizomes, stems,
and leaves to treat colds, coughs, pain. How to use

sweetgrass to focus nervous energy, how to decoct
nettles for tea. Is there a benefit to sharing this knowledge?
Respect for Indigenous people and land? Downtown Montréal
in an Urban Outfitters, there are cellophane bags

stapled shut, labelled *Spirit Sage*. Sold alongside mass-
manufactured Ojibwe-inspired dreamcatchers, Navajo prints,
two-hundred dollar tipi tapestries. All things here are trendy:
the astrological ashtrays, the tongue-in-cheek cookbooks

for grilled cheese. Fashion distills meaning, and fades. Cute
feathered artifacts and moccasins made in China are not
as authentic as rubber bullets, tear gas, and the cancers
borne out of degraded environments. What's the medicine for that?

IX

Mother grew up in the North. Hay
River: small town, big family. She drew
strength from the lap, lap, lap of the Great
Slave Lake. Went to school, learned

her vocabulary: rebellion, Riel, halfbreed,
treason. Little reason to acknowledge
ancestry when textbooks dissect all
the ways you've been beaten. She was forty

when she circled back to map her genealogy.
Applied for her card, got a job teaching
Métis culture and history. Brought birchbark
and beads to class, brought buckskin

jackets and Sashes home. Enlisted me
to dance, said *maybe not now, but one day
this inheritance will make you proud.* Yet,
like me she's questioned on authenticity

by our own community: *you don't have* lived
Métis experience. What counts and who decides?
We all have stories, we're all legitimate. Don't
believe otherwise Mama, that's bisonshit.

X

I'm a product of my generation:
put too much faith in post-modern
pastiche collages of my culture. Here
is a glass bead I sewed onto an Old

Navy sweater, a fake feather I glued
to a mood board. A Michif word
sprinkled for flavour, a quick smudge
of sage when I'm stressed, a mini Sash

in the back of my closet, my heirlooms
and modern trinkets coalesce. I want
to adapt without assimilating, but maybe
I'm kidding myself. With my five-dollar

soy lattes, credit cards, and Halloween
costumes for dogs, I'm shoulder-deep
in colonial capitalism. In the Great Bear
Rainforest surrounded by giant cedars,

I struggle for words. I fear the violence
of pipelines, and other warped definitions
of progress. Is it possible to change *and* protect?
Ancestors say I should never fear a good fight.

SHASHI BHAT

Food for Nought

THIS STUDENT OF MINE has turned in an eating disorder poem. She's not the first. There's one nearly every semester—thin, with loopy handwriting. I admit there is something poetic about self-starvation, and though Jessica's poem included a tired metaphor about a broken ballerina, she also surprised me by describing hipbones as shark fins jutting from ocean water. A month or so ago she turned in an impressive sestina about mirrors. It's clear this poem's about her, which makes it hard to give feedback. "Try to experiment more with enjambment," I write. "Too many similes?" I query. I consider writing "This poem makes me want to be sick."

Grade 10 English is the period after lunch, but because I spent my lunch hour at the QEII visiting my father, who has just had a heart attack, I'm eating the sandwich I brought with me at my desk. It's kind of a sad sandwich—potato curry on Dempster's multigrain, but one slice of the bread is the loaf end, because that was all I had left. I have it in one hand while eating, hoping I have enough time to finish chewing and marking before class starts, when Jessica comes in early, presumably because we are workshopping her poem today. It's the third or fourth poem they've written for me; I'm never sure whether to count the haiku or not. "Hey there," I say stupidly, through potatoes. She adjusts her lean body neatly into her front-row seat, and for the next seven to ten minutes, she watches me eat my lunch, which, I realize, too late, is composed entirely of carbohydrates.

While examining him after his stent surgery, the doctor had said to my dad, "Oh, you're Indian. You've been eating too much butter chicken!"

"I told him real Indians don't eat such things, and our South Indian diet is very different than what you see in restaurants here. In fact is the utmost healthy cuisine," my dad said to me. He eats nothing but rice and vegetables. He doesn't eat butter, salt, cream, or fried foods. I've never seen him eat a dessert, though he once claimed to have a weakness for maraschino cherries. He's been a lacto-vegetarian his entire seventy-two years, except for one single bite of a hot dog he took at my tenth birthday party. Lying in his hospital bed, he still regretted that hot dog: "All of you were eating them," he said, "you and those friends of yours, eating hot dogs with such relish"—he laughed at his intentional pun—"and I thought, this is a real North American item I must try…" I told him not to blame that hot dog for his current situation, and that my doctor friend said Indian men have notoriously small arteries. I was sorry I said it, because my mother, who I had forgotten was in the room with us, started to cry. She was wearing the same colour blue as the plastic chair she was sitting on, and it looked as though she'd grown four metal limbs.

The rest of the students arrive. Some days my class looks particularly hostile—there's the frowning one and the one who always crosses his arms and the one who rolls her eyes when I use *Pretty Little Liars* as a hip pop-culture reference. I wonder how aware they are of their facial expressions. The best semesters are the ones when I have nodders, students who nod whenever I say anything even half true. "Poetry is still relevant," I say, and they start to nod. In my Psych 101 class in undergrad, the professor told us if you are in a conversation but don't know what to say next, you should start nodding, and the person will be motivated to keep talking. Nodding can influence the nodder's own thoughts, too, so even if I believed that poetry was entirely irrelevant—which I don't but I'm just saying—if I nodded vigorously enough, I could convince myself otherwise.

So we start class and I talk about last night's episode of *Pretty Little Liars* and how that show has way too many suspicious hunks. I say something trite about body image and the media, as an easy segue to talking about Jessica's poem. "Sooo, what did we like about this poem?" Two other girls seem to be texting each other. I see one type on her phone and the other start suppressing laughter, and then she types and the first girl smirks. If only they weren't laughing, I could pretend they were texting about what a great teacher I am.

"I like that this poem is relatable," says one student who I'd been calling Mike the first month of the semester because that's the name on my attendance sheet, but then he told me he prefers being called Matt, except I can never remember in the moment which it is. So now

when I say his name I make the M sound and sort of muffle the part after that.

"This poem flows really well," says another student. I like her, despite her use of poorly defined verbs. She wears unassuming hoodies and showed up mid-semester with a nose ring. I think we would be friends if she weren't my student.

"Well, what's up with this rhyme scheme?" says my devil's-advocate student, and then I hear, "I don't know if anorexia is really worth writing about," from my controversial student. The class erupts into a fantastic debate about whether some topics are more worthy of literary rendering.

"Just look at *Seinfeld*," says our one nodder, "It's a show about nothing!"

"But that's not literature!" another student practically shouts. I'm not even participating in the discussion, just sitting back and picturing this scene as a scene from one of my favourite movies, *Dead Poet's Society* or *Mr. Holland's Opus* or *Dangerous Minds* or *Sister Act 2*. Excellent movies about excellent teachers, where all they have to do is deliver some quotable quote—"Play the sunset," or "Once a marine always a marine," or "I'm not really a nun"—for their classes to pass the standardized exam or win the national choir competition. Twenty minutes pass and I conclude the discussion by gently discouraging one student's suggestion that the poem be made into the shape of an hourglass.

I give a brief lecture and then assign an in-class writing exercise. Five minutes before class ends, I look up to see if they're still writing. Jessica is not writing, but has her arms stretched out in front of her, her pencil clenched in both hands. With their flexed tendons, her arms look like the braided wires that hold up a suspension bridge. Her head bends down almost to touch her paper. It might be a yoga pose. Her hair, falling over her arms, is of such an indefinite brown that when it goes grey, probably no one will notice.

Two weeks later I'm grading poems at my parents' house in the North End. My dad has returned from the hospital and taken a leave of absence from his job as a real-estate agent. He spends his time discovering innovations from a decade ago. "I just opened a Twitter account," he tells me. He has it open on his laptop screen while another window streams *Slumdog Millionaire*. Lately he's been really into Indians who've succeeded in Hollywood. "Indians have come such a long way," he says, and starts googling pictures of the actors. One features the ragamuffin children from the movie wearing tuxedos to the 2008 Oscars; another has them lined up at the Mumbai visa office. He turns the screen to show my mom.

"That was us!" he says.

"Speak for yourself," says my mother, chopping a large pile of vegetables. We're in the kitchen. My dad and I are at the table, and my mom seems to be cooking dinner with foods I've never seen in our house—kale and flaxseed and avocadoes—I can't imagine how she's going to combine it all. She pulls out an egg carton from the fridge. I am certain my parents have never eaten eggs before, a thought that's confirmed when my mother cracks the egg by tapping on it with a spoon. She breaks it over a bowl and attempts to separate the white by using the spoon to scoop out the yolk.

"The nutritionist suggested egg-white omelettes," my dad says.

"And salmon," says my mother, shaking her head.

"And she said to stop eating white rice," my dad adds. "Can you believe it? I've been eating white rice two meals a day since I was a small boy."

My father launches into a story about growing up in a village house. It sounds like the home of a cartoon gopher: clay walls, red dirt floors, root vegetables piled in a corner on a scrap of burlap. My father's sister still lives there, her back perpetually bent at a ninety-degree angle, a result of the house's low ceilings and doorways, and of carrying heavy things for long distances. My father claims they took ten-kilometre walks with bags of rice hoisted up on the tops of their heads. This image clashes with the one I have of him yanking bags of rice from the trunk of his SUV.

"But one day," my dad continues, "there was no rice in the house." They went ten days without rice, eating curries made from gourds as they waited for their arecanuts to be harvested and sold so they could afford to go to the store. "For an Indian, rice is everything," he says, closing his eyes. I remember the time he made mushroom risotto from an Uncle Ben's packet, stirring, tasting it with a look of surprise, then stirring again, patiently, as though he could coax it into tasting better.

I don't know how to respond. You can't trade stories with people who've lived a long time, because yours will come out meaningless. You can't trade stories with people who've been hungry.

I root through my pile of poems, find Jessica's, and read it aloud.

"I don't know what to do with this," I say. "We discussed it in class, but it's like there's something missing from the discussion. Everyone loudly tiptoes around the fact that she's writing about herself. Of course it'd be worse if they did acknowledge it…"

"Don't you think you should inform someone? Her parents? Or the counselling office?" asks my mother.

The guidance office in our school consists of a gym teacher in a skirt suit. It's clear: a girl in my classroom is gradually destroying her body. But then, aren't the smokers out by the bus stop doing the same?

"The first time somebody turned in a poem like this, I handed it back with a little note saying she could talk to me if there was a problem or I could make her an appointment with the counsellor. The student never came to me, but one of my student evaluations that year said I should 'mind my own goddamned business,'" I reply to my mother, who has somehow burned the omelette and is scraping the pan off into the sink and rinsing it, gagging at the smell.

Perhaps it's mass hysteria—all the other students start writing about their bodies, too. We read one poem about budding breasts that actually uses the word "budding." There's one about skin picking that I recommend the author submit to the school arts magazine. There are only two boys in my class, and one of them writes about the pressure to take steroids and the other writes about being short. Jessica proposes a class project: "Let's build a plaster woman," she says, and explains that we should each contribute a body part, even the boys (to symbolize a non-binary view of gender). Then we will fasten the parts together with wire.

"We could write lines from our poems on it," suggests the impassive student, and the nodding student begins to nod, and soon everybody is nodding, and I agree, since really you can do anything in an English class as long as you assign a writing response afterward.

The next day they bring in rolls of plaster of Paris bandages and economy-size tubs of Vaseline. We fill empty yogurt containers with water from the bathrooms and space them out on the desks. One student plays music from her tablet, a mournful playlist full of violin solos. It's not what I thought my students listened to, and I wonder how well I know them, despite their thinly veiled autobiographical writing. The humble notes of a bassoon form a backdrop to nineteen people covering themselves in plaster by dipping crumbly sheets into cold water and molding them on to greased upper arms and calves and necks and noses. It looks like a plastic-surgery recovery room. One girl carefully covers her chin, the waffle-weave bandages spreading upwards like wings.

Two girls each volunteer a breast, and one more says she'll do her upper thighs. They build a privacy curtain by draping jackets over chairs and backpacks in a huge pile. One of the boys heads over there, where he's left his backpack—"Gotta check my phone," he says, and I point him back to the other side of the room.

"Can we use your stomach? You have such a flat stomach," somebody says to the likeable student, and Jessica looks angry. The likeable student declines, wrapping her arms protectively around herself.

"I was going to do my hand," I say to her. "Why don't you do yours instead?"

She offers her hand up to them—"Why would we want your hand?" somebody asks. Jessica says she'll do her stomach, and instead of going behind the privacy screen, she lifts up her shirt and knots it high above her midriff. Three girls begin rubbing Vaseline on her and wrapping plaster around her in the shape of a corset.

I excuse myself from the classroom, promising to return quickly, though honestly, I want to get away from all the bodies. At the guidance office I find the school's one counsellor, who is wearing sweatpants today. "Hey Joyce," I say, "Congrats on the Senior Girls' win last week."

"It was all of them," she says, swivelling her chair to face me. "They're a hardworking bunch of kids. Really put in the effort to improve." Volleyball trophies decorate her office shelves. "Can I help you with something?" she asks.

"Well, I have a quick question…say one of your girls was showing signs of…a personal problem. An eating disorder. Would you confront her about it, or…?"

"That can get serious," Joyce says. "We had a player at an away game once who vomited so violently it ruptured her esophagus. We had to take her to the ER in Moncton. You better give me the student's name."

On the weekend, I go with my parents to the gym because my dad has signed us all up for a discount family membership he found on Craigslist. We walk purposefully into the lobby, where we are suddenly unsure of what to do with ourselves, never having been inside a gym before. My mom signs up for a spin class and later, disappointed, tells us that "spinning" is only another word for indoor cycling. My dad experiments with weight machines before a gym attendant hurries over and tells him to stop.

I escape to an elliptical machine. I am thinking about what an odd contraption the elliptical is, and how it doesn't translate to real life the way a treadmill or bicycle does—I imagine separating this machine from its base and using it for travel—and then I worry that if I don't concentrate, I might fall off and become tangled in the equipment's swiveling parts, when I think I see Jessica immediately ahead of me, climbing on to a treadmill. She walks for a while and then starts running. There's an episode of *Full House* where D.J. starts dieting and over-exercising. In one scene she walks off the treadmill and immedi-

ately passes out. One of the show's numerous father figures has a concerned talk with her. D.J. never skips a meal again.

I notice that on the treadmill next to Jessica is another one of my students, the nose-ring wearer, the one I like best. I hadn't realized they were friends outside of class. I wonder if Joyce has called her to the office or telephoned her parents. Does she know it was me who reported her? There's a giant mirror on the gym wall, and I imagine the girls spotting my reflection and glaring at me in unison. I leave the elliptical under the pretense of buying a bottle of water. I imagine going to school on Monday and finding an empty, boycotted classroom. I imagine a workshop mutiny, where everybody disagrees with every single thing I say—all nineteen of them sitting in their desks, frowning and crossing their arms and keeping their heads perfectly still, two of them texting each other to say that I am not a good teacher after all.

The school lobby forms a T-shape with its intersecting hallways. At the top part of the T, inside a display case about nine feet long, is the plaster woman, wired together and suspended with rope. It looks like a body cast without a body, displaying its hollow eggshell insides. They've installed it in a sideways swimming position, with one arm stretching forward and one backward, bent realistically at the joints. Her outside is painted in streaky maroon and powder blue—the class couldn't agree on a colour. She shimmers garishly under two coats of varnish. Instead of clothing, she wears glitter that spells out lines from the class's poems in confrontational block letters and alluring italics. I lean close to read them and they are all about acceptance and hope and loving your body—lines from poems so sentimental that the students themselves, when forced to read their work aloud to the class, blush and stammer, admit to having written them the morning they were due.

I turn left with the intention of heading to my classroom. It's early, so the hallway is empty except for one caretaker and one chair outside the guidance office, where Jessica is sitting. She sees me and says, "I don't have an eating disorder."

"It's okay," I begin, but she interrupts.

"No. I don't. *Nur* is bulimic."

Nur is the name of the likeable student, the one who uses the word "flow" in workshop. When confronted with this class project, she did not eagerly sacrifice her body to the cold strips of wet plaster. She unveiled her hand from under the long sleeve of her shirt, which billowed like a poncho when she sat near the air vent.

Around the corner in the hallway behind me, Nur's hand, narrow and bony and now replicated in plaster, is fixed to somebody else's

forearm, behind glass. Her hand's so small it holds only a single letter, the "o" in the word "steroid," likely not even a word she'd find meaningful to her situation. The "o" could easily be mistaken for a sparkly hair elastic.

"I'm sorry," I begin apologizing. She's wiping her eyes. I try to think of the most reassuring words I can say. "I'll let them know it was my mistake," I tell her.

"It doesn't matter," she says. "Her parents checked her into the hospital."

"They'll be able to help her there," I tell her, hoping this is true.

"Her liver is all messed up," she says. "And now she hates me because I had to tell my mom and then she called Nur's parents. You know, you could have just said something to me instead of going and telling the school. Now my parents think *I* have a problem."

At my parents' house, my father sits in front of his computer, eating unsalted almonds from his palm. "Monounsaturated," he tells me proudly. He pushes his weight back against his chair and crunches an almond. "Look here, Nina," he motions for me to lean in to the screen. It's playing a video of somebody's echocardiogram, and I wonder: at what point of starvation does your heart start to weaken? Does it matter how small your arteries are when you are only a teenager? I guess it's more about chemicals—mineral deficiencies, electrolyte imbalances, things English teachers don't know about.

I'll later hear from Joyce that Nur left the hospital using a walker, and that a month later she checked back in again. She'll lose muscle and bone mass. Jessica will organize a fundraiser to help Nur's family cover her hospital expenses. Nur's organs will fail one at a time. Jessica will enroll in the nursing program at Dalhousie. By then I'll have left teaching for good, without telling anyone the reason: that I don't want this kind of responsibility; that it feels like a job for somebody both more and less human than I am.

The plaster woman will hang in the school hallway for years.

JOHN WALL BARGER

Smog Mother

"The soul is silent. If it speaks at all it speaks in dreams."
—Louise Glück

I stand before a ceramic jug
at the Siriraj Medical Museum,
Bangkok. There'd been a fire
at a cinema, 1970. A boy,
instead of escaping with his family,
climbed into a jug of water.
That made sense. Then
the water grew hot, & boiled.
They found him curled up
in the shape of the jug.

I

Thai volunteer protester of faithful bones
You stomp the immense thoroughfare
One hundred thousand souls
The Democracy Monument is wrapped in black
The sharp wings of it are cloaked
O gentle offended ones
Which like clouds have no face nor
When your heart marches out to die
When you march out to kill
The crowds are like crawling waves
I don't really know what to do where to be
The further one travels
The less one knows says Lao Tzu
I run write eat lunch applaud
I weep scrutinize destroy

A military junta has taken the country
The National Council for Peace & Order
Protest leader Sutin Tharatin was shot dead
Tharatin was giving a speech
Now Cambodians are fleeing Thailand
Sutin Tharatin! Sutin Tharatin!
The crowds sing his name
His corpse sprouts stories
One book under another sprouts
From that sudden corpse
The world says this is Thailand's business
Who gives a fuck about them anyway?
Who cares about them
Their whores & cockfights
Anyway?

We clap & clap & clap
We cannot get enough of the clapping
Loudspeakers bleat slogans
Ideology is rampant in the streets
You can cut doors & windows out of nothing
You can make a room out of nothing
You can slash an idea
You can electrify an idea
You can shove shit into the mouth of an idea
This turns to hate
Better to claw at empty space
Soon there will be nothing
Nothing for all these winds to play on

In the wake of a mighty army
Under a so brutal sun
You must walk slow or collapse
O tourist open your wallet of glimmering gold
O tourist at this wat of glimmering gold
O tourist you stop to watch us march
Your face is Christ-haunted frightened
The crowds are singing Sutin Tharatin!

Monks glide among the protesters
Theravada monks in loose orange robes
Some monks look calm amused even
Kruba Srivichai among them giggles
Dead seventy-five years but still he giggles
He drifts under a billboard of the king
Beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej
He peers down upon us o frail god
His face is bland unsmiling
Kruba Srivichai giggles
Beware the newly rich
Beware the devourers of corpses

Beggars stagger among
Beggars in black rags skin grimy like sadhus
Beggars are here for a free lunch
They have never heard tell
Of the National Council for Peace & Order
They look about in muted wonder
They wade the human tide
They ignore the current of human beings
Their stomachs are as hard & empty as wood
These are the household gods
That one is holding a broken machete
That one with plastic bags for shoes
He sleeps in a cardboard box beside the ATM
That one in his Spider-Man underwear
He sleeps in the alley beside my guest house

I follow a limping dog off the street
He limps to a marshalling yard
Skinny chickens stand in bamboo cages
A family is huddled silent around a fire
The fire spits like a goblin
The dog wags her scabby tail
She limps into a labyrinth of shanties
Walls of corrugated metal are leaned against one another
On an unpropitious day in the observation of

Bamboo huts on stilts in a mud river
Wide open is the gate
A parrot-footed boy cries standing in a bucket
I lean to tousle his hair
I cannot help myself
He twists away like a released balloon
O reader listen closely lean in yes you just you yes

The city wails dementedly
The city howls like a dog at an ambulance
The city reminds you to praise
Praise the moon! it says
Praise a green leaf! it says
Praise the hem of a robe! it says
The city leans down over me
The city whispers in my ear
I run my hands along its surface like a screen door
I hear a yellow song of the scooters
A song of the painted trucks
The painted trucks are heaving smoke rings
Every thing that lives heaves out the smog
Smog hangs in the air like a song
We step inside a fog of sleep
It is a cave we are its Minotaurs
We growl against the intrusion
A hero has come uninvited

II

Smog Mother your one broken heel
Smog Mother walking the edges of Bangkok at dusk
Smog Mother at the edges of the property
You chew gum on the edges of praise
You drag eyeliner along the edges of the river
Your fake leather purse is filled with burning bodies
There is defiance in your eyes Smog Mother
You have swallowed Bangkok whole
Like a snake you have ingested Bangkok
The 7-Elevens glitter within you
The TVs inside the open doors of the alley glitter
They are lovely fake diamonds
They glitter along your broken heels
The flowering bird the crystal the virgin the dagger

Smog Mother you provide us your milk
We are your children
We are weaned on the milk of your praise

Mother Smog I do not like the heroes
The heroes on TV whispering eloquent speeches
Their speeches echo across us
Here is a clear-eyed boy his shirt torn to shreds
He is seated cross-legged on the sidewalk
He tosses bits of white bread for pigeons
Beside a field of junk glittering like poppies
Here is a woman on the curb
She hums what might be the *Hawaii Five-O* theme song
Her legs are distorted twisted naked
Under wave after wave of passersby
Into the smog *de profundis* without thee

Mother Smog protector of the people
Mother Smog *nobis fiducia* save us from evil forever
Direct us by thy grace Smog Mother
The sharp pagodas against the sky your nipples
The toxic streams your feral juices
Those waters of a perennial spring
The dogs are sleepy all day
The dogs are manic & dangerous at night
The dogs your breath
At a karaoke an old man heard the mountain
The old man is your antenna
The teeming markets are pregnant with thy glory
Smog Mother with your huge migrant worker's bag
You limp through the alleys
You shot Sutin Tharatin down
Spreading strife is your greatest joy
Mother Thai smog our mother
Save thee guide thee give thee wings
Mother Smog you glide toward the future

III

Beside this river I crouch
I don't really know what to do
I present my finger to a tiny white cat
The cat will not smell it
Her skin flaps at the dugs
In the dense heat she moves slow
All the cats move slow
The thin haunted hunted cats
Their fur patchy dirty scabby
They lie supine on the sidewalk like beggars
They lie in view of dogs & scooters
This cat pretends I do not exist
I crouch in her world of no return
It is as if I were not here
Neither of us moves
The sword in my heart blazes
I move too fast with worry & stress
I am sorry for things I have done
I am sorry for things I never even did
Unpeaceful

Beside this river men sit in a circle
Fishermen in torn T-shirts drink beer at a table
Women bustle on & off boats
Wives clutch bags of groceries
The toxic river splashes us all
A boy lies on the tourist path face down palm up
I surprise him
He shivers with feigned epilepsy
One of his eyes is on me
Serious as an owl in a tree

He collects himself peels a candy
While I breathe while I breathe
He drops a candy wrapper in the river
It floats past slow
Slow as a smoke ring on a windless day

The junk floats past me slow as clouds
I sit on the bank
The Styrofoam cups take-away containers
The plastic straws leaves turds
The hunks of meat in the toxic water

A girl & boy in love flirt like horses
Gum falls from the boy's mouth into brown water
The girl lurches nabs the gum
The girl drops the gum on her tongue
She smiles whispers to him
All esses & vees fly sounds
My love you held me by the river
My love you held me under
My love your bodies filled so many graves
My love how can you be so young & tired

A bride rises out of a swamp of cars
She is very drunk cursing
Dress hiked up
She collapses like a wounded swan
They take her picture with their phones
She is waving waving
Wings of trash
They carry her off in a pong of fried fish

This old man has the biggest ears in the world
The hardened shock in his eyes familiar
The sun does not touch
His hands behind his back
He moves slow as a cat
He inches past the market stands
The stands of T-shirts rock like cotton boats
A plastic flower is tucked behind his ear
He is filthy
His face emits a minute light

I have a fantasy I die in Bangkok
Somewhere in Bangkok in a bamboo hut with a street girl
A comical debridement
Goodbye goodbye
Though I have not been with a street girl
I have done worse
Luther told his disciple
If you are not sure you are in a state of grace
Sin bravely

An orange-clad monk reads from a cloth book
I think it is scripture
No it is verse
I think it is ribald
His lips are stone still his eyes ferocious
I do not blink or ask the way back
I do not ask what path I am on
I am so far from my guest house!
This foliage this dream unremembered
Praise the lord!
Hallelujah!
I became a full-time worker in His holy vineyard
I became father to a toxic river

Yeats says all that is personal rots
The smiles between these women cooking goat skewers
The sex drive of this child
Bread in the stomach
A thin grimy dress over beauty
So it must be packed in ice or salt he says

Human history is you Smog Mother naked upon a tightrope
Smog Mother your body of yellow light bursts
The world is suspended
The world its mountains its fields
My spirit shatters
I walk in the hot afternoon wind
The wind can find no limbs of mine to play on

I follow a naked man through traffic
He is skinny twisted limping
He is the ugliest human in the world
His forehead blooms like a cauliflower
His neck skin droops like grapes
His eye stares out of a cave sorrowful
I sit beside him on a curb
He starts to speak

A huge man with greasy lips pulls up on a scooter
He tells me he has a sister
Be good to her I say please brother

Two steps to the left is a glass jar.
Inside is an arm. A left arm,
chopped. At the elbow,
gristle & veins burst out
like wires of a radio. Fog-white,
the skin, fog-yellow.
On the forearm is a tattoo.
A blue-green man ambles
down the road in formaldehyde fog.
He carries a fish on a string.
He has been fishing.
He wears a pointed hat.
He smokes a pipe. No, not a pipe,
a flute. The way he ambles
he must be a musician.
He is coming from the river.
He has spent all day at the river.
He walks the long way home,
nice & slow, by the poppy field.
He is penniless. He owes
everybody. But tonight
he has dinner. You can sense
his joy in the way he plays
what he learned from the river.
He sings, O ferryman, take me home.
I don't have a penny
but I'll play you a song.
When my wife gets a whiff,
even she will forgive me.
When she sees this glittering fish.

TIM BOWLING

Found Poem of Strait of Georgia Insults

You're a Dull Oregon grape you black-bellied plover of a long-billed dowitcher. You lugworm you screwshell. What a walleye pollock of a Kelp-encrusting Bryozoan. Yeah, you heard me, you Suborbicular kellyclam Twelve-tentacled parasitic anemone. Your scaup's always been Lesser you three-spine stickleback Spring-headed sea squirt. That's right, you Hairy chiton, I said it. Don't give me any of your Green falsejingle, you Fat gaper. Who do you think you are, the Lord dwarf-venus himself? You're nothing but a Flap-tip piddock with an Aggregated nipple sponge. Come on, you Pile worm you Dubious dorid you squat lobster. You want a piece of me? Agh, you're all Hollow green nori you yellowleg pandalid. I wouldn't waste my time on a solitary tunicate like you. Yeah, so's your mother you Oblique yoldia. Goddamned mud shrimp. Surf scoter. Sea-clown triopha. Gribble. Sea noodle. Dunce cap limpet. Bladderclam. Whelk.

GENA ELLETT

Heaven

You were a fisherman for thirty-five years. You didn't finish high school and this was a sore subject, but you were the best man I could think of.

At five, I asked you if I could keep one of the fish eyes. I imagined holding it in my palm, the satisfying cool squish of it between my fingers, an eye from the ocean you lived on for four months of the year. Alone on your boat, the fish had sung to you on nights when we, my mom and sister and I, were home without you.

This was after you'd arrived home from months up north. You walked in smelling of diesel, face shadowed with stubble. You were still smoking then, so you smelled of tobacco, too. Stale and familiar. When I think of that old house on Truman Road, with the dogwood tree in the yard that cast shadows across the front steps under a cool September sun, I always imagine you climbing them, a black garbage bag of frozen sockeye slung over your shoulder.

When you tried to cut the eye out for me, you said it wouldn't come in one piece. Maybe you didn't try. It was a strange request from a daughter to her father. Imagine, the gift of an eye.

•

There is a story where you are the hero. It was mid-June in Prince Rupert and you were stuck in a slow season. You rarely took deckhands with you and so were alone, crouched in all that silence as the hours crept past. Maybe you were inside making toast in the little oven that took forever to heat up, then burned everything. Maybe you were on the deck smoking or perhaps it was late or early enough that you

were untangling your nets for a new day of work. Either way, you spotted a man in the water. There was nothing around—ocean but no land, nothing—but somehow you saw him.

You pulled a grown man, a Japanese fisherman whose boat had capsized, out of northern B.C.'s freezing waters. You wrapped him in blankets and offered him every hot thing you could think of. Burnt toast and coffee. His lips were blue and, trying to conserve life, he'd lost whatever English he'd had. I wonder if you were clean then. I wonder if you had thought it was your imagination, that man in the ocean, signaling for help.

I'll tell you again, you were the best man I could think of.

•

This is a different story. This is the story of your daughters meeting you for lunch on Main Street in late August, twenty years after you saved a man's life. It's taken six months for you to drop too much weight. Your baggy clothes—a denim jacket, dark jeans, and a T-shirt with a basketball logo chipping away off the front—fold into your ribs with the weight of our arms. We sit on the patio of a generic restaurant where the specials are all fried and I'm almost nervous you'll order a drink because you are reckless and addiction has taken your gentleness away. You smell like the bottom of a tin can, metallic, and, wasted, you talk and talk and talk. You say, *I have to tell you, I OD'd while I was watching a hockey game in the downstairs room and I didn't know the year when I woke up, thought I missed the ferry, boy you chuckle this stuff's bad stuff.*

Are you talking because you miss us? Or is it to mask your lack of hunger? I was cynical before and now I am a scared animal and you are lightning. I retreat when I feel you approaching.

My sister is nervous and chatters along with you. You talk about getting better and you talk about us and you talk like a fallen hero, with that bravado I've come to hate. *This stuff's bad stuff, boy.*

Of course you ask about our mother who, trying not to answer your calls, will always answer your calls. A silver sedan drives by as we sit and eat and you jump up because you're sure it's her.

You sit down again, quickly, and I ask for the cheque. *I'm getting better. I've got a place in detox in three days. Let me pay, I'll pay.* You are too narrow-minded, too weak and wild now, to spot the holes in the story. You are too lost to mend them.

I wonder, do you remember the frozen weight of the fisherman, a human on the brink of death? And when everything got too heavy, what parts of yourself did you discard in the ocean to stay afloat?

Imagine that, a man throwing his empathy, his generosity, his liver and a slow beating heart out into a grey Prince Rupert morning.

•

One year after your relapse.

You've been clean and dirty again so many times I've lost count. How many times have you broken her heart? One day, I find you downstairs with my mother, lying on the couch with your baseball cap pulled low. You say hello in that silly voice, the one you reserve for my sister and me.

You have been with her since you were ten-years-old. She stayed through thirty years of addiction, years of prison, two children, seventeen years of sobriety, followed by a slip. I will never understand why you became her drug of choice, but I am never surprised to find you back in her home.

She used to spend long hours on the front porch mending your nets. Metres upon metres of green twine callousing her fingers. And so, when she found herself sixty-five and without you, she turned from the ocean and began cultivating gardens. She learned to grow green beans and kale and pumpkins. She fished for carrots and potatoes and bought wild flowers from a woman she shared a plot with. She landscaped the yard around her new home so that her grandchildren could one day play in it and eat fresh snap peas with dirty fingers and run barefoot through parsley and tomatoes. There would never be those old concerns about slippery decks, about hooks and tangled lines, about drowning.

Her dad drowned when she was forty-two. I imagine that once she'd been running long enough, needle and thread in hand, trying to find that invisible tear though which things keep escaping, it is easy to get tangled in all that green twine.

In passing, I see you lying on the couch, so do not linger too long. I was bringing my mom a gift, a rock-salt candleholder. It's pink and jagged and holds the small beeswax candle at its core. We turn the lights off and strike a match. We try to see each other in the rock-salt glow.

•

You come to Paris with Mom and the understanding that you are clean and want your family back. There is a moment on the metro when you nudge my arm and tell a stupid joke—*Why do French people only eat one egg? Because one is un oeuf. Get it, Gene?*—and we are our old

selves again, sitting without talking in a swarm of tourists and Parisians, only this is too simple and I know that you are not well.

We drink coffee and you forget the name of an old friend and I roll my eyes and this is enough to set you off. I follow you out in front of Notre Dame where you display your frustration and anger, like a child stomp your feet and yell at me and demand that I start treating you like my father again. I let you walk off into the crowd and I ride the metro home alone.

•

Of the two of us, my sister and I, people say I look like you.

I share your nose, or what your nose used to be before it was broken five times. I can see the similarity in the few black-and-white pictures of you as a child in lace-up leather shoes. I share your eye shape, my left always squinting a bit more than my right, especially when I'm tired. I share your impatience, which causes both of us to head out abruptly and alone, driving across town to buy coffee or just for the sake of leaving the house.

When I was a kid, I wanted to be your favourite. I went against all my better judgment and tried to play baseball and watch hockey and show interest in trucks and boats and motorcycles so that we would have some shared thing, some special common ground.

Each year you give away half the things you own. TVs and guitars and hand-carved wooden benches. Artwork and leather jackets you found on eBay. Hockey tickets and front-row seats at concerts you won't go to. I describe you as generous, first and foremost. And now it's turned ugly—the pawn shops of the downtown eastside are familiar with you and hold the contents of our living room, your wedding ring, your Rolex watch.

We shed things little by little, you and I. Material things are best given to other people; in our own hands they are only exciting for a day or two; people are lovely in moments. I would like to say that we move on. Am I not undoubtedly your daughter?

•

A poem I wrote at seven. It went: They say I have my mother's hands/ my father's nose/ my sister's hair/ my father's laugh and red cheeks/ don't I have anything of my own?

There are times when I worry that I am heartless. I feel too much at inappropriate times, nothing at all when people say I should. I feel no harm in letting go of friends; I do not make an effort to stay in touch

with extended family; in some cases, it takes me years to feel comfortable with people. And then, all at once I'm crippled with love for the people around me.

You told me when you went into treatment just before my fifth birthday into my sixth year, the only thing you knew about yourself was that you were kind to dogs. The staff at the recovery centre where you lived asked you to define happiness, boredom, enthusiasm, hope and you could not find the right way to even fake such things.

Remember when I was a teenager and I ran you through hell? I'd sneak out or in at stupid hours and drink whatever I could get my hands on. I don't remember you being mad. I remember Mom being mad and you being quiet, and so I was quiet right back. I'd stop talking to you for days and I felt the power of my silence surging through me until you couldn't take it anymore and would yell, red-faced and swearing at me.

There is no power this time, when I stop speaking to you. It is the only option I have left. You aren't red-faced and yelling anymore. You aren't here.

•

Two years.

I walked down to the ocean the other night. I was hung over and it was dark and I smoked a cigarette that I didn't want as an excuse to leave my room. I couldn't sleep so I stepped down onto the grass that was black and lead down to the rocky beach that was black, to the ocean that was black, and beyond that, and beyond that.

It's ridiculous, but you're always in my dreams. Even when I haven't spoken to you for months, even when I haven't thought about you or worried about you for days at a time, you'll pop up again.

At first, it was you as a younger man, standing at my door in your red plaid shirt. There was a sense of dread, your eyes bloodshot beyond explanation. Lately it's been you complaining to me about how I keep my distance. Funny, right? It's the only reason I've stopped ignoring your emails, because you are nagging me in my dreams and I keep waking up with urgent guilt.

Your messages come every couple of weeks and are run-on sentences. *I am getting back into recovery. bought a white hydi station wagon to cruise around its so spread out here. They call the area I live the inland empire I get a kick out of that.*

You're in California and mostly write about the heat. You joke around like my childhood conversation with you never ended. In your head, am I still your little girl? Happy, chattering, doing crafts at the

kitchen table? You've cut around fifteen years, missed my listlessness, my heartbreak, my loneliness because what would you do with such things? Where would you put those feelings, those memories?

You're in California and I'm waking up in the night with the sudden realization of how much it takes for a child to stop loving a parent and wondering if I've passed that point. I don't know much these days. I never think of you but you are there, and you're not there.

It's just that I keep remembering the hull of your fishing boat, the *Miss Kaitlynn*. Sometimes I wake up thinking about the little angled beds of that boat and how Tal and I could sleep, literally, for days. No matter the tide or waves.

I'd like to go back there, if only to sleep.

The subject of the last email you sent me was *Heaven*. You write that you went to a mall in California that had every store you could imagine; everything a person could possibly want was between those air-conditioned walls. You got lost and almost couldn't find your car. You said you were thinking of me, that I would have been in heaven down there, cruising the chilly halls of a mall in a town I've never been to before. I'm yelling at a TV screen in Vancouver and you're wandering fluorescent-lit shops in California—are we still feeling for that shared ground even now, even after all this? But you just keep talking about the heat and I wonder if, like me, you get headaches and have difficulty breathing when the air gets too dry, when the ocean's too far off.

I don't regret the things I can't change.

You taught me those words from the serenity prayer, and I want desperately to believe they are true. You were the best man I could think of for so long. I now understand that there are stages to drowning. That man you saved, you caught him right before he lost consciousness. I walked down to the ocean the other night and I promised that I would never leave the West Coast. I'm running with a needle and thread. I will wait and see this through. I will wait for heaven or for all those drowned things to resurface. I will untangle us and I will tell you to swim away, to find land.

I keep looking out into the dark, expecting to see someone waving.

NATHAN PATTON

Peter Parker

is it strange that I want to visit the man who killed
my best friend when the three of us were just boys

he's only a year older than me

than us

what would we have in common?

we could talk about comic books
maybe he read them

we could talk about movies
maybe he saw one at the theater

when it had just two screens
before it grew so tall

we could talk about jewelry stores
why he felt he needed to ruin everyone in them

why he wrapped their heads in towels

why he wrapped their heads in towels

why he wrapped

you can tell the image haunts me

and so does the moment just before he squeezed
the trigger when he could have stopped himself

took the towel off and asked my friend about Spider-Man

could have learned so much

how his real name is Peter Parker
how he lives with his aunt, works at a newspaper

everyone knows this now because the movies got so tall

but back then it was a secret we all

us boys

shared and traded and kept at all times

and even the boy who was just a year older

he might have known that Peter Parker did not
help to stop the robber that killed his uncle

and that he regretted it for the rest of his

life

Philippe Cousteau

The mammalian diving reflex
leads to apnea, bradycardia,
making little frogs of us all.

I didn't have time to forget.
Four years old when I made my first dive,
aqua-lung as pacifier.

That was 1945. The War over—
but the stories just beginning and with time
Dad's tales grew more harrowing.

I longed to resist along with him,
to swim, to film, to fly,
but I couldn't make it to The End.

The heart and lungs slow
as the infant aquanaut drifts off
to the rocking of the waves.

Neuchâtel

The pregnancy test read positive in four official languages:
not one of them comprehensible.

They took a room in a Swiss chateau:
peasant beds, heavy wooden beams, views

of a lake so great they couldn't stop naming it:
Neuchâtel, Neuenburg, Nuovocastello, Neufchâtel.

But it all means the same thing:
something new was planted long ago.

Wine to celebrate the latest vendange:
beaujolais nouveau and something that sparkles,

forgetting he was drinking for two now.
Never rise faster than your bubbles—good advice

lest it go to your head—as he sank deeper
into champagne seas.

She couldn't sleep. Searching for the words
to describe the difference in tone

between cow bells coming home at night,
and church bells in the morning.

SADIQA DE MEIJER

City, Lake

If we had the elevation of a seagull—one of the sunlit arrows that coasts on drafts—from that vantage point, the city would form a dull-coloured grid, glued to a body of water. Green silk of algal regions, rocks dark with cormorants. A ferry on a parabolic course, waves scrolling toward the shore.

The absence of salt in the air would disclose that the water is lake, tideless and without huge forms of life—unless those sightings that precede photography, of serpentine creatures winged with fins, are truer than assumed. Even if not, still the lake imparts a minor sense of wonder, or at least of equilibrium: a natural limit to what may be paved.

Clustered at the water's edge, larger buildings indicating commerce and public activity. Spires flanked by condominiums. Between them the crawl of cars and trucks, a square quilted with the canopies of market stalls. Harbours made for pleasure crafts: not a port of industry, except for one enormous factory, against the shore and on a lariat of road and rail. Train cars stamped with a long and compound chemical name. Ducts in Gordian formations.

Ascending east, we find a procession of olive-green vehicles on an otherwise empty road. A hillside spewing bits of earth, as if pelted with hail from clear skies—but there are targets on it, there is a row of people in fatigues: a city with soldiers, though the market and sailboats and crowds of pedestrians suggest a local peace.

Neighbourhoods, radiating from the downtown in a partial star. Swift descent: dense streets with craggy trees—not naturally craggy, but drastically pruned by chainsaws and ice—trees shaped like the letters F and Y and T. The metal and dormered roofs of materially com-

fortable people. Then a park, rectangular, criss-crossed with pathways of asphalt and also the fainter trails pedestrians leave in grass.

At one end of the park, a playground with a wading pool. Blue iris in a concrete eye. A double row of toddlers moves like a dissembling caterpillar through the chain-link gate.

If we were closer to the child walking on one of the pathways beside his mother, who pushes a canopied stroller with a sleeping baby—suppose we had the proximity of the flea that happened to leap from the cat the child stroked in a driveway, then we'd smell the blackberry jam on his T-shirt, dark and sweet, and hear the whistle of his breath through a congested nasal passage.

His slow inhale before he asks his mother, "Why is Earth boring?"

A pause and then her voice, the creaks of fatigue in it: "It isn't."

Already we have made another leap—parasitic, miasmic, or deductive—we've started to sense her experience, that her answer strikes her as less than adequate, but the baby still night-nurses and yesterday when coffee should have been purchased there was no chance, and now each uncaffeinated effort her brain makes feels viscous, partially realized. Not to mention the question of what exactly to say, even in cerebral lucidity, to an earnest, beloved five-year-old who has such thoughts.

Which leads in turn, in what has become a predictable shift, to speculations on the nature of inheritance, and specifically whether the melancholy predilections of her husband—his favourite film features a suicidal man on an interminable drive—could produce a son like theirs. Or, from blame to guilt, the question of whether carrying a child under the stresses of medical school, the crescendos of cortisol from exam to exam, could have had a formative effect.

The baby is another matter. In the mornings, she crows from her crib, seems unaware that crying is an option. The mother gives herself the minor remonstration that is also an encouragement: her task is not to wish her children to be typical, but love who they are.

"It's interesting that you feel that way," she says, "I wonder why?" But her son is off, sprinting to his favourite monkey bars, which are free of other children for the moment.

She lays a blanket on the ground. The baby sleeps; the mother watches Dylan drop from a bar in the measured, cautious manner that seems steeped in reluctance but is nevertheless repeated again and again. There are other mothers, fathers, children—some familiar but none of them friends, and she is happy to smile at them half-absently without having to speak. Two boys are chasing each other, reckless and loud. One wears a costume padded to look muscular, printed with the pectorals and rectus abdominis of a superhero. He's too small for

it, and the shoulders droop from his frame like clipped wings.

The boys seem to have come with an older woman on a bench—she watches them inertly from under a fuchsia hat. They're freckled redheads, but she appears South American or Middle Eastern, though without the vitality one would look for in a nanny—perhaps a family friend. There are girls trying to untie from the climbers the deflated balloons of a birthday party. Another girl takes the monkey bars by storm—Dylan edges away to the swings.

"I'm just going to push Marcus!" he shouts.

Marcus isn't real, but has become an appended family member, changing mercurially in age and biography, sometimes temporarily declared dead. Yes, this is one of her objectives as a mother, to make it possible for him to comfortably shout about Marcus and push an empty swing.

"He's going so high!" she calls out.

Dylan goes to kindergarten at a private school. There are only six students in his class. They learn a lot: he's told her the date before, when she was stumped while writing a cheque, and she has heard him explain to a friend what fractions are. They figured, she and her husband, that the size of a public-school class might paralyze him.

The woman on the bench, her head has slumped forward as if her neck were rope, the hat facing out like a warning. The mother leaps up. No need to labour through her thoughts now, and this pleases her: the rote decisiveness, how it returns when summoned. She nears the woman and enters a cloud of perfume, needs both hands to push up the forehead and check the airway. Heads are so heavy.

The woman is breathing: scent of scrambled eggs. She has a pulse, but she doesn't stir when called. Her jaw hangs slackly and her metal fillings glint. The mother is uneasy, not because of the woman's state but because both her hands are now occupied, holding the lolling head up, unavailable to either of her children should they need her.

Another parent asks, "Is she okay?"

"Let's lay her down."

They turn and lower her gently along the seat while a third parent calls an ambulance. Only now do the boys circle in from their playing, and they pause just to glance at the bench, one saying, "Grandma, are you tired?" Then they return to their chase.

"I'm a doctor," says the mother, an announcement she has grown more comfortable making—she used to withhold it, for complex social reasons, the risk of sounding self-important surely, and also the nuisance of impromptu consultations. But it gives her the lead in this scenario, which is essential—already the father helping her is starting some kind of television-inspired CPR. "She doesn't need that!"

Where is Dylan? Right behind her, watching intently.

Cheerful prattling from the stroller.

She opens the woman's hip pack, which has her name on a credit card, Sevil—but nothing useful, no medical note or prescription. Someone raises a parasol, blue with stylized whales, over the wooden bench.

We may as well proceed to know what Sevil was thinking, when she was still conscious. A cursing of the humidity. Pride at her grandsons' swift movements, the older boy's love for the costume that she bought him. An appraisal, too, of the assessing looks of the parents, their back-and-forth glances between her and her grandsons before smiling and turning away—she remembers how small the city is, how far from cosmopolitan.

Canadians. What she's used to now: no public conversation as there would be in the parks at home. Or if it happens, then on harmless subjects, in the mildest of emotional registers. As if their skin colour signals a broader condition, an anemia of the temperament. No street vendors to treat her grandsons to anything remotely nourishing. But at least she is here with them, and they will know who she is. And then the thought, I don't feel well.

The ambulance comes. The mother tries to brief the paramedics, but they hardly listen, performing their own series of checks. Now she can turn to Dylan and begin the slower, less straightforward work of hashing out whatever impression these events have made on him.

The fence around the wading pool: all the toddlers from the daycare are pressed against it, watching the flashing lights. The parents are saying a stroke, or the heat, or a seizure. One of them approaches the mother, who tries to recall her name—this woman is lovely, they were in prenatal class together, and her name is so close to surfacing.

"Emily?" says the woman, "They're my neighbours—so I can take the boys home with me."

In the din, she hears her baby crying to nurse.

Parasite or seagull, letter or tree. From the eighth story of an office building near the park, a human-resources assistant has seen enough to know her daughter's daycare is at the pool, and now the ambulance. *They'd call, they'd call, they'd call,* she chants silently with sweating palms, staring at the cellphone on her desk.

Children's faces pressed to chain-link is what one of the soldiers from the firing range pictures whenever he doubts what good he will do, in arid mountains full of barely grateful people.

The lump on the arm of the cathedral's cross is a peregrine falcon. Every day the groundskeeper finds iridescent pigeon wings, with rough edges of bone and quill, scattered around the bell tower.

The ambulance navigating one-way streets. Wailing towards the hospital, which has a faded landing pad for helicopters, a smokestack like the factory—they used to incinerate: gauze and syringe and gall-bladder ashes drifting out over the lake. Now there are steel barrels in the basement, rotating on axles and suffused with steam, sterilizing the debris before trucks drive it to a landfill in northern woods.

Dylan sits on the flowered blanket and dips carrot sticks in hummus. The baby smiles, a film of milk on her gums. Then the mother collects their things, decides to detour to a coffee shop before heading home to make lunch. Tossing a used diaper out, pushing the stroller back past the tennis and basketball courts, past where the men with jack-hammers and drills have been making a hole in the path. They pause there. The mother glances at the back of a worker, mud-caked boots and amber overalls and orange vest—EARTH BORING, it says in black capitals. She looks at Dylan, who is waving back at one of the men.

An element of the festive then, in their march to coffee. She promises him chocolate milk.

He looks up and says, "Because I'm not like Dad?"

Which is a thing he is capable of sometimes, inexplicable but also uncomplicated, or so he makes it seem, and then she is excused from answering by the passing of white airplanes in formation—too momentous, too deafening for a five-year-old to return from in the stream of thought.

SUSAN OLDING

Blue Ridge

North Vancouver, January, 2005

Even the planners warned them not to build there,
the slope too steep, erosion a persistent risk,

but they sank foundations deep into that chesterfield
of moss and hoped for the best. Now a thunder

of mud tearing up roots and snapping trees
like bits of trellis—reporters orbit, counting

the missing and the dead while residents bend
to waiting microphones and search for the street

beneath the sludge, their faces bleached to marble.
What do you bring if forced from home at 3 a.m.?

The baby in bed beside you. Your cat, some cash,
a rainproof coat—whatever you can grab,

whatever you can hold—and you feel lucky
to have it, lucky to be alive, as you lean

against your loved ones, finger their wrists to find
the pulse—unmindful of tomorrow's shock

you blink back tears of gratitude. Later,
wading through the wreckage, bruising

your boots on broken timbers, crumbled drywall,
you plot escape, forswear views and vegetation

for the vision of an arid square, an alleyway,
bodega in the full glare of the sun. Meanwhile,

seismologists scour the cliff, reckon
a safe date for your return while the gossip

of water goes on and on.

JENNA LYN ALBERT

Famille

You hate roses, their damask scent of formaldehyde, methanol:
paper boats lure schoolboys into the Saint John River.

The maple in the backyard sheds its leaves prematurely, determinedly.
Choleric, it digests itself—yellow bile seeping through dappled bark.

Menstrual synchrony's a bitch in a household of women.
Some sheets never see the line, endometrial tissue Javexed and tumble-dried.

To captains off-duty, solariums are wheelhouses:
antique binoculars magnify songbirds, deer and that one black squirrel.

Close the blinds to the neighbours.
I am the stuff of garbage-bagged hand-me-downs.

ANZHELINA POLONSKAYA

The History Teacher

What is happiness? It's fragmentary. I don't know a single thinking person who could say that he is happy. Your glance snags on the imperfections of the world. Your being refuses to accept death. Picasso, who lived in wealth and fame, having had many lovers, said towards the end of his life that he had never loved anyone. Beckett died half a year after his wife. He simply couldn't stand her absence. Was Onassis happy, having left one of the most amazing divas of the twentieth century to marry Jacqueline Kennedy, who drank Cristal on his yacht and never loved him? Was Callas happy when he got down on his knees below her windows and begged for forgiveness—too late, Maria Callas had already lifted herself above the world. Perhaps happiness is possible only for the most normal, quotidian people, who are born old and never know passion. Although what do we know? We don't even know how birds die.

I felt a strange and troubling attraction to her from the moment her form, her face, out of the myriad faces and forms, caught my attention and never let go of it. She was thirty-two, I was sixteen. And she was my teacher. In the atmosphere of spiritual poverty that characterized my school, in the absence of liberty, optimism, or anything remotely individual, the only thing I learned was to look through the windows at the landscape that stretched back to my childhood, ignoring the screams and the voices, the scrape of chalk on the blackboard. In any part of my homeland, that depressing landscape, with its damp tree or hopeless tramcar with frosted-over windows or lonely figure carrying his burden of everyday slavery, would immediately become a canvas, a painting of frozen nuances. Like a painting created from cold hues. At night I would feverishly stare at some completely different

and changed image, having nothing to do with reality. The only thing that would connect the two worlds was the opaque and cold background of the drawing. It would have to harden, to lose the power of movement. And then the words would flow. Words had a specific taste and it was as if I carried them on my tongue, the way an alcoholic can conjure the taste of booze even after he stopped drinking long ago. Whenever the two conditions (the image and the taste associations) overlapped, the *living* material for a poem would come into being.

My school couldn't teach me anything. It was an internal rebellion. I placed myself in opposition to the teachers. Like a pawn before a rook on a chessboard. I refused to have anything to do with any form of subordination or teaching as a concept. Sneering at the standard curriculum, their way of thinking, and their clothes that stank of sweat. And I was defeated. But still I thank that yellow low-slung building for my meeting with her, she who for many years would be my secret, my incredible inner turmoil from which, as from a spring, I drew inspiration.

My only school friend had abandoned me at the beginning of the academic year. This was how I first came across one of the most important human qualities—betrayal. I had to quickly turn that loneliness into something funny to prevent my classmates from smelling blood. Only a jester has the right to kick the king. Despite what many people believe, the most flagrant human vices are concentrated in children, although those vices are still not fully developed thanks to a lack of experience. But their innate ability to persecute is perfection itself.

Pity. How many times did I hear about it, while my mother was lying in the ER of the local hospital with a concussion and a huge bruise that covered her entire face. Which happened one winter evening when someone mugged her. Taking neither her documents nor her money. Just out of malicious spite. Later, when her memory started to come back, she named one of the neighbouring boys. His family "*hated all the* yids." Though my mother wasn't Jewish.

"You need to learn to forgive them," said the pious lady who came to the ward to feed my mother. The ward. A long rectangular room dating from before the revolution. There were more patients than it could hold. And so there was simply no way to walk through it. The smell of urine and rotting flesh. I sat on the edge of my mother's bed with a bottle of apricot compote that I had made, afraid to move. Paying no attention to the daylight, cockroaches would crawl out of one hole in the sheet and hide in a different one. At night they fell from the ceiling. Along both sides of the hallway lay women on iron bedsteads, covered in bloody rags. Usually they were put there after an unsuccessful pregnancy and the men from nearby rooms came to look at them. Once my mother said, "I don't care if I live or die."

"Where's your cat Tapka?" I asked the pious woman the next time I visited.

"Tapka's gone."

"Where is she?"

She didn't want to answer the question, but she couldn't bring herself to yell at me.

"She ran off," she said.

"Where?" I asked.

"Into the forest. The cat got sick," she said, offering my mother a spoonful of chicken soup. A woman who forgave everyone got rid of an unnecessary cat. She found a simple solution. She took the cat, put it in a fake leather bag, closed up the zipper, and carried it so far away that her cat, which had transformed from a lovely little animal into something that no one would pay attention to, could never find its way home again. The terrified cat can't figure out what is going on. It's dying of thirst. Where is its home? The familiar paths and roads? The aluminum dish by the door. No one calls its name. Time passes. It tries to find the way home by smell or by using its internal feline compass. In the end it simply weakens and one day its body stops resisting. Maybe someone kills it with a stone or it's ripped apart by a pack of dogs. Or it makes its way to a different home. No one knows. The cat disappears. And no one can tell you where this everyday cat, which gave some colour to the surrounding world, has gone. Someone claims to have seen it just the other day, perhaps on the neighbour's fence, perhaps running across the street, but no one's sure. Because it's no longer there. This kind of thing happens frequently with cats.

I wanted to punch that pious lady who was taking care of my mother in the stomach.

Definitely in the stomach. I've never learned to forgive.

It was the time of year when the maple leaves were turning colour. When I remember myself as an adolescent, I recall collecting leaves around the abandoned dachas with a kind of preternatural yearning. Slowly, my world narrowed down to two things—contemplation and books, stolen from my father's library when he was away from home. His library was a sacred place and therefore locked away from mere mortals, who could desecrate its holiness by, for example, leaving a book open and face down on the polished library table. But still, I'm grateful to my late father for his upbringing. I spied on him and saw where he hid the key. He was ill, and slowly and in ways dangerous for us, he was collapsing. He staked and lost his life as if on a card, or as if he had arrived late for the last train. And he remained standing forever in the emptiness of the station, empty hands hanging by his sides, in his worn-out grey suit jacket, a man with an exceptional mind,

broken by fate. He was torn from the world into endless space, taking with him a piece of our small-scale age. That same winter my dog died. We'd bought her as a puppy from a drunken stranger one New Year's. She died, having lived a long but unhappy life, on a freezing December night, quietly, while I was sleeping. We wrapped her in a plastic bag and carried her body to the garbage bins by the infectious-disease hospital—the ground was too cold to dig a grave. And so my childhood came to an end, though I never really had one—I was never a child.

It's hard to recall when a flood begins. Who can pinpoint what love is? All my life the only answer I have been able to give is "yearning for the impossible." Life will always remain irrational, like a flower or a cloud, indebted to no one.

My history teacher. Between us a strange relationship arose. Long and unbearable, like a sound, impatient and strangled. Frequently falling flat, like a cut stalk of a plant. I can't stand her gaze and lower my eyes because everything is so blindingly clear and impossible simultaneously that a cold sweat goes running down my back, and my pulse beats wildly in my neck. At each break between classes I find myself in her office. I ask for any job at all—putting up wallpaper or dusting the shelves. I don't care about the work, just about being somewhere near her. Having called me out of class, she's carrying a pail of white oil paint.

"Can you paint a door?"

I happily dip the flat brush into the paint, taking more than necessary. The paint flows down, leaving tadpole-like streaks on the wood. I try to get it even, but the brush sticks, the paint already dry in some spots. The more layers I put on, the worse it looks. My hands, face and the linoleum floor are splattered and no amount of turpentine can get them clean.

"Sylphide," says my teacher, returning from out of doors and folding her wet umbrella.

While she goes to get a second can of paint, I lean over the telephone receiver and drink in the smell of her perfume.

Just a little time remains before the end of my senior year. And my attachment to her gets more despotic and pitiless. I become more possessive and jealous of *Her*, jealous of visitors, of disgusting young men who do not deserve her attention, of my own absence, of every passing day. Sleep got in the way of my *illness*, and so I cursed sleep. She forgives my tantrums, my clowning, with demonstrative silence. From nonexistent, but nevertheless obvious messages I clearly heard.

"You are not they."

Not they. And the worst of the nightmare was that I was completely incapable of understanding what I wanted from this relationship. Had Eros really touched me, with all of his destructive power, I would have broken down and run away in horror and shame. My desire was puny, barely touched by a thin film. What could I do with this closeness? With the possibility of *such* closeness? But nothing happened, just as a volcano cannot erupt in the middle of a plain.

Much later, I learned to experience the taste of another's saliva in my mouth. To wait in hotel rooms leaning my head against the mirror. Relationships that fulfill you and empty you out, ephemeral flashes, nastiness. Nastiness that's simply jewel-like! Cut by the greatest craftsmen. The betrayal of childhood friends, which spreads like cancer. From time to time I dream of my teacher. I ask her for some trivial thing, suffering from insurmountable desire, from the fact that she is short with me, understanding my dependence on her. "Don't even think about it. I would never have taken *that step*." Recognizing perfectly that I'd be destroying my illusions with my own hands. Don't believe anyone. Over time nothing slows down or disappears. It sinks deep inside you and turns into a straight line, a constant hum, which the human ear can barely endure.

Sometime later I'd be sitting at a laden table with a group of empty shades at a school reunion. We'd gotten together to have a good time, to see how the years had maimed us. Each of us hoping to find a little peace.

"How's your mom?" she asks, looking at me with her dark eyes.

And I want to stroke her hair. And I do. Not paying any attention to the surroundings.

I don't feel anything, and not because love has passed. It is I who've become deadened inside. One important detail has disappeared—that exceptionally thin film which bleeds whenever you touch it.

"Sometimes good, sometimes not," I say.

And we go out into the freezing February night, and on the porch of the little café she gives me a farewell kiss on the cheek. I don't go back to my drunken classmates. Having pushed the tablecloth with its half-full glasses and pile of dirty plates off to the side, they've started to arm wrestle.

I call a taxi and give the driver my address.

For me, the party's over.

Translated from the Russian by Andrew Wachtel

J. MARK SMITH

Ready, Blue Sky

in homage to R. F. Langley

I

In a mid-day lull, bluets over
the slough's surface, a *pointillisme*
of black-spotted green. Drop a stone in.
Thistles and fleabane. Aspen wood warm
and lifting. Soft suck of beaver dam's
mud underfoot. Gnawed stuff. Blue sky, big.
Wide-spaced clouds. Those damsel-flies stitching,
stitching, but what? The air—the instant.
Take to the bench and consider it:
a never dwelling in one place long.
Being made to go forwards, backwards, side—
ways, with easeful power. Futurity,
passé composé, and lateral jaunts
out into the recently present.
Such horizonal range. Sense-rich, un-
encumbered, they hover, dip, search out
lost time. With a sinewy torque of
thorax, might bite off a spider's head.
And then are gone, whole of cloth, elsewhere.

II

My-skee-toe. Evenings thick with them.
The tent's inside smeared, variously,
with blood pocket torn on polymer.
A tock-tock. The mosquito inserts
proboscis. Ready, blue sky? Ready.
The sound of it going in changes
into the buzzy trill of thrushes,
Iscoreus naevius, across dark
July forests. Down the main ranges.
Changes tenor. —Aren't they known to,
dragonflies? Their altering, mid-pitch.
Better, for intense, to take the one
who lives momentarily: you know,
pinioned. Who'd opine that to taste the
day is but ersatz Horace. (That kind
of romantic.) The birder who would,
on entering, not be entered. Our black
hermeneutic. To revive paper-
dry castings with a skinlet of now.

III

Hundreds flying low and fast around.
Aeshna eremita. Lake Darner.
The toddler and I try to catch one.
Crouched down, sweeping the air. Those ancients
pass a few inches from my hands. They
veer always up, down, or to the side
in time. Take account of our movements.
The one we got had been killed earlier,
exoskeleton lodged in the Sube's grill.
Not even the same year. Regressive flight
of the mind. We could not touch them and
yet. Skeeters found *us*, you can be sure.
Change the tenor, yes. A space of words
opened, next grief comes razoring in.
One may watch such grotesqueries on
YouTube. I mean the way dragonflies
take what they eat, not the day count notched
in the picnic table. Not the cuts
in the twelve-year union. (Only wait.)

IV

I flee a creature without blind spot.
One seemed to snooze on a blackberry
bramble, its abdomen the glaucous
blue of juniper's fruit. Whither that?
Four wings, eight legs, motionless torso.
Great turquoise eyes. Compound. Such other-
worldly lines to fix you with. Lens-like
depths—depths?—throw photons back at any
optics sighting sightfully. What does
a dragonfly ken with its Argus
eyelets? Ultraviolet. Far-fetched
wave-lengths not discernible to the
rest. Of a hundred tries, it kills and eats
ninety-five. (Ready, blue sky? No. No.)
She moves into an exploding rain-
bow, an armature of colour more
faceted than heavens. Strained fine. Hunger
sublimed: into diamond light. Cat-like,
the darners leave us, droning nightwards.

JOHN REIBETANZ

The Lighter

The moving part was a cookie-sized ship's wheel,
  eight spokes radiating like compass points
from a central hub, each capped with a handle
  my forefingers and thumbs steered by pinching.

Somebody must have tossed it out as garbage
  when the wheel no longer struck sparks inside
the cylinder it spun on. I salvaged it,
  fired up by its chrome gleam in a trashbin.

If I'd been raised in the country, my trophies
  might have been snail shells, birds' eggs, arrowheads,
but in my dresser's bottom drawer, dungarees
  hid clock parts, keys, a bent hood ornament,

and the lighter. Weekends, parents sleeping in,
  my fingers steered the polished, tube-hulled boat
through heavy flannel-blanket seas to beaches
  or snug coves breaking from dream-misted coasts,

landforms more solid with each turn of the wheel—
  as if, freed from bondage to tobacco,
it now ignited primal light and made real
  things out of imagination's specters.

Decades passed before I learned that a "lighter"
  was also a vessel used to unload
and lighten larger ships with too deep a draught
  to dock in port. Which explains the floating

feeling that still rises from a pliant hand
  and spirals up through arm, shoulder, and neck
until the mind, buoyant once more, unburdened
  of its misty cargo, can rekindle.

ADRICK BROCK

The Bull Cook

His father rises in what, to the boy, feels like the middle of the night. Sometimes Benjamin sleeps through this disturbance, continues dreaming, but if his father is careless with the cabin door, can't muffle a hoarse cough, he will get out of bed and join him in the cookhouse. The routine is a silent choreography—feeding wood into the stove, setting the water to boil. Within half an hour the kitchen smells of coffee, delicious in aroma but terrible to taste. His father mixes the pancake batter while he cracks eggs, a dozen at a time, into a large tin bowl. Benjamin knows how much salt to add, knows that paprika gives the eggs a warm reddish hue, knows that the men like to be surprised every now and then by garlic and herbs but, to overdo it would upset their appetites.

Toward mealtime his father leaves to set out the sandwich makings, bread and meat the men will groggily assemble into pack lunches, and Benjamin is left alone to watch the steaming pots and sizzling skillets. He knows there's not much he can do to ruin breakfast. Were he asleep, his father would still be able to manage the operation on his own. Still, there is trust involved in the duty, and were he to char the pancakes or neglect the scrambled eggs, his father would curse under his breath and think less of him.

Easier to please are the men, who arrive to the cookhouse at six, dressed in their Stanfield sweaters and caulk boots still wet from the previous day, who rustle his hair as they move along, piling their plates with the food he's helped his father make. They are gruff but always thankful. They smell of diesel and damp wool. Out in the mess tent, they sit together at long tables forking eggs into their mouths, talking quietly about the hard times—no work on the mainland, droughts in

the middle provinces, useless politicians back east—sore and tired and dreading the day ahead. Ten hours in the rain felling trees tall as skyscrapers. They tell Benjamin he's picked the better line of work. Thinking he might follow in his father's footsteps, they call him the bull cook, a name for the camp helper who once fed the oxen and mucked their pens, before machines took over. They pat his shoulder when he collects their empty plates, grab his cheeks with their leathery hands. What's for dinner? they ask, needing something to look forward to.

Then comes the silence he hates: the long stretch of their absence. He helps his father wash the dishes and scrub the spilled batter from the floor, knead the bread for the following day's lunches. It is just the two of them in the empty camp, and when his father returns to their cabin to sleep, Benjamin is left on his own. He is supposed to complete his booklets. They teach him to divide and multiply and to spell words like *lizard* and *archaeology*, but his father is a poor disciplinarian, and he makes slow progress without much reprimand. Instead he sneaks into the men's bunkhouse, making archaeological discoveries of his own.

The men are from small towns and big cities, countries he's never heard of. Their belongings stand in for a kind of world travel. He passes by each man's bunk, daring himself to handle their postcards and wallets, their buck knives and Brylcreem and pulp magazines. Some of them have children and wives. Many abandoned farms on the prairies. He wonders about the languages buried beneath their shaky English, the origins of their smells. He feels their loneliness in the itchy planes of wool that blanket their single beds, but guilt forces him back to his studies. Here he is under a roof, while farther up the mountain, the men are busy disturbing the canopy, opening holes in the sky through which the rain will fall.

There are no names for the places they live. They travel north in the warm months and south in winter, follow the booms and busts of the mills. Towns pass through him like forest-fire smoke: Campbell River, Duncan, Nanaimo. They might stop for supplies, a quick meal in a Chinese restaurant, but there is always a company truck waiting to drive them away from the telephone-wire strung streets and into the nameless woods.

It is the men who form the cast of characters in his stories. There are no other children, which makes him both invisible and singular, the subject of their affection and blindness. Sometimes, on days off, the entire camp travels to a nearby town and the men disappear into bars and hotels to lose themselves. He sees them on the sidewalks and waves, calls them by their names, but they look at him as if he were a stranger.

During these visits to town, his father drags him from errand to errand, filling his orders with the butcher and grocer and pharmacist. He is both the camp cook and the medic. One time he takes Benjamin to a local veterinarian who agrees to yank a rotten baby tooth. The man is large and round with a pink face that reminds him of a hog. He dips a set of oversized pliers into a glass of ethanol before sticking them into the boy's mouth. The pain is sharp and quick, a gush of warm metallic blood. His father, who has been squeezing Benjamin's arm to create a distraction, lets up. He and the vet share a chuckle. "To do that to a horse," the vet says, "I need to pump it full of this." He flourishes a small clear vial of tranquilizer, which his father pays for in addition to the tooth. Benjamin has seen it used before, during a night of mania when a man threatened to burn down the camp if he wasn't driven to the railway station. Others held him down while his father slid the needle into his shoulder. By the next morning he was back in the breakfast line, ready to return to the cut block.

The first day back from town is the worst. Benjamin understands why they call it a hangover: the men move through the mess tent with their heads drooped to their chins, shielding their eyes from the daylight. Some have black eyes. Some have lost a month's wage to cards. A smirking few have managed to get lucky without paying for it, or so they brag.

On a wet spring day his father is roused from his midday nap by the foreman and told of an accident on the block. Benjamin drives with them up a muddy switchback. He looks down at the dark valley and sees all the places their saws have been—brown scabs in the forest, the earth naked and sore. The foreman, a Manitoban his father's age, explains the accident to them. The lead cable had snapped from too much tension, rebounding through the air like a steel whip. One of the loggers took it in the thigh.

The truck bogs out where a creek cuts through the road and they get out to scramble the rest of the way. When they reach the injured man both shoes have been sucked from Benjamin's feet. He stands in mud-coloured socks. The man, whom he knows only by his Polish nationality, sits in a puddle of dirty blood. His left pant leg has been torn off, a tourniquet tied around the upper thigh. The wound is a dark and bottomless gash.

His father sets to work with his kit, calling out the items and tools he needs. First he sprinkles coagulant over the gash, next shoots morphine into the man's quad. All the while he asks the Pole questions: What is his mother's name? What is his favourite movie? The rest of the crew stands in a circle watching.

"Thread," he says to Benjamin.

The morphine takes hold; the man's answers come lazily. He likes the look of Joan Crawford, his favourite meal is golonka. Benjamin watches his father spear the needle through the ragged flap of skin and tug the thread along. He is good at many things, fixing engines and baking bread, and medicine is just another skill he's picked up. After stitching the wound, he wraps the leg in gauze. The loggers help carry the injured man down the slope to the truck, where he's laid across the back seat. Benjamin is to sit with him and hold his leg above his heart. They reverse halfway down the mountain until the foreman has the room to spin the truck front-facing. At every culvert the man's body bounces on the worn upholstery, and still he has a smile on his face. Benjamin holds the leg up and watches the bandage darken with blood. He smells the raw meat behind his father's stitches.

The foreman and his father leave him at the camp and drive the man to the hospital. By four o'clock they've not returned. Benjamin lets himself into the cookhouse and starts preparing the dinner. He drains the starched potatoes and dresses them in oil and salt and sets them in the oven to bake. The emptiness of the kitchen is exhilarating; he is a traveller in a new country, no one to tell him where to and where not to go.

He pats the steaks down with salt and pepper, and then, as though daring himself, adds chilli and ginger and cardamom. He splashes white vinegar over the meat, stirs ginger root and sugar into the boiled carrots. The gravy he makes by simmering hog fat and onions and a few glugs of table wine. There is little thought to his choices. He adds and tastes and if the flavours improve, he keeps going.

The men are surprised to find him alone in the camp. They look more ashen than usual, mud-covered, farm animals destined for a slaughterhouse. He watches them pile their plates with his inventions, follows them to the mess tent, and spies at them through a crack in the canvas. Few of them speak. They shovel the food into their mouths and chew. That the largest logger comes back for seconds is all the thanks he needs.

He washes the dishes and mops the cookhouse and soaks the oats for breakfast, and when his father and the foreman return around midnight Benjamin is the only one awake in the camp. It feels good to hand them the plates he's set aside, even as they tell him the bad news.

A heavy snowfall keeps the men from working so the foreman closes the camp and sends everyone away until the weather starts cooperating. His father takes him to Port Alberni, a hamlet in the middle of the Island, and they rent a room in a hotel by the inlet. The owner explains

how it once stood at the heart of life here, when logging was profitable and men were flush with wages. Now, half the lights in the hallways are burnt out, and the burgundy carpets smell of mould and ash.

His father sleeps from the late afternoon through the night, and come morning he's still dead to the world. Benjamin repeats the instructions in his workbook, perfecting the equations and studying the maps that show him the world. He watches the town life outside the window. A Ford attempts to make it up the icy hill until the driver gets out and starts walking. A snowball caroms by his head. He wheels around in the direction of the throw and another ball pops against his black jacket. From his vantage, Benjamin can see a pack of children hidden behind a snowed-in Studebaker. He smiles at the reversal: here is a full-grown man cowering before children.

Benjamin looks at his father, a lump under the blankets.

He puts on his coat and walks cautiously through the snow. Children are like birds to him, clustering in colourful packs, watchful and ready to disperse. This gang is mostly boys, but there is a single girl in their midst, a sister likely, and she breaks the silence he has caused by offering him a ride on her toboggan. They march up to the top of the hill. Benjamin sits in front of the girl and feels her arms come around him. Two other boys take hold of their shoulders and start running, piling on at the last second, so the four of them are a wobbly rocket speeding downhill. Benjamin's face prickles from the cold slap of the air. Cheers and laughter surround him. The road curves at the bottom, and at the girl's command they lean to the right to turn with it, lose their edge, and crash in a splatter of snow.

After, Benjamin is made to tug the sled back up the hill. He listens to the boys boast with one another about speed records and who weighs more. They want to bring water from their houses to pour onto the track. They imagine the long, slick ribbon. Benjamin is grateful for the way they ignore him. He's like his father this way, part of a group but separate from it. A distance, he finds, is necessary.

The following morning a cold rain washes away most of the snow. He's quiet during the long drive back to camp, thinking about how much fun the sledding had been. His father senses this. "Don't be angry with me," he says. "You'll get your own life soon enough."

His father was once a logger, before his back gave out. He tells Benjamin about the largest of the cedars they felled, back when axes and broad saws were the only tools they used. He isn't proud of what they did. He has a reverence for the trees, and so he lives with the guilt of having brought them out of the sky. The worst is what logging leaves behind, millions of board feet of perfectly good timber, rotting back into dirt. Part of him hates that the wood still goes south to the States

to build cities filled with bumptious men, lawyers and debt collectors and capitalists. He sometimes mutters as much under his breath when an especially wide tree is found and felled. The men always get excited and he always reminds them that their wages will not increase because of the tree. The only one to stand to gain is the company owner and his investors. The wood could panel the walls of a new hospital, sure, but it could also be used to build the mansion of the same owner who doesn't have the decency to give you a day off after one of your own has been killed by the job.

There is a disagreement between his father and the foreman and they leave for a camp up-island. Someone is always in need of a cook, especially a cook who, like his father, can fix a broken donkey engine and set a broken bone. The men at the new camp have different faces but the same look in their eyes. Tired but hungry for more work. Benjamin's archaeological digs uncover their pasts: one has a wife in Victoria, another takes medicine for his heart. The bush is more wild here, the trees larger, and what he sees coming down the mountains on the backs of the trucks are trunks wide as Model A's. The men are particularly quiet around one another. None will say more than a thank you or a hello. It is the foreman, Benjamin can tell, who is a mean-faced man with a temper. They aren't working as fast as he thinks they can.

In the cookhouse, he and his father make fish cakes and meatloaf and stew. His father gives him entire dishes to prepare on his own. He resists the urge to add too much spice. He understands that the men have simple tastes, that they expect and crave a certain plainness to their meat and potatoes. When he can, he slips small and curious accents into his handiwork: bacon cooked right into the pancakes, syrup dolled up with rum and melted butter. His father permits him these flourishes only occasionally. He is a mechanic in the kitchen, not an artist. On days off, he prefers to eat leftover bread and not to cook at all. For Benjamin, playing with flavours feels like the only fun he gets to have.

One night he hears voices coming from the men's quarters. It is their first night off in sixteen days, and he'd watched them tilt whiskey bottles into their mugs of tea while the foreman wasn't watching. Beside him, his father is asleep. This new camp has been hard on him. The foreman is unreasonable, wants them to feed thirty men on a budget suited only for fifteen, and so the hours have been longer, trying to stretch the staples, convert every grain into a baked good or pudding. They've even gone fishing in the nearby creek, and pulled out five rainbow trout.

He follows the noises to the bunkhouse and sees men with lanterns working their way into the dense forest. The yellow light makes long shadows of the Douglas fir. The sword ferns cast jack-o'-lantern smiles. It is warm finally, and dry, and he feels the underbrush tickling against his legs as he follows the lights.

He's uncertain at first what they're doing. Twenty or more men stand in a circle in a small clearing. The first man to step forward is skinny and short, a climber, Benjamin knows from his belongings. He pulls off his shirt to reveal finely detailed musculature, ribs like fingers grabbing him from behind. Another man removes his shirt and joins him in the lantern light. They come together in a hug and whisper into one another's ears, and then, as though an insult has been exchanged, they push off and cock their fists.

Benjamin climbs onto a mossy nurse log to get a better view. The men stab at one another, piston-like, a blur of ducks and swings that makes the other men giddy. The climber lands a shot to his opponent's temple and like that the fight is over. He bends to help the downed man up, and they hug again, all smiles, before joining the circle.

One after the other the men pair up and spar, first the smaller men, then the giants. These last are the loggers who run the chainsaws, rig the pulleys that bring the fir and cedar down the mountains. Bare-chested, they remind the boy of gorillas. They circle longer than the smaller fighters, prolonging the suspense of the group. They lock arms and paw for dominance. The punches they land cause a dull thud like a sack of flour hitting the floor of the cookhouse. For sixteen days they've slung tackle and saws through the forest, worked their way through acres of timber, but somehow they have energy for this. Benjamin isn't sure if what he's witnessing is grace or destruction. Each punch makes him shield his eyes, but still he keeps watching, these strange animals who in the kerosene light look like men.

all poetry.

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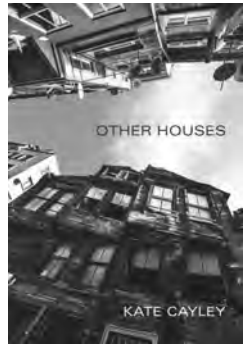

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Poetry

M. TRAVIS LANE, *The Witch of the Inner Wood: Collected Long Poems*, edited by Shane Neilson (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 2016). Hardcover, 377 pp., $40.

M. TRAVIS LANE, *Heart on Fist: Essays and Reviews 1970-2016*, edited by Shane Neilson (Windsor: Palimpsest, 2016). Paperbound, 296 pp., $19.95.

SHANE NEILSON, editor, *How Thought Feels: The Poetry of M. Travis Lane* (Victoria: Frog Hollow, 2015). Paperbound, 174 pp., $27.50.

M. Travis Lane's writing impels and bewitches—often for the same reasons: impels because of her fierce acuity, her unremittingly engaged intelligence as a reviewer and her razor-fine sense of lyric texture as a poet; bewitches with the capaciously melodic cadences of her thinking and with the sustained conceptual resonances of her creative and critical practice. Forty years of published work—gathered and addressed in these three recent, late volumes—offers a window onto the consistently remarkable and wrongfully under-regarded corpus of her poetry and poetics. It is a true pleasure to discover and to re-discover the—Lane wouldn't like this descriptor—sheer greatness of her talent. Honestly, reading M. Travis Lane pushes me—with a mixture of heart and fist, of kind involvement and stern jostle—to pursue an intensely felt connection, like hers and through hers, to a deeply-sounded and moving experience of meaning in the world, and of the sensual and imaginative heft of words.

As Lane's editor, publisher, advocate, curator, apologist, fellow poet, and acolyte, Shane Neilson willingly acknowledges his thorough involvement in these books. His introduction to *How Thought Feels*—which collects essays on M. Travis Lane's poetics by him, by Jan Zwicky, and by Jeanette Lynes, along with a compilation (his term) of thematically-arranged slices from Lane's long poems—begins with a personal account of walking out to visit Lane while he's on a visit to Fredericton to care for his father. Their relationship, from his side, combines genuine friendship and objective admiration, warmly reciprocated by Lane herself. He describes Lane appearing like a "white-

haired sprite" at her door: "'Hello Shane,' she said, 'Now come in, come in.'" Nielson positions himself as surrogate reader, sitting on her couch leafing through her publications while she hovers nearby—a detached but palpable presence, at once inviting and formal, close and still proper. Neilson wants to enable her recognition beyond this intimate, critically privileged sequester; "Travis is 80 years old," he writes in a letter accompanying *How Thought Feels*: "As a woman who lived in New Brunswick and who published on small presses, she didn't acquire the attention she deserved in her career." (All three of these books come in small runs from small presses.) Neilson understands his role as clearing space for Lane's work to be heard and felt. But his sense of needful discovery persists; he assumes that very few will know who Lane is, or have a sense of the monumentality of her accomplishment. Jan Zwicky describes her surprise at her first encounter with Lane's work—during a 1989 reading at the University of New Brunswick—when, arriving in what Lane calls a "shabby eastern province," Zwicky unexpectedly hears a "sharply intelligent, sophisticated" and musically rigorous voice that she characterizes as "an attempt at honest seeing," in caringly crafted poetry. Jeanette Lynes wants to affirm Lane's place, when she seems "to have fallen through the cracks" of critical reception, in an "ecological web" of Canadian poetry, a vital "connectedness" to other writers and readers that remains unattended and underappreciated.

Lane's copious, keenly attentive reviews might represent her own enmeshment in an expansive literary network, although she speaks from one of its more attenuated edges. She positions herself as an informed amateur, an exacting poetic interlocutor who will not suffer incompetence gladly but who also celebrates the weightiness and global reach of real accomplishment: "I review because I love to discover good poetry, to share my pleasures with others, and because thinking about writing that I admire exercises my mind. I also review because I've never had a full-time job. Poetry and keeping house have been my life" ("On Reviewing"). The sculptural surety elevating taste to objective standard—she knows clearly what "good" writing is—modulates to a colloquial humility ("I've never had…") that feels more or less characteristic of the regional, of the marginal and the "shabby." Still, Lane engages with Tomas Tranströmer and Anne Simpson on equal footing: Eurocentric metaphysical grandeur, for her, has no problem coexisting with the world-class compositional acuity of a poet from Antigonish. Redressing such imbalances of reception informs Lane's project, as reviewer, as much as it does Neilson's editorial work around Lane herself. Her readings, for example, of what she calls the "unimpoverished" "maximalism" of George Elliott

Clarke leverage the wealth and reach of his "Nofaskoshan" style onto a much wider cultural stage. Lane is, in my view and *pace* Zwicky, no regionalist, at least not in the wheelhouse of James Reaney's arch formalism or in the mould of E. J. Pratt's hyperbolic cultural nationalism. Rather, Lane usually takes for granted the attendant worldliness of the writing she encounters: poetry, for her, is poetry, subject to the same acumen and standards no matter where it says it comes from.

It's not that she ignores the Canadian genetics of much of what she reviews. She repeatedly makes a case for the poetry of UNB's A. G. Bailey, which I have to admit doesn't convince me; I just don't hear it. But hearing is exactly the basis of Lane's globalizing critique: she takes as objective that a genuine musicality in language can bear witness to essential human truth—though her ear, while largely accurate and openly acquisitive, can also be fairly unforgiving. A recalcitrant formalist, she nonetheless decries saccharine aestheticism (the danger of "too much sugar" that renders poetry merely—and this is a recurrent complaint in her criticism—"amusing"). She's certainly a latter-day Yeatsian modernist, and like Yeats never lets go of a certain difficult version of homecoming, of a capacious but rigorously cultivated place for poetry of tangible value, of "good" work. Her own lines never settle, and words are honed, refigured, prised apart, and revised, articulating a "sleek unsaying" even as they fall into contingent domestic order. "For home," she writes, "is a place we've never been. / We would not be home in it were we there." Unlike Yeats, Lane is particularly concerned with making space for women's writing, for poetry by women; her self-description as a housewife (or faculty wife) seems wryly ingenuous, and a large part of her own mythopoeic practice centres on opening up excluded voices (of girls, wives, witches) to audibility. "Homecoming," the first long poem collected in *The Witch of the Inner Wood* gathers a set of seasonal "musings" and transplants an Odyssean *nostos* to "rural New Brunswick" where "there are moose among the olive trees" and where a new Penelope recomposes her Ithaca, repurposing music from quiescent grief. Lane's poetic homemakers shape, fracture, disrupt and unsettle verbal form to produce alternative lyricisms. Lane listens astutely to the ludic wrangle of Phyllis Webb, to the fraught melodic conviction of Margaret Avison, to the lyric provocations of Paulette Jiles, to distill, to sound and to recuperate, variously, a noisy antiphony of women's voices. (Oddly absent—unless I have overlooked her—is P. K. Page, who strikes me as an ally in approach and practice for Lane.) Rather than rehearse Lane's readings of others, though, I want to take a little time to listen to her particular musicality, to substantiate my case for the significance, the cultural weight, of her work. Lane tries to populate her reviews with

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liberal quotations, "by which you may judge the reviewer," by seeing and hearing for yourself. Fair enough.

The Witch of the Inner Wood gathers all of Lane's long poems ("I propose that a poem which takes at least five minutes to read aloud is long," she writes), lifted and arranged chronologically from *Homecomings* (1977) to *The All Nighter's Radio* (2010). The earlier work shows the influence of Robert Frost. Her first review to appear in *The Fiddlehead* in the fall of 1962 was about Frost's final collection, *In the Clearing*, and her 1967 doctoral dissertation (for a PhD awarded by Cornell) focused on Frost's style. The poems tend to be loosely narrative, metrically tight, and voiced through personae, many of them dialogues. While Lane's mature poems do retain vestigial narratives—"Time," as she puts it, "is the grammar of our perceptions," and without some kind of narrative movement, poetry can become "duller to read than a tooth chart"—but they tend to consist of daisy-chained lyrics, progressing through a more associative and surreal time-sense foregoing linear development in favour of more complex and subtle sequencing, a polytemporality. Many of those moments are reflexive, and open up questions around Lane's own sense of articulate form: "Nothing is sure. A poem speaks / but with a mouth of weather. / Nothing's clear. / […] Words / can turn upon themselves" ("Six Poems Looking at a Sculpture by Űlker Őzerdem"). Traces of Yeatsian diction persist, along with a sculptural sense of prosody. (Notice how the second and third lines meld firmly into iambic pentameter.) But that monumentality, that assuredness, is broken and offset not only by what Lane's speaker appears to admit here, that nothing is sure, but also by the offset fracture in the temporal fabric of the foreshortened lines themselves. Pocketed within a longer sequence, this aporia reknits itself, looking to foreclose on its unruly "mouth of weather." (I need to pause here to note that I had a hard time with the Frost-like datedness of "Red Earth," particularly around descriptions of Indigenous people: the vocabulary, while attempting to be empathetic ["my white words / go lame"], retains a stereotyping diction of otherness that's uncomfortable, recalling both the maudlin pathos of Duncan Campbell Scott and the reductive tragic symbolizing of "Indians" traced in Margaret Atwood's 1972 *Survival*: "The red earth marks the Indian graves." Jeanette Lynes attempts to recuperate this poem—voiced through the figure of a disempowered scholar's wife—as an effort at feminist-ecopoetic engagement, but her argument feels a little forced.)

One of my favourite pieces by Lane is "'Cracked'" a tribute to and reworking of Emily Dickinson; the doubled quotation marks suggest both the artifice of self-fashioning and the gap between word and world that Dickinson seeks to cross, suspended in the contrary hiatus

of her own *parrhesia*: "Daffy with weakness my black self holds / the secret of my strength." The lovely mishmash of diction floats in an elastic fourteener characteristic of Dickinson's hymnal-like rhythms; Lane's lines push at their temporal envelope to suggest a woman's voice—strong for all its supposed weakness—cracking its container. The textures of pastoral domesticity call Lane's poet home and out of herself:

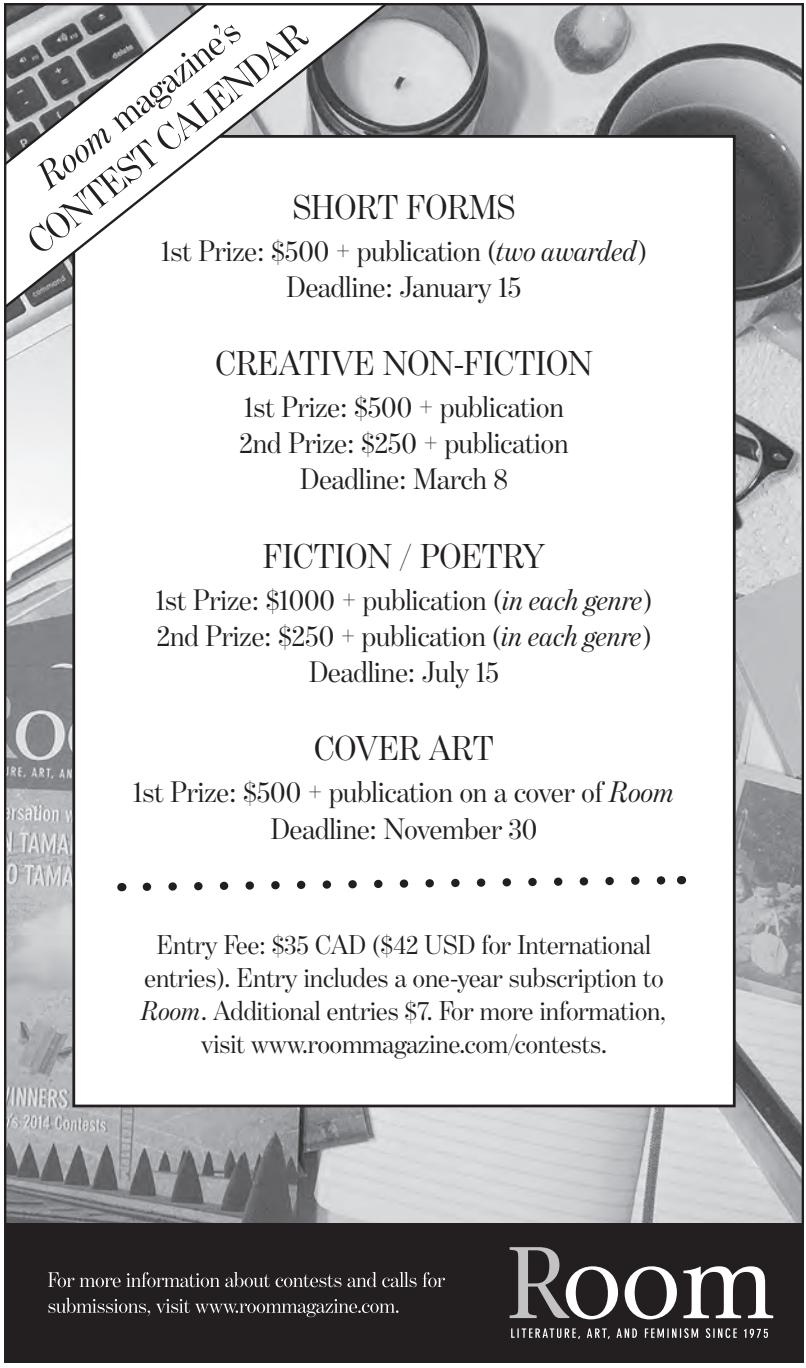
> Each day
> the smells of home-baked bread, sweet ginger,
> honeycomb—
> the heartless, joyless, juvenile
> eternities, bee-lovely,
> waft me toward what shores
> what tropic luxe,
> what paradise?

Dickinson's metaphysical vocabulary and three- and four-beat lines short-circuit with the sensuous overload in Lane's rendering of the poem's material present; the question of where the poem's imperative nudges her and nudges us remains open, but thick with vitality.

One of the most compelling of Lane's sequences is "The Witch of the Inner Wood." As with the other long poems, there is too much to describe, and I can offer only a taste of her writing here (this is the seventh section of forty five):

> This lank knot-armed, close-knuckled tree
> stands like a marker in the rain,
> like some old map.
>
> I read it in the nodes and scars.
> I read it in the crawling birds,
> the black tarpaper shanties of its worms:
> that which endures its little while,
> supports, blooms and maintains.
>
> I clear its lower branches with my axe.

Again, we have successive moments reflecting in a tense present tense on the work of making; design unfolds and reshapes itself, balancing intervention with acceptance, craft with humility. Notice the shifting counterpoint of tetrameter, pentameter and hexameter line-envelopes, and the involute consonance and slant-rhyme at play. Writing involves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both attentive reading of and accommodation to the descriptive, but also a rigorous, judicious pruning that registers the conversant design of the poet, her capacity to understand the collision of thing and marker, of object rendered meaningful.

Lane unfurls her careful music, an admixture of gathering and letting go:

> in coiling, miming loveliness,
> and all indifferent maths resigned
> into the beauty of the frame
> their first design,
> that what should be dispersed and lost
> should be
> upgathered now
> in love's
> retarding
> skein.

Her long poems offer an extended calculus of the variegated tensions between the given and the artificial, between mimesis and *poiesis*, between joyful attentiveness to what is and reweaving the skeins of the possible: "These things are light. I weld them into light." The extensive interlace that Lane's long-form texts offer up to us testify, at both the large and small scale, to her sustained desire to trace the motile interconnections of the spoken and the felt, of sense and sense. "I want the real…" one of Lane's personae tells us, and her. Just so.

— **KEVIN MCNEILLY**

JAN CONN, *Tomorrow's Bright White Light* (Toronto: Tightrope, 2016). Paperbound, 54 pp., $19.95.

> A sock particle was detected in the supercollider.
> Can we make time out of bacteria?
> Trade genomes for another year of elephants?
> A parody of my pernicious scheme unravels
> but the scheme itself is silk.

So begins the poem "Battered Civilization," which also opens Jan Conn's ninth book of poems, *Tomorrow's Bright White Light*. I had the privilege of choosing this poem for the 2014 edition of *Best Canadian Poetry*; I was struck, in part, by the disparate knowledge and tones that collide so surprisingly in these first speculative images. The domestic sock meets the hyper-technological realm of the supercol-

lider. Bacteria, that could be living in a Petrie dish or on your bathroom sponge, are fodder for a conception of time as makeable. What desperation makes an attempt to quantify our relationship with an entire species, commodify the knowledge of genetic science, and appeal to some ancestral sense of fairness by suggesting the barter system? This interesting voice then turns inward, and reveals personal desire, or failing, and a poet's taste for metaphor.

In the first lines of this poem, we hear the registers that Conn balances in the rest of the book—one, a biological scientist's technological savvy, curiosity and observing distance, and two, a more personal voice that shares a woman's everyday, domestic, and fleeting joys. We also get a taste of a recurring concern for the environment that bridges these two realms of experience—the personal and the scientific—in Conn's restless, interrogatory, and sometimes surreal poems.

This is a slim volume, only fifty-four pages including acknowledgements. It is organized loosely, without an overarching biographical/historic focus as we have seen from Conn in books like *Jaguar Rain.* The notes of intellectual restlessness, geographic worldliness, and a subtle, humorous penchant toward the surreal that Conn hits in this book will be familiar to readers of her earlier work. Her style has often been described as "fragmented," and Conn has stated in interviews that it is not terribly important to her that poems be "easily accessible." *Tomorrow's Bright White Light* is consistent with these descriptions; the book's unity comes from simply gathering handfuls of poems that exemplify her distinctive, subtly withholding style and her preoccupations with nature and global citizenship. Here are the first few lines from the poem "A Torrent of Sparkling Can No Longer": "Only now has hunger reached me. // After cataract surgery do you continue to detect those / spectral shapes? // How does it feel, no longer possessing a skeleton / and those tiny blue eggs. Hip deep in blackened greenery. // Oh lonesome. Don't force feed me rocket fuel. / Did you jam the machinery with the dead bolt?"

This poem, which ends with the lines "The power grid cannot be managed, the northwest perimeter / held against us," is a good example of the kind of leaping, fragmentary consciousness that is so particular to Conn. The varying subjects of verbs—first person, then second, with some subjectless interjections or directives thrown in—leave the reader unsure who the speaker is. One is reminded of the fragmentary sentence-craft of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, but something other than the orthodox poststructuralist intention to destabilize the reader's sense of a single subjectivity propels this writing. Our readerly desire for a stable vision informing each poem, for a narrative structure giving it a sense of meaning, is being challenged here. Yet, through the slow

accretion of the poems, Conn builds up a sense of voice and experience that suggests a body, a person with a history, behind the writing—one who needs to leap with language in order to use it effectively, to grapple with what it is to live on this Earth. The disjointedness makes sense ecopoetically: the scale of environmental change, and the acuteness with which a biologist would be aware of it, is often perhaps beyond coherence, beyond narrative logic.

The poem "Touch Me Anywhere to Begin: A Biography of Eva Peron" is a series of single lines that looks deceptively like a list: "She was spotted in an estancia near a river. // Every day being videotaped by a tiny tribe of microbes. // If a person is infallible, she has to draw the line somewhere. // For a carnival she dressed as the unknown. // A local parade of sequined donkeys passes through her. // Do you pledge in favour of control or glory?" The poem moves like this, the tone objective and dispassionate, as though a multidirectional microphone is picking up phrases from the psychic buzz of Peron's mythology. Stabs of intimacy are followed by macro-level observations of Argentinian society: the eye that sees what "passes through her" also sees "rampant forgery at every level." And here is Conn's oblique humour: the same voice that refuses storytelling will draw a picture of microbes using video equipment. At the poem's close, it is as though we have moved through the atmosphere of Peron's politically charged life. Not all the poems in the collection are this exaggerated in their disjointedness; Conn does write narrative poems which are easier to follow, though even these often unfold their stories in a stepping-stone to stepping-stone, stop-motion rhythm.

Much of Conn's work (she is a geneticist who studies mosquitoes) takes her to South America. One poem takes us to Santa Rosa, Argentina, where her speaker "count[s her] lucky stars" and wonders, "To whom should we bow down in thanks / for stereo sound?" as she registers the termite-infested, jungle-lush poverty and religious credulity of her hosts. Another poem takes us to the "Left Bank of the Itaya" in Peru, where the speaker is both familiar enough with the country to speak of how "we elect politicians by marking an X / through a tree, a chick, a house or a boat" but foreign enough to not know the names of the streams the local fishermen are working, and to suddenly refer to the landscape as "the local vegetation."

The Latin American poems give context to the poems from closer to home. Poems about getting lost on a summer drive somewhere in southwestern Ontario, about Lac Mégantic, or about pressures to own a condo, feel connected to the poems about people living in tropical landscapes, in or on the fringes of mines. One trusts that Conn looks at herself and us as animals busy anthropogenically changing the

planet, with the same fascination, passion, and equanimity that she brings to her study of *Anopheles darlingi,* the bugs that spread malaria.

Conn imbues her work with a sense of biological, rather than geopolitical, time. There is hopefulness in her voice that looks for "tomorrow's bright white light," but one senses, by the end of this collection, that Conn's vision anticipates not a glittering future but the blinding immeasurability and imminence of our collective extinction. Her voice feels at times matter of fact, as if Conn imagines her poems as a byproduct of a human being at the end of a cycle of Western civilization's values and ecosystemic balance. But her dry, clean tone is surface to a deeply phenomenal wonder. The humanity and vulnerability of Conn's voice, which shows itself in controlled glimpses, is one that measures its surroundings, and finds hope in that place where two modes of attention, objectivity and sensitivity to beauty, meet each other with profound respect.

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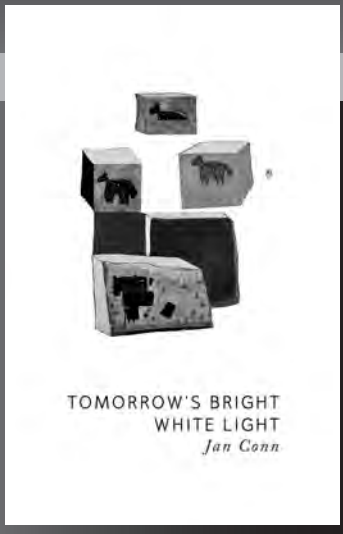

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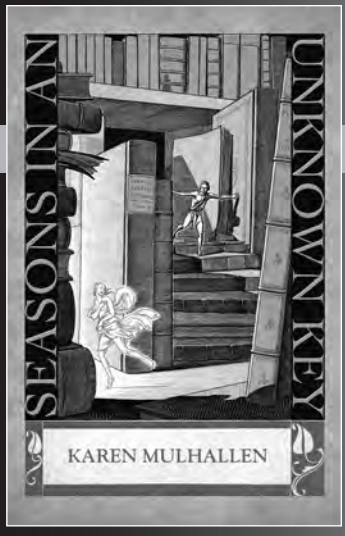

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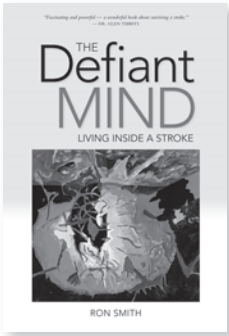

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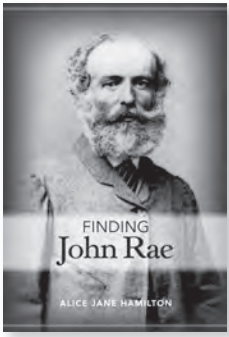

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Fiction

JEN SOOKFONG LEE, *The Conjoined* (Toronto: ECW, 2016). Paperbound, 264 pp., $18.95.

There are novels in which readers can wrap themselves in a cozy haze of escapism, but Jen Sookfong Lee's *The Conjoined* is not one of them. Lee's approach to crime fiction prompts me to wonder why thrillers are pleasurable. If they are a form of escapism, then what kinds of harsh realities are we evading, and if readers take voyeuristic enjoyment in grisly murders and criminal behaviour, then what is missing from our mundane daily routines?

Jessica Campbell, the protagonist of Lee's novel, seems in need of an escape when we first encounter her. Her career as a social worker in Vancouver has brought her from one support agency to another, yet despite the "noble pursuit" of finding foster families for abused and neglected children, Jessica is dogged by a sense of futility and stagnancy: "The number of files she couldn't satisfactorily close grew. It didn't matter how many times she moved them, the pile sat—top-heavy and teetering—in her head. She could never shake them. And she was scared of failing, always failing."

Here is a woman at a crisis point in her life: disillusioned by the system she is working within, weary of her boyfriend and his "mental system of privilege and risks and best practices," and numbed by the recent death of her mother, Donna, who was "not a saint, but close." While sorting through the detritus of her mother's useful life, Jessica makes a discovery that undoes her presumptions about goodness and what it costs. Finding the bodies of two teenage sisters, Casey and Jamie Cheng, in a freezer in her mother's basement becomes the catalyst for Jessica's plunge into traumatic, subsumed memories.

Jessica's discoveries are interspersed with episodes depicting Casey and Jamie before they are briefly in foster care with Jessica's mother, as well as Donna's childhood. Jessica picks apart past events, painfully confronting truths that both haunt her and compel her to search further. The plot races forward with each revelation, and then slows as Jessica reels with its consequences. The reader also experiences a similar tension between craving to know more details, and aversion and horror at each disclosure. This tension is inherent in our pleasure at reading thrillers, but in *The Conjoined,* the events feel too close to home to be salacious or entertaining. At times, certain plot turns can feel too convenient and scripted, yet they serve to highlight how complicity

can envelop individuals and communities in a fog of guilt, forgetfulness, silence, and complacency. Jessica learns how certain questions will unravel the careful façade of an easy life. That façade is propped up by photo albums of family memories: "this was the version of her family Donna wanted to remember: happy, craftsy, nature-loving," and beneath it is a legacy of violence that goes unpunished. While questions may lead to the truth unfolding, they do not bring justice, at least not in the Vancouver depicted in Lee's story. *The Conjoined* could be a portrait of Vancouver's social tensions arising from race and class divisions. With very few exceptions, social workers, housing officers, foster parents, and police officers are middle-class and white, while foster children and disappeared women are of colour and from lower-income backgrounds. Asking after the disappeared reveals that there are lives that matter and lives that don't: "What difference does it make? Except that there were two girls, twenty-eight years later, whose deaths should have made a difference and didn't."

Creating a protagonist such as Jessica Campbell allows Lee to flesh out in unflinching and sometimes droll ways the hamartia of privilege. Jessica slowly realizes that for most of her life she was insulated from tragedy, only brushing up against it in the files of children awaiting adoption or in her blurred awareness of the girls' movements beyond her bedroom door at night. Despite Jessica's capacity for growth and self-reflection, I often felt exasperated by her conflicting desires, which is perhaps the point. If the reader feels an unnamed frustration towards the three generations represented by Jessica, Donna, and Grandma Beth, perhaps it's because we recognize in them our own capacity for gentle hypocrisy.

I would have liked to spend more time with the Cheng family, who are too busy merely surviving to be improving the lives of others. Bill, Ginny, Jamie, and Casey are blown apart in a way that feels predictable, perhaps because there were too many familiar elements to this part of the story: the father who spends days drinking through the family's savings after being laid off; a mother working multiple jobs and fearful for her daughters when they venture beyond Chinatown; the rebellious, restless girls; and Wayne, the older, male friend of their father's whose desire is both a threat and a possible escape. While these characters' lives pound on the page like an aching pulse, their fates feel inevitable. They don't have the luxury of reflecting on the tragedies that pursue them and, as a result, a sense of helplessness immures the Cheng family in spite of their plans for the future. It isn't enjoyable to watch characters flailing, yet we can't turn away. Perhaps this is because the irresolution of their misfortune might hold some insight into how we cope with our own thwarted plans and catastro-

phes. If one person's escape is another's adversity, *The Conjoined* implies that we can no longer avert our eyes.

—PHOEBE WANG

JOHN GOLDBACH, *It is an Honest Ghost* (Toronto: Coach House, 2016). Paperbound, 141 pp., $18.95.

A different John Goldbach could have written each of these seven stories (six shorts and a novella). This is not a bad thing. I'm particularly fond of the John Goldbach who nails millennial narcissism in a one-and-a-half-page, single-sentence stream-of-consciousness narrative about being hypothetically abducted and murdered by terrorists while standing in front of a Russian cathedral. I'm less fond of the Goldbach who wrote a very long story about a writer named John who goes to Kenya to write (ostensibly not about a writer named John) but instead just becomes ill and decides to break up with his girlfriend.

I first read Mr. Goldbach's "Sigismund Mohr: The Man Who Brought Electricity to Quebec" in a past *Malahat* issue. It's the kind of story that makes you leaf back to the contents page to find out what genre you're reading; it almost seems like one of those Canadian Heritage Minutes commercials. Sigismund Mohr was a real person and he really did bring electricity to Quebec. Many of the story's general details about his life seem to be factual, as far as I can tell, but the intimate details (taken from the diary of someone close to him) are fabrications—I think. Goldbach has taken a relatively unknown historical figure and tried to breathe a little colour into his life and death, which isn't something we're used to seeing in short fiction, but it works.

Another of the John Goldbachs I like wrote a story called "A Girl With a Dragon Tattoo." The joke of the title is, of course, that there are many girls and many dragon tattoos, and probably many girls with dragon tattoos, but that's not why I liked it. It's a dialogue between a stripper and a customer she used to know in high school and it has the crude minimalism of a good Gordon Lish piece. As a fragment of dialogue, there's no attempt to direct the reader to anything in particular, and the author is his best self when he isn't trying to send the reader off to some meaning.

The novella, "Hic Et Ubique," makes up the bulk of the collection. There's no doubt that it's an ambitious piece of work—racial, cultural, and political themes abound. It's the kind of story that really wants to be about important, contemporary stuff. With that said, it doesn't really move. The narrator is bland to the point that you want to jump into just about any other character's consciousness, which tends to be the case when you write about writers, because writers make boring,

self-absorbed characters. What normally saves this kind of story are sharp observations and finely tuned, rhythmic sentences, however much of this novella lacks rhythm and stumbles around in banal details, like "my face looked sallower than the day before, my face looked more unshaven," to which the reader will point out, *perhaps that's because you haven't shaved.* And where there ought to be some economy, there are whole paragraphs like this:

> …as soon as I exited my room, I was outside, and then I turned to my left and walked by a couple of rooms and then I was at the outdoor pool, which in daylight looked inviting, more so than in my memory, and I turned right at the pool, walked down a few steps, and then was in the lobby, which I bypassed for the restaurant.

This sort of thing is objectively not fun to read, and that's why I prefer the Goldbach who writes short, funny, quasi-postmodern bits like "Jenny," the last piece in the collection. The story is a series of quotations from a very intelligent (though outrageously racist) girl with such nuggets of wisdom as "The only good thing about dying is you really start to like life. What a joke," and "People just want to get famous, like it'll save them, even if the reasons for getting famous are ignominious, it's actually a boring topic and for stupid people, like God." She's like a contemporary, female Holden Caulfield, and though I wasn't entirely convinced by *It is an Honest Ghost*, I know I'd pay good money to read the John Goldbach who writes a novel about Jenny.

—**MATTHEW K. THIBEAULT**

CLEA YOUNG, *Teardown* (Calgary: Freehand, 2016). Paperbound, 225 pp.; $19.95.

I read most of Clea Young's *Teardown* while wedged into an economy-class window seat on a nighttime flight bound from Toronto to Victoria. As my neighbour adjusted her headset and lost herself in the Technicolour romance of *La La Land*, I followed Young's more ordinary and complicated characters through the streets and restaurants, warehouses and shops of less-fabled coastal cities to the north. About an hour into the movie, Air Canada's media server inexplicably quit, but even if it had worked perfectly, I'd still have been the winner of the in-flight entertainment lottery. The stories in *Teardown* share with *La La Land* an edge-of-the-continent setting, a mostly youthful cast, playful wit, sparks of romance, respect for their genre's traditions, and moments of surprising, surreal beauty. But they go beyond mere sur-

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faces to trouble the myths that make those surfaces seem so appealing. In the process, the stories convey a truer sense of contemporary life in Victoria, Vancouver Island, and the lower mainland than a dozen cinematic confections.

A man loses his pregnant wife at Ikea; an unemployed woman wobbles home on kitten heels after an office holiday party she has crashed; a different woman runs into an old flame on the ferry, steals an apricot Danish at the cafeteria, and gets caught; long-married high-school sweethearts pick up a pair of hitchhikers on their way to a friend's wedding and face up to their mutual betrayals. These characters are typical and recognizable, yet oddly off-kilter. They live in, or among, the "teardown" houses of the book's title. This is a place where even Subaru-driving suburban parents can feel precarious; where the environment in the form of a powerful wave or a sudden firestorm might knock them to pieces or burn them to ash, and where a miniscule shift in real estate values could render them rich or homeless in an instant. Longing for love and connection, they teeter on the brink of solvency, self-understanding, maturity, and commitment.

Just thinking about caring for his unborn child makes the narrator of "Teardown" shaky. He cannot picture the baby in a crib, and cannot understand why his wife keeps insisting they furnish a home. Similarly, Holt, the dad in "Chaperone," has so much trouble imagining himself as an adult that on a school excursion, he buys his teenage daughter and her friends the illicit alcohol he's there to prevent them from getting. Tova, of "Split," secretly rejoices when her period arrives, even though—or perhaps, because—she knows her boyfriend is eager to become a father; Kirby and Ben try to escape their own baby for a sexy weekend only to find themselves unwilling caretakers of a teenage niece and her friend in "New World." These are people who want and don't want the trappings of adulthood and all its responsibilities. They know what they are "supposed" to do, but what if they're not up to the task?

Teardown's stories may centre on youthful characters, but with their economical characterizations, deft pacing, and sly reveals, they are intelligent, accomplished, and mature. Most have appeared in literary magazines. Several have been anthologized in *Coming Attractions,* and three have been short-listed for the Journey Prize—attesting to their individual strengths. Yet taken together, they're even more impressive, for set between two covers, they do more than introduce us to appealing characters who are struggling with interesting problems. In addition, they subtly and incrementally summon an atmosphere and convey to us the power of place. The ferries, beaches, conifers, craftsman's houses, pastel apartment blocks, and swimming holes of Van-

couver Island and the lower mainland may make it seem like an idyllic playground, but ferries sink, the ocean has an undertow, trees are subject to clear cuts, beetles, and fire. In other words, a beautiful backdrop can't save anyone from making tough choices and facing tragedy. No wonder commitment seems risky. No wonder these characters hesitate to dive in.

Given its west coast setting, it's not surprising to find *Teardown* filled with images of water. Ocean, lakes, waterfalls, rain—all make repeated appearances in these pages. Yet what lingered for me even more were its evocations of light. The book begins with an argument over a chandelier, as a frustrated mother-to-be tries to illuminate her husband about the impending changes in their lives, and it ends in a Vancouver warehouse where a woman tiptoes uncertainly toward her future amid a labyrinth of lunch-bag lanterns. As our plane neared its destination, my seatmate jabbed uselessly at her personal television with a lacquered nail while I peered out the window. Below us, Victoria's lights flickered like the beeswax candles of Young's final story, spread out in poignant patterns against the dark. With its sharp and graceful language, its empathy for human frailty, and its openness to the unexpected, a book like *Teardown* sheds a radiance all its own.

—**SUSAN OLDING**

Nonfiction

SIMON ROY, *Kubrick Red: A Memoir* (Vancouver: Anvil, 2016). Paperbound, 160 pp., $18.

To begin, a terrible confession: despite studying and teaching film for about thirty years, I've never been a huge fan of the cinema of Stanley Kubrick. Heretical though it may sound, I often find his films, with their reliance on low-angle distance and one-point perspective, to be too coldly stylized, too detached for my tastes. Obviously, there's much to admire in Kubrick's work, but I have to admit I find it a very difficult corpus of films to warm to—especially those portentous, agonizingly airless late films featuring austerely lush settings populated by beings who seem less like characters than like faceless (though magnificently sculpted) ciphers moving from one centrally composed shot to another. *Eyes Wide Shut*, the last film Kubrick completed before his death in 1999, is probably the best example of this tendency, but it is an aesthetic that Kubrick embraced from *A Clockwork Orange* onward.

This isn't to say I don't like *all* of Kubrick's films—even a heretic has to (however grudgingly) acknowledge some elements of orthodoxy. *Dr. Strangelove* is a brilliant and still relevant satire, and *2001: A Space Odyssey* remains one of the greatest, most influential science-fiction films of all time; *Barry Lyndon* is a fascinating experiment in visual style disguised as a period piece. What remains especially compelling about Kubrick's work is his ability to transform genre—the costume drama, the war film, the erotic thriller—into a decidedly personal statement of a world view. Perhaps surprisingly, no film in the director's oeuvre reflects this auteurist quality than Kubrick's 1980 foray into the horror genre, *The Shining*.

Montreal literature professor Simon Roy's first book, *Kubrick Red: A Memoir*, is an often-harrowing account of the author's family history as projected through the filter of Kubrick's treatment of the source novel by Stephen King. The various, labyrinthine iterations of the narrative are important here: this is a book that attempts to translate the psychic impact of a film that attempts to translate a book's translation of psychic disorder into prose (and it's worth mentioning that King was outraged by Kubrick's handling of the story). Roy's connection to the film is singular and striking: stumbling upon the film (in its French version) on TV one Saturday night, the young Roy is shaken by a scene in which Scatman Crothers's Dick Hallorann, chef at the Overlook Hotel, telepathically offers young Danny Torrance a bowl

of ice cream. The seemingly innocuous scene terrifies Roy: "For some unknown reason, even though I couldn't possibly be that naïve at that age, I felt like Hallorann had for a moment drawn back from his role as the guide to the Overlook Hotel to establish a direct relationship with me and reveal something hidden. A revelation that went far beyond a cordial invitation to savour a bowl of chocolate ice cream."

Roy claims that, "Through *The Shining*, horror entered my life. A life which had, until then, been safeguarded by a mother always ready to overprotect me from the threats of the outside world." From this imagined conversation with Hallorann emerges a sense of connection to the film—an obsessive fascination that at first is inexplicable (why *this* film instead of another?). As the memoir progresses, however, we come to realize that *The Shining*'s visual narrative of blood-soaked horror has a deep, even traumatic personal significance for Roy and awakens memories of real-life family tragedies involving derangement, brutal murder, and suicide. Ultimately, the book takes on the form of a fifty-two-chapter maze, at the centre of which resides Danielle, the author's mother, and her struggles against demons inner and outer, present and past.

Translating the written word into film is a notoriously complex task, how much more difficult, then, to translate the filmic image into text—and in the form of memoir, rather than as a novelistic re-telling. In many ways, though, Roy has chosen the perfect film for such an act: *The Shining* has a reputation for ambiguity, the kind of film that encourages multiple interpretations, including the extreme conspiracy theories outlined in the documentary *Room 237* (Rodney Ascher, 2013). To his credit, Roy never indulges the compelling absurdities of that film, but still manages to let the book explore the many parallels and coincidences he finds between his family history and the narrative of *The Shining*—an endeavour Kubrick, who apparently loved coincidences, would surely admire.

Kubrick Red's greatest strength lies in its structure, a series of very short chapters detailing the author's relationship to *The Shining*, the production history of this and other Kubrick films, some of the bizarre theories about the film that have circulated over the years. Throughout, however, Roy returns to his mother, providing a loosely chronological narrative to hold the whole thing together. This allows the reader to experience the book as the textual embodiment of the Overlook Hotel; we weave through its chapters the way the film's ghostly, unsettling Steadicam shots rush along the hotel's corridors, drawn toward the shocking violence of Danielle's childhood as inexorably as Jack Torrance and Kubrick's camera are drawn to the horrors contained in room 237.

The book's original French title—*Ma vie rouge Kubrick* (Les Éditions du Boréal, 2015)—offers a clearer sense of its subject than does the English translation, and this points to a relatively minor quibble: there are times when the translation, by Jacob Homel, seems to slip a bit. We learn, for example, that when Jack kills Hallorann "the old man crumbles [sic] to the floor." More problematic (for me, at least) is the nagging sense that the book's numbers don't completely add up. Roy, born in 1968, claims he first saw the film when he was "ten or twelve, no more than that," which means he either saw *The Shining* two years before it was released in theatres in 1980, or that it was first televised in Quebec the same year as its release. Otherwise, *Kubrick Red* is a fascinating and deeply moving account of one man's attempt to make sense of his life, his family, and the film that has haunted both.

—**MITCHELL PARRY**

SEAN HOWARD, *The Photographer's Last Picture* (Kentville: Gaspereau, 2016). Paperbound, 378 pp., $29.95.

What does one say about a book so singularly defeated by its premise? The question is one this latest collection by Sean Howard, a poet and professor of political science at Cape Breton University, seems determined to make obtrusive. The hints it contains of the fresher work it might have been are far from redeeming, though they lend it a certain pathos. They have the advantage, at any rate, of differing from the mode of redemption-by-defeat that it seems to court, as if it would make itself an allegory for the historical tragedy of obsessiveness and determinism it describes. To say they suggest an alternative to the book's own logic is emphatically to concede that it *has* a logic, which it pursues with considerable willfulness. As for whether to prefer the consistency or the exception—readers will have to make up their own minds.

As the jacket copy explains: "Sean Howard has written twenty poems inspired by photographs he discovered in a tattered copy of *Collier's Photographic History of the European War* (1916)." These, however, make up a small fraction of the book's more than 350 handsomely mounted pages. Instead, each poem comes at the end of what is essentially a chapter, beginning with one of Collier's photographs, followed by passages in prose. First comes a paragraph in italics (perhaps simulating notebook cursive) responding directly to the image, then a more open-ended set of reflections, typically incorporating quotations and Howard's commentary on this research. The conceit is partly that of the darkroom, as each photograph "slowly develops" into a poem, but Howard also tells us it is "akin to, and inspired by, the associative amplification of dream imagery and symbolism." The process, we

understand, is to reveal something latent in both the image and our collective psyche.

There is some tension between these two guiding conceptions. The associative technique is somewhat like collage, as disparate snippets are brought together to compose new images. In another respect, however, the darkroom analogy is more exact. Though variable doses of chemicals introduce an element of contingency, what they reveal is something already having occurred: the mixture of choice and chance in the light inscribed on the negative. The contingency is limited, in other words, by something predetermined. You could say, in a similar way, that the problem with Howard's book is not that it is too associative, but not associative enough. What the photographs prompt are reflections about "history and memory." The theorists dutifully wheeled on stage—Benjamin, Foucault—tend to be those ready to hand for anyone who has spent time in a social science or humanities department of the last three decades. The choice of poets and other writers for mining—David Jones, Wilfred Owen, the once recherché but now disquietingly resurgent Ernst Jünger—is barely less predictable. The cumulative effect is of a punishingly repetitive determinism. By the time we get to the poems—when we are hoping for a breath of air—we find they have little to say but the same thing once over, with greater constriction: "History— / *Opera of the* / *Phantom* // Wagner—Hitler, / *conducting the* / *dead* // Faustian fusion— / *humanic, plan-* / kind." And again, "Hiroshima— / Somme / *Encore!* // Shell-hole— / begging / bowl // Nazi xylophone— / *Goethe's* / *bones …* // *Daily Basis*—the / prosaic fucking / us all." Or, as the last sequence sums things up, a few stanzas later: "Total War— / *Fuck* / *All.*"

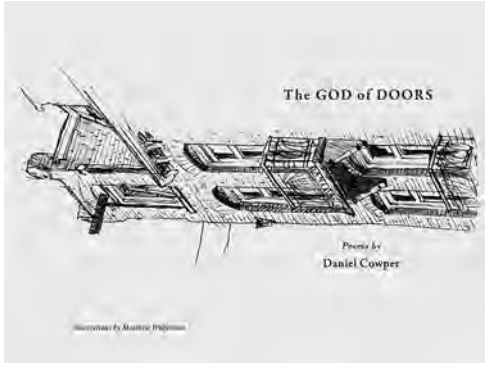
This poetry can be cited more or less at random, since it confines itself to the narrowest range. Its technique consists mainly of puns. These can feel either well or poorly motivated, but all tend relentlessly toward one end: the exposure of war as a dense nexus of violent psychosexual compulsion. Though this is served up as condemnation, the ascetic style will hardly elicit excitement from anyone not strongly invested in the words it splits and splices, with an obsessiveness the furthest thing from free association. It is hard to shake the impression, throughout, of an essentially prurient spectatorship—mainly because the book depends on it. This culminates in the title image, reproduced on its cover, which purports to depict the death of its own photographer, killed by a shell burst that hurled him in front of the lens at the moment of clicking the shutter. As is usual in such cases, the impression is not mitigated, but rather intensified, by the persistent predictable moralizing, here wearing the thin disguises of solemnity and a certain grim humour.

There remain one or two areas where the book shows promise of something better. The prose paragraphs in italics, the initial descriptions of the images, are consistently the most interesting passages in the book, and you are always disappointed the further Howard gets from them. Even in the passages that follow, however, Howard's writing can still surprise when he hews closely to acts of looking. His verbal punning is tedious, but his visual puns can be witty or poignant—as when he allegorizes a line of infantry fading into the background as "The photograph depicting, right to left, the dissolution of The Soldier": that is, of his individuality into the mass.

If this represents one form of occluded illumination, an anecdote near the beginning of the book is another. This is when Howard tells us, literally parenthetically, "(My father was a skilled machinist, making military helicopter engines […]. One Sunday (I was ten?) he asked if I'd like to see inside. We walked hand-in-hand, no one else around, over the litter-strewn, dog-shitty grass, the steel wave looming up, cresting.)" Here, one feels, is the story about looking Howard really wants to tell: about a child's desire to inspect the secret male world of machines and weapons, and his discovery that the path there leads through a waste. It is in such moments, or when Howard tells us about "my best friend," a career soldier, "instinctively sacrificial, secretly shunning the realities he tirelessly improves for others; an artist without an art," that we sense the background of personal experience casting a halo around these interests. These moments are vivid, but muted, kept in the background. In context, they make more palpable what one has already sensed: that the book's clichéd associations, far from charting a new course through the unconscious, collective or otherwise, are so many shields set up around its more authentic and vulnerable subject matter.

There is a suggestion of something willful in this book's weaknesses, as if it wished to assume the burden of everything it exhibits as indictable. But do we need this? Even at its most negative, an accomplished poem probably implies, in its imaginative energy, some sheer dogged hopefulness. We can only hope that in Howard's next book he will trust himself more, and his intuitions, and give us the story he seems to really want to tell; perhaps in prose.

—PAUL FRANZ



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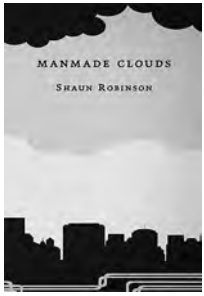

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Notes on Contributors

JENNA LYN ALBERT is a creative writing MA student at the University of New Brunswick, editorial assistant at *The Fiddlehead*, and poetry editor for *Qwerty*.

JOHN WALL BARGER's poems have appeared in *Rattle*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Best Canadian Poetry*. His third book, *The Book of Festus*, was a finalist for the 2016 J. M. Abraham Poetry Award.

SHASHI BHAT edits *Event* and teaches at Douglas College. *The Family Took Shape* (novel) was shortlisted for the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award.

TIM BOWLING's fifth novel, *The Heavy Bear*, appeared in Spring 2017. It deals with Buster Keaton, Delmore Schwartz, and teaching university. He lives in Edmonton.

ADRICK BROCK's fiction has appeared in *The New Quarterly*, *Riddle Fence*, *Event*, *Prism,* and *The Dalhousie Review*. He was a treeplanter for many years on Vancouver Island and in the B.C. interior.

SADIQA DE MEIJER's first book of poetry, *Leaving Howe Island*, was a finalist for the Governor General's Award. She lives in Kingston. "City, Lake" is dedicated to Sayyida Jaffer.

GENA ELLETT's writing has appeared in *Event*, *SubTerrain*, *The Matador Review*, and is forthcoming in *Gulf Coast* and *Slice*.

ROBERT FINLEY gardens in St. John's, where he teaches at Memorial. His books and collaborations include *The Accidental Indies*, *A Ragged Pen*, and *K. L. Reich*.

PAUL FRANZ is a writer from Toronto.

LENEA GRACE's debut poetry collection, *A Generous Latitude*, is forthcoming from ECW in 2018. She is founding editor of *The Mackinac*.

ROBERT HILLES' second novel, *A Gradual Ruin*, was published by Doubleday. A story collection, *A Hint of Salt*, and a book of poetry, *Woven*, are forthcoming.

MARK JACQUEMAIN's work has been featured in Oberon's *Coming Attractions* and nominated for the *Prism International* Fiction Award, the David Nathan Meyerson Award, and a Pushcart Prize.

SONNET L'ABBÉ, a professor at Vancouver Island University, "overwrites" or "colonizes" all 154 of the bard's sonnets in her new book, *Sonnet's Shakespeare.*

KEVIN MCNEILLY teaches English at UBC. His poetry publications include *Embouchure* (Nightwood) and the chapbook/CD *Ammons: A Sheaf of Words for Piano* (2015).

CHRIS OKE's poems have appeared in *Canadian Literature*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *Grain,* and other journals. He is a founding editor of *Errant*, a literary travel-writing magazine.

SUSAN OLDING, author of *Pathologies: A Life in Essays*, has won a National Magazine Award and published in *Maisonneuve*, *Utne Reader*, *Best Canadian Essays*, and *In Fine Form*.

MITCHELL PARRY's first poetry collection, *Tacoma Narrows*, was a finalist for the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award; a second, *Imperfect Penance*, appeared in 2008. He teaches film studies at the University of Victoria.

NATHAN PATTON, an MFA candidate at the Michener Center for Writers (Austin, Texas), has published his work on *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Monkeybicycle*, and his mom's refrigerator.

MARILYN GEAR PILLING is the author of five books of poetry, including *A Bee Garden* (Cormorant) and three books of short fiction, the most recent being *On Huron's Shore* (Demeter).

ANZHELINA POLONSKAYA, born in Russia and now living in Germany, has published numerous books of poetry. In 2016, her first book of short stories, *Greenland*, appeared in a German edition.

JOHN REIBETANZ's ninth collection, *Where We Live* (McGill-Queen's), was published in 2016. *The Essential John Reibetanz*, edited by Jeffery Donaldson, is forthcoming from Porcupine's Quill.

MATT ROBINSON's latest collection of poems, *Some nights it's entertainment; some other nights just work*, was published by Gaspereau in 2016. He lives in Halifax.

AUREL SCHMIDT, originally from Kamloops and known for the adept execution and autobiographical frankness of her drawings, constructs a momento mori of our vulnerability and mortality. P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York, will host her next solo exhibition in September.

J. MARK SMITH's most recently published poems can be found in *Vallum* and *Zocalo Square*, and his English versions of poems by the Chilean writer, Winéde Rokha, in *Shearsman* and *The Fortnightly Review*.

MATTHEW K. THIBEAULT studies at the University of Victoria.

DÉLANI VALIN, a writing student at Vancouver Island University, won *subTerrain*'s 2016 Lush Triumphant Literary Award and has published in *Adbusters*, *Soliloquies Anthology*, *Portal*, and *Those Who Make Us* (anthology).

ANDREW WACHTEL, president of the American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, has translated poetry and prose from Russian, Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Slovenian.

PHOEBE WANG's debut collection of poetry, *Admission Requirements*, was published in 2017 by M&S. She works at Seneca College in Toronto.

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