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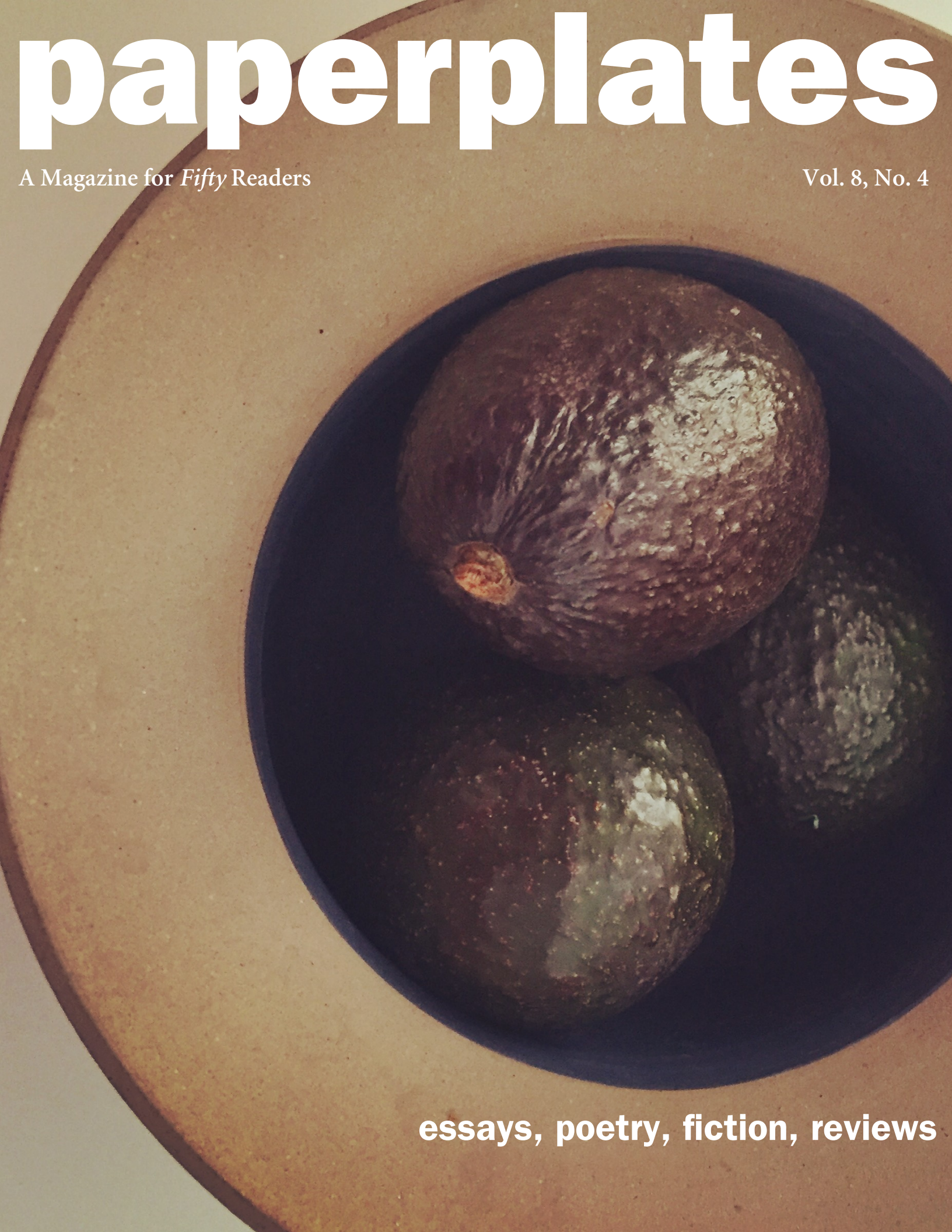

essays, poetry, fiction, reviews

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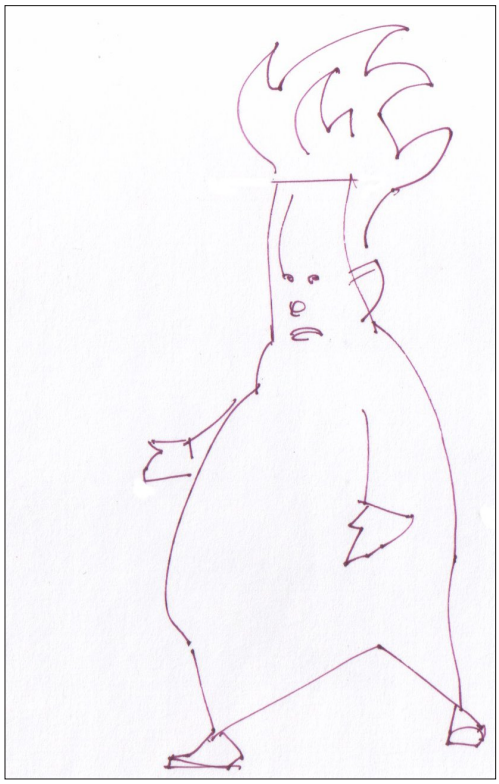

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I'd invite you in, but my hair's on fire.

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Child's work

Then the schoolboy … with his satchel
And shining morning face … to school

— As You Like It

IF SHAKESPEARE'S WORDS MERIT REPEATING, if all the world is "a stage," its "men and women merely players," then I recognized this truth before I had the wits to read a poem. I took it seriously, perhaps to a fault, as I was a serious child, with six older siblings busy making "their exits and their entrances," who had precious little time to spend with me.

Typically, their friends or dates, upon being introduced to me, would don grave expressions, lock their eyes onto mine, and say something like "You're awfully solemn, aren't you?" Or they'd cock their heads and tug their chins, while saying in a halting voice, "Hum, you don't look so much like the rest of your family." Words that proved disheartening and led to my feeling misunderstood, because the reason for my seriousness – aside from the fact that I was shy – was that I wanted to be as much like my siblings as I possibly could, to cast off the lowly role of onlooker and be counted among their troop of players.

I was getting bored hanging out with my mother who, like many women her age, hadn't learned to drive a car; who insisted, each day, that I lie down with her for afternoon naps (although, unlike her, I wasn't tired); and to whom, without a trace of a doubt, I knew I belonged. Day in and day out – even when I was five and could play outside alone or with one of the other children who lived on our street – I sensed it was my job to keep her company backstage in the theatre of life.

This "real life," I deduced, took place somewhere in the goings and comings of people who were at least old enough to go to school. Thus making fantasy play, the act of pretending to be something other than I was, chronically fell short of my expectations – the illusion, all too evident to me. Ordinary make-believe wasn't real enough and, at best, it provided only temporary relief from the existential angst of an often lonely preschool child. Which, I suppose, is why I began applying all the accuracy and precision I could muster to fine-tune my imaginative play, to raise Maria Montessori's "work of the child" to something that approached the level of art.

I might have been inspired one day when I was four or five, on hearing my mother say about my Sally doll, "Maybe we ought to send her to the doll hospital." That such an institution existed and that Sally – a hefty baby with sapphire-blue eyes and ebony hair, whose right eyelid had grown lazy, opening fully only when I shook her hard – might actually undergo surgery there, was a notion that exceeded my quaintest imaginings.

When I asked my mother where this hospital was and how we might "send" Sally there, she replied that all we needed to do was wrap her up in newspaper, place her in a box, and ship her via parcel post. After Sally returned in the same corrugated box we'd packed her in, her eye opening and shutting as it had when she was new, she appeared more real to me than ever before.

Now that Sally seemed like a genuine baby, one who could see me clearly and return my gaze, I began mothering her on clock time. Each morning before dressing her, I'd bathe her in the bathroom sink, then feed and diaper her every few hours; walk her in her coach in the morning and, again, in the afternoon, pausing now and then to straighten the blankets she'd kicked up; tuck her in for a nap after lunch and, at night, sing her a lullaby while rocking her to sleep.

Since my oldest brother was married and had two sons, I'd become familiar with the rites and rituals of caring for babies, having carefully observed my sister-in-law, who waxed angelic as she tended to hers.

Motherhood, as I saw it, was the most illustrious role of a woman's lifetime, the crowning achievement of her existence, and the thing that I romanticized because it would deliver me, I believed, from my position of powerlessness as the youngest member of a family where everyone, other than I, appeared to be doing important things. Mothering my dolls with abandon was a way for me to distinguish myself (in my mother's eyes, especially, and therefore, my own), and it was the closest I could get to a life of meaning and purpose that would approximate theirs. As a mother, I was the most important person in the world to my baby, the most important person in the world to me.

Eventually, Sally took a backseat to the more lifelike dolls gaining in popularity in the late 1950s. "Tiny Tears," a newborn doll who, after being given her water from her bottle, shed tears from a hole on either side of her nose. "Betsy Wetsy," a baby doll with wigged hair like Sally's who, after drinking, peed in her diaper. "My favourites": those blond-haired, blue-eyed gems, whose rubber heads, arms, and legs were attached to stuffed muslin torsos and joints, making them soft and floppy and as cuddly as babies. And finally, "Debbie Reynolds," an older doll whose gorgeous mane of auburn hair I, a "real hairdresser," decided to coif into a bob, after finding her under the tree one Christmas morning, before anyone, including my mother, had come downstairs.

My mother's reticent nature and hands-off parenting style, complicated by the fact that she was often preoccupied, lent themselves to the whole-hearted quality of my theatrical play. Also, I envied her interactions with my grown-up siblings, their friends, spouses, or significant others, who, it seemed to me, engaged her in an animated way more frequently and more effectively than I'd ever done. Thus, when I was alone with her, which was most of the time, I took advantage of the opportunity to woo her as I'd seen them do, to recruit her as a playmate which, at some level, I must have longed for her to be, and perhaps, above all, to cheer her up, when I guessed that she was lonely, too.

One way I did this was to pretend that I, a mother like her, had stopped by for tea. While she was puttering in the kitchen, I'd announce myself in a grown-up voice – "Oh, hi, Mrs. Finn, how are you doing?" – holding a doll in my arm and knocking on the kitchen doorframe. In response, she'd smile and say something like "Well, hello there; do come on in and have a seat." Then she'd brew us each a cup of tea, adding an extra dollop of sugar and milk to mine, whereupon we'd sip and chat, mostly about how my baby was doing.

In the summer, each afternoon at the shore where we owned a cottage, I'd accompany my mother to the beach, my beloved and tattered "beach-a-bag" dragging from one arm, my doll and her diaper bag in the other. Once we'd smoothed our blanket out onto the sand, I'd carry my doll on my hip to the water's edge and, clutching each of her hands in mine, dip her toes into the surf, then swing her to and fro, laughing and cooing with her as the water splashed against her legs. After drying her off and changing her clothes, I'd lay her down on the blanket and cover her with a towel, my mother "babysitting" while I collected seashells, built a sand castle, or frolicked in the waves myself.

AS I APPROACHED THE AGE WHEN SOME children might have gone to kindergarten – no one in our family had ever attended – playing school began to take precedence over playing house; school in the sense of my being the student, as I hadn't yet had a teacher to imitate. I hadn't been a student yet, either, but had seen enough school-age children, assembled around our dining room table, doing their homework while my mother supervised, to get the gist of the world of school. And there was something about the woody scent of pencil shavings,

notebooks, rulers, and texts, laced with the sweet rubber smell of eraser and the pungent odour of Sheaffer's ink that beckoned to me, just as those of plastic, rubber, Ivory soap, and baby powder had been part of the allure of playing with dolls. Furthermore, often enough I'd watched my mother balancing the chequebook and paying bills, sitting at the mahogany secretary in that same dining room, to realize that the key to entering the theatre of adults was the readiness to read and write.

Therefore, every weekday morning after my father left for work and my siblings headed off to school, I'd fill one of my brother's discarded army satchels with the used composition books and texts my mother had rounded up for me, don a coat or sweater if the weather so dictated, exit the front door and idle on the porch for a while, or saunter out to the sidewalk as if I, too, were walking to school. Then, as if entering the classroom, I'd come back in and take off my coat and hang it up before proceeding to the secretary, where I'd unpack my books and set to work, "reading" my lessons and scribbling notes.

Those mornings, I found solace in the sudden peace and quiet that fell over our house, punctuated by the dance-like steps of my mother's feet as she made beds, raised window sashes and shook out rugs, laundered clothes, or ran the vacuum, her mind swooping over fields where the green was leeching out of her dreams. I revelled in the fluty sound of her voice as she talked on the phone or greeted some salesperson that rang the doorbell. The Avon Lady, who'd leave pint-size samples of perfume and lipstick that my mother always shared with me. The Fuller Brush Man, hawking all manner of brushes and cleaning supplies and, to appeal to the lady of the house, a line of fetching and affordable health and beauty products. Or Mac, our insurance agent, a burly man with a winsome smile – mysterious and dashing in his khaki trench coat – who, by stooping down and teasing me playfully, managed to coax me from hiding behind my mother's apron strings, which made me fond of him, despite the fact that he was yet another grown-up able to mine the ore of her sociability.

Still, I suspected my mother valued my companionship and the added bonus that I, the last-born of her seven children, not unlike a moulded doll, had come with a built-in knack for self-amusement. She did call me "dollface," and, while I don't remember it, I've heard tell she enjoyed foraying into the neighbourhood with me, seeming to delight in my being not only a girl but a girly one at that, who chattered amiably with people she knew, skipped and twirled like a windup toy, and was enamoured of dressing up and playing with dolls.

My sister, nine years older than me (born after four sons), succumbed early on to my brothers' tormenting her for wearing dresses. Although she'd won first place in a baby parade, her photo featured in the local newspapers, she'd grown into a tomboy, to my mother's dismay. This wasn't long after, one day, in a fit of wrath over not being able to remove the dress from one of her dolls, she hurled the poor thing down the steps, breaking its head and prompting my mother to collapse into tears.

I don't remember my mother initiating any kind of play with me, other than on summer evenings at our shore house when, along with a few of my siblings or cousins, we gathered round the card table for a game of *Old Maid, Scrabble, Chutes and Ladders,* or *Candy Land.* As for the rest of the year, I'm not sure how many mothers in the post-war era, many of whom had birthed large families, had the time or inclination to play with their children. What I do remember is that in my mother's warm and abiding presence, I learned to be both resourceful and creative. That, by and large, it was incumbent upon me to organize my day, so much so that I took for granted, until I had enough neighbourhood playmates and friends from school with whom I

could compare myself, the sense of freedom that – as a child unaccustomed to structure, prone to blurring the boundary between reality and fantasy – this self-directed lifestyle gave me.

ONCE I MADE THAT FIRST BIG EXIT, ENTERING Shakespeare's "second stage of man" to become a school child, I clung to my fastidious ways, still playing with baby dolls until I graduated to Barbie, devoting my creative energy to cobbling together outfits and furniture from fabric remnants, shoe boxes, and other odds and ends either donated by my mother or that I'd scavenged from around the house. I continued to play school, this time in the role of teacher, lining up my dolls and stuffed animals on my bed, drilling them in arithmetic and grammar, giving tests with questions I'd meticulously lettered in ink and answers that, afterward, I penciled in. When test time was up, I collected their papers and graded them – perfect scores getting stars on top – before, one by one, I handed them back, offering each student tips on how to improve.

As I got older, I began to channel my zeal into things like reading aloud seamlessly, nailing cartwheels, Chinese jump rope, and *Double Dutch*, riding my two-wheel bike with no hands, ice-skating backward and, on the stage of our back porch, dancing and singing songs I'd learned from listening to the radio or watching TV. I was elated that, with a modicum of practice, I could accomplish such feats without missing a beat.

Possibly my mother would have been wise to sign me up for music, dance, or swimming lessons, as I was aching for know-how, and the desire to be seen and heard, of having an audience, even an imaginary one, for whom I could perform and in whose eyes I might shine, motivated me to push myself. Perhaps I would have progressed sooner from the above-average student I initially was to the outstanding one I eventually became, from the Jill-of-all-trades I spent half my life being to practitioner of a viable skill.

Yet I wonder if I'd have had the discipline to stick with the training, if the freedom to do as I liked, or what Shakespeare would have called "too much of a good thing," that I'd basked in for so long, had been denied me. If I could have withstood the pressure, even the self-consciousness I might have felt when expected to acquire an ability at the hands of another – a type of intimacy I hadn't experienced – regardless of how dedicated and tolerant that person might be, knowing that he or she possessed the power to judge me. If, when I made mistakes and, at times, failed to live up to an expert's idea of what, precisely, was precise; of what, exactly, was exact, I would have folded beneath the weight of such expectations. If I would have been ashamed that I wasn't learning fast enough or that I might never be good enough, if the image of what I believed I was might have collided with what I actually was.

Perhaps the pains I invested in mastering certain versions of what we call play, as well as work, derived from a compulsion to master a different sort of pain, sending smoke signals to the grown-ups in my world, particularly my mother, hoping to communicate that my needs to be noticed, affirmed, guided, and understood weren't being sufficiently met. That I was trying to learn – to come to terms with the world, its physical, social, and emotional reality, as well as with who I was and what, someday, I might become – more or less in isolation, causing me to feel that I wasn't worth being taken seriously, that I was inadequate or, possibly, even that I wasn't real.

On the other hand, maybe my mother's fatigue over having raised so many children, her *laissez-faire* parenting style, insouciant manner, and low-level bouts of midlife depression weren't as damaging to my development as I tend to think. She was patient and gentle and I knew she loved me. An experienced mother, perhaps she'd given up trying to direct me, gauging that leaving well enough alone was the better

tack to take with a child whose developing autonomy and sense of self seemed to require an ample berth. I might prefer to blame her – as mothers are so easy to blame – rather than consider the possibility that my unusually sensitive, intense, and persnickety temperament – I'd dissolve into a puddle of rage on detecting the slightest lump in my sock – brought its own unique challenges to our relationship, and that few children, if any, receive the measure of emotional supplies that they need. Or the truth might be that I've always been weird.

I'LL NEVER KNOW ALL OF THE ANSWERS. MY mother's been dead for nearly fifty years, so whatever thoughts she'd have on the subject are missing from my mental dialogue. Nevertheless, if by some sleight of hand she could make an entrance one more time, show up at my door for afternoon tea, on seeing, in the corner of the living room, the baby grand piano I've never learned to play, smelling the soup simmering on the stove, conjured from the tidbits I've scrounged up from the cupboards and fridge, noting the portraits on the wall – a few of which I painted myself – composites of us both and looking like dolls, she'd recognize me, no doubt, as the daughter she once knew.

She wouldn't be surprised to find me, on the threshold of the "final stage of man," sitting here at my desk, popular music, mostly that of female vocalists, wafting from my high-tech sound system, surrounded by my books, journals, pencils, and pens, scrawling notes and playing with words, using what I have on hand to live a life of purpose and meaning. And though I sometimes try to deny it – still a bit miffed that she died before I, at thirteen, had the chance to know her – she's here with me in spirit, because she is my muse, which makes writing my stories, for the most part, far from what's often described as a lonesome task.

As I type away, the house is silent and still, save for the patter of her feet as she goes about the housework. The sounds of her now-unspoken words, lithe and melodious, like butterflies flitting about in my head, I try to snare with my imaginary net. Sometimes I hear the front door open and close, because she's stepped out to fetch the mail or a package the UPS driver has tossed onto the porch. Or she's brought the laundry in, fresh from the clothesline, quietly folding it, her mind veering along a trajectory I still can't follow. Other times, she's simply taking a nap.

All of which makes it hard to bring my story to a close, because whenever I do so a curtain drops and she vanishes, leaving the house cold and empty, and me, rattling around in it like the phantom of myself I became after she died, trying to come to terms with the world again on my own, always, in some way, trying to find her. What I'm now more able and willing to see is that her exit is a good one, in that it allows me the space, despite how desolate it sometimes feels, to mourn her more fully, remember her more clearly – in all her motherly virtues and failings – and better take up the task of becoming a mother to myself.

Besides, I know that the theatre of my creativity will eventually reopen, that she'll return, as she always does (although, in truth, she's never left me), just as my Sally doll did after her visit to the doll hospital, each time we're together becoming less of a ghost and, as a Freudian might say, more of an ancestor, more real to me than ever before.

— Patricia Heim

Pale pink

FROM MY CHILDHOOD BEDROOM WINDOW IN a garden suburb of Ottawa, I looked out onto a small knoll, on top of which rested the Lindenlea Community Centre. In the early 1960s it housed a ballet school. There, I spent happy childhood hours, and learned a couple of life's lessons.

I was four years old when my mother asked at breakfast, "Would you like to take ballet lessons with Hilary?"

"Yes," I said between spoonfuls of *Special K*.

Of course, I had no way of knowing what this entailed, and in those days parents didn't always take the time to explain. No matter – if my best friend Hilary was doing it, I was in. Hilary's father was the military attaché to the British High Commission in Ottawa. They lived in the largest house in our neighbourhood. She had a cream complexion and short black hair and wore sensible leather shoes with patterns of small, drilled holes of varying size. She said you could only buy them in England. We did everything together.

Our one disagreement was when she insisted my family could not drive from Ottawa to London, England. At four, I found this impossible to believe. My family drove everywhere. "If you try to drive to England," she said, "you'll drown." I ran home in tears, but somehow it got patched up.

The week before ballet classes began, my mother put on her 1950s Dior-like grey suit and short white gloves. We took the No. 1 Maple Lane bus downtown to purchase ballet togs at a narrow store on Rideau Street.

An elderly man with an accent placed my foot on the metal measurer; then he produced the correct slipper from piles of white boxes. Next, he found my tights. "Here, little lady." He handed me a slim carton. "Look after this for your mother." That pale pink – a colour seldom replicated in nature – peeked at me from the box's small plastic window. I couldn't wait to get home to try them on.

In my bedroom, I drew them from the box and pulled the stretchy fabric up over both my legs and my tummy and then regarded myself in the full-length mirror on the bedroom door: perfect. As thrilling as the idea of attending ballet was, it was not nearly as thrilling as this first pair of virgin ballet tights. I was allowed one pair of tights per session – a session being two ballet classes a week for three to four months. They had to last. By the end of term they had nasty toe holes, runs, and stains, but there was always the new pair to look forward to.

TWICE A WEEK, I WAITED FOR HILARY TO RING the doorbell. We were allowed to walk to ballet class by ourselves as long as my mother watched from the living-room window. We held our pink slippers by their sewn-in elastic bands and ran up the pedestrian walkway to the ballet school – our arms extended behind us like dove wings.

At that early age it was hard to decide what was more exciting – the actual ballet class or watching the older students prepare their hair in the dressing room. Regarding themselves in the mirror, the girls would twist long manes into buns and secure them with bobby pins kept at the ready between tight lips. The final head garnish was usually a stretchy pink hairband. The scene must have looked like a Degas painting.

I had the great misfortune, when young, to have my hair cut on the third floor of Freimans department store's beauty salon on Rideau Street. While my mother sat under the hair-dryer waiting for her perm to set, Mr Tim, her hairdresser, would give me a pixie cut. In summer, Mr Tim would say, "So cool and refreshing for the summer." In winter he'd say, "So chic", but really I got pixie cuts because my mother was tired of combing tangles out of my thin, brown hair. Hilary and I were the only girls in our ballet class with pixie cuts, and we had long discussions about the virtues of short hair. I think it made us feel better.

THE BALLET SCHOOL WAS THE BRAINCHILD OF Ottawa socialite Mrs K – as she was described in the dailies. There are people who are set apart by their carriage, appearance, and influence. She was one of them. If anyone mentioned her name in my mother's presence, she would say in hushed tones, "Oh, Mrs K. Yes, she is someone."

Whenever Mrs K visited there was a flurry of excitement among the teachers and mothers. She wore pastel suits with boxy jackets, and her hair was set in a perfect swept-back shoulder length *do*. She was also one of the thinnest women I had ever seen, and so unlike the other motherly mothers who fluttered around their children after ballet class. Her persuasive charms helped to finance the school and recruit staff.

Our first ballet teacher was David Maroni. He was tall – or maybe he seemed tall as we were all so short – and strode about like a prince. We had no way of knowing what his future influence would be in the greater ballet world. We simply loved him.

One day at the barre, a little girl peed her leotard. We were mortified, but he was so kind. He sent her to the change room without any mean words, cleaned up the floor, and then returned to teaching as if nothing had happened.

Once he used me to demonstrate a point. "Look, girls, see how well she does fifth position – it's perfect." He pointed to the angle of my back foot. That was the highlight of my ballet career. Actually, no, that's not quite true: I was also not bad at the shaping of the arm.

Mr. Maroni taught us the five ballet positions, the *pas de chat, petits jetés,* and my favourite, the *plié*, as it did not involve jumping. I was never fond of jumping. That happy year, Hilary and I learned how to be flower buds emerging from the warm, spring soil, how to hop like bunnies and creep like cats – all useful skills.

Our pianist was an older, heavy woman with sensible shoes who also played piano for the Brownies. She performed *bourrées, adagios*, or *gavottes*, always taking direction from the teacher. This was my introduction to classical music, as my parents rarely played classical recordings at home. Even before I knew I could hold a tune, I discovered I could *pas de chat* in time to a *bourrée*

The only problem with ballet was when you needed to use the bathroom. (Remember that unfortunate incident.) This required us to pull down our leotard, and then our tights, meaning that we were sitting on the toilet completely naked other than for our feet and ankles. When the Centre's utilitarian bathroom was chilly, its usual state in winter, this could be pretty miserable. Hilary and I agreed it was much better to go before class.

Sadly, at age six, Hilary returned to England. There were few girls in our neighbourhood, so it was a lonely period. Shortly after Hilary's departure, David Maroni left for Winnipeg – another sadness – to become one of the principal dancers of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet.

My second ballet teacher was Miss Mitsy – I'm not sure whether this was her first or last name. She was slim, not skinny, had dark hair, and always walked with her feet turned out, as many ballet dancers do. She also wore a ribbon around her waist and a short flared skirt. She built upon the foundations laid by David Maroni, and she had a thing for posture and alignment.

"Miss Alison, remember to tuck in your tummy."

"Yes, Miss Mitsy."

So I would try hard to pull in my tummy, but it was not good. Though it didn't feel comfortable, I still enjoyed *pas de chat*-ing around.

There was a rhythm to each ballet year – weekly rote exercises in the first term were followed by second-term preparation for the ballet recital held in May at a large high-school auditorium. Letters were sent home to mothers with strict instructions on how to sew the costumes. Students sold tickets. We

younger ones prepared hard for the recitals, and at the dress rehearsals we practised our routines, then sat cross-legged as the older girls taped their toes before tying on pointe shoes. It looked painful.

On recital day, we arrived two hours early to have our make-up done and then sat quietly in small groups playing cards while waiting to be called. It must have been a sight to see a rosebud point at another rosebud and say, "You cheated." In my short ballet career I remember being a rose, a sunflower, a bunny rabbit with white ears and tail, and finally a ballerina.

One May when I was nine, a youngster showed up at the last minute to learn a recital routine. She never came to class but obviously craved the glamour of the stage. Her name was Hope – who literally had no hope of getting it right. If the *corps de ballet* of six-year-old rosebuds *pas de chat*-ed right, she *pas de chat*-ed left. Those watching from the wings gasped silently. Fathers who normally sat quietly at the back of the auditorium listening to sports games on transistor radios, or reading newspapers, roared with laughter.

Later, back stage, teary rosebuds conspired to do serious damage to Hope. I wondered why she was allowed to dance.

"She's Mrs K's niece," my mother said.

IN MY LAST YEAR AT BALLET SCHOOL, SOMETHING extraordinary happened. "Girls." Miss Mitsy placed her hands in prayer pose in front of her chest and then waited for absolute silence. She said softly, "The National Ballet School is coming to see you all in three months. They are looking for new ballerinas. This is a great honour, and I know you will do your absolute best." The older girls between eleven and thirteen squealed appropriately – they jumped up and down and hugged each other. You would have thought the Beatles were coming to town.

That term, it was about the auditions. We were divided into groups of six by age and learned a routine that would show off our form and ability. Miss Mitsy was excited about our group, as we had good musical timing, but anatomically we were a motley crew. I was skeletal-looking, having just recovered from viral pneumonia. There was a tall, thin girl with buck teeth – you never see buck teeth any more – who always looked like she was smiling, and one plump, blonde girl. I don't remember the others. Miss Mitsy formed two lines of three. She would arrange and rearrange us like chess pieces, then nod to the pianist for the music to begin, surveying our group from various angles as we performed the routine. I had the impression she was never quite satisfied.

At last, the National Ballet School arrived. Our group showed up a half hour early. We pinned numbers to our leotards and waited in the dressing room until called. There was a panel of three – two women and one man. Our sextet danced away. It was over in fifteen minutes and seemed to go well. The adjudicators scribbled notes. The next group entered. We were changing out of our leotards when a girl named Tulia, the daughter of the ambassador from a distant island, came rushing into the dressing room.

"You're late," Miss Mitsy said to Tulia. "The group has already gone in. You've let them down."

Tulia was devastated, but no amount of crying by this headstrong girl would stir Miss Mitsy into giving her a chance.

Tulia kept saying, "It's not fair."

I felt bad for her, but like Maria in the *Sound of Music* she was always late for everything. At that moment I learned that if you want something, it can't hurt to show up a bit early, or at the very least, on time.

Of course, even before the visit of the National Ballet, I knew that any long-term ballet career was doomed. While on summer vacation in Saskatchewan, I *jetéd* around my grandmother's yew bushes. When I entered her cottage-like house she asked, "What in heaven's name were you doing, child?"

"*Swan Lake*, Grannie."

I completed a last twirl in her living room, almost knocking over a lamp.

"Well, it's a good thing you stopped before the neighbours saw you."

As well, my mother spoke of the older sister of a boy in my class who had "the look." I had seen her dance. Her arms actually transformed into wings, and she enjoyed jumping as if there were springs on the bottom of her pointes. For the National Ballet School, the "look" probably meant a dramatic visage, long, slim legs and torso, perfect foot extensions, and, of course, musicality. The unfortunate Tulia had some of these qualities.

In the end, after all the practising and testing, my mother was correct – the National Ballet School wanted my friend's sister. She was thirteen, had long black hair, a dramatic face, musicality, and perfect form. Her parents could not afford the entire tuition, so a fundraising effort was launched. We sold tickets to a screening of the film *The Red Shoes*. The entire ballet community turned out. Mrs K wore a sleek black dress and gave a speech. The lights lowered, and the film began. I remember the line delivered by one of the characters: "Life is so unimportant." It didn't ring true for me, but no matter, enough money was raised, and the fortunate girl was sent to Toronto.

In grade four I dropped ballet halfway through the year. I had outgrown its charms, and the lure of pointe shoes, which drew some, did not draw me. During one of my last classes, a friend, a boy from school, set a small ladder against the outside wall of the ballet school. He peeked in and made faces at me. I laughed out loud, and he got into trouble. After that, I decided it might be more fun to hang out, but I never lost my love for those pale pink tights.

— Alison Colvin

Naked pink ladies

THREE HELICOPTERS WERE CIRCLING OVERHEAD this morning, so close their search seemed almost centred on our house, though I know now the true centre was never here, but one-eighth mile south. I'd wanted to pick the naked pink ladies that grow by surprise on the side of our house. We never planted them and only stack old firewood there, firewood that seems to sit forever, never quite ready (yet) to be burned. We haven't used the fireplace since we retiled it in pale cerulean blue and muted sage green, with five extra earth-tone tiles, each a distinct colour, for flavour, eight years ago when my mother died, and we rushed to complete a long-before-begun renovation, wanting, just then, our home to be reasonably presentable for her memorial reception.

The tile guys followed the crayon drawing I made of the layout for a design that Michael and I created the night before, using the overabundance of assorted tiles we'd acquired over the years since the renovation first began, long before my mother died. They photographed the finished fireplace for their show book (and asked if they could keep my crayon drawing, too). The fireplace has now been finished for as long as my mother has been dead, but we have not used it since before she died, because we have not yet purchased a new fire gate to replace the decrepit one we threw away when the tiling began. All the wood we saved from the trees we cut down – Ficus, ash, eucalyptus – now just stacks there beside the house where the surprise naked ladies bloom from time to time.

This morning when I was picking up dog poop, scooping it into the plastic bag the newspaper arrives in (which is good repurposing), I noticed the pink naked lady blossoms peeking out from beside the house. I should pick them, I thought, and bring them inside and put them in a vase. I took out plant shears, but then got frightened by how close the three helicopters were circling, circling, circling. Were they circling because I'd watered past my time allotment the day before? Or because I watered on the wrong day? Or, perhaps there was a dangerous person running through the neighbourhood, someone with a gun, someone hiding, or skipping over fences and walls to make a getaway, so close it might not be safe to be outside. Ah, Van Nuys, my home!

So, cutting naked ladies just then? No! Not then. Not a good idea. Maybe later. Better to go inside. Maybe the dogs shouldn't be outside, either. What if the men (or the women: they might be circling trying to find dangerous women), marauders of one sex or the other on the run, were jumping over walls and fences, trying to be incognito, packing pistols, and what if the dogs caught sight of them and barked? Would they (the bad guys) (or gals) turn tail, or would they shoot to stop the barking? I put the shears down, called the dogs in, locked the front and back doors, secured the doggy door, too, and texted Michael. He said to let the dogs out so they could guard the house. But I did not. I wanted them safe inside with me.

I searched "Van Nuys" on Twitter and found: *Home invasion, carjacking, Bevis and Hartland* (a two-minute walk away), *grey Sonata stolen, found crashed into nearby tree, gun thrown from car, suspects on the run, sheriff's search* – a perimeter detailed included all the streets bordering my little neighbourhood. Inside my locked-down house I fed the dogs, ate figs that I'd picked the day before (with heavy cream), tried on the new thrift-store purchases I bought, inspired by a combination of *Project Runway* and *Altered* magazine's repurposing contest, challenging readers to purchase twenty dollars' worth of thrift-store items and alter them to create a new and original fashion design, and began to write about my morning, spicing the story with found words and phrase fragments borrowed from poems and prose I'd been reading.

I was sitting at the dining room table, my workplace, this piece well near finished, when I realized, just as silence dawned, that I had not yet used even one of the random words or lines I'd collected and laid out in front of me on the table. But now the helicopters were gone, the neighbourhood returned to quiet, and I was safe to go out beside the house, with dogs, to where the old firewood is stacked and naked pink ladies bloom. So I left the not quite finished piece on the table, got the shears, ventured forth, cut the blossoms, brought them inside, put them in a tall lavender vase, set them beside my work, and sat back down in quietude to choose just one of the collected lines to end the tale of surprise naked pink ladies amidst chaos, and grabbed: "Everything good is simple."

And, in the end, isn't it?

In thick (or thin) of the ever-rolling ruckus of a life, goodness, often right there waiting to be found in the simplicity that hides at every turn, peeks out now and again, by surprise, and reminds us of its perpetual presence.

— Marilee Robin Burton

Do you know our names?

GRANDPA JOE KNEW A LOT OF THINGS. Invited to the school for grandparent reading day, the retired civil engineer had been asking the grade one students rapid-fire addition and subtraction questions all morning. The four students in the group had been able to answer nearly every question he had devised. Observing them, I wondered how he looked in their eyes. Did they see him as the knower of all things, a stranger as omniscient as he was ancient? Was this how they saw me, a twenty-five-year-old practicum student?

"Do you know our names?" repeated the five-year-old girl.

Grandpa Joe was clearly stumped.

A smile washed over the precocious young girl's face. From observing her I had learned not only that she possessed a sharp wit and eloquence uncommon for her age but also that she was already a blossoming cartoonist and could speak Mandarin. It dawned on me that there were probably many things this five-year-old girl knew that neither Grandpa Joe nor I would ever learn.

"If you don't know our names," she said, "it's like you don't know us."

HAVING FINISHED MY MSC IN NEUROSCIENCE, I now found myself in a drastically different environment at the University of Calgary's Faculty of Education. A life is what I wanted: something secure that I could spend thirty or forty years at without getting too bored, a response to dinner-party questions about what it was I did for a living. However, what drew me most towards education was becoming increasingly apparent: there was something very special about teaching. It seemed somehow different and more important than nearly everything else we humans do, and in it was the same great mystery

that had originally attracted me to research the brain. This was only the first of four field experiences, and so the point ostensibly was to wet our toes before having us dive into teaching.

Lately, I had been trying to see the school through the eyes of a young child. I wondered if the sight of the 1912 *beaux-arts* building evoked comparisons to Rowling's *Hogwarts*, Salinger's *Pencey Prep*, or Sachar's *Wayside*. I wondered whether ascending the blackened sandstone steps reminded students of all the young Calgarians whose footsteps had first dirtied the hallway floors. I tried to fathom the innumerable adventures that had been sought on the playground and in the schoolyard over the years, each snowfall and *chinook* presenting new mysteries to be solved. However, the more I tried to supplant the thoughts of a child with my own, the more I realized that I was learning only about myself. Observation was more personal than I had anticipated.

I wanted to know what schools, teachers, and students were, and it was important that I strive to define these things without the crutch of teleological arguments or pre-constructed assumptions. However, in defining these three concepts, I quickly ran into a problem: diversity. No two schools were alike, just as no two people were alike, and sometimes it was difficult to tell teacher from student.

I had intended to come away with an idea about the generic Canadian school, the everyman's school, a universal school devoid of definite marks of individuality. This proved difficult, because both schools I visited were distinctly unalike. The first was a faith-based secondary school of 1,700 students. The decorations from its fiftieth anniversary celebration still in the process of being taken down, the school stood in a suburban residential neighbourhood of roughly the same age.

"GIRLS, TA, LET'S GO," THE VICE-PRINCIPAL commanded from across the room to three young women peering into the cafeteria before school, instructing them to head to their teacher advisory (homeroom) before morning announcements and prayer. Defiant, the girls peered further until the vice made like he was going to approach them and said, "TA's that way. Let's go!"

Ordinarily, the cafeteria was locked during this time, but for the next two weeks, student teachers like me would be visiting the school, and already we were disrupting the regular routine. In scientific terms, we were demonstrating the *observer effect*. I also noticed that the school looked different, depending on when and from what angle I observed it. A walk from one end of the school to the other exposed the ethnographer to a wide variety of climatic conditions and sensory stimuli. The atmosphere varied from the hairspray-saturated salon air of the cosmetology room, to the choking odour of burnt pipette in the chemistry lab, to the pine aroma of sawdust freshly buzzed from a table saw in the woodworking shop. The warmest places in the building were where the students gathered, and the smelliest places were where they exercised.

The school was also adorned with many signs. One sign overtly warned against drinking and driving (produced by a student-led campaign called *Students Against Drunk Driving*), while another sign displayed Galileo's famous dictum: "Math is the language with which God has written the Universe." The silhouette of a feminine figure bedecked the door to the cosmetology room. The most prominent wall spaces were reserved to honour athletic triumphs and high-achieving alumni (a new exhibit, installed prior to the fiftieth anniversary party, which many alumni attended and at which fundraising was a major focus). In every room, an icon of the dominant religion and the school prayer could be found. We were reminded of the values of the school and the prescribed morality of the dominant faith at every turn.

Every eighty minutes, students erupted into the hallways, squeezing through the narrow stairways and past the pastel-coloured lockers. The madness of the move ended as abruptly as it had started, and the vacant hallways again became no more than a scenic route for students excused to use the washroom, who feigned ignorance of my surveilling glances. At lunch, the way that students occupied the hallways reminded me of Delillo's description:

> They sit [...] in various kinds of ungainly posture, clearly calculated to be the identifying signs of some kinship group or secret organization. They are fetal, splayed, knock-kneed, arched, square-knotted, sometimes almost upside down.

The students were as much a part of my visual, auditory, and olfactory perception of the school as was the physical structure itself.

The environment evolved all day long, from 7:00 a.m., when the first basketball bounced on the gym floor until late in the evening, when the last sneakers squeaked across the snow-soaked carpets by the main entrance. All this time, teachers were busy coaching, meeting with students, calling parents, marking, planning lessons, and teaching. In some cases, nothing but the continuous flow of testable information seemed to engage students in what the teacher had to say, although it was difficult to imagine what I might have done differently. Students were learning, weren't they?

THE SECOND SCHOOL I VISITED WAS AN INNER-city public elementary school of 315 students. The school was built 100 years ago and is surrounded by a community of gentrified single-family homes, busy crosstown roads, a beautiful park, and midrise apartments and offices. The school was divided into "community" classes (those students who live within the public boundaries of the school) and GATE classes (gifted and talented education, for children with IQs above 130 and whose parents applied for the program). The staff and other student teachers arrived by foot, bike, bus, train, and car. The foremost displays in the main hallway were the "Circle of Courage," showcasing examples of student generosity, mastery, belonging, and independence, and a large painted mural of children engaging in every activity from hockey to archery amongst local landmarks such as the Calgary tower and the Rocky Mountains. Easily noticeable was the broad diversity of colours used to depict the children's skin.

Unlike the high-school students, these students were eager to learn about me and tell me about themselves. As I walked through the hallways before and after school, I was deluged with questions about my favourite colour, my favourite animal, and cheery "Hi Ryan!"s. It was impossible to be a fly on the wall here.

Teaching elementary school seemed to involve more improvisation and leadership in real time, whereas teaching in high school seemed to demand more preparation and organization. Elementary lessons were taught in every moment, and the topic easily transitioned between languages, humanities, math, and ethics. Only questions seemed capable of retarding their infinite kinetic energy, and the most tactful of teachers were masters of directing student behaviour through inquiry. Nearly everything discovered came attached with a lesson in fairness, courtesy, and societal convention. Behaviours were consciously reinforced or extinguished with every teacher action. I took notes avidly.

At times, hours would pass without the teacher "teaching" anything (that is, without the teacher stating anything). At every question posed, a wave of hands would shoot up, many belonging to students without the faintest clue what the answer could be. The lesson to me was clear: students wanted to be heard. They *needed* to be heard. Without a listener, the student's voice had no chance of developing.

Moreover, often their sign was not as direct as a raised hand. In both schools, everywhere I looked I saw signs: in their posture, in the clothes they wore, in their attitudes and behaviours, in their acting up, and in their sitting quietly. There were signs to their teacher, signs to one another, and signs only visible as a by-product of some seemingly unrelated factor. Even the teachers showed signs, some of which I'm sure they did not intend me to see. The truest signs were usually involuntary.

And so, how does one become a reader of signs? How is it possible to read signs from every student? How can one know when to push forward and when to hold back? When no two individuals are alike, and no two environments the same, how can one facilitate the maturation of student voices so that they might more clearly express themselves to their next listener? I still have much to learn, but I think my first step will be to learn their names.

— Ryan William McCarthy

A sacred space

THE YOUNG MAN IN HIS WHITE SHIRT, OPEN collar, walked past the foot of my bed to the empty space near the window. He sat on the chair in the corner, focused on his cell phone. He was in his late twenties or early thirties, attractive in his dark-rimmed glasses. This was day three after my surgery, third room, and anticipated fourth roommate. My husband objected to the first placement. A pizza party was in progress, including a number of visitors surrounding the woman in the bed assigned near the window. Hence they reassigned me next to a middle-aged woman who had recently been released from intensive care.

She chatted the entire night, turned on lights, and watched TV, albeit after having asked if it was okay. A morphine-induced agreeableness let her conversation about nurses wash over me as she identified which nurse was accommodating and which was not. She'd been hospitalized since before Christmas. This was January 8. She warned: "Stay on top of the morphine drip." Following her advice, I pressed the morphine drip so frequently that the room began to spin but not enough to erase her verbal irritation with the nurse who refused to give her pain medication before it was due.

Time swirled, as did the revolving door that gave entrance to this place, where snippets of lives are captured as in compartments in the door, except in the rooms we see little yet hear all. The roommate was urging me to have my pain prescription filled before leaving the hospital to prevent it from running out on the weekend. She confided that she keeps a bottle hidden in her closet at home for those times when she might need it. Her medical story held sway through a press-the-drip fog, and as light seeped through the window shades, she revealed that she had had bariatric surgery, two knee replacements,

two shoulder replacements, and a mastectomy, and was suffering from a third bout of MRSA. Sharing a room with this person became a burden greater than the incision across my abdomen. Our bellies are so vulnerable. They are not protected as the brain is by the skull, as heart and lungs are by the ribcage. The urge to build a protective covering over my abdomen intensified. The fright of spending another night with this woman, a walking surgical nightmare, stiffened my joints, and the thought of sharing this room with microbes that breed in hospitals pushed all my limits.

THAT MORNING A KIND AND UNDERSTANDING nurse pulled the curtain between our beds and wheeled me into the third room, where the young man came through the following day. In the bed by the window, a young woman was waiting to be discharged. The thoughtful nurse was attempting as a favour to find me a space of my own. The curtains between our beds were drawn, but the doctor/patient conversation was not out of reach. These alleged privacy fabrics are as effective as a judge telling the jury to strike a statement from the record. Neither work. The doctor explained that her colon issue required surgery and that she needed to return to the hospital the following week. She was college age and frightened. An urge to say something to her swelled inside me, but eavesdropping did not give me the right. A half an hour later, her mother and another woman came to take her home. The young woman, who had been silent since the doctor left, shouted at her mother:

"Leave me alone."

"See how she speaks to me. I didn't say anything that was hurtful," her mother said to her companion.

The other woman suggested they leave and return later. No sooner had they gone than the young woman started to sob. Her tears carried me into her despair, and with one press of the button, sleep triumphed. She was gone when I awoke.

Privacy, a rare commodity in a hospital, must be relished even in brief moments of rest in between constant visits of nurses, aides, and visitors. This reverie ended quickly when a middle-aged woman was wheeled into the room. The nurse swished the curtain across its noisy track to surround her bed and with it went daylight. Surrounded by a barrage of attendants whose forms were outlined by that veil of privacy, the woman kept vomiting, the sound and smell of which defy disguise. When the attendants left, she remained quiet for the remainder of the night. We didn't share talk about our procedures. She only asked one question when I made arrangements to connect the TV.

"What TV shows do you watch?"

"I'm a PBS fan," I said.

"You mean like 'Downton Abbey'?"

"Yes," I was happy to respond.

The conversation ended there and by the next morning she was discharged, leaving the daylight and the possibility of having a private room. Only a few hours passed when the young man made his way across the room. We exchanged a brief hello as he settled in to await someone. He stood up, rubbed his neck, paced the empty space between us.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I can't believe they did this," he blurted. "How stupid can they be? They put her in the same room and spot where my brother died in August."

"Is she your wife?"

"No, my mother."

Our exchange ended. I wrapped my arms around my abdomen like a snail curling into its shell, and the anticipated joy of returning home in twenty-four hours seemed selfish.

They wheeled her in about 8 p.m. Once more the flimsy curtain was drawn, a sieve to the conversation on the other side. She'd had a procedure and they were waiting for her to urinate so that she could go home. The young man spewed his anger:

"How could they do that? It was the same room where he spent six weeks, eating nothing but one sandwich the whole time," he said between sobs.

His mother was a small woman who excused herself every time she passed my bed to visit the bathroom. In her gentle voice she said to him:

"I don't think of it that way. For me it is a sacred place, a place where he breathed his last breath."

Her healing words hung in the room. They gathered his tears into a palpable silence. Mine wet the pillow.

In the dark of the early morning, the surgeon came to discharge me. There was no need to draw a curtain this time; the absent young man and his mother were unable to hear that my tumour was benign. Two long-awaited hours later, my husband and a hospital volunteer wheeled me through the lobby's revolving door, where the faces coming in harboured many intimate stories destined to land on unintended ears.

— Catherine Parilla

JAMES DE MONTE

Sick at home on the couch

Intermittently I study
That shining window
Open just enough
To allow the muffled sounds of health
And I'm hoping a scent of breeze.

It's shadowy in here, though
Even in bright day
The lights are off –
Melancholy darkness
Lurks in corners
Slinks along the furniture
And mouldings.

The faux-antique clock
There on the mantle
Ticking always
Effortlessly
Slicing gloomy silence
Letting out time in cruel snippets
Little pieces of pain and loneliness
Fluttering in hopeless tedium.

In housecoat and slippers
And fresh pajamas
I sprawl on cushions
Like a dilapidated grandee
Light-headed and sweaty
Goblet of lemon tea nearby
Meandering through broadsheets
Holding court
With fevered thoughts.

Let me float through that shining portal
Out of this cavern of shadow and discomfort
And light, clear-headed and vigorous
On the living grass beyond.

Or more likely, slumber out
In wretched half-sleep
And disjointed dreams
This paltry state –
That pitiless clock
Ever near,
Ever audible.

EUGENIE JULIET THEALL

Pillbox

She watches our neighbors from her perch,
taps her nails, threatens to call the police
if the people in the corner house
water their lawn again. There's a drought,
she seethes: *Their lawn is always green.*

She hoists me up by the neck, scrutinizes
through double bifocals, salivates,
sees herself magnified, spins the lazy Susan
packed with childproof containers, asks:
Where are you going dressed like that?

I roll my eyes, but the lancing becomes
routine; suitors cower. She palms her heart
medication, insists I swallow for my own good,
prides herself on loving me *more*
than the whole wide world, and everybody in it.

Fever pitch

That single black curl reminds me of what we did two nights ago, reminds me of what we didn't say.

There was an imbalance – too much grabbing and sucking, not enough words.

You stumbled through the front door, weary from greasing chains, tightening bolts, rendering change.

I let you sit, slipped off my shorts, not even a hello, slid my tongue from cheek to neck, tasted you.

Your member arced – was what it was: skin, blood, muscle – for me to straddle, a way for me to come home.

The fever pitch swelled. Tell me, did you drive away full? My heart is strong enough to break, again.

S t r a y B i r d s

Wrinkled Codpieces, Butoh and Becoming Bird

Notes from the Aboveground in

London, Paris, Tokyo, Pittsburgh,
Bennington, Middletown,
Easton, Mt. Tremper

Michael Pestel

2000 -16

•

Stray
b i r d s,
Taketeru Kudo
and Michael Pestel,
are unpredictably caged
or uncaged. They are also un
mercifully cunning and perfectly
capable of hamming it up, three wings
to the wind, when the moment is right. Most
of the time, though, they are fluttering aimlessly,
continents apart. When they do meet sometimes, in
their vast, lateral migrations between East & West, there is
little choice but to start at the beginning from the ground up.
Even their title,"Stray Birds," lifted from Rabindranath Tagore's 1916
collection of dreamy aphorisms, must be rethought each time they meet.
Writing now in early Spring, as I wait for my stray counterpart to return after a
too long absence, Tagore's poetic gems illuminate my thoughts in sudden, phos-
phorescent bursts. They are at turns f i r e f l i e s , f l y c a t c h e r s , f i r e b i r d s .

Taketeru Kudo may be the most sublime master of the new generation of Japanese Butoh dancers. His movements are unusually fluid and quick for Butoh, more like those of a songbird, a hawk, or a hummingbird, than the chalk-white zombie whose slomo kinesthetic has become the cliché of Butoh's netherworld. "I am not a Butoh dancer," he once said, trying to disavow the label and set the record straight. "I am nothing. Just becoming. *Becoming bird.*" But labels stick. What really counts for Kudo, and for me, is the performance itself as a blank slate where writing appears out of nowhere, dense and unhyphenated. *Walkingcrawling, cultivatingabandoning, whisperingshouting, flyingfalling* – dialectics that, when necessary, can cut through the onion strata of a bitter heart.

Thoughts pass in my mind like flocks of ducks in the sky.
I hear the voice of their wings.

Working with an avian ghost is not easy. Just because I play the *Birdmachine* and other syrinx-inspired instruments, doesn't give me a leg up on the emotional demands of Butoh. The truth is, I have to conjure up at least three M's – musician, magician, mortician, to

say nothing of a murder of crows – to get through a performance. To do so requires deadly concentration and a touch of whimsy, as well as nearly scatological outbursts of sound woven thick with silence. 4'33 meets 7-Eleven.

Silence will carry your voice like the nest that holds the sleeping birds.

How any of this happens, or can happen at all, is a mystery. Kudo and I rehearse diligently, but nothing is ever planned except to maintain a meticulous absence of planning. Instead, decisions emerge on stage *in situ et extempore via animi motus*. From the gut. Kudo and I are both Cancers with Leo rising, moonchildren in reciprocal orbit, though I'm a teetotaler and he's a master sake drinker. It's an alchemical formula for perfect lunacy and double trouble eclipses. That's why, at the start of a performance, we play a gentle form of hide and seek to test the waters before plunging in to search the depths full tilt. Soon enough, the raging *humanimal* sounds and movements will erupt like meta-hashtag revelations – *#Gutwrenchinglaughing #Birdsingingcrying #Satyrprancingcrawling #Licescratchingsoothing* – whose tears will trend to laughter, then revert to tears, and twitter back to laughter in the blink of an owl. Or … when the cloak-swept motion of a codpieced king becomes a sudden beggar's hobble, and just as suddenly returns to royalty, and just as quickly buckles back to crippling terror. Or … the way a bird in flight unwings itself to fly hard against caged bars, and takes flight once more. When speaking Butoh, Kudo is death resuscitated from life.

We read the world wrong and say that it deceives us.

Such dialectical forces are at the heart of an island culture forged deep below by seismic faults and lava flows. Add the explosion of capitalism radiating from the ashes of an emperor's surrender, and the matter is conspicuously intensified. That was August 15, 1945. Soon after, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, the postwar founders of Butoh, began pushing back against the modern world. One could almost say that Hijikata took over from where Hirohito left off, and reconfigured Bushido – the Way of the Warrior – into primal dance, pedestrian movements, and disheveled forms of Noh. Hijikata was Butoh's Dionysian aspect, and Ohno its Apollonian cross-dresser. It was Ohno who, in 1961, officially named *Ankoku Butoh – The Dance of Darkness* – and gave the world its most radical form of dance. Call it what you will – *Butoh, Unballet, Ballroomcrawling, Choreogravity, Wrinkledcodpieces*. It turned the world of dance upside down. Ohno was fifty-five at the time and was still dancing at a hundred when he gave his last public performance in Tokyo in 2006. He crawled across the stage that night and brought an audience to their feet in tears … and yet the crisis of capitalism is more stuck in the Japanese craw than ever. Butoh fights on as best as it can. *Asbestos Kan traps / Fukushima's glowing tears / Crows caw on the cliff.*

I think of other ages that floated upon the stream of life and love and death and are forgotten, and I feel the freedom of passing away.

The question of when and how to end a performance with Kudo is far more difficult than starting one. In some cases, the finale will arrive slowly in fluttering waves of exhaustion, and fade out incrementally. In others, a swan song will plummet suddenly, spasmodically, and writhe out excrementally. Or … it might take a lawn tractor full throttle to pull both audience and performers across the finish line. That's what happened on a freezing October day in Connecticut when Kudo danced with my sextet – trombone, viola, flute, bassoon, contralto clarinet, *pianotable* – on and around and above the forest stage at Prout Hill Farm. Initially, the guests followed Kudo in slow motion as he crawled codpiece-naked in the streambed and back uphill to the large octagonal stage. The ensemble, which had dispersed at great distances throughout the landscape before the start of the performance, sounded forth while gradually making their way back. They reassembled just as Kudo emerged from the stream and disappeared under the stage for a wardrobe change.

What you are you do not see, what you see is your shadow.

As plumes of multi-coloured smoke rose up from down below, Kudo reappeared in white body makeup, a beggar's cloak, and, later, a blood-red scarf for climbing trees, pianos, musicians' gazebo, and darting through the forest. When he'd had enough, he sensibly flew the coop. His performance was breathtaking. But the musicians went on too long, and no one seemed to know how to settle the score and call it a wintry day. In exasperation, I set my contralto down, brainstormed across the stage, and bolted toward the John Deere parked nearby. Saddling up, I turned the key, engaged the 52" screaming blade, and popped the transmission into *tallyho*. Driving straight ahead, I cut a grassy path through the undergrowth toward the frog pond's wild rose thicket, and disappeared from view. I stopped at the pond, turned the machine off, and breathed a sigh of relief. An unplanned ending had broken the impasse. Pitch-perfect Butoh. For a moment, the world was swallowed up in combustion, then in silence, and finally at the hands of an audience's long and spirited ovation blowing leaves in gusts up off the ground and back into the trees.

Stray birds of summer come to my window to sing and fly away. And yellow leaves of autumn, which have no songs, flutter and fall there with a sigh.

Becoming Bird – Some Straybird History

Early on, while majoring in French literature at Keio University, Kudo studied Butoh with Akiko Motofuji, Hijikata's widow. Later, he also studied with Koichi Tamano, Hijikata's first student. In the 90s, he toured with Sankai Juku, the company that put Butoh on the world stage with a dancer's fatal fall from a Seattle life insurance building in 1985. "Butoh is a dialogue with gravity," Amagatsu Ushio, Sankai Juku's founder, had said years earlier.

The dust of the dead words clings to you. Your soul is washed with silence.

In the late 90s, Kudo went mostly solo and founded his own school, *Tokyo Gui-En-Kan*. Since that time, he has performed frequently in Russia, Israel, Brazil, Mexico, and throughout the United States and Europe. Recently, on stage in Moscow, he was the solo dancer in *The Full Moon*, which won the *Golden Mask*, Russia's most prestigious national theatre award. Kudo is a prodigious reader of dark Russian novels and a master vodka drinker. Audiences in Vladivostok adore him!

If you shed tears when you miss the sun, you also miss the stars.

Before April 21, 1991, the day I first played flute with birds at an art opening in Pittsburgh's National Aviary, music was for me a strictly human activity. After that, it became an interspecies conversation, indoors and out. For the performance that day, I read aloud the names and dates of 165 bird species we humans have eradicated since 1600. I improvised a short riff for each name as a stand-in for sounds we can no longer hear, and listened in amazement when a toucan and other birds in the room mimicked me with uncanny regularity during the forty-minute litany.

The echo mocks her origin to prove she is the original.

By the end of the performance, an avian avant-garde had taken hold of me. Lark, stork, and sparrow. I was hooked. I returned most every Sunday throughout the 90s to join in the morning chorus. The birds became my teachers in timbre, phrasing, and multiphonic splendor. They transformed my playing, my listening, and sense of musical place, which is to say, the place in which extinction is both remembered and transformed into living sentiment and sound. Throughout those years, I brought musicians, composers, dancers, artists, poets, Zen monks, and, of course, Kudo to perform at the National Aviary. *Becoming bird* became the story that was telling me out loud and from within.

Birdsong is the echo of the morning light back from the earth.

Beyond my collection of woodwind instruments, I began acquiring bird whistles and other avian sounders, and attached them to my flutes, recorders, hands, feet, and especially to my nose. I invented avian instruments, mostly hybrid combinations such as the *Birdmachine* (bass recorder and birdwhistles), *Violaire* (violin and slide whistle), and *Broominette* (extended shop broom with contrabass clarinet mouthpiece). The National Aviary's orchestra included Inca terns, greater flamingos, sun bitterns, ruddy ducks, crested oropendolas, snowy egrets, scarlet ibises, blue-winged kookaburras, red lorries, golden conures, roseate spoonbills, hooded mergansers, and many others. They perched, floated, nested, and swooped throughout their vast and resonant glass-steel prison. I responded to them, not in mimicry or as their maestro, but in the spirit of blending in beyond recognition. The keepers insisted I was their Johnny Cash, their charges' winsome, Folsom saviour. But I was just *becoming bird*, not quite one of them … but definitely no one's jailbird saviour.

O troupe of little vagrants of the world, leave your footprints in my words.

In the past twenty-five years, avian reverie has increasingly defined the arc of my travels. I spent one long summer night exchanging Aeolian riffs with a solitary Sprosser thrush on the edge of the Mueggelsee in Berlin. Then the following Spring, I was hidden away in the grotto of a small Buddhist temple in Kita Kamakura performing with a nojiko, a Japanese yellow bunting. A year later, an uguisu, a Japanese nightingale, accompanied me every night for two weeks in a dense forest on the edge of Mt. Asama, a not so dormant, smouldering volcano looming over Karuizawa. On the Canary Island of Lanzarote, I practiced glissandos with a flock of lesser short-toed larks on a high cliff overlooking the ocean toward Africa. Their sound in flight rose and fell along the thermal gusts of sand coming off the Saharan coast. Neither flutes nor faces are particularly fond of windswept sand, but here …

… the poet wind is out over the sea … to seek his own voice.

For years, back home in Connecticut, not far from Wallace Steven's nesting grounds, I've played redwing flutes, contralto clarinet, and eleven other instruments with blackbirds nesting in the frog pond's surround of autumn olives, birch and cedar trees, and wild, white roses. The blackbirds' lyricism blends with three varieties of syncopated frogs – peepers, green, and bull (treble, alto, bass) – that fiercely raise their decibels by end of June. Then they're fodder for great blue herons, hawks, and foxes.

Thought feeds itself with its own words and grows.

Butoh in Paris and Tokyo – Two Straybird Stories

I first met Kudo on the cusp of Y2K under a large, black umbrella in front of a London hotel. I was there as music director for a troupe of dancers from Tokyo performing at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and then in Paris at the Maison de la Culture du Japon. As fate would have it, we shared hotel rooms and a lack of enthusiasm for the troupe's choreography. None of the performances were memorable, but the last night in Paris changed everything.

You smiled and talked to me of nothing and I felt that for this I had been waiting long.

That's when Kudo's friend, Joni Waka, the ubiquitous art impresario and Jean Genet lookalike from Tokyo, invited us to a party for Paloma Picasso … and would we like to perform for her? The question was unnecessary, of course, though Kudo, once we arrived at the party, required some plying with a glass of Joni Waka's namesake. Once plied, he went to work pulling down a heavy velvet curtain from a high parlour window and wrapped himself in its maroon royalty. Then he commenced a slow procession, trailing a long train through the vast, luxurious 19th-century apartment. As he trailed and mused, buckled and crawled, I wove woofs of French Baroque into warps of avian voices through my hybrid flute – half Pan, half Boehm, half growling Metro-Gnome. Soon Kudo's impromptu robe dropped off midstride to reveal a body ripped gaunt down to a single, wrinkled codpiece. The audience gazed in awe as if at someone slightly overdressed, and must have spurned him on to leap with vulture swoops along the backs of sofas filled with lounging guests. As they alternately sipped their wine and sucked wild caviar out of pastry shells, Kudo hovered spread-wing over them and held their lives in check. I cawed and mewled an avian sonata with transverse nostrils flared, while the assembled haute couture shuddered with delight. Suddenly, Kudo jumped onto the Turkish carpet and collapsed into a writhing mass of chitinous mayhem. Like Gregor Samsa, some eighty-five years earlier, Kudo's arthropodic limbs pawed manically at the ceiling. I marked the transformation with palindromic mantras of bird sound. *! ... Satan, oscillate my metallic sonatas … !* rang out in aleatoric timbres back and forth and back and forth and back and forth … .

That which ends in exhaustion is death, but the perfect ending is in the endless.

As Kudo's exoskeleton heaved its last breath, I froze mid-flight and locked my gaze. The audience of Parisian A-listers remained spellbound and ruminant well past the normal span of wondering when to clap. At last their silence broke with shouts of "Bravo, bravo bravo …" and a hailstorm of applesauce and approbation. Above the din, Joni's voice

crowed: “Long live the avant-garde, long live the avant-garde!” over and over again at the top of his lungs. In the midst of it all, I caught Paloma’s eyes near the back of the room. She beamed her approval and moved in our direction, along with Joni, who introduced us as “the great American flutist and Japan’s premier Butoh dancer.” As I plucked her hand aloft for a straybird kiss, the room grew still, all ears bent in her direction. She purred: “You are magnifique! I luv ze krayahtif weigh you play ze floot, and Monsieur Kudo muves vis such majestie and unpredeaktabealité! I hope u weel pairform offen een Pairee! I em luking fourwerd!” It was undoubtedly the deepest brush with history I will ever have … and surely the deepest blush. According to Joni, Paloma still raves about us.

Her wistful face haunts my dreams like the rain at night.

Whatever else one could say about him – and someone should write the book! – Joni Waka has always kept the magic going. He seems to know everyone and everyone knows him wherever he happens to be. When Kudo and I performed at *Die Pratze*, an avant dance venue in Shinjuku, he arranged for us to entertain the legendary French actress Isabelle Huppert at the French ambassador’s residence. Mademoiselle Huppert was the subject of a superstar photo exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum. There were hundreds of portraits of her by dozens of well-known photographers, but I only remember the video installation by Robert Wilson. In it, he slowly – excruciatingly slowly – transformed Huppert into Greta Garbo as she appeared in an Edward Steichen photo on the 1929 cover of *Vanity Fair*. The effect was chilling. Huppert is a thoroughbred chameleon.

The stars are not afraid to appear like fireflies.

After the opening, two-hundred guests from the museum and film worlds, along with governmental dignitaries and attendant gadflies, clinked their champagne flutes and devoured a mountain of sushi and sashimi at the French ambassador’s residence high on a hill above Ebisu, not a lonely goatherd in sight. Just before twilight, Joni struck an enormous Korean gong and announced our performance. He gathered the guests around the factory-fresh Yamaha concert grand where I had installed myself with a fastidiously arranged line-up of bird whistles and flutes reflected on the black lacquer surface. I launched in unceremoniously with a gash of angular, syncopated chords and an auk call blasting from my mouth. Kudo, meanwhile, zigzagged dangerously through the crowd removing his clothing one piece at a time. Before I knew it, he vaulted onto the piano and executed a handstand in full codpiece glory. Then he flipped right side up and bounced up and down as if on a trampoline, his arms reaching high toward the ceiling lights. The audience gasped as my bird whistles scattered to kingdom come inside and off the grand piano, but by then Kudo had leapt down and made for the veranda. It led to the royal garden on the hillside overlooking the lights of Tokyo twinkling far below.

The hills are like shouts of children who raise their arms, trying to catch stars.

Kudo's faun was already scampering menacingly in the hedgerows as I squeezed my way outdoors through throngs of guests straining to catch the action. Finding a perch on the edge of a fountain whose *urina puerorum* aimed a plump stream of water into a resonant basin, I began to play *Syrinx,* Debussy's canonic flute solo. In counterpoint to his pastoral and chromatic homage to birdsong, I interjected flocks of snorting pigs, a squall of buzzards, and a gattling of mallards jammed up my nose. Debussy and Louis Fleury, the renowned flutist for whom the piece had been written, must have turned in their graves that evening. But no matter, the applause at the end of our performance was as thunderous as Joni's trademark crowing "Long live the avant-garde!" over and over and over again.

Listen, my heart, to the whispers of the world with which it makes love to you.

When the panda's ammonia had died down, Joni brought the ambassador and Mademoiselle Huppert over to us. To say I was starstruck would be to say the sun shines and the moon glimmers. There she was in the flesh, the elfin and quixotic actress whose virtuosity I'd admired at twenty-four frames a second (plus popcorn) over the past forty years! To my surprise, she echoed my sentiment and professed, "Extraordinaire ! Formidable ! C'était un rêve. Je suis profondément émue !" For a moment in eternity – *cela a duré une éternité* – we stared into each other's eyes as if we were the only ones in that vast, open room. Cliché, perhaps, but the ambassador clearly sensed a rift in the fabric of time and moved forward quickly to break the spell. Before he could intervene, I took Isabelle's straybird hand and lifted it to my lips, whispering, "Enchanté, Mademoiselle ! Tout le plaisir est pour moi ! Mon cœur a effectué le vol ! – My heart has taken wing!"

Once we dreamt that we were strangers. We wake up to find that we were dear to each other.

In the years that followed, I brought Kudo to Chatham University in Pittsburgh several times to lead Butoh workshops. During those visits, we performed at Carnegie Mellon University, at the Mattress Factory Art Museum, and at Pittsburgh's National Aviary. In Bennington, Vermont, we performed at night around a sixteen-foot bonfire, and once under bursting cherry blossoms at a Shinto Shrine in Shibuya together with Joni's Rhodesian Razorback. In Roppongi, we performed at *Super Deluxe* with the Golden Rooster of Japanese saxophonists, Yasuaki Shimizu. We appeared on stage at Lafayette College, and then at Zen Mountain Monastery in the late autumnal shadow of Mt. Tremper in the Catskills. As that shadow lengthened into winter in the wake of our performance, an ayahuasca scandal sent a beloved and brilliant abbot into permanent exile. *Straybirds Butoh,* as it turned out, was his monastic *coup de grâce … Able was I ere I saw Elba …*

Your voice, my friend, wanders in my heart,
like the muffled sound of the sea among these listening pines.

Swansong

Be
fore C
age & Cun
ningham, not
many had ever
questioned the sacro-
sanct relationship between
dance & music. It could be said
that Kudo and I, like Cage and Cun-
ningham a half century earlier, define
ourselves as equal-but-separate partners
bent on annulling the lockstep marriage of music
and dance. But to Kudo, a performer who must evis-
cerate himself from the bottom up and pursue a new path
with each performance, such thoughts are all but meaningless.

The bird wishes it were a cloud.
The cloud wishes it were a bird.

For Kudo, the path of *most* resistance is the one that finds its way back home.
The body, pushed along by whistling cemetery winds, oscillates irregularly
through rattling piles of bones long ago picked dry of dreams. The gol-
den body scampers cloven-hoofed in stuttering zigzags within
the heated scrutiny and avarice of audience eyes. It is true,
I have seen it from the musician's side of things, that
an audience's gluttony for entertainment can melt
the body's loneliness into ingots of despair. But
that is its prerogative. In the end, no matter
the path of resistance, the body must
let go altogether, and dissolve for-
ever into the black, fat air of
nothing and nowhere.
Such are the require-
ments of Butoh
and *becom-*
ing ***bir***
d .

FRANK DE CANIO

A musical offering

What words obscure, concordance celebrates.
In duple meter or 3-quarter time,
how eloquently it accelerates
the pulse with neither metaphor nor rhyme.
No hackneyed linking of cocoon with June
to harmonize its speechless melody;
it only needs a memorable tune
to function as a gig or threnody.
And though it's deemed a vocal piece or lied
whose text receives the measure of each note,
it's hardly the semantics that we heed
but honeyed sounds the tonal blacksmith wrote.
For notwithstanding each resounding word
it's music's ringing sanction being heard.

KEN HAAS

Bad Homburg

Roman legions took the waters there.
Count Friedrich named a fountain for his English bride.
Kaiser Wilhelm, after gobbling states piecemeal
then spitting Deutschland out whole,
drank iron from the native springs
to smooth nagging questions in his colon.
Springs that still steam into the light ether
of baroque façades, oompah bands,
and the foothills of the Taunus mountains.

The only thing my father ever mentioned
about his hometown
was the Easter he leaned so long
against the limestone fence circling the sulfur bath
that his knee swelled, got wedged,
and the piqued bürgermeisters –
after soberly debating all options –
felt obliged to chisel small crescents in the columns
and set the boy free.

He never told me what held his fancy
all that time on the other side of the rails.
Maybe the Gothic virgins honoured in statue,
Goethe's white tower in the distance,
a dip in the magic waters.

Last Christmas, a few of his childhood friends
gathered for schnapps somewhere in South Florida
with thick air, scant history, and no cures.
Hannah Stein recalled Klaus Heidrich
dipping her pigtails in an inkwell.
Max Rosen spoke of his grandma
rapping her cane as he barked out
a march song taught at school.
Fritz Levy said he'd gone back in spring
and the stone fence was still carved out;
could not be mended, though they'd tried;
said he'd asked the townspeople how it got that way,
but no one knew; though they knew
about the Romans, the Kaiser, and the princess bride.

HOLLY DAY

The Bible will keep

I step off the train and shake myself free. My name
is drawn to your voice, puts me on my back
later, in the dark. From head to toe
I am this new woman, one that wants only you
pressed into the places I spread open
to God. Confession, it works against me,

there is always so much work to do.

Sparrows and cardinals and whiskey all scream
my life out on the thin quilt for you to go through, I tell you
that God has forgiven me my trespasses, that the Bible in my pocket
is the only thing keeping my dreams
from leaking out and clattering on the tiles
noisy as a handful of spent bullet cartridges.

AMY ROHER

Coyote

BRENDA'S PHONE RINGS JUST AS THE BRAKE LIGHTS FLASH ON THE CAR AHEAD. SHE slows down to pass a coyote trotting along in the ditch, a snowy jackrabbit dangling from its mouth.

"Hey, Mom," Alison's voice comes over the speakers. "Can you check on Dad's house for me on your way in? I'm not sure how long he's been away, and I haven't been able to go."

"So just checking in, then? Pipes and furnace?"

"Well, yes, but I need you to check on his backyard too. He's got chickens now."

"Chickens? Downtown?" She glances at the dashboard.

"Yeah, I know. Can you just feed them and whatever? They're more like pets. They lay eggs."

"And the neighbours are okay with this?"

"I have no idea." Alison pauses. "Can you just take care of it, please?"

"The key is in the usual place, I guess?"

"Probably."

"All right, I can do that."

"Great. Text me when you're done and we'll figure out what we're doing."

Brenda drives into Regina. A thick coating of hoarfrost has covered the elms on Victoria Avenue. She turns south and parks outside her old house. She pulls a toque over her hair, newly bobbed with the thick purple streak that her hairstylist talked her into last weekend – "Live a little! Let's do something fun for a change!" – and opens the gate to the backyard. Beside the wood pile, the chicken coop is solid and new. She lifts the lid and sees five hens inside; the water and food dispensers are empty.

WHEN THEY WERE IN THEIR TWENTIES, Gary used to keep her up late, talking about what they could do if they won the lottery. "We could have horses," he said, his hands reaching under her pyjama top, encircling her ribcage, pulling her close. "I could be your very own cowboy."

"Having horses would be a lot of work," she answered, putting her hands on top of his, holding them still. "I've got to get up in four and a half hours."

"You wouldn't have to work," he continued, his hands slipping out from under hers, grasping her by the shoulder, turning her toward him. "We'd pay someone to do the maintenance and just ride on our land. The kids could play in the barn. C'mon, it would be fun."

"Why are we talking about this? We're not winning the lottery."

"I'm just saying if we did. We might. You never know."

"Fine. If we win the lottery, you get to be a cowboy. Can we please just go to sleep now?"

"You're not listening to me," he said. "You never listen to me."

It started that way. Then he spent the next few days moping, making sideways comments about whatever he was obsessing about. Sometimes it was cowboys, often it was computers or even robots.

One time it was about canning and pickling, and how they would never have to go grocery shopping again if she would just be more supportive of his growing and preserving all their own food.

"You're suffocating me," he said. "You don't let me express myself. You don't believe in me."

He wasn't any good around the kids when he got in these moods. Especially Sean, who, even on the best days, was a handful. A tiny, talkative boy, he never stopped moving. Whenever Gary yelled at him to shut up, he would snort, burp, fart with his armpits, anything he could do to make noise. Once, Gary flipped the kitchen table over, smashing glasses of milk and plates of pork chops and green beans all over the floor. "Fucking retards!" he yelled, kicking the upturned table. "You don't let me think. You're a bunch of fucking retards."

BRENDA TRIES TO TAKE THE WATER DISPENSER out of the chickens' coop. It isn't easy, bending down like that, standing on her tiptoes, the plywood jutting into her stomach. The lid of the coop keeps coming down on her head. She props it open with a hatchet. Still, she has to admit that it's good to be needed, and later that night she and her little granddaughter can do some baking with all those eggs.

"Hello there, stranger." It's Peter, the next-door neighbour. "Let me give you a hand with that."

It seems funny, after all these years, to be sitting in this kitchen without Gary or Sheila. She and Peter have started with tea and moved quickly on to wine. Paul Simon's *Graceland* is turned up – a bit loudly, but never mind – and she is wearing a pair of his wool socks, along with his sweatpants. Next door, the chicken coop is clean, the chickens fed and watered. Watering was more complicated than she had anticipated – on her grandparents' farm, they didn't have anything like what was set up out there – and she and Peter both got soaked trying to get it done. Her pants and socks are hung to dry over the back of a chair.

"I'm a huge Ramey fan," he says, while filling their glasses. "Just look at this golden colour. Can you taste that tropical fruit?"

She swishes the wine and smells it, the way he does. "Thanks again. It really is delicious."

"I can't tell you how good it is to be able to chat with you again."

"It's good to see you, too. I don't know what I would have done without your help."

"It's serendipity."

"Maybe it is." She laughs.

"This is a 'why I drink wine' moment, that's for sure."

"What a lovely twist on a crazy day." She takes another sip. She's been looking around at his framed photos – mostly of a recent trip to Europe, and some older ones, too, of his son, Travis. He has been talking about Travis. Who's still in trouble, it seems.

"You know, Sheila did everything for him. She put the toothpaste on his toothbrush until he was thirteen years old. You'd go into the bathroom, and a toothbrush would be there on the counter, ready to go. And now we sit around trying to figure out why he's so lazy."

"My problem was the opposite. Gary used to spend days at a time in bed. I felt like I was a single mother."

"I never could wrap my head around the two of you together."

"He's very unpredictable. I wish I'd seen that when I met him. He seemed so exciting back then."

"Sheila never would hear anything I had to say about Travis. All she'd say is 'He's a good boy. He's been through a lot lately.' I'm sure you remember how he saw his friend get hit by a car."

"Yes, of course. That poor family. How terrible for Travis. How terrible for all of you."

Sean had been fascinated with all of the morbid details of the accident, which happened only a few blocks away. It was all she heard about for months. At eleven years old, he got stuck on it.

"They were stoned out of their minds, of course, grabbing the bumpers of passing cars. The kid's brains were on the road. But that was twelve years ago now." He refills their glasses. "Travis was getting into trouble before the accident, but Sheila just erases that. She doesn't like to see things as they are."

"Oh, how awful."

"He got fired from a construction job last month for smoking up on the site, and still she says, 'He's a good kid.' It's like she has no feeling, no feeling of her own."

Brenda runs her fingers along the hem of a linen napkin. "Oh," she says.

"At least Alison isn't lazy. You raised her well."

"No, she's not lazy. That's one thing you can say about her. Sean, though, is lost."

The phone beeps in her purse. She checks it. A text from Alison: None of them got much sleep last night, it seems, and Leif still needs to pack, since he is flying back to the rigs tomorrow. She sits there quietly, looking at the screen.

"I guess I'll be seeing Alison tomorrow. Today isn't working."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," says Peter. "I'm glad you're here, though." He takes her hand and squeezes it. "Stay for dinner. It's a shame you'll miss Sheila. She's at her parents' up in Saskatoon until Sunday."

He takes a couple of hamburgers out of the freezer and puts a few strips of bacon in a pan on the stove. Then he goes out through the sliding glass doors and stands in front of the barbecue, talking on his phone.

After he comes back in, he starts to make a salad. When she gets up to help, he touches her shoulder. "No, no, please. I love to cook. You just sit there and look pretty."

He laughs, arranging the food on the plates.

"I've got a very nice cabernet sauvignon," he adds, setting their meal on the table. "Very intense fruit notes, well balanced, the oak well integrated. A cabernet superstar. A perfect match for my bacon brie sirloin burgers."

She has passed the warm buzz phase by now. Chewing the hamburger, she wonders if Peter and his wife might have some sort of an arrangement (not unheard of, after all). It's getting dark, and the chickens are still in the run.

"This is the best dinner I've had in a while," she says, "and I can't thank you enough. But I should get back to my hotel pretty soon."

"That's some son-in-law you've got there, making you stay in a hotel. There's no need for that. Why don't you sleep in my guest room?"

"Thank you, that's very generous, but I think I'd better go. Maybe it's silly, but I feel a bit awkward staying. Well, you know. With Sheila out of town?

He chuckles and glances over at her pants on the back of the chair.

"Sheila? Who's that?"

In the bathroom, after changing into her own clothes, she hovers over the toilet for a minute or two, trying not to look at the water too much – that always pushes her over the edge, if she's close to throwing up – and is glad when nothing happens. She calls a cab. She does it before opening the bathroom door – it's easier that way – and surrenders his folded sweatpants and socks.

"Come on, it's only eight o'clock."

"Really, thank you. But I've got a busy day tomorrow."

"Okay, okay. Have a good visit with Alison. I hope to see you again soon. We should make plans to get together next time you're in town."

He puts on his jacket and walks her to the cab. He opens the door for her and, as she settles into the seat, hands her a twenty-dollar bill. Then he gives her a brief wet kiss on the mouth. "We have a connection, Brenda. Let's keep in touch."

"The Ramada Inn, please," she says.

The driver is talking quietly into his phone in a soft, bubbly language. She is relieved at the sound of it, glad to be done with conversation for the night. Closing her eyes, she thinks about Sean, about how strange it is that he is still close to his father. Maybe he just wants a house to party in, she thinks, but that doesn't add up. He has his own apartment.

Gary used to say that she was spoiling him. She remembers how, as a toddler, he rarely laughed or cried. She tried to bond with him. He even took naps on her chest in a carrier until he was two. "There's nothing wrong that can't be spanked out of him," Gary would say, but she knew there was something, something she had to make up for. At one year old, he already had a flatness in his eyes. She could see it, the hardness there. When, after years of assessments, they got his diagnosis, all Gary had to say was, "Fine. It's official now. You win."

Of course, Sean, now in his twenties, has rejected the label and blames his mother for it. In his eyes, his father has always been his champion. She remembers the last conversation she had with him, six months ago.

"Dad always knew that I was just an energetic kid," he said. "You had to prove that there was something wrong with me. Do you have any idea how that made me feel, all those years of thinking there was something wrong with me? Like I was some kind of a retard?"

These were not his own words, she knows, but a carefully coached conversation, one that took place a few months after she moved out. She plays it over in her head now, wondering how much truth there might have been in it. She thinks about that as she lies on top of the covers of the hotel bed in her dirty jeans. The room spins a little. She thinks about it until she drinks some water and the room slows down and she remembers that she never did put those fucking chickens back in their coop.

THE NEXT MORNING, BRENDA TAKES A CAB BACK to the house. All five hens are still out in the enclosure, pecking happily in the snow. She looks over the fence, at Peter's sliding glass doors. The curtains are open and she can see him sitting at the kitchen table, with a woman. Back in the yard, she brushes the snow off an Adirondack chair and sits down. She calls Alison.

"Thanks for taking care of Dad's chickens for me. You know I don't have anyone else I can call."

"You're welcome. So what are you doing today?"

"Well, Leif's flight leaves late tonight. It's our last day together for a few weeks. Would you want to get together tomorrow?"

"Alison, I came here to see you and the baby, not to hang around your father's backyard."

"Listen, I told you, Leif is leaving tonight. I don't get to see him for a few weeks. You can't move two hours away right after I have a baby and think you can just cruise back into town and get to see her whenever you want. It doesn't work that way."

"Okay. You call me when you're ready."

The sun on her face, she sits there for a while. Then she opens the enclosure and picks up a chicken gently, by the neck, supporting its body with her other hand. At the farm, she'd seen her grandfather do it. He had used a tree stump and a hatchet. She thinks the edge of the deck will work, and it does.

Later, as she is walking down the driveway, she stops to retrieve her car keys from her coat pocket and realizes that the last one is still in her hand and so she drops it there, in the snow.

DAVID SAPP

The hen

Soon after Hoover
promised "a chicken
in every pot," the hen
embarked upon a grand adventure,
a ride into town in
the farmer's jalopy, rust,
bailing twine, and fence wire
strung together like the leather
and laces of a loose-jointed shoe.

The hen sat up front beside
the farmer's dog, a venerable geezer,
an odd couple that got along
in a curious unison cocking
their heads at passing sights;
she clucked as a fretting wife
in low, wary comments
and the occasional, excitable cackle,
from him, a growling "humph."

Long before the farmer's
dentures rattled in his mouth,
like a clacking tractor engine,
he needed a tooth pulled
and didn't have a quarter;
the hen became the barter.

In the dentist's waiting room,
in her cushioned chair, she
gracefully laid an exquisite egg,
warm, smooth, spotted, and tanned
like a girl's freckled shoulder;
she seemed to know – she seemed to ask:
"will you pluck my feathers
to the skin for a single meal or
fry my lovely, yellow yolks
forever in your skillet?"

MARK BELAIR

The gardener

I can't talk about it, the kneeling neighborhood volunteer barked
as he roped bundles of branches newly chain-sawed off a pair of
healthy elms in the communal garden between two brownstones,
old elms hugged by brick paths bordered with ground cover, their
stumpy trunks, behind him, cut down to man size and doomed.

I can't talk about it, he repeated as he tied another bundle, though
I hadn't asked twice.

I can't talk about it, he went on, my extended presence, I suppose,
a form of continued questioning, the power behind this destruction –
was the whole, now shade-stripped garden to be dug out? And had
he been forced to do the work or was he just clearing up? – pressing
into him, it seemed, the defensiveness of the weak, complicit, beaten.

And even after I left, I heard him say, behind me, to no one but himself,
I can't talk about it.

EILEEN HENNESSY

Stone unturned

Stones overturned:
temple, market, court

Stone in the hand

Stone thrown

Stones planted in rows

Stones chain-gang broken

Human by human broken

Lord, give us this day
a story to salvage our ruins.

TOM LANE

Money for nothing

"I CAN'T CASH THIS CHEQUE. THE NAME'S SMUDGED," THE TELLER SAID, HANDING Owen back one of his two cheques.

"But it's only for five dollars."

"A cheque's lettering must be clear, or we're not allowed to cash it. Bank rules."

As she counted out the money for his paycheque, he saw her name tag: *Betty Sands*, in bold white letters. No smudging there. She must have been new, as he hadn't seen her before. He always kept count with the teller who counted out his money, but not today, as Betty had upset him. He also couldn't concentrate on his own recount. He gave up and stuffed the bills in his pocket. Sticklers like Ms. Sands didn't make mistakes.

"Have a nice day," she said, smiling.

He in turn made an obscene gesture.

Inside his apartment, he pulled the bills from his pocket. They felt bulkier than usual. Counting them, he discovered a four-hundred dollar overpayment.

Wow, he thought. It serves her right for refusing my little cheque. If she hadn't upset me, I would have counted along with her, and I would have alerted her to the mistake.

Owen believed himself honest. He returned anything of value that he found as long as it came with a name, address, or phone number. But he feared returning the bank's money, thinking he might have already committed a crime by taking it. Also, returning it would call attention to Betty Sands and possibly make matters worse for her. He'd already made that obscene gesture when she was only doing her job, by refusing to cash his name-smudged cheque.

He put his hand in his pocket again and pulled out a paper scrap upon which he'd written the number 8. He smiled, remembering that on the late-night radio show he listened to, to help him fall asleep, a guest numerologist had associated the number with wealth and power. She said that to carry it would bring you gain. He'd been carrying it to prove her wrong, and here he was, less than a week later, four-hundred dollars ahead.

But Betty Sands' image haunted him. She looked young enough for that job to have been her first ever. A pretty brunette in tan slacks and matching blouse. He could imagine her sobbing as she blurted out the details about being fired to her mother while her father, listening in the background, shook his head. And yet he didn't know for sure she'd lose her job. His friend Natalie, who worked in retail, once told him that employees handling cash routinely made mistakes, but that nothing happened to them unless their mistakes formed a suspicious pattern. She herself had once got extra money from a bank. She'd kept it, and the teller had kept his job.

THAT WEEK THE BANK SENT OWEN A LETTER. Terrified, he tore into the envelope but relaxed when he read that the bank had corrected an error made in their favour against his account. They

were honest. He was not.

Payday came, and he approached the bank, wishing he had direct deposit. He cautioned himself not to overreact. If he got Betty as his teller, he'd apologize for having made the obscene gesture, but he'd say nothing else, and he'd speak only if addressed.

Inside the bank he saw Betty's window, darkened with a "closed" sign across it. He handed his paycheque to another teller, who excused himself and went to bring the manager.

"We no longer cash post-dated cheques," the latter said, returning the paycheque. "Tomorrow we'll be happy to cash it."

This refusal should have upset him more than Betty's had, but it didn't, as the manager had said nothing about the overpayment.

From time to time, Owen's bank would stop cashing post-dated cheques. Then, after weeks or months, they'd resume, without any explanation. Not all branches complied with the policy, so he tried one farther from his workplace. But they, too, were refusing to cash post-dated cheques.

"Could I cash this five-dollar cheque?" he asked, taking a chance.

"Yes. The date's in order."

"But the name's smudged."

"Yes, but it's still readable, and it's only for five dollars."

He took the five-dollar bill the teller handed him, turned, and came face to face with Betty Sands.

He expected her to complain about the teller's having cashed a name-smudged cheque, but she didn't. Staring at them both, she passed by without a word. Some fine facial hair that he hadn't noticed earlier told him that she was older than he'd first thought. She must have been filling in for a teller then, too, because now she appeared to be working as a manager.

THAT SHE SAID NOTHING ABOUT THE OVERPAYMENT suggested the matter was resolved. But Owen still had to live with his conscience. It began to make him overly honest.

He found a ragged and dirty sweater on a subway bench and brought it to the agent on duty. "This is for the 'Lost and Found,'" he said. The agent looked at him oddly, then took it and thanked him.

Later, while waiting for the train, he saw the agent emerge from his post, the sweater dangling on the end of a broomstick, to dump it into a trash barrel. Which had the effect of making Owen feel he'd been silly.

Had Natalie's windfall caused her this much guilt?

The late-night radio show had the numerologist on as a return guest. This time, Owen paid her more careful attention. She spoke of balance and the number 8.

"An eight consists of two balanced circles," she said. "Some call it a karmic equalizer. The balance is compensatory. If you gain something, you lose something. Those who indiscriminately add eights to their charts, seeking power and wealth, do not understand this. They often get neither. If it were so simple, there wouldn't be a disproportionate number of people with many eights in their charts listed among the homeless."

Then came the calls. A woman said that she had inherited a great deal of money in August, the eighth month, but that it came from the will of her dearest friend. Another caller said that he had got a power-laden promotion after eight years on the job, but it was accompanied with so much stress that it cost him his health.

Owen called Natalie and, after some small talk, asked her if she'd suffered guilt for having kept the money she got for nothing from the bank.

"No. The bank can afford it. They're insured. And nothing happened to the teller."

"What did you spend it on?"

"A dress, but a worthless one. It's a good thing I went to the bathroom before I left my house, because when I sat down, the dress fell apart and off me like a prop in an old Western. It took me months to get a refund, and it wasn't a full one, either."

"What did you buy with the refund?"

"I can't remember."

He hung up.

The numerologist might say that Natalie's gain cost her a quality purchase and that his gain cost him a peaceful conscience.

But I don't believe in numerology, he objected. I carried the scribbled 8 on the paper scrap to prove her wrong. People are always making up systems to explain the unexplainable.

He readied himself to toss the paper scrap but hesitated. He slipped it back into his pocket. Then he turned on the TV to help himself think less about everything.

TYLER GABRYSH

Bristled

It wasn't purely the undotted i's
and uncrossed **t**'s in your finalé,
but those empty breathless spaces
dividing such frozen dis/severed words.

Like you just tossed them off
before meeting a him or a her.
Or no one at all.

Hermetic success,
yes, even your perfume crawled
under and out the window
while I needled Schönberg.

A lovely piece,
evoking ivory evenings you played him
or a part of, as you're playing me
now fronting this easel,
wetting brush after brush.

Grieved bristles on a white canvas,

cleaning,
cleansing
you away
fu
ti
le
ly
.

TYLER GABRYSH

Steps to oneness

I tell you people, conversation never ends
non-stop arresting pain. And saying
whatever can't mother us.

How should love actually exist?

Live a simple life in a simple place, meaning:
participate but don't change anything.

Everyone would know in their hearts
but not talk about it.
One picture in each mind. *Static.*

I really think all details should be an illusion.
Be, to be.
Specks of people alive in an art form.

So,
    novelty touches the back of your throat?

Just breathe the possibilities
but not enough to taste them.

DARREN C. DEMAREE

Emily as higher and paler

Above sheet
& forest,

Emily
is what

really happened
to the soul's purr

when it just
wouldn't stop,

even when we
asked it to.

Emily as the mud's flat hiss

As much song
as can, will be
with this Emily.

Emily as we hear pain

That terrible thought
brought along by the rattle
that just will not leave
& not once do we feel our ribs
before we run towards it.

MEGAN LYNCH

Even in February

By the way
I tried to say
I'd be there
Waiting for…
– Red Hot Chili Peppers

THE MAN WITH THE FLOWERS IN WAITING ROOM C OPENS HIS EYES. HE CANNOT remember how long he has been asleep. His neck is stiff and forming a hard knot at the top of his spine. His hands are so cold that no amount of rubbing them together will create warmth. He glances at the thermostat over his shoulder, which reads 23 degrees. The clock beside it flips to 3:10 – in the afternoon, judging by the number of people in line for a mid-day coffee at the canteen down the hall. He knows a craving when he feels one. And he knows when a piece is missing from the big picture. He can't remember why he is here.

He pats at a shirt pocket not there and realizes he's in work uniform, a starchy, navy-blue fabric with the city transit logo patched on both biceps. The name tag stitched just right of his heart reads: *Jeff*. Well, at least he knows who he is. He digs a hand into his pants pockets for change and finds a wad of transfer slips, a hole-punch, a pack of gum, and a beat-up leather wallet the colour of Dijon mustard. Inside it are a few dollars, a cheesy prom photo, and typical plastic cards of identification, licence, and membership riffraff.

Jeff gets carbon print on his fingers from the slips and reaches for a tissue from the box on the side table. He looks at the bouquet in his left hand, a therapeutic bundle of daisies and white peonies laced with Scottish thistles and baby's breath. A small card falls out of the Tiffany-blue paper cone holding it together. It flits and floats, blown by the small electric fan at the reception desk, and lands on his shoes. Moccasins actually, and suspiciously female.

"Christ, since when do I wear moccasins?" he says. He glances around and sees no one but a secretary on a phone headset clacking away at her computer. "And since when do I talk to myself?"

He picks up the card. A cute teddy bear wearing its heart on the outside offers its overstuffed arms in the top corner. He recognizes his own handwriting, what his fifth grade teacher Mrs McGarrity called "spidery," in a cheap blue ballpoint pen: *Room 19.*

"Wentworth Hospital," rings a sweet voice from the reception desk into a headset, answering his unasked question of just where Room 19 might be in a bonanza of city buildings.

He hears the ding of an elevator and spots the floor number over the doors: *6.* Not having gone to college, he has no idea who Ivan Pavlov or his dog was, and so the irony of the situation is lost on him as he bolts from his chair. A sweaty hand clutching the bouquet, he rushes through the door to the hall and collides with the shoulder of a young intern in green scrubs. The intern looks up as he runs by and waves a hand. He waves back in apology and nearly bangs into another doctor

coming towards him. He sidesteps out of *his* way and turns to see the two colleagues meet with a clap on the shoulder, continuing up the hall.

The elevator doors start to close. He steps forward and sticks his hand in between. They continue to close.

"Shit," he says, and holds his breath as he squeezes past them.

He tugs the pocket of his jacket towards him as the doors shut with a mechanical shudder. A teenage boy leans against the railing by the panel of floor buttons.

"Hey kid, push *L*, would you?" Jeff says.

No answer. He tilts his head to see the white iPod buds in the kid's ears. The boy nods his head, eyes closed, oblivious to the world outside of his mental music video.

Jeff pushes *L* himself. The square border around the button remains unlit. He tries again. *Tap, tap, tap,* his finger insists, like the persistent woodpecker that woke him up this morning at an ungodly hour. Then he remembers a childhood prank and runs his hand over all the buttons. No change.

"What the hell?" he says to no one in particular.

The elevator stops on the third floor, and the kid gets off. A blind man shuffles on with a guide dog clothed in a bright orange vest. The dog growls at the wall.

"Wally," his owner warns. The man brushes his hand over the braille on the elevator buttons until he finds and presses *L*. It lights up, bright as a Christmas tree.

Wally paws at the only pair of moccasins in the elevator and yips in frustration. "What's the matter with you?" the blind man asks. "If someone's in here, sorry about that."

"Yeah, I'm here," Jeff says. "If your dog likes to chew ugly-ass shoes, he can have mine."

Wally whimpers and backs away from the man with the flowers.

"C'mon, Wally," his owner jests. "No one's here but you and me."

Jeff clears his throat. The blind man doesn't even flinch.

"What do you mean, 'no one'? Hey pal, you hard of hearing, too?" he asks. No response. He cups his hands over his mouth and blows a raspberry. Wally barks.

The *L* lights up above the door. Wally growls as he's led away. His owner laughs.

"What's the matter with you, Wally. You see a spook or something?"

THE PROGNOSIS LOOKS GOOD FOR MONICA SELBERG on the last leg of a two-week stay in Room 19. The headline for her accident was taken from a statement given by the only eyewitness, an octogenarian walking the pedestrian bridge over King Street West on February 21, 2012: "She Was Damn Lucky, That One."

Dr Bill Chatterton, aka Dr Head Case, – 25-year pin, prematurely white hair, a recent stomach ulcer – briefs his students in the head trauma unit on the first floor.

"Monica Selberg, 26, car accident two weeks ago. She got cut off by a truck, swerved, and slammed into the side of a bridge. She hit her head on the wheel and sustained four stitches near the left temple, two broken ribs, whiplash, fractured her left ring finger – luckily without a ring or she would have had further damage – and had a shitload of bruises on her chest and face. And,

good girl, she was wearing her seatbelt, otherwise she'd be in the basement on a slab. She was unconscious for a few hours until the nurse on duty put on a pot of coffee and she awoke, asking for a cup." He taps his nose. "She obviously didn't lose the good olfactory sense. She was groggy but knew her name, the date, the Prime Minister, and without being asked, the planets closest to and farthest from the sun. She has a clever mnemonic device. 'Mary Visser eats mulberry jam sandwiches unless no pomegranates.'"

This raises some eyebrows. Dr Head Case, indeed. He ignores their stares and continues.

"She hasn't edited out Pluto yet. Anyway, Miss Selberg is currently stable. Gets recurring headaches, some of them biggies. Doesn't want anything stronger than Advil. Says she's defending her master's thesis next week and needs a clear head. Her parents are out of the country. Only child. No boyfriend at the moment. So, it's just her and her alone."

Dr Chatterton fishes in his pocket and tucks a rolled-up five dollar bill in the hole of a gold "M" attached to the patient's keyring. He tosses it at an intern who hasn't learned to wipe the smug look off his face in his presence.

"Nick, go on a coffee run and get the patient's laptop from her apartment. The address is on the file."

"Why, Doc?" he asks. "It's not like she's going to be well enough by next week."

Dr Chatterton smiles. "Consider this your first lesson in hospital human resources. The patient's been getting pissy with the nurses about it." He winks at the intern as he gestures to the others to follow him. "Do us all a favour and go fetch. I take cream and sugar."

A string of ridiculous coffee orders follows. Nick flashes a middle finger, pockets the keys in scrubs the colour of his Irish eyes, and heads out the door to the sixth floor hall. Tilting his head to check his watch, he feels a hard knock against his shoulder. But when he turns, he sees no one even close to him. Across the hall, though, he recognizes a friend from med school and waves, then hustles up to meet him, clapping a hand on his good shoulder. He rotates the other one and makes a mental note that he should spend more time at the gym or his muscles will collapse.

JEFF CIRCLES THE FIRST FLOOR FOR FIFTEEN MINUTES and still can't find Room 19. He passes by the same rubber plant and cheap Chagall knockoff for the third time. And surprise, surprise, no one seems to notice he exists: when he asks no fewer than ten people where he should be going, they ignore him. He might as well have been handing out pamphlets. No one cares. He clocks a fist at the wall and feels the reverberation in his knuckles flaring to the back of his hand. It leaves no mark on the cheap plaster.

A woman in rust-coloured scrubs with a frayed name tag – *Jackie* – comes out of the washroom with a pushcart full of soapy water and a mop leaning out of it. Jeff stands right in front of her about five yards away.

"Lady, please help me out," he begs.

She walks towards him and actually smiles, meeting his eyes. Hope builds despite his weariness. Then she proceeds to walk right through him. He doesn't feel much more than a tickling sensation, pins and needles on his skin. She keeps on walking and greets a nurse about his height at the duty

desk directly opposite him. Through him, in fact. He follows her up there and becomes the world's greatest eavesdropper.

"How you doin', Pat?" the cleaning lady asks.

"Oh, there's a real sweetheart in room 19. Won't shut up about her friggin' computer. I hate technology. You'd think for a few days more she could live without it."

The cleaning lady groans. "Man, I've got to go clean that room."

Pat gives a tiny sympathetic smile. "Well, I hope she's asleep for your sake. See ya."

Jackie waves, and Jeff follows her as she pushes the cart up the hall through a small corridor he passed by earlier. They both peek through the crack in the door to Room 19, a semi-private white box with sunlight pouring through the window, spotlighting the stained tile faded from a good thirty years of being walked on.

Monica Selberg rolls over in bed to face the door. She has clear, pale skin, and unnatural blonde hair with dark roots that need touching up. She blinks at the blurred sight of two bodies.

"Do I know you?" she mumbles sleepily.

She stretches her long lanky arms speckled with sunspots, a strange sight in the month of February.

"No ma'am," Jackie responds as she starts mopping the floor of old fluids, some bodily. "I'm just the one-woman cleaning crew."

Monica's eyes flit over the man with the flowers as he deposits them on the table by her bed next to a tray with a pudding cup and a blob of green Jello. He can't help himself and pokes it. To his surprise and boyish delight, it wiggles and jiggles like Bill Cosby promised.

"No, I meant you," she says. He looks up and meets her eyes, and she nods at him. He starts, jumping back and catching the rail on the empty hospital bed beside him before he topples to the floor in surprise.

"Who, honey?" Jackie asks, concern showing in the wrinkles on her forehead.

Monica points at the bearer of flowers, her eyes not leaving his, not even to blink. He realizes he hasn't looked anyone in the eyes for a very long time, even before waking up on the sixth floor of the hospital. At least none that looked right back at him. God knows why. He focuses on hers – despite their dark circles, a gorgeous blue.

"Him, of course, who do you think I mean?" she says.

Jackie looks at Jeff or, rather, through him at chest level, her eyes lowered. "Oh, yes, sugar," she says with the voice that once sang her babies to sleep. After quickly glancing at the dosage levels on the IV, she hurries out the door.

Monica frowns. "Well, that was rude." Then she notices the bouquet. "Are these for me?"

He nods and hands her the card.

"Room 19. Well, that's me. Not the most creative of messages, is it?" She points at a red leather handbag on the visitor's chair. "If you'll pass me that, how much do I owe you?"

"No, I … ." He stops to see if she can hear him. Apparently she can, as she raises her eyebrows, waiting for him to explain himself. He scuffs a toe on the floor, rubbing away a black mark from the cheap rubber of someone else's shoes. "You probably won't believe me but I brought them for you myself."

"You're right, I don't believe you. If you're looking for some sort of trade-off, I'm a little incapacitated and not interested." Jeff stares at her, flabbergasted. He bites his lip to hide a smile. She frowns back. "If that's what this is about, you can take your flowers back and go."

"That's not it," he chimes in. "Flattering, but not it. I'm Jeff Wilkinson of the Wentworth Wilkinsons." He gestures in a bow with his hand. "'Salami, salami, bologna,' as the wise man once said."

Monica leans back in the bed. She claps a hand to her head, the other hand lingering by the call button. "The doctors say I haven't lost my mind. Am I hallucinating or something?"

He shakes his head. "Don't believe so, no."

"He says I haven't lost my memory either, so I presume I don't know you?"

"No. And I don't know you, either."

"Perfect." Her finger touches the call button, but she doesn't have the nerve to press down. Then she thinks about something. "The cleaning lady didn't even acknowledge …"

"Yeah, I know. She and the nurse outside, too. There was an intern who didn't mind getting his shoulder pummelled when I walked into him, but he didn't see me or hear me, either. Just like a whole boatload of other people. But you can, right?"

She nods, chin to chest and back to centre, as he paces the narrow aisle between beds.

"Why don't you sit down? You're making me nervous."

"I'll just stand if you don't mind. I sit, or maybe it's *sat*, for a living." He flexes his fingers, making a steeple. The fingers slide in the spaces between them to make a church. He speaks no louder than a whisper. "I'd just like to know why I'm here."

"Okay, Casper. Trusting you're not some amnesiac zombie, treat this like you lost something," she suggests. "Retrace your steps, starting from the beginning. What's the first thing you remember?"

He smiles gratefully. "Okay. I woke up about a half hour ago on the sixth floor with those," he says, pointing to the bouquet. "I followed the card. And now I'm talking to you."

She sniffs a daisy. "They're lovely by the way. Thanks."

He rubs his chin and feels a shadow way past five o'clock. "You're welcome. Hey, what do I look like. I haven't seen a mirror in a while."

"About six feet, 180, light hair, nice face."

"That's me."

She looks him up and down and notices his shoes. "Women's moccasins. Really?"

"Yeah, I found that weird myself."

She points again to the purse on a chair. "Would you hand me that?"

He takes the bag by the long strap and pulls it back just as she reaches for it. "You don't carry a can of Mace or anything, do you?"

"In a hospital room. Certainly." She rolls her eyes.

As he gives it to her, their hands brush. "Did you feel that?" he asks. She grips his hand. He puffs out a breath that he feels he's been holding for hours. "Yeah, I thought so. I can't be dead. And watch this."

He pokes her Jello and it wobbles. He taps the lunch tray and it sounds off a beat. He eases down in the visitor's chair and it exhales a *brap* with the pressure on its air pocket.

"That was the chair. At least it knows I'm alive. So, got a mirror?"

She fishes out a compact, opens it, and hands it to him. He looks at the reflection and nearly drops the mirror about as far as his face falls.

"What?" she asks, alarmed.

"You didn't say I was … . Fuck me." He rubs his eyes, hiding the pained expression on his face.

"What's the matter?" she insists.

"I look old. Older than … . Jesus, how the fuck did I get to look like this?"

"Take it easy. You're not that old," she tries to reassure him. "You've got at least 40 years left."

"I look older than I was when I last saw myself. Okay?"

"No, not okay. That's a whole lot of strange. Maybe you are dead."

"That would explain a lot," he answers. "Then again, it would reverse a lot, too."

"If it's any consolation, you don't look dead."

"Gee, thanks."

"So," she says, sitting up with a wince at the pain in her ribs. "Back up. What do you remember that would explain why you're here. Do you remember coming to the hospital?"

"No. I remember lots of things before that. I guess it would be up to the time I drove a bus full of seniors to the casino."

"Please tell me that's a job and not a hobby."

He shows her the city transit patch on his arm. "Yes, I'm a bus driver. I'm not weird."

They both look up as Nick, the intern in green scrubs with a bruised shoulder, knocks at the door, carrying Monica's laptop case under his arm. He jingles the keys before him like he's entertaining a cat.

"I brought your fifth limb," he says. She gestures for it and he approaches, stepping on the right moccasin without causing pain. Jeff, however, makes a face and yells into Nick's ear. The cheeky doctor-to-be doesn't even feel a breeze.

She opens the lid, revealing a red shell with a peeling Wentworth University decal of a lion taking a bite out of the red and gold W.U.

Nick tosses her keys on the bed by her purse. "Don't push it. You're still recovering."

She turns the computer on and inserts a WiFi stick. Nick gets a text on his cell and exits.

Jeff props his right foot on the end of her bed and examines his shoes or, more accurately, what he pulled on his feet without thinking. "He didn't even leave a mark." He eyes the laptop. "You aren't by any chance pursuing a career in paranormal intelligence, are you?"

She snorts as she pulls up her documents folder and loads a working draft of her thesis. "The introduction for my master's thesis is due in a week and I've barely scratched the surface of my topic."

"Which is?" he asks, demonstrating more interest in a gummy substance on the bottom of his shoe, which he suspects is not from hospital floors.

"Twenty-first-century digital reading. E-books, Kindles, that kind of thing. It's a cultural juxtaposition with print culture dating back to Chaucer."

He gives a low whistle, impressed. "To quote my grandma, are you on the Google?"

She laughs, then gets an idea, and opens the search engine, typing in "Jeff Wilkinson." Seeing too

many of his *doppelgängers*, she adds "Wentworth."

"You're not very Internet-social, are you?" she says, finding an orthodontist on Wentworth Street in Seattle and the blog of a nature photographer from Wentworth, Nebraska, but nothing on a senior's centre bus driver from a small, out-of-the-way town in Canada.

"Oh, I don't know about that," says a voice from the door. Dr Head Case himself.

She feels a hot flush run over her face. "Sorry, Doc. I have a bad habit of talking to myself."

Dr Chatterton smiles and sits on the chair, right on top of Jeff, who waves a pair of jazz hands playfully before getting up.

"Monica, I've been told by some of the staff that you've been overheard carrying on a conversation in this room where, as you can see, there is no one here to talk to. You haven't had any visitors today and aren't using a phone, so what's the story?"

She glances over at the empty bed where Jeff is lounging and pulling his knees to his chest in a series of pull-ups. "Don't mind me," he says. "I'm just gonna lose a few dead pounds."

She takes a deep breath, contemplating the possibility of being fitted for a straitjacket.

"Doc, what if I told you I can …"

"Wait," Jeff says, holding up a finger. He points to the Jello.

"Don't call me crazy, Doc, but could you just watch the Jello for a second?"

He humours her. The Jello wobbles. But he sees nothing other than a lax, overly warm green substance, the same kind he's seen in countless hospital rooms, served to countless patients, over one too many years.

"What exactly I am supposed to be seeing, Monica?" he asks.

She looks for herself. The Jello is dancing, and no one can see it but she and her ghost.

AFTER SPENDING THE REST OF THE DAY TRYING TO convince a handful of specialists called in for psychiatric assessment that she is not losing her mind, she goes to sleep early, to rest it. At one point, she kicks Jeff out of her room. She has no strength left, and although he can be a real nuisance if he wants to, he has enough respect to give her space. Maybe, they agree, that will make the whole crazy experience come to an end. Not a resolution but a quick cut to the finish.

The bottom line is that they don't owe each other a thing. The problem is that he has nowhere to go. Literally.

Once specialist number four is en route to Room 19 and Monica has convinced Jeff to take a walk, he decides to avoid the elevator and jog the six flights of stairs to the lobby. He gets as far as the automatic front doors but, like a soulless wanderer at the pearly gates, cannot pass. He waits for people to come by and they do, in droves, but the joke of his nose painlessly hitting an invisible barrier can be funny only so many times. There is even a limit to the number of women he enjoys having perched on his lap in the waiting room. He spends the better part of the afternoon and evening people-watching, hoping for the subtlest hint of just what the hell he is doing here. He examines the contents of his pockets over and over again, expecting a cinematic twist of fate and getting a goose egg.

The evening shift begins at 7 p.m. He watches as tired nurses swap scrubs for grubs. A newly arrived one opens the closet to hang her coat and hip checks an open file drawer on her way from

behind the desk to start her rounds. Not expecting a random person to suddenly gain a sixth sense, he steps over and sits before the computer. He tries the mouse and the keyboard. No luck. He thought electronics were against him when he wasn't invisible. Now it was getting ridiculous.

He wanders back up to the sixth floor, walks the hall, and turns the corridor he missed on his initial visit. Through the window he sees Monica sleeping on her side, her back to the door. He notices her laptop, closed, its battery charging from a dusty wall outlet. He reaches down to retrieve it, and a tiny white spark of static electricity flares off his thumb via a set of metal prongs. It might as well have been numb; he doesn't even feel a tickle. He lifts the lid and sighs, remembering a childhood rule his mother had in the shopping mall: *Look but don't touch.* Never one for following rules, he presses the power button, and the screen lights up.

Puzzled, he thinks back. The flowers, the Jello, Monica's hand, and now her fifth limb. He smiles, remembering a favourite children's book. He can't recall the whole title, but it started with *This Can't Be Happening.*

Her login screen comes on: Renoir's portrait of a reading redhead above a password prompt. Three strikes – i.e., guesses – and you're out? He begins to write keywords on a pad of paper with a Wentworth Library pen filched from Monica's backpack. Only two: her name and her alma mater. Pathetic, he thinks. All he knows is it will be far easier to get his hands on the hospital files under the cover of darkness than in the light of day.

"Oh for Christ's sake, it's 'Elinor,'" a groggy Monica says. He jumps and nearly launches the computer off his lap. "Well," she adds. "You should feel relieved."

"Yeah, why's that?" he asks, typing "Eleanor" and getting the dreaded red X.

"You sure can't scare the dead." She glances at the screen. "It's 'Elinor' with an *i*, not an *ea*." He tries again, and it works. He shrugs at her in curiosity. "She's from my favourite book."

Observing no sign of recognition, she pulls out her battered copy of *Sense and Sensibility* with its sweet flowery cover.

"I see," he says absently. The PDF file open on the screen resembles the scan of an old newspaper. "Was she the sensible one?"

"Depends on your meaning of the word. Listen, since you're here, I've got something to show you."

"Yeah, me too," he says. "But you first."

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, JEFF CREEPS OUT OF ROOM 19 a few shades paler than he was going in. He holds up a hand to signal Monica to wait, hoping her head can hold itself up or he would be spotting her with it instead. He glances both ways, like an obedient child crossing the street, and curls a finger at her.

She tiptoes up the hall in her limp white hospital gown that leaves little to the imagination in back. He goes ahead, as her lookout, to the corner with coathooks in a caved-in area off the reception desk. She follows close behind and borrows a heavy fur-lined coat.

"To cover my patience?" she jokes, smoothing the sheer gown.

"You've been reading too many old books with bad jokes," he says.

She sticks her tongue out at him and reaches into the pockets for a pair of glasses with men's frames seen more in *America's Most Wanted* than American Apparel. She finds magnetic shades and clips them on over the lenses to hide some of the ugliness.

He points to the file drawers behind the main reception desk visible through a set of glass doors. With instinctive good manners, he takes hold of the door handle. She glances at him, wide-eyed, and nods at the brass bar still in his grip. He shakes his head and shrugs. Maybe it's not happening in Room 19, after all, she thinks.

"Wait!" she hisses, believing for just one lapsing moment that he might be seen and heard. She pushes him towards the couches with that same rubber plant and paint-by-numbers Chagall. She whispers, looking around to make sure no one notices a strange woman speaking intently to thin air: "If I'm near you, your actions seem to exist."

"Yeah, but only to you, remember?" he says, tapping a knuckle against her forehead. "Anybody home? If you can get close enough to the desk with me, I can get my file and get you back to the room quick-like."

Seeing her look of utter uncertainty, he touches her shoulder. "It's worth a shot," he says in a tone that insists on having the last word.

She sidles by the desk, checking her watch and humming a bar or two from a Gordon Lightfoot song that's been stuck in her head ever since she woke up. She winces as the healing bruises on her face pull with the cheek muscles needed to whistle. She tries not to make too much eye contact as the nurse, ignoring her, pecks at the keyboard. Jeff creeps silently to the drawers and grasps the one marked "W" with both hands. He slides it open and braces his fingers along the rolling stoppers to quiet the whirring sound they make.

When the nurse stretches, they both freeze. But she's merely popping a few air pockets in her back, weak from a long haul. He goes on fingering the hanging files until he finds one labelled "Wilkinson, J." The nurse stands. He yanks the file out of the drawer and, the gesture itself almost seamless, opens his jacket, ripping a hole in the worn, thin seam of his armpit. The nurse hears the faint ripping sound. As he closes the drawer and hustles away, Monica coughs and – the nurse glancing up – waves her off with an apologetic hand, walking over to the water dispenser for a drink. Jeff meets her there, grinning like a hyena, and plants a kiss on her cheek.

"Here, you hang onto it," he says. She opens her coat and tucks the folder into a deep, zippered, breast pocket inside. This time she holds the door open.

They get about ten paces down the hall before everything changes. Somewhere in the world at this very moment, a butterfly flaps its wings, a tornado touches down, and Monica Selberg fails to look up in time to avoid colliding with a tall, upright, silver box. It is the last thing she remembers seeing before everything goes black.

WHEN SHE OPENS HER EYES, HE IS GONE. Not a note or a trace of him anywhere. Dr Chatterton fails to convince her that the impact of her accident – the first one – made her hallucinate. Something about altering the emotional cortex of her brain. The sensible part of herself wants to believe him; her emotional, Austenian sensibility cannot.

The second accident – walking into a heavy-duty metal storage bin being wheeled on a dolly – hadn't fixed what the first accident altered. At least in a medical sense. But in a practical one, that was exactly what it had done.

After four days, she sits up and stands beside her bed without feeling a wicked sense of vertigo stab her behind the eyes. She pulls her laptop out from under the bed and turns it on. On the desktop featuring a close-up of Oliver, her Dickensian dachshund, she finds and opens the red swirling icon of a PDF saved under the initials "J.W."

A single-page scan of a mottled black-and-white newspaper article unfurls on the screen, like the scroll of a royal decree. She re-reads the content for the first time in several days:

Wentworth Herald

APRIL 29, 2011

BUS ACCIDENT CLAIMS FIVE

Driver "Saved Our Lives"
Before Falling Comatose

What began as a jumpstart to spring vacation for a busload of seniors ended in tragedy yesterday around 3:45 p.m. along the Highway 3 bridge approaching Fournier Road. Wentworth Transit driver Jeff Wilkenson was shuttling 12 residents of Springvale Retirement Centre to CasinoRama for an evening of entertainment. A red Ford truck carrying a bundle of 4 x 8 lumber not securely fastened to its roof rack lost its cargo while changing lanes, causing Wilkenson to swerve into incoming traffic. The bus nearly collided with a Toyota minivan before breaking the guard rail and plunging into Westview Lake.

As Len Ivankovich, the driver of the Toyota, called paramedics, Wilkenson, who has driven local buses for six years, has a spotless driving record and CPR training, pried open the emergency door of the submerged bus and carried seven of his passengers to safety, despite suffering lacerations to the face and a dislocated shoulder.

Ivankovich and a group of witnesses sat with the "Springvale Seven" as the survivors have been called, until ambulances arrived.

"He saved our lives," says Maude Hinson, 83. "He acted heroically and while being hurt at that. He did all he could do and more. For that, I'm forever grateful to him."

Five passengers drowned after sustaining injuries related to the impact. After successfully bringing 90-year-old Sidney Garrish to the surface, Wilkenson dove back underwater to look for more survivors and fell unconscious from what examiners conclude was the result of a previously undetected concussion. He remains comatose at Wentworth Hospital where the "Springvale Seven" were released after successful treatment for minor injuries. The driver of the red Ford truck left the scene and remains unidentified.

One typo had left Jeff Wilkinson anonymous to the Internet. A combination of nameless keywords had sent her to the digitized archive of the city newspaper. The article pointed to a conclusion that neither of them could believe.

Monica is fuzzy on some things, but she clearly recalls Jeff's reaction as he scanned the article by her hospital bed that night.

"I'm what?" he had asked, and she pursed her lips, nodding. Her eyes were the most sympathetic ones he had ever seen.

She remembers the file, of course. The coat she wore had been stripped away by emergency personnel and handed to an orderly. He, assuming it to be hers, had hung it in the closet right next to her bed, just feet away. And it kills her now not be able to go over and pull out the file with the label "Wilkinson, J."

She has a moment alone on day four. It takes her fifteen minutes to sit up, rotate her legs, push herself out of bed, and walk the three steps to the cupboard. She unzips the pocket, praying that no one has snooped.. She reaches in and, feeling the ribbed edge of the file folder, lets out a sigh.

Her head stinging, she opens the folder and sees that the first sheet is an admittance form. Behind it is his medical history. But the log stapled to the left side of the folder interests her most.

She runs a finger down the column to the last entry, dated February 21, 2012. *Patient exhibits subtle twitches in the fingers of both hands. Wm. C.* Next to the comment is Jeff Wilkinson's room number. *61.*

She feels her headache getting worse and buzzes the nurse for a pill. By the empty vase beside her bed, the card on the table faces away from her. The teddy bear in the corner is upside down, as is the message.

ON APRIL 28, 2011, JEFF WILKINSON WAS AWAKENED at 5 a.m. by the hammering of a woodpecker on the birch tree outside his bedroom window. He rolled out of bed and cursed at it, slamming the window shut before returning to bed and oversleeping by a couple of hours.

Running late that afternoon, he parked his Casino Coach in between two faded yellow lines and paid for a bouquet of flowers at a corner shop. As he waited in line, he scratched the back of his leg with his foot; feeling an odd sensation, he looked down. It was the fabric of a woman's moccasin against his jeans. He chuckled at his mistake. Had his girlfriend always had big feet or were his just small? Either way, her fashion sense could use some work. So could her lack of a soft nature. Maybe the flowers would help that along.

"What can I get you?" the old man at the cash register asked him.

"Surprise me."

He laid the bouquet in the large glove compartment and drove to Springvale Retirement Centre. Walking to the back door of the bus, he stepped in something sticky that he wasn't sure he wanted to identify and lowered the ramp. He then helped wheel a few less than able-bodied seniors onto the bus, braking their chairs between handrails. The others sat in the bright-blue upholstered seats.

"They still haven't mandated belts for these seats?"

"No sir, no ma'am, not yet, sorry to say."

Making the sharp turn onto the Highway 3 bridge, he waved to the Smart Car that let him in. A grandma on board said how "adorable" it was.

One of the men – Jeff would never remember his name, but he was one of the unlucky five – sat near the front. He spotted the flowers.

"Are those for your girlfriend?" he asked with surprising politeness. Genuinely interested.

"Yeah. She's in the hospital. Broke her leg water-skiing. On vacation, of course, so she'll heal just in time to get back to work. Isn't that always the way?"

"You hoping to swing back tonight to see her?"

Henry? Murray? Something ending with a *y*.

"Sure hope so."

The old man points at the red Ford ahead of them.

"Something's fallin' off that truck."

MONICA SELBERG SIGNS HER RELEASE FORM and is given a prescription for the recurring headaches. The taxi will be another half hour or so. What the hell, she thinks. I might as well give it a try. She asks for directions to Room 61. On her way, a heavy brown fur-lined coat with a hideous pair of glasses tucked in the pocket finds itself returned to the coatroom on the first floor. And at the nurse's station a file folder with the label "Wilkinson, J" finds itself propped up against the computer screen, whence the duty nurse returns it to the "W" file drawer without another thought or speck of wonder about its absence.

Monica finds that Room 61 looks much the same as her own inverted room. Two parallel rows of beds are occupied with bodies in the deepest states of sleep. She takes a slow walk up the middle row, gazing at faces that are unknown to her – but for one, that of a fully intact man who hasn't moved from his place for almost a year.

"There you are," she says, astonished to see him. He looks thinner than she remembers. She understands now what scared the hell out of him when he looked in the mirror. The stubble on his face has grown coarser, small flecks of grey coming through the brown; his skin looks as ashen as a storm cloud; hollow trenches are forming under his eyes.

She sits by his side. When a nurse comes to shave him, she offers to do it herself.

"So, where were we?" she asks as she lathers his cheeks and chin. "Well, I must say I never congratulated you, being a hero in my company all this time. You're humble about it, which is refreshing."

She makes gentle strokes with the razor. "I know you have a girlfriend. Or at least, you did." She nicks his chin. "Ouch, sorry." She stops the blood with a tissue, his face set in a muted frown.

"Don't look at me like that. You have to realize that she had to move on. She visited you for a while and had so much hope that you would wake up. Of course, you should have done it when she was there, just so it would be romantic and perfect." She bats her eyelashes playfully. "But you just had to lie there like a carrot. I almost don't blame her for leaving you."

She wipes his smooth face clean with a warm, damp cloth.

"C'mon, handsome, open your eyes. I need to talk to you and this one-way conversation just isn't cutting it."

She wipes tiny streaks of excess lather from his sideburns.

"Oh, I meant to tell you. I've still got that song stuck in my head. You want to hear it?"

ON FEBRUARY 21, 2012, MONICA SELBERG DROVE through the beginnings of a dull, slushy late-winter rain. She pulled up to a red light, heard a soft tune on the radio, and turned it up to sing along. Gordon Lightfoot.

If you could read my mind, love
What a tale my thoughts would tell
Just like an old time movie
'Bout a ghost from a wishing well
And I will never be set free
As long as I'm a ghost you can't see.

She was singing when a truck driver came into her blind spot. Her voice lurched into a scream as her tires slipped on the wet road, sliding towards the mast of a bridge.

THE SONG RESTS ON HER MIND, LINGERING and swaying there. She doesn't know why until, after two weeks of fluttering eyelids and twitching fingertips, he awakens.

The burning lights, a single blurry figure.

Once his eyes focus, he sees the sunspots on her arms. Strange that they would show even in February. Or is it no longer February?

How long has it been since I've been anywhere or anyone?

She takes a deep breath and smiles at him. Her eyes are wet pearls with a splash of beautiful blue. He remembers seeing a gorgeous set of blue ones some time ago. Had they belonged to her? Was it possible to remember a rarer sight on more than one face?

He points a finger at her heart.

"Do I know you?" he asks.

Before

Sometimes while I'm listening to the radio (this is true!)
I think, *It would be nice to listen to the radio,*
and I reach out to turn the radio on.
Listen! This is true! So strange!
Another example: I'm watching TV and, as I'm watching TV,
I think, *I wonder what's on TV?*
Listen! This is true! So strange! But

(Listen, this is a serious poem! For God's sake, pay attention!)

indisputably, before
these things,
in the days of very long ago,
they sang.
Perhaps my great great grandmother sang while hanging laundry out to dry,
and thought (unquestionably, I am sure!), *I should like to sing.*

And in the cryptic days of wandering,
when great silences would envelop everything,
when the mother tongues were simmering,
and the night sky was knowing and alive,
did we each feel to ourselves
as we looked at the night sky,
(Of course! It must have been! No?)
I should like to look at the night sky.

Impression

We say, for example, *Here is a work by Emerson,*
although no one is left to remember him …

That is, the memory of his touch
or the memory of the feeling
as he entered, or left, a room.

TERRY TROWBRIDGE

Envy

A dying fly that has one last hour
to chirp like a cricket
is lying on its back and trying
to kick notes into the air
where it used to be the envy of crickets
by flying.

Phonemes

Your name is you. This is you.
Your name, your name, you in the tones of love.
You in the tones of however we say it.
This is you: this tone however we say it.
Before there is you and me there is only you.
Before we know that our bodies have boundaries,
when we still think as if we are the entire universe,
we interpret everything else as part of ourselves.
We hear others as ourselves.
When they say "This is you," (your name in tones),
we hear "I am me, we are this" (your name in tones).
And that combination of syllables is the world
until we experience a second, much subtler birth.
"This is me, and not them."
But maybe that is the first time we tell a story about ourselves.
Maybe that is the story of how our name referred to only one thing.

HARRIET G. MULDER

Calvinism

I despise myself
so it must hold true
that, given time,
I will despise you

Honey bee

You used to visit our garden on Maplewood,
an easy-access street-level grotto

Now, here you are, on my balcony
many stories up,
an aerie inaccessible to all

But thee

Mum

Early mum, late mum, and a geranium in between –
these are the belles of the ball in the fall,
a living balcony screen

Hunched down in wicker in my chemise, I, too, a fading belle
Early Mum, late Mum – and a peace at the end

And surprise that all could be well

TRACY O'BRIEN

Space

A METALLIC SILVER BANNER HUNG ACROSS THE CORNICE ON THE FRONT DOOR TO 23A Poplar Place. Red, blue, green, and yellow block letters spelled out "WELCOME HOME !", the words rippling in the crisp breeze. Colourful clusters of translucent balloons were tied to the nearly naked maple saplings lining the short driveway. The balloons bounced off each other and the branches, occasionally popping and deflating, hanging limp like used condoms.

Nikki pulled her Subaru up to the curb in front of the beige duplex and parked. A shout caught her attention, and she turned to see her petite friend, clad in black and pink Lycra, running down the steps of the house, waving her arms. Yolanda darted over and opened the car door before she could get her seatbelt off.

"I saw you pull up. Damn it! I wanted to be outside before you got here! Gizmo was going to show you his new trick. Oh, I'm so happy you're here!" Yolanda reached into the car and hugged her. A small white and brown dog tore around Yolanda's ankles in frantic circles, intermittently hopping onto its back legs and yapping in manic staccato.

She returned the hug, giggling. "Okay, let me get out. Is his trick standing up?"

Yolanda moved back, "Oh no. He just does that for attention. No, he wanted to show you how he can sit quiet and wait until he's called, like a big boy."

"I see."

"Come on, Gizmo. Let's show Nikki what you can do."

She pulled her sweater tighter around her body and leaned against the car as Yolanda beckoned Gizmo to the top of the steps. She had the dog sit and stay, and then she walked back to the car. Gizmo remained on the landing.

She vibrated with pride. "See? Isn't that awesome?"

"He's very smart. Way to go, Gizmo!" Nikki shouted to the dog. He craned his neck towards the unpainted railing post next to him, sniffed it, stood up and cocked his rear leg.

"Giz –" Yolanda started to scold, but stopped and whispered to her, "I don't want him to hear me being mad because it will compromise his self-esteem. He's still learning, but it's hard not to get mad at him sometimes."

"Uh-huh. I'm sure he'll catch on soon. At least it's not on the carpet, right?"

"True. Let's get your stuff inside, hey?"

Nikki sized up the driveway. "I've got quite a bit. Do you think you can move your car so I can back in?"

"Yeah, of course."

Returning to her wagon, she watched as Yolanda rolled her red hatchback forward a few feet, got out and waved her back. Nikki crept the car into the driveway and had just felt the front tires settle onto the asphalt when she heard "Okay, stop!"

She rolled the window down, "Are you sure I'm in far enough?" She leaned forward, straining to see how much of the bonnet was over the sidewalk.

"Yeah, you're fine. I didn't realize you had such a big car when I said there's room for two."

"Oh, I thought I mentioned the Outback."

"I don't think so. I'm sure you won't get ticketed, though. It'll be fine. Come on, roomie. Let's get you moved in!"

Nikki heaved her suitcase onto the porch of the split entrance. Stopping to catch her breath, she brushed the hair out of her eyes. Yolanda, in front, was carrying two bankers boxes loaded with books. Nimbly she removed her yellow sneakers and slid into the pink ballet slippers sitting on the mat.

"The kitchen and living room are upstairs," she said over her shoulder, "but I'll show you your room first, okay? You're down here by the rec-room and laundry. It's the basement, but it's warm. Plus, you get your own bathroom."

"That's great. Do you have your own bathroom, too?"

"Well, the main bathroom upstairs is right next to my bedroom anyway. It's really bright down here, though, and I think your bedroom might be a bit bigger than mine." She skipped down the stairs. Nikki hoisted the suitcase and followed her.

The stairs brought them to a large airy room with amber walls and beige berber carpet. A massive olive couch took up most of the far wall, its deep cushions like huge marshmallows. Two posters in black plastic frames hung above the couch. One showed a longhaired white kitten. The kitten appeared to cast a large shadow of a lion roaring – "DREAM BIG" was written across the bottom. The other featured a stretch of red sandy beach. Waves tumbled onto the foam-encrusted shoreline while a brilliant purple and orange sun settled into the horizon. Nikki read, underneath it, "Let Whatever You Do Today Be Enough."

Sunlight peeked through white plastic blinds covering two narrow windows set just beneath the ceiling.

"I keep the blinds closed along that wall because it's facing the neighbours' house. It's nice in the spring, though. I have tulips planted in front of the window, so when you open the blinds all you see is flowers."

"Sounds pretty."

"It is!" She turned and pointed to a treadmill in the corner of the room. "I work out down here sometimes when the weather is really shitty." A poster hung here, too, just above the front of the machine, always facing the user. It displayed the torso of a woman wearing a black sports bra, her hand resting flat on her sweat-shimmering, ripped abs. Next to the image, bold black lettering admonished: "A YEAR FROM NOW YOU'LL WISH YOU HAD STARTED TODAY!"

"Do you run?" Yolanda asked. "You can use it whenever you want."

"No, I tried, but it kills my knees."

"You really should, though. I teach a beginner's class at 'The Running Room.' I can totally help you learn to run without hurting yourself."

"Yeah, that might be good."

"You definitely should. You spend a lot of time sitting and reading."

She was nodding her head slowly as she said this, her eyebrows furrowed in concern. Nikki thought of her doctor lecturing her at her last checkup about the importance of regular pap smears.

Yolanda turned to another room, stood sideways in the doorframe and swept out her arm. "And this is your new room! What do you think?"

Nikki walked past her. "Four walls, a closet, a window, and a door. Works for me!"

"I know it's kind of blah. I never got around to painting it, but now you can do whatever you want with it."

"Maybe a bright green."

"You know what? Whatever you want. You're single and free now, baby! Maybe we can paint it this weekend. Unless you want to unpack and get settled away first."

"That'd be fun. The painting, I mean, not the unpacking. I can do whatever I want with it, can't I? Maybe I'll draw a giant portrait of Todd and put a big red X through it."

"Oh my God!" Yolanda squealed in mock shock. "I'm not sure that's the healthiest thing to do. Do we want Todd's face here all the time?"

"Hadn't thought of it that way. Why don't I get the rest of my stuff in, and then maybe we can pick out some colours?"

"Fun! Okay. And we should go over the lease, too, so you can sign it."

"A lease? I thought it was month-to-month."

"Oh. Oh no, it's a year lease. I can't do month-to-month – I need to be able to rely on my tenant, well, in your case roommate, so I have the financial security. That's not going to be a problem, is it?"

"No, no, it'll be fine. I've heard horror stories about leases, that's all, but whatever. I'm not going anywhere anyway, sister!"

"Perfect!" Yolanda squeaked. "I'll go back out and get some more boxes. You start to unpack."

A WEEK LATER, NIKKI WAS DRIVING TO MEET Yolanda at Whole Earth Foods, a conspicuous orange box-store with dark green trim that sat on a corner less than ten minutes from her office.

She had just managed to angle her arms the right way to channel the icy air blasting out of the vents straight into her armpits when she found the store. She crawled around the parking lot twice, ignoring empty spaces and enjoying the AC before resigning herself to a spot. Finally she turned off the engine and got out. The thick heat slammed into her, sat heavy on her chest, washed down her body.

She started towards the store and saw Yolanda right away, seated in the shade at a folding banquet table by the front door. A plastic banner was wrapped around the table, reaching down to the concrete. She was surrounded by tidy stacks of pamphlets printed on recycled paper that extolled the virtues of a vegan lifestyle and promoted organic food.

"Hey! You made it! See? Told you it's easy to find."

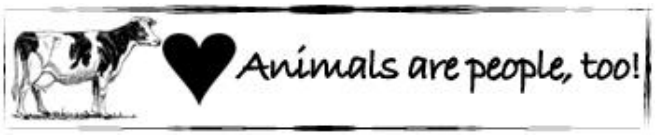
"Yeah, I'm surprised I didn't notice it before."

Yolanda picked up a purple plastic misting bottle, closed her eyes, spritzed herself and flicked on the fan. "You don't notice something until you need it. You want a spritz?" She held out the bottle.

"Thanks. So, how's it going? Convert any carnivores?"

"I wish! People are nice, though. Hey – what do you think of my banner?"

Nikki stepped back to read it:



"Well, it'd make me think twice about eating a cow."

Yolanda glowed. "Yeah, none of the ones at the office had quite the right message, so I made my own and picked it up at the printer this morning."

Nikki sized up the grocery store. "This building looks like a giant cheesie."

"They don't sell cheesies here. I think it's supposed to be an orange. Hey, if you're hungry you should have one of these." She reached under the table, pulled out a bar, and presented it to her roommate.

"Thank you, I'm starving!" Nikki ripped off the brown recycled wrapper and bit off a chunk of the bar.

"Happy to share. I love them!"

Nikki frowned, her eyes widening in panic.

"Are you okay, Nik?"

Yolanda jumped up and ran around the table. "Shit! Are you allergic to chia seeds?"

Nikki, shaking her head, spun away to spit out the glob. It smacked the pavement, green and brown sludge splattering out from the impact.

"What the hell is that?" She pulled a tissue out of her pocket and wiped her mouth.

"It's a Vegan Vitality bar. They're really great – and good for you!"

"It tastes like shit."

Yolanda burst into laughter. "Don't be so silly. That one must be expired. I'm so sorry." She patted her on the shoulder and walked back around the table. "Here, have a bottle of water and I'll get you another bar."

"I'll just take the water, thanks."

Yolanda shook her head. "You're kinda funny, you know that?" She passed Nikki the water and watched her guzzle it back. "Oh, there's a customer coming. Can you just stand over there?" She shooed her a few feet to the side of the table. A tall, slender man in his seventies exited the store. He wore khakis and a light blue, short-sleeved golf shirt. A few wisps of silver peeked out from his white ball cap. He tipped his head. "Beautiful day, ladies."

Yolanda hopped up. "It certainly is. You definitely need your hat on today, don't you?"

"Yes, but you girls are smart, staying in the shade."

"Yeah. I wonder – if you have a minute, can I chat with you quickly about animal rights?"

The man glanced over at Nikki for a moment and cleared his throat. "Well, I'm afraid I'm on my way to an appointment."

Yolanda slumped. He added, "But maybe you can give me some of this literature. I can't see myself giving up meat, but it never hurts to read, does it?"

She perked up. "Of course. That would be great!" She grabbed one pamphlet off the top of each of the five piles. "If you have any questions about anything, please contact our office. The contact information is right here, and you can follow us on Facebook." She pointed at the email address and phone number on the back of the flyers and passed them to him.

He accepted the flyers and tapped them against the placard next to her that read: "BE VEGAN, PLEASE." He winked. "No, thanks. But the politeness is much appreciated."

He turned and began walking across the parking lot. He was disappearing in the rainbow of Vespas and hybrid cars when Yolanda stood up, fists clenched at her side, and shouted after him, "It's really kind of you to eat animals, you disgusting fuck!"

She stood stiffly behind the table, her nostrils flaring, eyes fixed on the back of his head as it bobbed along. He stopped, just visible at the opposite end of the lot, his head and the vehicles vibrating in the heat rising from the pavement. He twisted around slightly for a moment, turned back, and then vanished into his car.

"Yolanda?"

Nikki thought of the time her brother had come across an injured Border Collie in the woods. Their parents were frantic because Chris was four hours late coming home, and it was pitch black outside. He'd come across the animal shaking and whimpering in some brush, a piece of snare wound around her foreleg. It had cut down to the bone and was tangled in a clump of bloody, matted fur. He said it took him an hour and a half and a bologna sandwich to gain enough of the dog's trust to get the wire off and the leg wrapped. Then it took even longer to lead the dog home because she wouldn't let him carry her.

Nikki moved forward a step. "You okay, there?"

Yolanda turned her head slowly. "Did you see that?"

"I did. But forget him. He's just one person. Maybe he doesn't realize, you know? About meat."

"Nikki!" She punched the table. "The guy is a fucking pig. He winked at me. Didn't you see that?"

"Oh, okay. Yes. I saw that."

She looked back across the parking lot towards the empty space where his car had been. "I hate it when they treat you like a child. I hope when he goes home tonight his wife cooks him a fat, juicy steak. And he chokes on it."

Nikki nodded. "You know what? It's really hot, like gross hot. I think it'd be fine if you just called it a day."

Yolanda began to pick up the stacks of pamphlets and slap them into a cardboard box. "He ruined it. I'm just going to go back to the office." She threw the placard in the box, and ripped the plastic banner off the table, balled it up and stuffed it in a large brown paper bag.

"Tell you what – I'm going to go inside, get some of that soy fake ground beef stuff and we'll have tacos for supper. How does that sound?"

"Oh, I think that would really help!"

"And some wine."

"Well, we need water more than wine in this heat."

"It's not about need. It's Friday. And grapes are good for you."

"Maybe I'll have one glass." She threw her arms around Nikki. "You are the best friend ever."

Nikki arrived home an hour later, her arms laden with brown paper grocery bags. She pressed the doorbell with her elbow, but there was no response. She stood back, lifted her foot, and managed to simultaneously push it down on the handle and shove it forward. The door opened, and she was greeted by Enya's ethereal lilt pouring out from the Bose in the living room, telling her to let the Orinoco flow. "Hey! I'm home!" she called out, sliding her boots off and pushing them neatly onto the shoe rack.

"Hi, in here!" Her roommate's voice rang down the hall.

She walked into the kitchen and found Yolanda placing a bottle of apple juice in a blue plastic bin. The bottle slid into the only remaining empty space in the tub, between a case of Coke, a box of microwavable popcorn, a bag of cinnamon raisin bagels, and a loaf of whole-wheat bread. Most of the groceries that Nikki had bought earlier that week.

Nikki went over to the counter, laid down her bags, and grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl. "Ya kicking me out of the kitchen?"

Yolanda stood up. "Of course not! Not at all. It's just – I was going to ask you if you can keep all your junk food in your bedroom."

"Oh.".

"Yeah. But then you weren't home, and it was all there looking at me, and so I figured I could pack it up for you."

"Oh, okay." Nikki glanced into the bin sitting on the floor between them. "Thanks."

"It's just – I see it all there and I want it, you know? But I don't really want it. Like, I don't want to want it."

"You crave it."

"Yes! Yes, and the kitchen is supposed to be a positive, nurturing place, right? So, I feel like it's not fair for you to have all this stuff in my kitchen – our kitchen – that's making me angry."

"Because you don't want to want it."

"Right!"

"I guess, whatever. Okay."

Yolanda's shoulders slumped. "I know. It looks weird, what I'm doing."

Nikki opened the cupboard under the sink and discarded the peel into the garbage bin, careful that none of the banana left traces of peel on the bag that might later transfer to the inside of the cupboard door. "No. Well, I mean – the apple juice?"

"Loaded with sugar."

"Right, right. But the bread? It's whole wheat."

"Gluten."

"Ah."

Yolanda put her hands on her hips. "Look, if this is going to be a thing for you –"

"No. No, whatever." She squatted to lift the tub. "I can keep it out of your sight, if it means that much to you."

"Oh, it does. Thank you! Hugs." Yolanda made tiny fists and embraced the air like there was an invisible child between her arms. "Tell you what, you bring that downstairs and I'll pour us some wine and get supper started. We're going out tonight!"

NIKKI STUFFED HER BANKCARD IN HER POCKET and was turning to leave the bar when she was nudged from the side. She looked up and recognized the salt-and-pepper curls, hazel eyes, dimpled chin. "Steve! I haven't seen you since you and Yolanda broke up!"

"Hey, Nik! What's new with you?" He squirmed his way in between the competing elbows and faced her, leaning one arm on the bar.

"Not much. Well, lots I guess. Todd and I broke up. I moved in with Yolanda."

"Oh yeah? How's that working out?"

"Good. Great. She had a shitty day today, so we decided to go out. She's here somewhere." She looked past him, but saw no sign of her roommate.

"Too bad she can't just chill out and have a draw like the old days, huh?"

She snapped upright. "Oh, yeah. I forgot she used to smoke up."

"Yeah. All the time." He waved a twenty in the air.

She took a swig of her beer while he leaned across the bar to speak to the bartender. She caught a glimpse of Yolanda leading some guy wearing a John Deere baseball cap out to the dance floor. They disappeared into the pulsating mash of bodies.

Steve turned back to her. "Anyway, I guess she got uptight after her dad's church burned down."

"What?" Her voice cracked as she tried to speak over the bass throbbing through her chest. "Did you say 'church'?"

"Yeah, her dad's church back home. I don't think he was drunk when it happened, though. Nobody even got hurt or anything. She went mad fundraising to rebuild it. She still at that?"

"No. I don't think so."

The bartender placed two rum and coke in front of him. "Probably a good thing. She's a nice girl, you know? She just goes kinda crazy sometimes." He tossed some money on the bar, picked up his drinks and looked at her. "Anyway, nice chatting with you. Good luck."

"Yeah, later."

She grabbed her beers and muscled her way onto the dance floor. She bounced into Yolanda and John Deere writhing against each other near the back of the crowd. "Here. This one's on me," she shouted, passing her roommate a bottle.

"Thanks!" Yolanda pressed her mouth to Nikki's ear and hissed, "Help me ditch this guy!" She popped her head around and wiggled back over to him. Nikki watched her shout something at him and then elbow her way out of the crowd. Nikki stared at her new dance partner and shrugged.

"She had to go to the bathroom," he bellowed.

She nodded. "Okay, well, I'm gonna go look for my friends. I'll tell Yolanda to find you when she comes out." He raised his bottle as if in a toast and walked off the floor.

She strained her neck to survey the crowd and saw Yolanda leaving the bathroom. She shoved a path through to her. "What the fuck was that?"

"I'm sorry! I just had to get clear of that guy. You're better at that sort of thing."

"Well, thanks a lot for bailing on me."

Strobe lights cast a rainbow of colours across their taut bodies. Yolanda looked around the club, her eyes blinking against the flashes and straining in the blackness. She put her beer down on a ledge. "I'm going home."

"Oh, come on! You don't have to go. We can tell that guy to fuck off."

"No, I'm doing my long run tomorrow before I go home for the week. You should leave with me."

"Yolanda, it's 12:30. I'm staying." She tipped her head and guzzled some beer.

Yolanda grabbed her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. Measuring her words, as if speaking to a foreigner: "Are you sure you're okay?" she asked.

"I think I'll survive."

She shoved her own beer into Nikki's empty hand. "Fine. Here, you can drink this. Call me if you need anything."

NIKKI CALLED A CAB FIRST THING IN THE MORNING. She paid the driver and lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the sun's glare. She leaned into the wind, the gusts ripping at her jacket. A flapping sound drew her attention to the driveway.

"You've got to be kidding me."

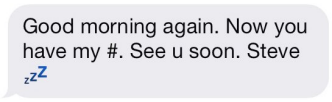
She tore the ticket out from under her car's windshield wiper.

She tiptoed up the steps, one hand gripping the yellow paper as it slapped her fist, the other hand knotted around the railing. The gusts mangled her hair and choked her.

She unlocked the door and delicately stepped inside, listening to the drone of the treadmill and its accompanying *thump-thump-thump-thump*. She leaned over the stairs and shouted, "Hey, Yolanda! Good morning!"

She could hear Yolanda chanting breathlessly, "Soft-er-fast-er-re-lax-er-soft-er-fast-er-re-lax-er."

"Christ. It's 7 a.m. on a Saturday," Nikki said, hanging up her jacket. She went upstairs to the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. Her phone buzzed.



"Have a good night?"

She jumped, coffee splashing out of her mug and over the counter. Yolanda lunged past her for a towel and began soaking up the mess. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you."

"No, I was a bit zoned out there. I haven't slept yet."

Yolanda's eyebrows peaked.

"Not like that. I just met up with some friends."

"Friends." Yolanda crouched down and rummaged through the cupboard. "Have you seen my protein powder?"

"By the cereal." She poured more coffee into her mug.

"So, how big is it?"

"What?"

Yolanda poured a cup of steel cut oats into a saucepan and laid it on the stove.

"You know. His cock."

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely!"

Yolanda began to stir the oats, waiting for them to boil.

"I'm not kidding. I wasn't at anything like that. Jesus."

"Okay, okay."

Yolanda wet a cloth and wiped over where the coffee had spilled.

She pushed her chair back and stood. "I've got to go to bed for a few hours. Will you be around later?"

"No, I'm grabbing a shower, then me and Gizmo are hitting the road, aren't we, boy?"

From his purple satin pillow in the corner the dog yapped his approval.

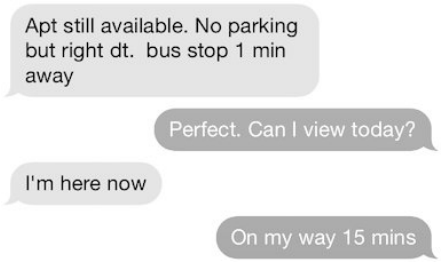
It was still light out when she woke. The house was thick with silence. She padded up to the kitchen, turned on the kettle, and sat down. An envelope was propped against the pumpkin spice candle in the centre of the table.

She picked it up and opened it.

> Dear Nikki,
>
> I'm sorry to do this in a letter but I need to get it off my chest before I go home and your still in bed. I'm concerned about you. I think your behaviour is getting out of hand. I was a bit scandaled when you got home this morning. I know it was only once but you comprimised yourself and its a sign of a bigger problem. Maybe you can take a break from drinking for a little while? I need peace in my life and so do you!
>
> I hope you know this all comes from a place of light and love. We'll talk more when I get back next weekend.
>
> Y ♡

"Nothing happened!" she screamed, slapping the letter onto the table. After staring out the window, she shook her head, picked up the letter, and read it again. "Fuck. You," she said under her breath.

An hour later, her phone buzzed.



Nikki grabbed her coat and went outside. She ran around her car, stopping several times to take photos of it at different angles. Then she sat in her car and texted Steve.

She dropped the phone on the passenger seat and drove off.

THE FOLLOWING FRIDAY NIGHT STEVE WAS sitting forward on the couch in Yolanda's living room, elbows resting on his knees, watching Nikki pace.

"Just pick up the phone and call her."

"I know! I am." She spun on her heels and walked back across the room.

"She can't do anything to you."

"I know that, Steve. Obviously."

"Don't get pissy with me. I'm not the one who wrote the letter."

"I'm sorry. I just don't see why I've got to tell her anything. I should leave her a note."

She stopped in the middle of the room and looked at him, her lips pursed, her fists on her hips.

He handed her the phone, and she dialed.

"Hey, Yolanda. How's it going?"

"…"

"It's fine. Listen, we need –"

"…"

"Yeah, I got the note. Yeah –"

She rolled her eyes at Steve.

"Yolanda, I have something important to tell you."

She took a deep breath.

"I'm moving out. I'm sorry. It's just not –"

"…"

"Tomorrow. But it's –"

"…"

"No, it's done. Downtown. I sold my car, and –"

"…"

"By myself, actually. Your rent is – hello?"

He whispered, "Is she gone?"

"I think she hung up on me."

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, NIKKI WAS SPRAWLED on a faux fur blanket in the middle of her living room floor. Her MacBook and a half-case of beer sat open in front of her. A thin finger of sunlight reached across the room, having burst its way through a crack in the drawn curtains. The warmth caressed her naked buttocks. Downtown tones gently penetrated her solitude: the steady hum of traffic, an occasional car door slamming, babbling voices growing and shrinking past the window. She stretched on her stomach, flipping through Facebook, a half-eaten deluxe pizza with extra cheese on one side of her, a bowl of *sour cream & onion* chips on the other. She scooped up a handful of chips, shovelled them into her mouth, and washed them down with a generous swig of Coors Lite. A message notification popped up on her screen and she clicked it.

Kathy White

Hey Nikki! Are you & Yolanda still friends? Might want to check her page …

Nikki Stuart

Thanks, Kathy. I moved out, but no racket. Still friends. Just want to try being on my own. ☺

Nikki paused, and then visited Yolanda's page.

Yolanda Saunders

8 minutes

So nice when roomie moves out unannounced and dumps you with 4 months rent due. Anyone know a good lawyer?

"Oh, for Christ's sake." She sat up and typed a reply.

Yolanda, ALL the rent money is in an envelope on your desk. You are not out any money. No lease broken. Hope that clears up the confusion.

She hit enter and took a mouthful of beer. After a few minutes, she refreshed Yolanda's page.

DO YOU KNOW YOLANDA?

To see what she shares with friends, send her a friend request.

23 mutual friends

A laugh bubbled up from Nikki's chest. She shook her head, returned to her own page and updated her status.

My good friends, it is time for me to move on. Light and love to all. Letting go. Rising above! ♥ ☮

LEE SLONIMSKY

Ancestor

"There was a light film of dust, such as accumulates in the cleanest
room when it is left shut up." — Raymond Chandler, *The Lady in the Lake*

Dust is at the very core of the universe.
Stars formed from clouds of dust.
So did we.

So when you're sitting at your baby grand,
11 a.m. on a Tuesday morning,
sunlight from the bay window
luminescing its polished ebony,
and you're troubled by a few spinning motes
or a smatter of speckles on one onyx key,
say hello to your venerable,
cosmic, distinguished and meek ancestor,
a speck of Is
that wouldn't harm a fly.

The meek not only inherit the earth,
they are the earth.

And when your gaze strays to
the glimmering ocean beyond the window,
breezetossed winks of seaspray
blinking back at you in agreement
that you're both a matter of dust
arranged, rearranged by the cosmos
in Is's eternal howl;
your first tentative keystrike in "C"
puts an exclamation
on slim aeronautics of dust,
and your second seems to rejoice
at how smoothly one intrepid note
comes in for a filmy landing
on a stretch of mahogany
as blank as primordial zero.

LEE SLONIMSKY

A walk long after class

Three ways to start a poem, I tell my morning students:
an image, word, or an abstract idea.

"Shimmer" is still my word that evening and
it's not too long before I see it, radiant
in thick-crowned grove of oaks; the way their leaves
reflect a pale red sun, a deep slow glow.
I walk under the tangled canopy
and spy a bright red apple –
yes apple tree, amidst these oaks –
a shade or two darker than
the rosy setting sun.

Amazingly

I suspect it's that apple tree
as if to add idea to image, word:
Eden's fruit still hanging for decision.

I pause, quite hesitant, as fading rays
splash light of purpling sky upon this fruit
that dangles like a piece of history
and seems somehow to bring Fate very near.

I choose to just hear crickets, watch the wind
shake leaves into small shimmers. Branches sway.
Then suddenly the apple drops, and rolls away.

I take a bite, instead, of evening air;
I haven't found a poem yet, but there's truth
in rising hawk that scythes this purple night,
in shimmer that's now dark as evening's breeze.

LEE SLONIMSKY

Trace

The earth's tilt takes care of the snow:

and what we're left with is a glow
as if it's our accomplishment:

the mud of March,
the gleam of streams
unleashed from ice,
the rainwashed sky,
as sapphire blue
as this huge jay
that hops and pecks.

The earth's tilt accomplished this,
alone in space,
the subtlest trace of love
slow-veining seasons,
tinting stars,
reminding us that change
is in every molecule,

that sunlight melting ice
will soon enough sear leaves
as green as emeralds
evoked by dew-sparked grass

that startle the casual eye
on even the blandest morning.

REED STIRLING

Magalee's cloak of darkness

ALL DARK AND QUIET AT CIRCE'S DISCO, AND GIVEN MY PREDILECTION FOR reading Greek signs, I should have read the dark and quiet as portentous, if not sufficient proof of Manolis' savvy. He had told me not to expect too much of New Year's Eve around the ancient harbour except for maybe at his place, the Socratic Bar, where Magalee, attraction enough for me any place any time, would be serving, and where reasonable behaviour under routine conditions usually ensured contentment. I definitely planned to wind up there. Manolis, bartender supreme of the Old Port, proved prophetic that night, his forebodings not without considerable understanding of base human instincts and out-of-character goings-on. Or was it Herr Heinrich Trüger at the Pan Pub &Bacchus Bar that proved to be the really clear-sighted one?

Calypso's Cave, dark and quiet as well. And likewise at the Maenad Club, Zone Zagreus, and other discos like them, loud, proud of their sound, their lights and mirrors, their ability to generate mad motion till all hours of the night. Housed in edifices centuries old, the discos were populated by ghosts that night, ghosts also proclaiming a kind of emancipation, ghosts in leather, ghosts with red lips and long curly locks – trendy ghosts. Doors to noisy celebration would just not open.

As I trudged along the deserted quays, I heard few familiar sounds. The waters were silent and ill defined by either moonlight or streetlamp. Faros, the lighthouse, seemed far away. Except for an occasional figure darting over the sheen on the flagstones from rain recently fallen, I walked alone. Heading back towards Venizelos Square, I sought the company of stray cats among the shadows of back lanes. I felt almost guilty skulking along.

The door to the back entrance of the Paphos Hotel had been left ajar. This sign I read correctly.

Why I associated the Paphos Hotel with opulence and the realm beyond my reach I could not say. I had been in only once previously. Catching sight of Magalee from the other side of Halidon, I mistakenly thought she had entered the old hotel. Intimating to the desk clerk a need for accommodation, I was invited to inspect the premises freely. I did, but I did not find Magalee.

Subdued lighting, dark veneer furniture, decadent decor, a subtle redolence that seemed to stimulate more than a single sense: there was a touch of the bordello about *The Paphos* as well. Here, Heinrich Trüger insisted, officers of the Third Reich had been entertained by whores. The floors leaned at discernible angles as though designed to usher a visitor into the first available room with a bed.

More of the incongruous even for New Year's Eve in Chania when I caught myself drawn into the semi-darkness of the foyer and up the creaky stairs into the bar by the lyrical whimsy of Bob Dylan's "Sweet Marie." Step by step I personalized the refrain to accommodate Magalee. Located on the second floor, the bar was small and intimate, with a partial view of the Old Port. A pendant sanctuary lamp gave just the simplest of signals, that along with the Metaxa and Johnnie Walker spirits and the sprites that lingered there with them.

Another incongruity. Bob Service without a rococo cloud drifting about his head stood behind the bar. He had been hired, he informed me, by Stelios, who had heavy family commitments, to manage things till 10 p.m. as a service to the guests. I ordered a double scotch. Service charged me double the posted rate on this night of scarce scotch.

"Stelios' order," he said.

"Yeah, right!"

"I'm not ripping you off, man. Ask her. She heard what Stelios told me."

He pointed his chin at Emma Leigh Trüger sitting with a man and a woman, looking as though she were conducting a séance. Perspectives narrowed. She looked to me out of the faint light and allowed her eyes to scan the space behind me as if she half expected, because I had appeared, David Montgomery to appear. Another presumption, of course, on my part. But I had noticed an obvious attraction between Emma Leigh Trüger and David Montgomery, one that had the potential, a winking Manolis had assured me, to go beyond mere flirtation.

She introduced me to Dan and Meryl, friends from her days in Matala when the winds blew in from Africa and their colony of cave dwellers had been visited by pop royalty. Dan and Meryl were the only guests that night in the Paphos Hotel.

I asked Emma Leigh about her husband.

"My friends don't matter to Heinrich very much. He's probably at the Pan Pub & Bacchus Bar acting out his fantasies. We're to meet him at Manolis' before midnight. He might show up and he might not."

"Where are all the people? The Old Port is dead."

"At home gambling, making bets as to the best for the coming year."

"But not Manolis. With the rest of the Old Port sealed up, he'll make a fortune."

"No, not tonight, Steven." Manolis was like all too many Greeks, an inveterate gambler. Played big, won big, lost big. One card away from losing his place to Heinrich a while ago. "No, it's open house at the Socratic Bar tonight. An odd bit of logic to do with sharing the good luck."

"He hadn't mentioned that. But our good luck is his."

"It's brilliant," Meryl said.

"An enactment of fate," Emma Leigh said.

"A syndrome," Dan said, and bought a round.

Ten o'clock came quickly. Emma Leigh led Dan and Meryl over to Manolis' place. I was about to follow on when Bob Service asked me to come down to the Pan Pub & Bacchus Bar with him.

"Sure, but only for a short while."

"Short. Long. A joint like that is not just seasonal, it's eternal. Hey, man, I just got hold of an old Zundaar wagon. You can drive it down."

"A Zundaar! What for?"

"To get from here to there. Wanker! Trucking around in it earlier, I ran into a couple of Canadian nurses. Nurses, man, you should know what that means. I go for the little bouncy one."

I did not know what that meant exactly, but I said I did, and when I said that, Bob called me a wanker again, and said that if I didn't really know, I sure as hell would find out if I played my cards right. (But I

did not find out. Besides, I had other cards I had hopes of playing that night.) In discussing all of this with him before we got rolling, I flooded the engine of the Zundaar. We had to walk.

THE PAN PUB & BACCHUS BAR. Some said the Greek Mafia owned it. Bob Service always maintained that Heinrich Trüger was a silent partner. One habitué, a poet from The Hague, who frequently held forth in the fashion of the Beats, said he had proof an immortal owned the pub, but the proof had gone missing the night of a particularly memorable bacchanal when his creative powers had reached a height never before attained. Patrons debated the issue with waiters, but no one knew for certain the identity of the proprietor. Waiters got paid cash every night by big Kostas, known also as Corunetes, Cudgel Man, because of his extraordinarily large fists, at the end of long muscular arms made even more imposing in rolled-up shirt sleeves. He was butcher, cook, bouncer, and personified *kamaki*, male macho Greek style

A grape vine growing by the entrance, old enough to provide extensive shade in other seasons, had been hacked back at this time of the year, though it still blew about giving the place a kind of wild, natural look set against the rock of Kastelli. The doorway, balanced on either side with arched windows, resembled those of many old Venetian structures housing the bars and cafés along the quays. Four large speakers, two in the rear, and two up front and hung outside for convenience in warmer weather, pumped out punk and heavy rock. Inside on the right, a large Pan figure greeted entrants with a lascivious look, while on the left, a bronze satyr cavorted, very much amused at his very large erection. The Bacchus Bar, also cavernous, was a louder and more riotous extension of the Pan Pub. Both provided for the visitor in ways that the discos and chic *tavernas* of the harbour did not. Once in, you got the impression that people wore masks and that costumes were *de rigueur*. Here the behaviour of Krikri, boy wonder of the Old Port, passed as normal.

"Within," David Montgomery observed one night as we made our way past, Jim Morrison and The Doors wailing after us about liars and fires, "one is tempted by life's variety in its seriocomic mode. Underworld, under the table, under the influence of."

"Sometimes I feel out of place, and sometimes I feel right at home."

Though not a regular, I was known here, and would enter of my own accord, that is to say, when not induced to do so by the likes of Bob Service or the artist Damen Van Raamsdonk, especially when in a less Socratic mood, or less given to rational and Apollonian influences, or when I felt like getting down and dirty, more interested in life's underbelly than its spirit. Here I could be entertained by Heinrich Trüger when he talked suggestively about Magalee. These were nights of denial, spiritual betrayal, and pornographic wish fulfillment for which I would later make amends at the altar of her praise. Something like that. Perhaps it was the graffiti near the men's room: *Magalee eats goat!*

Bob Service shared the rococo smoke with me, then vanished. Pulling on a beer, I meandered through the crowd, but did not bump into any of his Canadian nurses, or if I did bump into them, I did not notice that I had. Things were getting misty.

Krikri appeared for a while, hopping around as though on a bed of coals, opening and closing his long coat in feigned attempts to take flight. Whenever firecrackers exploded outside, he would

retreat into that coat and then be reborn as Elvis. His impersonations exhausted, he would grab a patron's sleeve and get his hair ruffled.

"Hey, Spire," Bob Service called. "You lost?"

He sat with Damen Van Raamsdonk, wildly attired in shades of orange, and Heinrich Trüger in the company of two big redheads, Amazons in tights, tattooed and silver ringed. And friendly. As for his part, Trüger had suited himself in large tweed, with a light brown shirt and black tie. He introduced the women as associates from Berlin, ordered me a drink, and insisted I sit down. Their table was near the entrance next to the statue of Pan. How could I have missed them?

"Tell me, Steven Spire, which face your friend Herr David Montgomery wears tonight? I think this one." And here Trüger reached across the divide to stroke the bronze satyr, at which point everyone at the table erupted into laughter. "Magalee, ja?"

As midnight approached, and as the noise level reached hellish intensity, Damen Van Raamsdonk pulled me up by the arm, and ushered me towards the back of the place. We passed the large open fire pit where Kostas held sway, and where (you were told) goats had been sacrificed. Damen stopped and pointed to posters advertising dramatic productions, tragedies and comedies both, that decorated much of the space on the rounded black walls, many pasted over others, giving the impression of seasons having come and gone. He made to say something, but then indicated by a twist of the hand that the noise was still too intense. He led me down narrow, winding stairs to where the washrooms were located. The entrance to the women's room was identified by a kind of montage, three bloodied maenad faces looking on the hysterical side of ecstatic.

Here Damen put his arm on my shoulder and declared with friendly insistence: "Just once to see her, my friend, clad only in her cloak of darkness!"

"See who?"

"The beauteous Magalee."

"Sounds good, Damen. But what does it mean, her cloak of darkness?" I turned towards the men's room. Phallic horns on the head of a satyr marked the entrance. I began counting Magic Bus decals on the wall.

Damen grabbed my wrist. He looked at me, his eyes now full of wild surmise. "We have to get Magalee to come here. It would make a good start. Maybe at midnight, my friend" – and here Damen's clamp on my wrist tightened – "she comes to this sacred place."

Odd, my drifting thoughts said, calling this pit of fondling and frottage a sacred place. And the beauteous Magalee, and goat –

" – hey, my friend!"

"Magalee's working at the Socratic Bar tonight."

When Damen released my arm, I headed into the john. He followed. After finishing at the urinal, I read some graffiti, much of it anti-NATO. I shrugged my shoulders, not really knowing what else I could tell him. Maybe explain the meaning of *sacred? Beauteous?* Declare that my passion for Magalee was greater than his?

"Don't have much time," I said finally, and left him there staring at the writings on the wall.

STANDING ROOM ONLY AT THE SOCRATIC BAR. No masks, no face paint, no costumes, just you and the open bar since 10:00 p.m. The joint throbbed with revellers. Cries of "Encore! Encore!" And hands raised high, churning the blue smoke. Music played, but two American servicemen at the far end of the counter seemed to be controlling the tempo of the crowd – one flat palmed against the top of the bar beating out the rolling rhythms of burlesque, the other with an edge on a long-necked beer bottle counter-pointing. One red-faced fellow, loose and glassy eyed, called out "Monty!" And then the house erupted with cries of "Monty! Monty! Encore, Monty!"

David Montgomery: in full flight to the slip-slap tempo of the servicemen, his lanky form framed by the stone arch over the stairs where he stood swaying, his arms pumping, his shag head crowned with light. Below him, a sea of frenzied faces.

Behind the bar, Manolis wore a wide smile of amused satisfaction, a bottle of whiskey in his hand, and next to him Magalee in magnificent bopping magenta, Montgomery's crimson Cretan bag around her waist like an apron to set it off. No cloak of darkness about her that I could see.

"I am scant of breath," Montgomery declared. He extended his arms in a gesture of supplication.

"Give him something to drink!" someone yelled, and someone did. As he flushed down a mug of beer, the timpani modulated, then rose in a crescendo.

"Encore, Monty! Encore, Monty!"

Montgomery to a chorus of cheers pulled out of his pants pocket a crumpled sheaf of paper that he looked at once, rolled into a ball, and tossed to Manolis. I would eventually, in anger and regret, get my hands on it.

"Extempore!" Montgomery shouted.

In the voice of a barroom baritone, and with bumps and thrusts in the required places, he resumed his ditty to the tune of, slightly strained, "The North Atlantic Squadron."

Ramona is spinster at the spider's ball
She lures us in and threads us all
Silent she sits, admiring her doll
She lifts, she drifts, she rises to fall

Lick yourself with paradox thick
Precious to those who live under the rose
When all they feel is really just prick
Vying for loving that comes to blows

Untie the knots you really must try
Watch them slip around your hips
Skin your shin and rub your thigh
To touch my heart, just suck my lips

Ramona is spinster at the spider's ball
She lures us in and threads us all
Silent she sits, admiring her doll
She lifts, she drifts, she rises to fall

There followed verses about leaving a dark lady waiting in her state of grace, fractured dawns and mirrors of lace, and the desire to sculpt scars with her blushes, and part the waters of her rushes.

"Brilliant!" exclaimed a jubilant Meryl. She along with Don and Emma Leigh Trüger had gathered around the curved part of the bar. They seemed to be pressing in on me.

"How long's this been going on?"

"Not long enough," a voice of serene sweetness replied, and when I looked, I had a jigger of whiskey in one hand and a mug of beer in the other.

"Monty was quite sober when he entered," Emma Leigh said. "And then he's up doing what he calls his 'Ode to Ramona.' Dedicated it to Magalee."

"He hasn't had much to drink at all," Don said. "And booze is on the house."

"He's high," Meryl said, "on life."

"Or love," Emma Leigh said sharply. "He's turning this place tonight into another Pan Pub & Bacchus Bar. Unfortunately."

"It seems Manolis is okay with that," I said, to which Emma Leigh impatiently added: "And Magalee!"

"He's into the mother of all syndromes," Don said, and clinked glasses with me.

Krikri appeared from out of the blue smoke wearing Montgomery's duffle coat, mouthed something incomprehensible into my ear as though he had just had a phone call from Delphi. His fate for the coming year? Mine? Manolis'? Magalee's? He laughed, spat on the floor, then danced on the spit.

Magalee corralled me. She pinned my arms, and at the same time tongued my right ear – me with both my hands full. I got more than a whiff of her, understanding in a frenzied sort of way how her essence worked, her *Déjà Vu # 2*.

As Montgomery came to join us, red-faced admirers slapped his shoulder. He rescued his coat from Krikri and his Cretan tote bag from Magalee.

"To the general company, cheers," he said, and everyone quaffed down drinks.

Manolis started the countdown to midnight while Magalee topped up glasses along the length of the bar. The eruption of noise and cheers and handshakes and kisses that hit the place lasted for longer than I could endure it. Magalee, and then Montgomery with his hands to her hips, and after him, a whole lot of servicemen, then Dan and Meryl and Emma Leigh, and the rest of the servicemen, Krikri and I at the tail, formed a long snake that uncoiled by the curve in the bar, and meandered out into the street, bobbing and bending all the way up to Venizelou Square and back. Once inside, the snake broke into flying elbows and gyrating hips.

It did not take long before time began to unravel, mostly around the image of a fading Magalee. At one point Manolis gave me a knowing but sympathetic look, then shrugged, before pouring a bobbing serviceman another shot of scotch. And then one for me. It was no longer a night of scarce scotch. My mind rolled in desperation along the edge of a once hopeful New Year's Eve toward another routine, unrequited tomorrow as I imagined Herr David Montgomery, my one-time friend and mentor, reaching out and finding Magalee's cloak of darkness.

BARBARA TRAMONTE

Museo de la Revolución
for Che

It was not a revolution
But a reformation
Yet we must look at the spoons.
The spoons of Frank País
The spoons of Huber Matos
The spoons of Bosque
Cuchara, cuchara, cucharas.
We must see the blood spattered shirts
And the bullet holes at the entrance
to the presidential palace
And the cap of Camilo Cienfuegos
All swimming in a pastiche of spoofs
Capitalismo, Imperialismo
You fought these ideas with beauty and force.
A fellow traveller from New Jersey
A therapist
Laments the complacency of her life
Counting calories
Fending off the brash American media
By keeping the dial on off
Which version suits you?
Suits me?
Land of which free
Home cannot brave.

DANIEL J. LANGTON

Reminiscing about the present

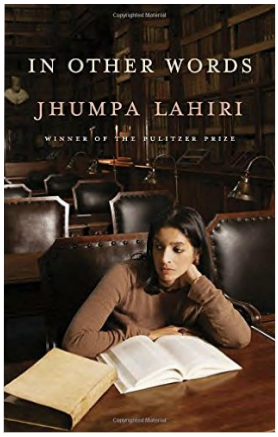
Looking back, I don't think I fell in love,
I've fallen, and it's damned unpleasant.
And then there is time, does love take a day,
a month, a season? Falling is right now,
you know when it's there, if push came to shove
you could pin it down, recall the moment,
remember the way you twisted, the way
you saw what was coming, both why and how.

Once, at the movies, I saw a flower,
I think a sunflower, but I'm not sure,
open its petals in heightened motion
so what would in nature take an hour
danced to a rare tune, shaped to endure.
That's what it's like, with the sweep of an ocean.

Da bambina

In Other Words
Jhumpa Lahiri
Knopf Canada, 238 pp.

IT TAKES YEARS FOR MOST OF US TO LEARN another language – first, how to read it, then how to speak it, and then, if we're at all ambitious, how to write it – the qualifier in each case, of course, being "as well as we do our own." That, at least, is the ideal held out to the eager student: to read those foreign books, speak and write those foreign words as if we were foreign ourselves. As if by acquiring a new language we could acquire a new, more satisfactory existence. As if it, this transformation, had happened by magic. And perhaps many of us abandon such attempts, in the end, because the magic, though we may have dreamt nightly of its effects, will have had none whatsoever upon our daily progress – each promising new method we choose to put our faith in (including that, supposedly irresistible, of full immersion) sooner or later disenchanting us with the same old unwelcome caution: we learn by learning, forgetting, relearning; acquire fluency not instantly, by magical thinking, but after years of simply hard work.



If reflections of this kind seem to you to be too obvious to need stating, then you are probably not the intended reader of Jhumpa Lahiri's latest book, a collection of essays entirely devoted to her struggle to learn Italian. If, however, you are, like me, a fellow student and can read the pages on the left without much difficulty, then *In Other Words* will certainly have more to offer you. The pages on the right, you see, are but a translation, by another hand, of those on the left, which Lahiri wrote directly in Italian. Indeed, let's not stop there: the book itself slowly emerges as one of the subjects ("Come definire questo libro?"), its evolution leading the author, now reluctantly, now eagerly, toward the irrevocable, hugely personally significant gesture of publication. Something more is at stake, she never lets us forget, than correct grammar and usage.

Therapy is the analogy that most obviously springs to mind. Lahiri is like a patient who feels compelled to question the validity of the process she has taken on: *Is it doing her any good? Is she any good at doing it? What will she gain from it? What might she lose?* The outcome (when she begins to foresee an outcome) frightens her. Some issues, primordial, she can't let go of; she returns to them frequently, tries to articulate them differently. She worries that those readers she wants to reach (on the left-hand side) won't accept her and that those who once accepted her (on the right-hand side) will misunderstand her intentions and think she is, rather, brutally rejecting them.

There is a pattern, after all, if not a precedent. Lahiri's first language had been Bengali, which she replaced, while growing up, with English, to such an extent that, as a writer, she would eventually succeed in it as few native-born speakers ever manage to do. Bengali was the language of her immigrant parents; it isolated them. English, the language of assimilation, of adulthood, freed her from ethnic restraints, allowed her to realize her ambition. And yet, as she notes, she seems to have felt "bound," nevertheless, in her stories and novels, "to restore a lost country to [her] parents" by limiting herself to their concerns. A responsibility that she says she no longer accepts. An obligation from which only writing in Italian has been able to release her. "In questo senso *In altre parole* è il primo libro che scrivo da adulta, ma dal

punto di vista linguistico, anche da bambina."

Da bambina: as a child – because, even after years of study and private tutoring, even after living for several years in Rome, even after the help and encouragement of her newfound friends, Lahiri still cannot say that she has mastered the language she fell in love with during that fateful week she and her sister spent in Florence in 1994. She was a teenager then, and like a teenager she has remained in awe of what she loves and admires. An awe that extends to this very book, about which she confesses (defensively) to feeling so much ambivalence and in the final pages of which we are made to examine, with her, every alternating side of the matter, her commitment ("a questo progetto di scrittura"), in effect, waxing and waning line by line. Remarkably enough, she (the mother of two boys) suggests that it might be regarded as "un libro autoctono," the Italian offspring of a non-Italian author. "Un pezzo di me" to leave behind.

IT'S HARD TO TELL, inasmuch as (apart from two stories) the entire work is more self-communing than self-affirming, how seriously this ambivalence is meant to be taken. Harder yet is it to tell whether Lahiri truly can't decide which language to continue to write in. She makes it sound as if the choice weren't hers alone. Suspicion (almost) and disapproval had been the reactions of some of the people to whom she spoke of the Italian text before it was published. Their opinions dismayed her. And now (i.e., the end of 2014) here she is moving back to America, where she will have to speak (and perhaps write) in English once more. Will the Italian she took such pains to learn be lost?

Whence, the reader may well ask, this need to choose one language over the other? Surely Lahiri placed herself in the situation (it can hardly be called a predicament); she will extricate herself from it, too. Unlike her parents or any number of similar immigrants, she wasn't forced by circumstance to change in order to survive. Whatever compulsion there may have been came, clearly, from within. And although she goes to great lengths to describe how much Italian pleases her, she is far less forthcoming on her displeasure with English. Or should we say with the known world of English-language publishing?

Lahiri's last book, the novel *The Lowland*, was, on the face of it, a success like the others. Nominated, in 2013, for several major awards and widely (but not universally) praised, it represented, as we reviewers are too fond of saying, something of a departure, in that her style was plainer and her research more pervasive. Critics who had been kind to her first novel, *The Namesake*, were distinctly less so to this, her second. Static, sombre, and dark, they said. Implausible characters, too full of one, and only one, emotion. The longest part the least interesting. Et cetera.

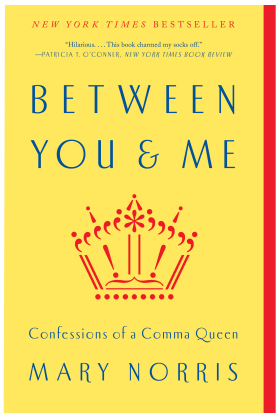
As little as she may care to read what people say about her, Lahiri, who spent a year promoting the book, cannot have failed to notice the barometric change. Yes, the Italian project was by this time well under way – but I do wonder whether impatience with greedily expectant publishers and public hadn't already induced a form of dissociation, whether she hadn't already decided to withdraw. Whether, in fact, these essays and sketches aren't simply evidence of a lovers' quarrel – not so much a declaration as a *dear-john* – and the question we readers should ask isn't "Will they stay apart?" but, more optimistically, "When will they get back together?"

— Ida Kohl

Uncommon usage

Between You & Me
Confessions of a Comma Queen
Mary Norris
Norton, 228 pp.

MARY NORRIS IS AMUSING AND ANNOYING IN almost equal measure. Perhaps the word "doughty" would best describe her and the book she has written, her belated first. In the memoir parts she is entirely sympathetic and joins a long line of *New Yorker* memoirists who have us in their grasp as soon as they begin to evoke the familiar but tirelessly enchanting eccentricities of those who worked there. For if the *New Yorker* is important, it is so, surely, for its history, which, as Norris demonstrates yet again, only continues to, as it were, accumulate. One might say that the magazine, this century, has ceased making history the better to conserve it.



The other part of the book, the usage guide, is a puzzle and redeems itself, I think, only in describing those practices peculiar to the institution – the diaereses, the hyphens and dashes, the doubling of consonants in past participles, etc. It is difficult, indeed, to know just for whom these sections were written. A clue may be found in the videos now appearing on the *New Yorker* website, where Norris, utterly straight-faced, goes over the basics with the brevity and intensity of a primary school teacher. So basic are the subjects treated that one begins to wonder: Has the typical – and possibly fictitious – profile of *New Yorker* readers (never mind the monocular Eustace Tilley) changed that much? Are they no longer assumed even to be literate? Or is this merely the effect of a more realistic appraisal of the general education of those readers Condé Nast is hoping to attract? Which is to say, a younger generation for whom talk of objective and subjective cases will have something in it of the exotic or the luxurious, being viewed less as a necessity than as a question, seemingly, of protocol or etiquette. Norris, though not exactly young herself, would, I think, argue that the strange and exclusive ways of her mentors, those older people who held fast to rules no one else followed (had ever followed – or not for ages), were as good as a warning to her (and us) not to become so insular. (See, however, below.)

In any event, the book is split between pleasant ruminations on her own past, as well as Melville and pencil sharpeners and such, and a series of lessons that, though gracefully written, lack the rigour to be found, much more handily, online (Grammar Girl, *et al.*) or in the printed manuals she cites in her determinedly up-to-date bibliography. *Between You & Me* is a hybrid, of course. And of things grammatical there can be no end of dispute, especially if, like the more usual kind of drudge, You've spent a good portion of your working life editing material that would have borne none but forced comparison with what Norris, the Me in this instance, was fortunate enough to be given free reign over. Perhaps that's the most annoying thing of all: between her Me and our You there lies, as to comparative good fortune, a gulf. In other respects, the terrain appears somewhat similar: creating or contributing to a house style, defending it against writers who have no allegiance to any style but their own, who prefer to apply their pigment raw and leave it so, and then against other editors, newly arrived, who remark all too freely on the oddity (the quaintness) of your decisions. Embattled, We are, from within and without. Little wonder that editors (of all ranks) should cling to

distinctions and variations that the more carelessly inclined feel no guilt at ignoring.

No doubt Norris envisages her audience, whatever their grammatical probity, to be thoroughly American. Nor can we very well blame her for this, since hers is essentially an American story, one of secular vocation, Mary, in her youth, wandering only briefly before discovering it. A thesis on Thurber led to an acquaintance with the *New Yorker's* chairman of the board, which led to a meeting with the executive editor, which led to a job in the editorial library. These steps, neither hurried nor deliberate, have about them a nonchalance *New Yorker* cultists will recognize. In that period, at least, careerism was still disapproved of. Old-timers were long-timers; they stayed put. To be sure, there was a hierarchy. But to ascend it, one waited one's turn. Which, often, never came. Staff were ensnared (as so many chroniclers have delighted in recounting) by the mixture of privilege and penury. The privilege it was to work there; the penury that was likely to result.

NORRIS KNOWS ENOUGH to satisfy our curiosity with a few well-considered anecdotes about her agreements or disagreements with the likes of John McPhee, George Saunders, and James Salter. But it's the subtlety of her reasoning as an editor that affords the most interest; tact and humility are the touchstones here. The specific examples she gives, though for the most part trivial, make for compelling reading. Her ethos in this regard is to be correct but never *too* correct, i.e., never to lose sight of the author's intention (or, one might suppose, his/her special status). Her tastes are fundamentally conservative but not especially narrow. She's no fanatic. – A dangling participle is left in place, since to change it would make things worse. "Untoward ideas" about commas get a (more than) respectful hearing (three pages in length). – Editors are, by nature, intermediaries, and Norris's examples generally promote an essential in-between-ness. A refined sense of balance. It's one thing to respect individuality, even oddity; it's quite another to propagate error. The magazine, for all its own oddities, must continue to set a standard. (Whether it remains an authority is never questioned.)

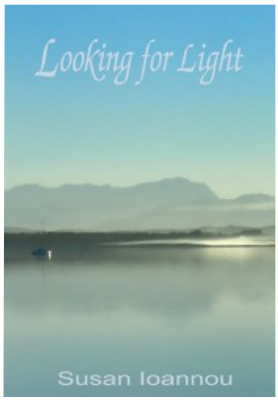
Norris has been, by her own account, a constant traveller – not, she would say, parochial in the least – and yet the impression she leaves you with is that of a person who still views the world (as in the Saul Steinberg cover) from a single vantage point, 9th Avenue. Faithful readers (and fantasy Manhattanites) would not want it otherwise. We hope the weekly goes on forever, even as we acknowledge, to ourselves mainly, that it is no longer the beacon it once was. Future memoirists, beware.

— Karl Buchner

Recent and recommended

Looking for Light
Susan Ioannou
Hidden Brook Press, 84 pp.

AGE IS SURELY THE MOST PROSAIC OF SUBJECTS for a poet, the most in need of a *lifting*. And yet it is also as surely the one subject most likely to draw that poet's readers in, as fellow travellers, co-conspirators. (The conspiracy being: to live.) The autumnal, the octobral, the season, however long, before the last, this is what has piqued Susan Ioannou's interest in *Looking for Light*, which, here and there if not generally, adopts the tone and stance of a summing up, with all the metaphysical anxiety that that implies.



First, though, poetry is asked to explain (defend, justify) itself at a time when "day by day foreign horizons / flame with metal and human flesh." The beauty demanded by the Muse has all too often served to make us culpably unaware: "None thinks, in a refugee tent, / about fine mahogany dusted / or Bauhaus mirrors agleam. / Mammon craves sleek walls, high steel / set in geometry's pleasing spaces / to buffer the foreign news' / tallies of how many unknown / were overnight blown apart by hate / or fleeing by sea, drowned." If the poet does nothing to mend the world, "is it enough only to peep / over the paper's edge and wonder / how to scribble words about beauty"?

The world, in its geopolitical reality, makes poetry (and the poet) feel small. Small of mind and stature. But the infinitesimal has the same effect: "Science, or mysticism? / At once, / each nano element / flickers here/not here." Physics brings its own fundamental opposition to bear upon her (our) beliefs: "How solid can our big world be / flickering in quantum space?" Indeed, it expects (like the Muse) to be "honoured," i.e., obeyed, requires that she (we) have faith. But the credo is unforthcoming: "I do not believe in the Higgs Boson, / a 'cosmic molasses' / where electromagnetic waves / transform into particles / as they wade and fatten. // – After all, / what makes the molasses?" The poet, being a poet, stands firm: "I believe in the ancient sages' / music of the heavenly spheres / concentrating to a solid / in an immeasurable / slowing of motion."

The "ancient revelations" may yet afford her (us) some protection against "that fat firecracker, chaos," personal and/or universal. In the end, the poet will have made peace with this world. Nor will she feel any more need to question her initial choice, which was that words should be her "light / and darkness too."

A fine (capstone) collection.

Middle-Aged Boys & Girls
Diane Bracuk
Guernica Editions, 215 pp.

AGE, ITS FLUIDITY/RIGIDITY, IS ALSO A THEME of the stories collected in Diane Bracuk's first book. Here, though, the end days, for the middling, are a little farther off. And, as the (fictional) past is so readily malleable, retrospection tends to be of the double-entry bookkeeping kind.

In "Shadow Selves" the narrator addresses a former friend and neighbour who, in size, appetite, and extravagance, had been her very opposite number. That was in the early 80s, when they were both 28, both single, both solitary. Even so, by the standards of the times they were "getting on," reproductively, as well as giving up, romantically, which combined judgement they would counter by

adducing the greater importance of attending to their "inner work." Outwardly, however, they still made for an odd pairing and had to reckon with the antagonism between their respective body types. Their body images. Their disorders. The shame of one, the shamelessness of the other. Repentance alternates with annoyance in the narrator's precisely delineated retelling.

Shame is the spur for many of Bracuk's "girl" characters. (The "boys" are mostly merely angry.) In "Prey" Sandra is "afflicted" not only with arthritis, which renders her vulnerable, but also with the shame of having once been conned by a (con) man to whom she believed she was an exception. Now she mistrusts the very people willing to help her. In "Dirty Laundry" a wife grows ashamed of her husband for violating the privacy of their tenant, for being the type of man a woman should be afraid of. In "Valentine" Holly is shamed by the thought that her daughter despises her for surrendering so easily to the momentum of a failing marriage. In "New Ground" Joanne seeks respite from her angry husband in a dog park group, among whom she identifies one woman who might help her to break free. Only, shame prevents her from asking. And in "Lord of the Manor," which, exceptionally, assumes a male (almost Lawrentian) point of view, shame (remembered, predicted) figures forth as the stench from a decaying (murdered) animal.

The "girls" have different names and job titles (medical illustrator, technical writer, TV producer, yoga instructor) but share, for the most part, a similarly pitched anxiety about their appearance (waning) and their relationships (wobbly). Their menfolk are as likely to show disappointment as they are to be found disappointing. The lone signifier for sexual attractiveness or frustration is, in several instances, lingerie (or, more especially, panties). Which is to say that stories written over many years may nonetheless have certain preoccupations in common.

The final story, "Doughnut Eaters," is not a story, exactly, but a piece of "creative non-fiction" (the category for which it won PRISM international's contest last year). Here, Bracuk, in the aftermath of her marriage to an ill-tempered husband, relates what she experienced, as a child, living with an implacable (ill-tempered) father. That experience has been (creatively) condensed into an episode of fog-induced *dépaysement*: the ten-year-old, lost and seemingly headed in the wrong direction, is rescued, in a manner of speaking, by the very caution she rails against, runs, finally, to her tyrannical protector with all the ambivalence of her adult self.

It's an odd editorial choice, to end a story collection with a piece so sharply factual, and yet it works, as a coda to the rest, in suggesting a (luminous) key without altogether foreclosing other (more literary) explanations. And it's skilfully enough crafted to cross any such categories. Bracuk writes well. Whatever she writes next will be a pleasure to read.

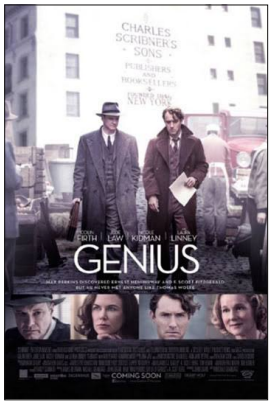
— Brenda Keble

Twangling instrument

Genius
Directed by Michael Grandage
Screenplay by John Logan
Starring Colin Firth, Jude Law, Nicole Kidman, Laura Linney, Guy Pearce, Dominic West

Fiction is not fact, but fiction is fact selected and understood, fiction is fact arranged and charged with purpose. – Thomas Wolfe

THE PAST IS IRRETRIEVABLE, ACCORDING TO director Michael Grandage. One may revisit it, as he does in this film, but only as a land populated largely by the dead. Hence the many extras who go about their business with the pale indifference of newsreel crowds, holding up uniformly black umbrellas to the sad skies above Fifth Avenue, reading (staring at) lengthwise-folded newspapers in the cozy Connecticut-bound railway car, teeming every which way in the narrow streets down by the docks … while here and there, among them, the alien visitors disport themselves in a manner that only we, the living (the *true* contemporaries), are unable to ignore.



In that railway car, for instance, as Max Perkins (Firth) and Tom Wolfe (Law) are having a little literary flirtation and the former is taking up the latter's quotation from *The Tempest* with "Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments / Will hum about mine ears … ," over his shoulder we can see (but inches away) the bland face of a paper-reading bit player all too evidently (implausibly) deaf to their "twangling."

If Perkins, in this scene, is readying himself to serve as Prospero to Wolfe's ever-ready Caliban, his own blandness will need somehow to be dealt with. Wolfe's southern charm won't, it is made abundantly (repetitively) clear, be enough. The famous editor's aptitude for erasing and amending would seem to have crept into his very soul. As eccentric as he may be (the hat never doffed except for sleep being but the more obvious reminder), Perkins is helpless to match the inordinate vitality of his protégé.

This, too, has an unreal air about it. For a good part of the film, the two principals seem merely to represent opposite types of personality (introverted/extroverted) bound together by a mutual obsession or, if you like, a symbiotic "genius." What tension there is is mostly anticipatory: we know these two will fall out and we know (we've been told repeatedly) why. But when they do, the film, already near the conclusion, can scarcely (dramatically) benefit.

Which is surprising, because Grandage and Logan are old hands at stagecraft, and theatrical motifs abound. Wolfe's mistress and (rival) benefactor, Aline Bernstein (Kidman), is a set and costume designer. Perkins' wife Louise (Linney) "writes plays." Wolfe, to whom she admits this proudly, himself began (and failed) as a playwright and says (almost) as much in reply but chooses to blame the form, which he, insulting her, supposedly (finally) thinks too "anemic." When Bernstein comes to Perkins' office, revolver in purse, not knowing, she declaims, whether to kill him, Tom, or herself, it's his drily pronounced one-line review that daunts her: "You've overwritten the scene."

FACT, TO MISQUOTE Wolfe, is not fiction. Biography, even such a colourful one as A. Scott Berg's, is not necessarily the best source or inspiration for a film. It isn't that the facts get in the way. The way would be darker without them. But the makers of "Genius" too often rely on the facts to wriggle out of a narrative impasse. We see the refrigerator on top of which tall Tom wrote and, writing, wrote again. We

see the swollen manuscript of a novel (*Of Time and the River*) overflowing three large, heavy boxes. We see outside (through a window, darkly) a New York as vertical as the one that modelled for Berenice Abbott's Century Universal 8 by 10 field camera. We see all there is to admire of this fidelity to fact, and we do admire it; yet still we despair of ever seeing anything that resembles the truth. The truth, in this case, being the fiction we paid for.

Perhaps the (most interesting) story wasn't, after all, to be found in a (ludicrously) foreshortened view of the writer's and his editor's be-twinned career. Perhaps the script had too many incidents (too many years' worth) to encompass and, like a bloated manuscript no longer free to avail itself of Perkins' red-pencil regime, resorted at last to the crudest of stratagems – scenes how cursory, lines how expository – with which to adumbrate a third act.

Perhaps that red pencil was the answer. Why not dwell a little (a lot) more on the essential? Which, in my opinion, is the conflict between two kinds of graphomania. Wolfe, of course, had the usual kind, as easily (persistently) illustrated. Perkins, however, had what might be called *para*-graphomania, a compulsion, that is, to write over (or upon (or beside)) the writing of others. The urge, unappeasable, mainly to excise, on which he built a lasting reputation for perceiving sooner than its author the inherent structure of a book gone awry.

When first they set to work, Max reads to Tom in the tenderest of voices an early passage from what was to become *Look Homeward, Angel*. The prose is all the more lush for Firth's delivery. Tom, having listened with growing appreciation, says he likes it, protests its imminent removal. Max says he likes it, too, which is why … it has to go. Later, they grapple with Tom's elaborate description of his hero's glimpse of a blue-eyed girl. Max argues that that's all it is, in the end. A glimpse. Tom argues, with waning conviction, that the reader has to be made to feel how isolated in his thinking the character then was. From the start, whenever Max is presented with one of Tom's laughably unwieldy manuscripts, he may be exasperated, but he grabs at it as eagerly as a Worker in a Soviet poster, sleeves rolled, shoulders squared.

Some of these scenes are better directed than others. Some are drawn out to too fine a point. Wolfe's concession, for example, as to distilling the blue eyes passage into a single sentence is so lazily (though peripatetically) dramatized that, before long, he and Perkins are little more than alternately quacking *PowerPoint* avatars. Here, all the same, is where their story escapes the ordinary, in this struggle between two Harvard men (neither fully representing art or commerce) to fashion a thing to its (mutually agreed upon) purpose. Who really cares about the rest, when the rest – what we're shown of it, at least – is so familiar, so second-rate?

The film, on the whole, takes a rather simplistic approach to Wolfe's "genius," as if it were a blubbery thing that had to be flensed. (*Did he dare imagine himself the next Melville?*) As if Wolfe the (overbearing) person had to be reduced in stature. (*The next Proust?*) As if those awful manners of his had to be eliminated. (*The next Joyce?*)

The truth is, the *Time* (like ours) rather favoured big books (the *River*), and Perkins seriously considered publishing Wolfe's second novel in several volumes. Nor are his own doubts as to the validity of so much cutting really given sufficient weight here. Had they been, who knows what more ambiguously rendered account might have emerged?

Instead, we are given a tale of two temperaments, hot and cold. The hot one cools down (fatally), which causes the cold one to warm up (somewhat). "Genius" [n.] isn't genius [adj.] at all. It's simple-minded. A calumny, in period attire.

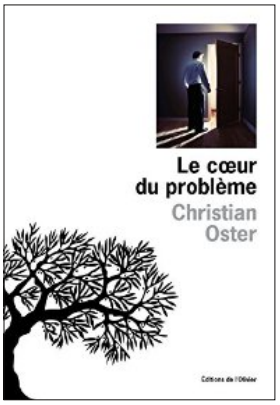
— Ida Kohl

À corps perdu

Le cœur du problème
Christian Oster
Éditions de l'Olivier
188 pp

Un beau début
Éric Laurrent
Les Éditions de Minuit
205 pp

LE DIX-SEPTIÈME ROMAN DE CHRISTIAN OSTER, tout comme son premier, s'ouvre par la découverte d'un corps gisant. Les admirateurs de l'écrivain vont se rappeler que dans le cas de *Volleyball* le cadavre encombrant, c'était celui du mari de la voisine – et que le personnage principal, du nom Bertin, n'avait de cesse ensuite qu'il ne l'eût remplacé auprès d'elle. Ici, pourtant, c'est l'inverse qui arrive : le narrateur tient le rôle du mari et le défunt se révèle être l'amant de sa femme.



Les intervenants des deux romans se rapprochent tout de même dans leurs réactions pour le moins dire inhabituelles. Ni l'un ni l'autre ne cherche à résoudre l'énigme en s'en extirpant. Non, chacun cherche tout d'abord à en extirper son interlocutrice – soit la voisine de palier soit la dame en passe de partir.

Car elle va partir, Diane, après avoir offert une explication des plus concises : l'homme qu'on voit étendu par terre s'est montré violent, dit-elle, et il est tombé (p. 15). Qu'elle l'a poussé et que, la balustrade y cédant, il est tombé du haut, de la mezzanine, là où se situe la chambre, le lit conjugal, cela elle n'admet que bien plus tard (p. 94). Le mystère, pour autant que jamais il y en ait eu, n'a qu'à se dissiper en même temps qu'elle – et lui, le narrateur, du nom Simon, encore sous le choc, qu'à en revenir sitôt que possible. Mais, voyons, il reste un petit « problème » : que faire de ce corps qu'elle lui a légué ?

Au contraire d'un polar, dans lequel notre intérêt se porte d'habitude sur le malfaiteur ou sa victime, ou bien son poursuivant, ici il n'y aurait que ce comparse (ou qui se prend pour tel) à nous intéresser. Et Simon, dès le début, ne s'emploie pas à grand chose, sauf à tourner en rond. Ne sachant trop comment réagir, il risque de se noyer dans la mélancolie (et nous avec). Leur couple n'a évidemment pas été sans faille – un amant, après tout – mais qu'elle ose se sauver d'une telle manière, à pas feutrés, sans qu'il la prévienne, c'est le comble. Un homme aussi veule ne mérite-il pas qu'elle le laisse à l'abandon ? À qui la faute s'il est le dernier à reconnaître que ça ne va plus ? – Bref, on commence là où leur histoire touche au terme, et ce corps qu'il faut inhumer, c'en est forcément le symbole, sinon la cause.

Ou est-ce qu'il serait plutôt le reflet inanimé de Simon lui-même, qui se conduit comme un somnambule et, tout en narrant les démarches qu'il fait, s'en dissocie perceptiblement ? Mettons qu'il se la recrée, son aventure ; il raconte ce qui s'est déjà passé, le suspens y compris. Au vrai, le suspens (du deuxième degré) demeure constant : on ignore qu'est-ce qui va lui arriver, même à la fin. Il aurait tout raconté, en effet, à l'exception du dénouement. Comme si pour faire en sorte que nous les lecteurs, nous continuions de vibrer par sympathie, une fois le livre fermé.

Diane, la fugitive, elle est d'origine anglaise. Il est loisible de croire que ce seul fait eût donné le ton au récit, vu qu'il y règne comme un flegme britannique : les personnages principaux se tenant sur la réserve, ce sont les non-dits que nous devons trouver les plus marquants. Et les péripéties – d'une teneur en drame plutôt faible – se produisent le plus souvent en

pleine campagne, avec de courts passages (peu essentiels) à Paris et à Londres. Il ne manque que le curé de paroisses.

Un autre détail y afférent : Simon, historien de formation, fait profession de conférencier, ce qui lui permet un horaire souple en l'occurrence très commode. Il s'est désenchanté de la vie scolaire, nous dit-il, s'est réorienté de préférence vers l'enseignement d'adultes, ceux-ci étant en général plus désireux d'en savoir davantage, par exemple, sur la guerre de Cent Ans :

> … c'est un sujet inépuisable et complexe, raison pour laquelle je l'avais élu. Je savais qu'on ne peut pas l'aborder d'une traite, surtout pas en le résumant, on ne retient rien. Je découpais, donc, dans cette opulente matière au gré des dates anniversaires ou des lieux où se programmaient les conférences.

Cela lui aura réussi, de toute évidence. Pas question de vivre dans la misère. On peut en déduire en outre que cela lui aura implanté une certaine tournure d'esprit. Par déformation professionnelle, sans doute, c'est rare qu'il agisse avant de s'être perdu en moultes conjectures. Même au départ, à la vue du corps, il se sent tiraillé entre l'agacement face au désordre et le désir de reprendre contrôle :

> … l'agacement a persisté alors même que je me rendais compte de la gravité de la situation. Je tentais de me représenter, au-delà de cet écueil psychologique, les faits avec la plus grande objectivité, et je me suis mis en devoir, alors que je n'y parvenais pas encore, de les aborder de manière efficiente.

L'auteur a cru bon de souligner lors d'une interview* que si Simon choisit de s'engager dans ce dédale, c'est en raison principalement de l'amour : il aurait eu pour objectif de couvrir sa femme (ou, précise-t-il enfin, sa compagne). C'est à cause d'elle qu'il commet l'erreur initiale de dissimuler le cadavre. Bien sûr qu'il ressent de la jalousie (un amant, après tout), mais il refuse d'en être motivé. Son erreur secondaire – inéluctable – c'est de penser à se couvrir de même en signalant à la gendarmerie qu'elle (sa compagne) a disparu. (Une disparition peut en cacher une autre, croit-il.) Ce qui a toutefois pour résultat d'attirer l'attention, plus amicale que d'ordinaire, d'un gendarme dans la soixantaine, Henri, vieux routier sur le point de prendre sa retraite. Alors se déclenche la véritable intrigue, un jeu du chat et de la souris : Henri, rassurant, inoffensif, se liant d'amitié avec Simon, au point de le présenter à sa femme Nicole et plus tard à sa belle-sœur Raphaëlle, chez qui d'ailleurs les trois vont séjourner quelques jours ensemble. Une intimité propre à faire taire les suspicions du traqué, bien que l'inquiétude ne le lâche pas d'un cran.

Conformément à ce que nous eût instruit la lecture des romans ostériens antérieurs, les composants de celui-ci ne s'assemblent qu'au hasard. Il n'y a pas de logique à discerner là-dedans, sinon du cœur. Les mauvais choix de Simon s'empilent en pyramide, et on a le droit, au commencement, de se demander si c'est le cas aussi de l'auteur, qui a l'air de s'y avancer à tâtons. – Est-ce qu'il a toujours de la patte, le maître ? Y aurait-il en ce qu'il écrit un excès d'improvisation ?

Ce serait oublier que chez ce romancier l'art est par essence désinvolte, plein de méandres qu'en tant que lecteur averti on se doit de suivre patiemment jusqu'à en être entraîné au large. Tout comme cette rivière où s'embarquent les trois, Henri, Nicole et Simon, dans une scène aussi épatante qu'elle est loufoque :

> C'est en arrivant au niveau du moulin, et alors que nous nous en approchions au point (mais je n'ai rien dit) d'en gâcher la perspective, que j'ai senti la barque osciller et que j'ai vu, au-dessus de la tête d'Henri,

*http://www.mollat.com/livres/oster-christian-coeur-probleme-9782879297798.html

> paraître celle de Nicole, qui manifestement venait de se lever et qui, cependant qu'Henri silencieux tentait de stabiliser la barque, s'est mise à bouger tout doucement et, au moyen d'un petit harmonica qu'elle venait de s'insérer entre les lèvres, à jouer un air qu'il m'a semblé pouvoir situer quelque part dans le répertoire de la chanson réaliste des années quarante.

BEAU, CERTES, BIEN QUE LOIN D'ÊTRE UN début, l'onzième roman d'Éric Laurrent se modèle non pas sur les polars contemporains mais sur les sagas réalistes ou même naturalistes du XIX[e] siècle, en ce qu'ils mélangeaient de féerique et de sordide. C'est l'histoire d'une famille du milieu populaire dans laquelle l'amour se fortifie de malice et les rôles dits primordiaux se sont un peu trop aisément embrouillés.

Un Beau Début s'ouvre, lui aussi, sur un corps – le corps nu d'une jeune femme – ou mieux dire sur son image. Une ekphrasis de trois pages, les premières, induit le lecteur à scruter tout ce que révèle de ce corps la photo affichée au mur d'une cellule de prison. L'homme emprisonné qui a pu en lorgner quotidiennement les « généreux appas » ainsi mis en montre ne sait (selon l'auteur) et ne saura jamais que la pin-up, sobriquée Nicky Soxy, c'est sa fille Nicole Sauxilange. Cela donne la note tout de go – une note incestueuse s'il y en a.

En vérité Bob, le prisonnier, ignore jusqu'à l'existence même de sa rejettonne. C'était afin de ne pas avoir à reconnaître celle-ci qu'il a voulu répudier la mère, du nom Suzy, lors de sa grossesse, comme si elle seule en eût été responsable. Et c'était sur son insistance qu'elle a tenté de tous les moyens pour se faire avorter – en y essuyant chaque fois un échec bien entendu (nous sommes en 1966). Il faut qu'elle accepte d'accoucher à la fin. Le malheur, c'est qu'elle s'est tellement toquée de son amant sadique que la nouveau-née ne lui inspire aucune affection. Pire encore, elle la déteste et peu après sa naissance décide de l'abandonner. Bob, lui, aura disparu entre-temps.

Suzy s'en allant bourlinguer, la petite, dont le prénom, Nicole, abhorré par la mère, eût passé pour une souillure, se trouve à la merci des parents de son père, d'une trempe, eux, équivalente. Sur-le-champ il vient à la rescousse les grand-parents maternels, Max et Mado. Ce sont des pécheurs repentis. Ils vont la dorloter, surtout Max, qui a de quoi repentir auprès de celle que vous savez, la bourlingueuse. Nicole le vénère, le prend même pour son papa. (Il sait, lui, qu'il a failli de l'être.) Entre les deux une idylle campagnarde s'instaure.

Elle est jolie, la petite Nicole ; elle a les traits d'une poupée. Les adultes la trouvent irrésistible. À l'école, les instituteurs ont tendance à vouloir lui pardonner son manque d'attention. Par contre, ses camarades de classe ont tendance à vouloir tout bonnement l'éviter et cela à cause de sa pieuseté manifeste :

> À l'âge où les petites filles rêvent pour la plupart de devenir infirmière, vétérinaire, institutrice, coiffeuse ou bien hôtesse de l'air, elle ne visait en effet nul autre état que celui de sainte … [L]a religiosité de [Max] n'était pas étrangère à cette lubie : les pieuses lectures dont il l'avait abreuvée dès sa prime enfance, tirées pour la plupart de la Bible et de la *Légende dorée*, avaient à la longue imprégné sa jeune âme – les vies de prophètes et de saints avaient été ses contes de fées ; le Christ lui faisait office de prince charmant.

L'un de ses camarades sait l'apprécier quand même ; il l'observe d'un œil flaubertien, ce garçon. C'est peut-être un sosie de l'auteur, qui partage non seulement la date mais également le lieu de naissance de Nicole (le 15 juillet 1966, à Clermont-Ferrand) et s'est servi auparavant de ce même village fictif de Courbourg (à vingt kilomètres de là) où elle vit son idylle.

> Ce mysticisme précoce, qui la faisait passer pour illuminée aux yeux de toute l'école, m'impressionnait plus que tout autre, pour la raison que pareil penchant ne m'était pas étranger, fût-il chez moi déjà tempéré, pour ne pas dire contrarié, par les premiers tiraillements de la chair.

Il se remémore une anecdote révélatrice : Les deux enfants se sont crus capables de ressusciter une chatte qu'on avait enterrée la veille. Tout en s'évertuant à ce miracle avec elle, le garçon s'est permis (comme il aurait fait à d'autres occasions) de regarder à la dérobée la petite culotte de son amie, là où le mot « chatte » a un sens tout à fait particulier. Revoici le sujet sur lequel Laurrent aime par-dessus tout s'épancher (cf. *À la fin* et *Les découvertes*) : le regard masculin en fleur. À la différence qu'il s'agit ici de l'évolution de l'objet du regard. Ou bien l'hypostase de ce dernier.

Voire, Nicole, que bientôt on va priver du regard protecteur paternel pour la plonger alors dans l'obscurité totale, ne s'attardera pas à être atteinte de la *phénomanie*, « l'irrépressible désir d'être vu[e] », n'importe comment ou pourquoi. Elle n'est pas vicieuse comme sa mère, qui ressurgit pour la reprendre ; elle est dévote comme feu son grand-père, en dépit des remontrances de celle-là, qu'elle qualifie de « pute ».

Elle est dévote, disons, jusqu'à l'âge ingrat, quand elle renonce « à ses vieilles idoles, les saintes et les saints, pour s'enticher de vedettes de la musique populaire ». Il s'ensuit une période où la jeune adolescente, toujours ambitieuse de se mettre en valeur, s'imagine essayer des rôles variés, en espérant y découvrir qu'est-ce qui sera sa vocation éventuelle. Comédienne ? Romancière ? Athlète ?

> À la vérité, pour n'avoir de disposition ni d'inclination bien marquées pour aucune discipline, Nicole Sauxilange ne se sentait nulle vocation particulière : la célébrité seule l'intéressait – c'était un but en soi.

Elle décide de « se teindre les cheveux en blond platine » et constate que cela modifie le regard que porte sur elle tous les hommes, « jusqu'aux plus mûrs d'entre eux ». À quinze ans elle se fait dépuceler par un garçon un peu plus habile que dans la suite elle persuade de la photographier nue. Il n'y a qu'un pas à franchir dorénavant, celui de quitter la maison, prendre la poudre d'escampette à destination de Paris.

« À nous deux, maintenant ! »

Ah, mais non, d'accord, elle n'est pas Rastignac ni même de Rubempré. Et cela serait une présomption de la comparer à Nana Coupeau, puisque justement, le récit conclu, la carrière de « Nicky » n'aurait guère commencé. Elle n'en est qu'à ses débuts, n'est-ce pas. Et pour autant que l'auteur ne laisse aucun doute quant au destin ultime de son héroïne (résumé en quelques notes de bas de page), on ne peut se garder d'émettre l'hypothèse que cette chronique salace, elle ne représente que le premier volet de ce qui va être la saga « Soxy ».

Certains lecteurs (les moindres cyniques) vont s'en réjouir, touchés qu'ils sont par la naïveté, l'innocence même de cette coqueluche au stade larvaire. D'autres (ces esthétiseurs, dont je suis) vont prétendre que vraiment il n'y rien à ajouter, les mots finaux sont parfaits, ils contiennent tout ce qu'on voudrait savoir sur son avenir à elle. (Cela finit en beauté, en somme.) S'approcher de plus près, y puiser des signes encore plus forts de déchéance … à quoi cela servirait-il au juste ?

C'est dire l'ambiguïté du projet de Laurrent : raconter une histoire « de ruisseau » dans un style hautement littéraire, pour ne pas dire rocaille. Sur ce plan, *Un Beau Début* s'avère un beau succès. À vous geler le cœur.

— B.-X. Mathieu

Contributors [cont'd]

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Patricia Heim is a retired psychotherapist. Her essays have appeared in *R.KV.R.Y Quarterly Literary Journal* (nominated for the Pushcart Prize), *North Dakota Quarterly, Dos Passos Review, Evening Street Review, Portland Review, SN Review, Westview, Moon City Review,* and others.

Eileen Hennessy is an adjunct associate professor in the Translation Studies program at NYU. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous literary magazines and in several anthologies. She has published two poetry collections: *This Country of Gale-force Winds* (New York Quarterly Books, 2011) and *Places Where We Have Lived Forever* (Off The Park Press, 2015).

Tom Lane writes fiction and non-fiction and publishes one or more pieces of each yearly. Some magazines that have published or accepted his work include *Nebo, The Griffin, The Storyteller, Trajectory, Downstate Story,* and *The Home Planet News.*

Daniel J. Langton's work has appeared in *Poetry, Vallum, Paris Review, Fiddlehead, Atlantic Monthly, Queen's Quarterly,* the *TLS*, and the *Dalhousie Review* and has won prizes in the U.S., Ireland, and England. His most recent collection is *Personal Effects.*

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Terry Trowbridge's poems have appeared in *Briarpatch, subTerrain, The Dalhousie Review, The Journal of Humanistic Mathematics, Carousel, (parenthetical), The Nashwaak Review, Whether Magazine,* and other venues. Three of his chapbooks have been published by Grey Borders Books.