PRISM international

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PRISM international

NON-FICTION CONTEST

GRAND PRIZE

"Horse Camp" (an excerpt) by JonArno Lawson

FIRST RUNNER-UP

"Narrative Supplemental" by Carolyn White

SECOND RUNNER-UP

"Skeleton Coast" by Jean McNeil

JUDGE Andreas Schroeder

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Andreas Schroeder

A CHALLENGE

Let me begin by admitting a bias. For years I've monitored—and in several cases judged—the creative non-fiction competitions of a variety of literary magazines, such as *PRISM international*, *Event*, *Fugue*, *Grain*, *Prairie Fire*, *Malahat Review*, etc. I've tracked the genre when it's been the focus of the CBC's annual literary contest, and I've assessed the creative non-fiction manuscripts of UBC Creative Writing's MFA applicants for more years than I care to admit. In the process I've encountered a lot of fine CNF writing, but what's bugged me for years is this: why do so many CNF writers in North America seem to define the genre solely as memoir? Here we have a literary form whose definition and potential ranges so widely that, at its extremes, it can seem utterly apples and oranges (try judging personal essays against docu-poetry in the same competition)—and yet for the most part we're merely using it to tell personal anecdotes and reminiscences. A non-fiction form of fiction, in effect. Meanwhile, its formidable capacity for the contemplative, the rhetorical and the experimental is being wasted or ignored.

Happily, *PRISM*'s Literary Non-Fiction Competition of 2012/13 turned out to be something of an exception—if not in the overall range of its entries, then at least in its winners. In all three of the best-written submissions, straight-line narrative has been enhanced or even replaced by approaches and techniques that emphasize exploration, contemplation, and a certain productive unpredictability. "Horse Camp" is a wonderfully cheeky, free-wheeling intellectual romp pretending to be a treatise on horses, but like some of the best creative non-fiction, it's primarily about itself, refusing to be unduly limited by thesis or theme. "Narrative Supplement" makes imaginative use of the ambiguity and insensitivity of bureaucratic forms and jargon to explore the pain and emotional effects of suicide on those left behind, while "The Skeleton Coast," which uses a 150-kilometre trek through the Namib desert ("The Land God Made in Anger") as its narrative base, spends a lot more time tracking a parallel desert in the narrator's emotional psyche. In some ways I liked this piece best of all, not least because of the way its author attempted to take Aristotle's theory of narrative (in the beginning everything is possible; in the middle, one or two outcomes are likely; the end is inevitable) and reverse it, though I had to eventually conclude that the attempt probably caused more problems for the piece than it solved. Still, it's the kind of headset that will help us make fuller use of this literary form's extraordinary potential, and I hope competitions like this one will encourage more creative non-fiction writers to experiment with approaches a bit more outside their comfort zone.

May I make that a challenge?

JonArno Lawson

HORSE CAMP *(an excerpt)*

It is easy to conquer the world from the back of a horse.
—Genghis Khan

At midnight, with Channa in company, the Buddha mounted his horse Kanthaka, and departed: on the banks of Anoma, the River Glorious, he renounced the world.
—The Jataka, or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births, (No. 460)

More than thirty years have passed since I last rode a horse.

No one remembers now whose ill-conceived idea it was to send me to a horse camp. It's possible the idea was mine—I enjoyed cowboy novels and had a fine iron-black set of six-shooter cap guns.

In any case, I spent eight long, unlucky days at this camp whose name no one can recall—I haven't been able to find any trace of it.

My father tells me it was only a half hour's drive from our house—this seems incredible. So close. But the memories I have of it exist in a realm separate from all other memories of my childhood—it doesn't seem possible that I lived those eight days in such close proximity to home.

SKINNER - MY BUNK MATE

Skinner was born into the freckled Saxon flotsam that people the poverty-stricken cores of small towns from Moss Point, Mississippi to Flin Flon, Saskatchewan—or from Opa-Locka, Florida to Emmunak, Alaska if you prefer instead to travel along a diagonal—and here we speak only of one continent.

Similar small-town Saxons can be found almost anywhere from the islands west of the Dogger Bank just beyond the Eurasian landmass to the distant shores of Australia, and in half a dozen bits of the world in-between—less than forty years ago we know for a probable fact that a group of them even reached the moon having, in the meantime, renamed themselves Americans.

In a way the most striking aspect of this nation of pirates is its ubiquity, coupled with its near-complete lack of self-awareness—historical, familial, or personal. And yet they are cunning. Only the Han Chinese are as numerous, but they tend to know who they are.

Pale and thin, with heavily-lidded eyes and strong, frog-like fingers, Skinner was, in his own way, ambitious: he watched for opportunities, and he was clever with knots. Though he was slight, he was tough—a sniffing giant, detecting in him the blood of an Englishman, might still have passed him over for fear of the trouble his sinews would give to his jaws.

Skinner slept in the bunk above mine. On our first day at camp, during a nature walk, he discovered a crayfish in the creek we were lunching next to. He

immediately picked it up, bit off its head, and spat the severed cephalothorax several feet through the air onto the sandwich of Farzad, who was sitting a few stones away. Farzad glanced down at the small, lobster-like head of the crayfish, and tipped it off onto the ground.

The present, which knows what it has to be, must constantly revise the past in order to arrive at itself. For this reason, there are moments in the past which will (sometimes fortunately) disappear forever. But some moments only disappear for a short period, and are then given a second chance, when the present becomes more hospitable to them again.

Which leads me to the relationship between Elizabethan England and Safavid Persia.

PERSIA AND THE SHIRLEY BROTHERS

I think it's safe to assume that neither Skinner nor Farzad had ever heard of the Elizabethan mission that reached Persia nearly five hundred years before the incident involving the decapitation of the unfortunate decapod. The Anglo-Saxon Shirley brothers (Anthony, Robert, and Thomas) representing the Earl of Essex, arrived in Isfahan late in 1599 at the invitation of Shah Abbas of the Safavid Dynasty. Shah Abbas asked the Shirleys to bring five thousand horses with them and to re-train his army according to modern English methods.

But before we look more closely at this fascinating early episode in mannerly equine cross-culturalism, the girls from Michigan must be considered.

THE GIRLS FROM MICHIGAN (OR, HOW TO MAKE THE BEST OF THINGS)

What is Michigan? I've seen it from across a river—I've never desired to get closer to it than that. My brother went dancing in Detroit, Michigan, one night, and a man who said he didn't like the way he laughed pointed a gun at him out of his car window.

What else can be said about it?

Michigan is not Minnesota. Nor is it Wisconsin. And the Great Lakes are not and never will be North America's answer to the Mediterranean Sea. There is little warmth to be had from standing beside them, and no inspiration at all to be had from glancing out across them. Why? Because on the other side are places like Rochester, Ashtabula, and Port Sanilac—none of which, we can assume, are in any way like Tripoli, Alexandria, or Algiers. When my wife says "Let's go to the beaches!" my heart sinks. I picture dead seagulls on a rocky shore under a grey sky. I think of death and zebra mussels.

But to return to the subject of Michigan.

It's hard now to convey to those who didn't experience it the down-spiralling atmosphere of the darkening, despairing and (who knows why? had something better been promised?) disillusioned 1970s—the faded skin-tight jeans people wore, the huge plastic sunglasses and the giant brass belt-buckles with bear heads and skulls and coarse slogans that sold at the run-down traveling fairs long since abandoned by the happy long-haired youths of the previous decade.

From town to town these rusted, flea-bitten end-of-the-world enterprises continued to truck their worthless wares—tattered beaded macramé owls, velvet posters of big-game cats, race cars, and half-naked girls, as well as various leather products, mostly vests, jackets, and motorcycle gloves. For some reason—possibly as a result of watching seedy Sunday night made-for-TV movies—I always thought these fairs came from California, but now I think probably most of them were on their way from (or on their way back to) Michigan.

At camp, all the boys feared the Michigan girls. Older than us, and larger, they outnumbered us three to one. They had real cabins, with proper doors and screened windows—until that summer the camp had been exclusively a girls' camp. Having boys at the camp seemed to have been an afterthought—a cash grab or the fruit of some other unsavoury scheme or contemptible plan. However it was, we were relegated to a single hastily-converted tumble-down shack without shade near the barn; the door was made from a sheet of thick plastic, and in the centre of the shack sat a single toilet, surrounded by a shower curtain.

Why the Michigan girls hated and hunted us with such fury we never knew. We hid in the shadows, but so did they, haloed by their feathered hair, their hard, heavily made-up misanthropic faces—pastel eye-lids and bright orange lips, their rough cheeks thickly rouged—wearing high-heeled hand-tooled tall-top fancy-cutwork cowboy boots, like vicious primped-up low-class clowns from some horrible planet consisting of a single vast nightmare circus with over-populated tents that finally spilled out into giant ferris-wheels that doubled in times of need (for instance when the pop and popcorn ran out) as colonizing spacecraft, their ships finally landing in Michigan, the colonist clowns sending their disturbed and aggressive progeny to be trained in the arts of controlling and dominating earth creatures.

This, anyway, is how I viewed them at the time.

Many of them are probably grandmothers now who wouldn't dream of kicking a little boy in the groin while wearing some fancy-but-frightening barn fashion tacky-tack girl cowboy boot. Though I'll bet many still enjoy kicking a grandson's bottom when it blocks granny's line of vision to the TV.

I only witnessed one attack, but one was enough. I remember how the boy fell, writhing in the sand, his out-of-control contortions, and then—the slowing of his spastic movements, and how he finally lay still for a moment in the dusty track before trying to stand, slightly bent, with his hand held across his lap, hobbling off to the dubious shelter of the shack. I remember that as I watched him I prayed to be spared—hoping against hope that I'd never experience his pain and humiliation.

I was not the one who'd been injured, but I experienced my first delicious moments of self-pity. It was a dazzling (though dark) sensation—I had no idea how addictive it would become, or I might have switched courses immediately. The all-encompassing amnesty I'd granted myself with my self-pity allowed me the slightly uneasy satisfaction of a growing, general passivity. Decades would pass before I learned again how to make the best of things.

As I mentioned at the beginning, it was most likely my six-shooters that landed me in the camp.

While there can be no doubt that the majority of the boys had been drawn in by the imagery of violent, inscrutable cowboys, I had never considered the possibility, until recently, that some of us might have been meditating instead on seductive souvenir shop effigies of Royal Canadian Mounted Policemen. Not Skinner, certainly, and probably not Farzad.

In the case of Farzad, I wonder now if it was the great mythological Persian hero, Rostam, and the seven quests he undertook on his great steed, Rakhsh, that instilled in him a desire to ride.

But let us consider, for a moment, mounted icons in North American settings: the red-jacketed Mountie is more or less a nineteenth century British cavalryman. He rides, however, without a troop—he's a loner, and this is what makes him kin to the American frontier cowboy. The Mountie's broad-rimmed hat is conservative and symmetrical—similar to (but also quite different from) the broad-rimmed asymmetrical cowboy Stetson, which is itself nothing but a squashed sombrero.

A Mountie is a man who might correct the grammar of lumberjacks, but he is also a last source of hope to lost prospectors. He sits straight in his saddle. He is not a gun-slinger. He annoys members of the First Nations, enforcing alien laws upon them, but it rarely comes to a shoot out. When he rides, he is at the service of the Queen. He does her will, not his own—this is what makes him most different from his south border cousin. A Mountie represents the law, while a cowboy represents only himself—he can be sheriff one day and, his slouching silhouette disappearing into the sunset, an outlaw the next. This is part of the cowboy mystique. The cowboy rebels against the strictures of society with his bad, sulking posture and face-concealing bandana while a Mountie is an upright open-faced poppy of bureaucracy.

The Mountie is surrounded by pine trees, mountains, and rivers. He makes his campfire, flint on stone, like a boy scout. The cowboy's habitat is the open, empty plain: he flash-starts his fire with broken percussion caps and a bullet. The Mountie is more samurai than cowboy, but really, not much of a samurai either: the Yabusame trained mounted archers of Japan probably had more in common with the Navajo.

The cowboy is closer to ancient models—Alexander the Great, for instance, was something of a cowboy when he galloped forward on Bucephalus to chop through the Gordian knot with his sword.

The Mountie, in contrast, is closer to a knight in the age of chivalry. He is self-effacing, and interested in the greater good; a gesture from his sovereign is enough to instruct him, and suffices him in his quest to establish justice in his (or her) Majesty's beaver-filled realm.

(Her Majesty is, in reality, a pirate Queen, as the pirated Nations of what is now called North America became only too aware).

The third, completely unexplored icon, was the First Nations rider. To little Indo-European boys, a First Nations rider was, for the most part, a thing of

alien beauty. He was almost a centaur, at one with the animal he rode. What he achieved with his horse was not open to us. The world he rode out from and back to was not familiar (and, to be fair, at that point we knew as little about our own histories as we did about the great riders of Comancheria; our criminal ignorance was still in its incipient state). We needed a saddle, a stable—an Old World and a New. What did the (to-us) nameless and nationless rider of the First Nations need? Where was he going? And where had he come from? We couldn't imagine. While many of us could see ourselves as cowboys, and possibly a few of us dreamed of being Mounties, I doubt that even one of us imagined himself as a nineteenth-century First Nations rider.

WOMEN AND HORSES

One problem faced by the girls from Michigan, I realize now, was a lack of historical and mythological role models.

While there were many famous horsemen who rode horses that were almost as famous, there are few horsewomen of note between Lady Godiva and Calamity Jane. There was the Iron Age woman of Wetwang, discovered with her chariot, and, come to think of it, there was also Joan of Arc, who is generally imagined either riding her horse, Papo, or burning at the stake.

Lady Godiva, of course, is nothing without her horse. A naked woman parading barefoot through town comes across as a lunatic, a nude woman on a horse is something else entirely, something so fine that she can't exist in reality—only in mythology and the imagination. The world's lowliest pornographer would not be able to exploit the image of Lady Godiva on her horse. It's a transcendent image. The legend of Godiva, come to think of it, probably owes something to the myth of Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. Anyway, you can see why Lady G. would not have held much appeal, or been much use, to the downtrodden girls from Michigan. Hippolyta though. . .there was a role model they might have made use of.

AND WE CAN'T FORGET THE FUNERARY FIGURE OF THE FEMALE POLO-PLAYER FROM ONE THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED YEARS AGO IN CHINA. WHO WILL WRITE HER STORY?

I will, but not right now.

HISTORICAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL TIME

We have little experience of living in historical time. Historical time is an innovation: it was, until recently, a highly anomalous way of experiencing life. Most of human existence has been lived out, instead, in mythological time. The newness of history has either given us (or created in us) a horror of it. It has encouraged in us an urge to apocalypse—to put an end to it—so that we can again re-enter mythological time.

We don't yet know how to live in the historical world we've created. We may never. Nearly all nations force mendacious mythological patterns onto their

histories out of an honest psychological need. Our desire for myth is insatiable, but we quickly get tired of history.

This is because history is familial, tribal, and/or national in nature. In some ways, the attempt to give religion a history is part of what hampers and kills it. Religion, however, is resilient, and by its ever-evolving nature casts off the figures that accrue to it—it moves free of history.

In the five books of Moses, horses are conspicuously absent. The Torah is full of anti-heroes, and in some ways, the stories work as a complete demystification of God-like humans. There are none of the saddled heroes we find in nearly all other mythologies where people have lived intimately with horses. Pharaoh's horses drown along with their elevated riders—they do not cross out of Egypt. The message is clear: when entering the monotheistic world, we must enter on our own two feet, in keeping with the ironic Italian expression *Andare con il cavallo di San Francesco*, or *Go with St. Francis's horse*, e.g. on foot, as St. Francis did.

Later, Solomon rides a mule to his coronation, and Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem. But it is the emergence of the Four Horseman of the apocalypse (from heaven, as John saw from his resort on Patmos) that indicates we are exiting the strictly monotheist Semitic world again. Just as the drowning of Pharaoh's horses in the Red Sea told us that we were entering it.

And not until Mohammed rides the lightning steed Buraq to heaven on his Night Journey to the farthest mosque, do we see the horse reappear for a brief, significant moment in monotheism. Buraq does not belong to Mohammed—he is a creature of God's, and Mohammed is taken on his back by invitation, to complete his mission as a Messenger.

SPEAKING OF THE WAR

Speaking of Mohammed and the Muslim world, let's return for a moment to gentle, good-natured Farzad.

It seems to me that Farzad came from Qom. Qom was the city where the first protestors of the Iranian revolution were killed in 1978. Farzad told me his family had left Iran earlier that year because it wasn't safe anymore. He had been in a car that was hit by bullets. He looked anxious when he told me this, not at all excited. He had seen a bleeding body lying in the street.

Just one? I asked.

To see even one person die is a lot, said Farzad.

Farzad wasn't getting it—I had been telling him all I knew about wars, and he was reflecting on the fighting he'd seen in Qom. But I was talking to him about millions. I was picturing the pictures I'd seen—the heaps of bodies, baskets filled with human heads. But Farzad was picturing just one dead man.

I said "How many people do you think died in the second World War?"

Farzad said "What do you mean, world war?"

"World War—a war that involved the whole world—everyone fought."

"Even Iran?"

This was a good question. "No—I don't know—maybe not Iran," I admitted. In all the stories I'd heard about the war, Iran had never been mentioned. Though

if he'd said "Even Burma?" I would have answered in the negative as well. My knowledge of the war was limited to Europe and Japan, and Japan only because of the atom bomb. "But everybody else fought—and how many do you think died?"

"A few thousand? I don't know, maybe that's too high, even a thousand is a lot of people."

I laughed out loud.

"Millions!" I said, loving the affect I was having—amazed at his stupidity—though even then I had a sense that stupidity was the wrong word. Farzad wasn't stupid. I knew he wasn't stupid. But I'd never met anyone before who didn't know about the war. I wanted to impress him—I was telling him about something I'd been hearing about for years, and I experienced a kind of demonic joy as I watched him struggling to imagine it for the first time.

"How many is a million?" asked Farzad.

I tried to remember. A thousand had three zeroes. Ten thousand had...ten zeroes? Or no, it had...four zeroes? A hundred thousand—was it five, or six? A million had a lot of zeroes—I could almost picture the number. To hide my ignorance, I started writing it with a stick in the dry dirt. I wrote a "one" with a lot of zeroes next to it. It looked too big, but hopefully Farzad wouldn't notice or question it.

Farzad did not say any of the things I am now tempted to put, retrospectively, into his mouth. He was bewildered. Not by the enormity of the number, or by the crimes, which I wasn't able to convey, nor do I think it was my smug sadism that dismayed him. He was bewildered because he was balanced. Or because he was well brought-up, in the best sense. Or was he lucky to have a good basic nature? Maybe all of these things combined. Though he'd seen people killed, and lived through his own terrors, he had not projected his experiences onto all of humanity.

I, too, was bewildered to my core, but I had lost access to my bewilderment. I felt an aching need to be clever. To see that he was still capable of a real emotional response both distressed and excited me. He had seen more of real life, at its worst, and he was still intact. He could still feel empathy.

I had merely seen a film and been told of the shadowy world of mass murder that lay behind it, and I was already hiding behind the mask of an expert, leaving behind my humanity in collusion with the violence that had been done to me by the film.

AN OMITTED SCENE

Above all, people love cleverness because it doesn't carry the obligations of wisdom. But people forget that along with wisdom's obligations comes wisdom's freedom. Wisdom overflows as an ever-expanding movement in every possible direction. Cleverness encourages nothing but the claustrophobia of more cleverness as it overfills a never-expanding space.

There are those who are most impressed when they hear things they've never heard before, and then there are those who are most impressed when they hear the things they already know.

The first group cast other people aside in the search for novelty. The second group cast themselves aside in their search for familiarity and reassurance. Our culture rewards both types of behaviour, and so there are plenty of both types of people. There are actually more than just these two types, but I don't have time to describe the other twenty-eight, in all of their permutations and combinations.

FARZAD AND I AMONG THE FIREFLIES

A half hour before dusk one burning hot evening we were made to get back onto our ponies for a game of tag.

We were supposed to play in and around the edge of the woods—I had little hope of participating in any meaningful way—and so it suddenly struck me that the best thing to do was hide. It isn't easy to hide on a pony, but I saw a promising clump of trees and shrubs off the edge of a path. Farzad was close behind me; without either of us saying a word to each other he saw what I was up to and he joined me. We didn't make eye contact. It was hot—there were bugs in the shade—but bug-bites were preferable to being chased by frenzied whip-cracking Amazons in the last blinding rays of a boiling sun. Mercifully, we were forgotten and sat quietly in our arboreal hideaway as the light faded.

It was incredibly peaceful—no one knew where we were. The ponies cooperated, and a great, surprising joy rose up from my chubby tummy to my flabby chest.

Tiny fireflies started to ignite in the air around us. For the first time in my life I think I had a sense of what was probably really happening—that we were drawn to the cosmos by a song it sings in which we are both the notes and the listeners. For a moment we harmonize our lives (if we're able) with this cosmic singing, and then fall silent to our graves, like fireflies at the edge of a dark forest showing up and disappearing to a cricket's rhythmic chirping.

That's not how I'd have said it at the time—I wouldn't even say it that way now—but that was the feeling.

Soon, angry voices shouting our names could be heard in the distance—it was time to leave the safety of the woods, and return to the indignities and the dangers of the shack.

CARING FOR MY PONY, SILVER

My paternal grandmother grew up on a farm. I never met her. But I once read an account of her brother's memories of their farmhouse: there were eight fireplaces in it, and he had to chop wood for them every day. When my grandmother was born in 1888, exactly eighty years before I was, it was assumed that any given day would have a fair amount of work in it, and work of various kinds as well, even if you were comfortably off.

My grandmother would not have understood how baffled and wearied I was by the care involved in looking after my pony, Silver. Nor would my maternal grandfather, who delivered milk with a horse and wagon until 1960.

I might have been born in a different universe. But as it happened, it was the same world, only older and stranger than before. Hardly a generation had

passed, but I (like most of my peers in the west) was already cut off from the common skills my parents and (even more so) my grandparents would have acquired at home as children: from the carefully accumulated knowledge of how to do things like chop and prepare wood, care for a horse, mend or make clothes, cook a meal—things that would have been basic knowledge to a ten-year-old in the Western world sixty or seventy years earlier.

But I could whistle a tune! And I had daydreams unlike any they could have imagined, fuelled by movies, television and NASA—and I was lucky, maybe, that I didn't realize yet how little I knew. This allowed me to be conceited in a way that wouldn't have been possible if I'd already been living a hard-working multi-faceted life. I hadn't faced any major trials yet. But I knew a lot about World War II, and to be fair, I also knew the Bible stories, which contain a lot of useful, compactly expressed information.

In those days I loved church. Wednesdays mornings, during the school year, I was enlisted by the elderly local Anglicans as an altar boy. I found the dark, cave-like beauty of the nineteenth-century church interior reassuring. Understanding nothing, I was caught up in the spell cast by the smoke and wax, the elaborate wooden carvings and the mysteries depicted in the stained glass windows. I best liked shaking the little brass altar bell during the "Holy, holy, holy." Pulling my cassock and surplice on and off in the vestry I was a sorcerer's apprentice. I can't remember if I was ever the thurifer (responsible for the thurible) or if I was engaged in lifting the chasuble or shifting the chalice veil. Probably not.

Unlike many my age, I looked forward every week to Sunday school. Our Sunday school teacher was an ageing war bride named Mrs. Gutcher. She had thick lenses, wore thick pancake make-up, and had a slight overbite. She may well have drunk too much.

Mrs. Gutcher told us how in the early days of humanity Eve once stood by the water in Eden, and while standing there, she fell asleep. And in those early days when everything was alive, when even shadows and reflections had lives of their own, a shadow approached Eve's shadow, and everything was so fertile that even Eve's shadow could conceive. And this happened with her reflection in the water too—another reflection approached her reflection, and also in her dream—a dream man came to her. And this was the beginning of the imbalance, when our shadows, reflections, and dreams gained independence from us and started to conceive progeny that we had no control over. This was why we were thrown out of the garden. Unfortunately, our shadows, reflections, and dreams came with us.

It may be that you know a different version of this story. Anyway, should we bother believing all our lives in the things we believed in when we were children? Is it safe, on the other hand, to pretend that our early beliefs haven't, in some definitive way, shaped us?

I can't vouch for the accuracy of what I heard—sometimes I daydreamed while Mrs. Gutcher spoke. My background, like hers, was (at least in good part) North West European. In other words, we were both lightly Christianized Celtic pagans, and as St. Patrick wrote to Corticus "One who betrays Christians into the hands of Scots and Picts is far from the love of God."

But I'm putting off telling you about how I learned to care for my pony, Silver. Just as I put off actually caring for my pony, Silver, when he was mine to look after.

I was the fattest boy in the camp, and so they gave me the fattest pony. Everyone fed Silver—they thought it was funny. I didn't like Silver, but I felt protective of him—I felt he was a symbol of me, and when they stuffed him and laughed at him, I took it personally.

Those who are successful at what they do would always (no matter what they tell you) rather have done something else. It is, in fact, essential to success—a basic indifference to and discontentment with the field of endeavour. And this, though I didn't realize it yet, was my problem. I wasn't indifferent to the elaborate rules and rituals involved in the grooming of a horse. I could see at once that I'd never grasp or master any of it, but I wanted to. It would have been far better if I'd approached the multiple problems involved in saddles, saddle blankets, bridles, buckles, brushes, bits and reins, as if they were of no consequence to me. The occupations of those whose lives were, at one time, built around horse culture left to the future last names which could have no connection to modern motorist life: the osler, the currier, the farrier, lorimer, or smith. Their days were over. But for a week I had to act as their inheritor.

I never looked into the mind of Silver. John Hawkes went as far as anyone can to fictionalize the inner life of a horse in *Sweet William*. And in the end, something about his account doesn't satisfy. Singer could bring an animal's perspective to life in his *Séance* stories, but they show the extent and the limit of what can be done. When you try to imagine the inner life of an animal, your account has to be brief, supernatural, and to the point.

Jessie Jones

MINE (WITH BACK TURNED)

mine is better in minus
mine is a scraping sound, hauling backwards
mine is in the city making money on small windows
mine hurt by every barbed dollar

mine is regarding the field as though not there
mine is yielding
mine is laughing at a wall of hip tea
cupping gasoline in a glove, oppugnant dark
spilling through thick

mine at the centre of the field, borrowing absence
mine, riddled with circular equations
mine can't summon psychosis, then can
a keeling sleep hides one thing only

mine awaiting completion in a sofa
mine awaiting completion in a bread loaf
mine articulating with a haircut, a throat
mine shaking off a plinth, alone

mine is the last elaborate freedom
mine is prescribed fire
mine is the field in the iris looking back
mine is the lock tolling left

HOUSE ADVANTAGE

Then out of the sun came Vegas
and we belonged to its
weekday getaway package deal.

City of costume. City
of noontime cow-tip
into floral liquor. Did people hug there?

I wanted to be hugged there, but
all the glitter. I attempted average
cleavage for all those mirrors. Most were
doors. You ate garnishes.

At every table, concentrated staying. General
folding on the floor, rubes glowing
with the need to be shown out. The hour

past the detrimental. If everyone was all in,
a woman leaned close and a staunch guard stood beaten.
The House was a man in an unfortunate vest.

Your hand was money until they told you
it wasn't. The loss was small but articulate.
The House with the cuttle fish mouth said in consolation

if it's a push, no one wins. No one wins for
whole daylight nighttimes. All over
small pockets jammed with fingers that smelled of felt, digging.

The loss is the start
of a return. I thought *it must be why*
they like magic also. It's all hoax

unless something comes back.

Tammy Armstrong

LAKE

I was wrong about depth.
On the lake's milk-stirred evening
the swallows sip mayflies from the surface.
They are half-sifted words in night's gritty pockets
where men, still in work clothes,
sit on rocks or coolers, smoke and dry fly
for rogue shad—dark muscles
down from Horsetooth reservoir
pushing toward skinned light.

Today's record heat was heavy in high 30s,
but you tell me to *wait*
while the tap water garters across my wrists
and the ice tray in your hands
hollows against the counter's edge.
Wait for something in the storm clouding
to push against the Front Range.
Just wait for the storm's rigging to shift
where lighting lodged its jack knife last week
in the field's soft grain.

Coyotes are coming down for water now,
seeking out the farmer's slough, the overturned trough.
On Rabbit Mountain we listened to their *a capella*
roll the canyon.
Soon the rains will escape the distended sky,
the sand will silt the gullies
and the bones will push through—
the mule deer's worn skull, the vertebrae beadwork—
an augur's toss onto the snap-grown grass.

White and clean as peeled rutabaga,
the bones will appear in the morning near enough to the house
we'll worry what their presence suggests.

Still, the swallows on the lake dip and half-dip.
They have been hitting our windows lately,
seeing something worth returning for.

LUNAR ECLIPSE

You set yourself to the atomic clock,
I set myself to you at the dormer's early squint,
asking, as we shift into the moon's shadow, *is it too slow?*

Time swamps the estuaries of our schedules,
fills our days with puttering and friends emailing,
What part of the country are you in?
Is this you who knew me some years ago?

We are lost to clocks that circle strange time;
their silver hands point to empty faces
or leap seconds missing footing.
It's five, no, eight o'clock my time.

I know the names of almost nothing now
and you asked me so long ago
for the return of your book of saints,
for an explanation
as to why my country has so many time zones.

Let me guess what you're thinking as we watch
the light low-belly its inky mooring.
Across the Front Range this moony saltcellar shifts
more,
a bit more,
drags its reading lamp back through the pines,
warms these rumours of kin-shadow.

EPITHALAMIUM: NEW MEXICO

For George

When the antelope lie down
in the storm's hollow,
our first story ends and begins.

Here is a good space
that hassles the ropes free
and leaves us over after-dinner mantras
in strange places on the edges of darkly mined towns.

Each new day, the road's black throat opens
beneath our threadbare radials,
swallows the pale spirit that shrugs off shadow
and shows the path down toward the town
with its trucks lined up like newly polished boots.

If you'll love me in the awkward,
I'll let those coy-dogs cross up North
while you drive against the kerosene sun.
Another mapless flinch. Our story is a back road.

This is the gold around our fingers.
The storm calls through the evergreen sting
while something in the air catches the starter flame.
A good winter. A book of plum.
The sky's worn blade.

Before the coming snow,
the antelopes settle at the shelterbelt.
Just there, a certain sort of light.
The snow falls. Our story begins.

NARRATIVE SUPPLEMENTAL

ARREST—INVESTIGATION REPORT[1]

Date/Time of Arrest Report: 10-3-08/1130
Location of Arrest/Incident: Golden Gate Bridge[2]
Offense(s) Charged or Investigated: (10-31) Suicide[3]
Name (last, first, middle): White[4], Laura[5] Margaret[6]
Race: W
Sex: F[7]
Birthdate: 06-14-89[8]
Hair: Bln[9]
Eyes: Hzl[10]
Height: 5'9[11]
Weight: 150[12]

STATE OF CALIFORNIA
NARRATIVE/SUPPLEMENTAL

DATE OF INCIDENT	TIME	NCIC NUMBER	OFFICER ID
10-03-08	1130	9350	17702

SUMMARY:

On 10-03-08[13], at approx. 1130 hours[14], I received a report that a witness had observed a person jump from the Golden Gate Bridge[15], into the water[16], from the east sidewalk, by light pole 87[17]. I responded from the east lot on the south end of the Golden Gate Bridge and arrived at the area of light pole 87 at approx. 1135 hours. Golden Gate Bridge Patrol had released a flare into the water and the U.S. Coast Guard had already been notified[18] and was responding. A green purse was located near light pole 87[19]. A search of the purse found a green wallet and inside the wallet was a Ca. driver license #D8060837, belonging to Laura Margaret White of Fremont, Ca[20]. At 1138 hours the U.S. Coast Guard, Greg Babst—BM1, advised they had recovered the body approx. 800 yards east of the south tower, and were in route to Coast Guard Station Golden Gate. After talking with witness I responded to U.S. Coast Guard Station Golden Gate. Presidio Fire was notified and responded to Fort Baker.

While en route to Fort Baker, the coroner was advised and was requested to respond. Upon my arrival at Station Golden Gate, I observed the body of a female, approximately 20 years old, as she lay on a rescue litter on the U.S. Coast Guard dock[21]. The picture on the driver license from the recovered purse confirmed the female was the owner of the purse and confirmed the identity of White. Presidio Fire Dept. Engine 52, Paramedic Zaffa, checked the body and pronounced her deceased at approx. 1155 hours[22].

At approx. 1213 hours Mari County Coroner Investigator David J. Foehner arrived on the scene. Investigator Foehner took charge of the body at that time and searched the clothing and the purse of the subject. While taking inventory of the purse, Foehner found a suicide note[23] helping confirm this as a suicide.

A set of car keys were also found in the purse. At approx. 1237 hours Golden Gate Bridge Service Operator (tow truck driver), Amarrilas, located the vehicle registered to White, parked in the east lot of the Golden Gate Bridge. The vehicle was stored by Corte Madera Tow[24].

WITNESS INFORMATION:

Rene Putman, Netherlands[25]

I contacted the witness on the Golden Gate Bridge. He identified himself as Rene Putman and stated in essence that he was walking on the bridge and saw a girl with red hair climb over the rail and jump into the water[26].

EVIDENCE:[27]

None.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:[28]

1. Clothing worn by White: brown two-tone shirt, blue jeans, and no shoes[29].
2. White was not listed as a missing/wanted person[30].
3. Notification to the next of kin[31] to be performed by the Marin County Coroner's Office.

OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS:[32]

It is my opinion that White committed suicide by jumping to her death from the Golden Gate Bridge. This is based on witness statements and the suicide note found in her purse.

1. ARREST—INVESTIGATION REPORT

When my sister swallowed handfuls of her sleeping pills and anxiety medications, pushing the capsules down her throat with gulps of Smirnoff, the EMTs who came to my parents' home to pump Laura's stomach and fill her body with charcoal told my mother, "Don't worry. She won't be arrested." In 1963, a police officer in North Dakota, South Dakota, Washington, New Jersey, Nevada, or Oklahoma would have put her under arrest, handcuffing her limp wrist to the gurney. On the day in July that Laura tried to die, and on the day in October that she succeeded, suicide was not illegal in this country.

A clarification: INVESTIGATION REPORT.

2. LOCATION OF ARREST/INCIDENT: GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE

Since 1937, upwards of 1,300 people have jumped from the Golden Gate Bridge. On average, one person jumps every two weeks. Laura was one of 34 bridge jumpers in 2008. The bridge meant nothing to my family until my sister died beneath it.

"Thanks Laura," my father says. "Thanks for picking the biggest fucking landmark on the West Coast."

3. OFFENSE(S) CHARGED OR INVESTIGATED: (10-31) SUICIDE

Barbara Meyers, a Unitarian Universalist minister with wine-colored hair and wide, glassy eyes, sits in my parents' kitchen. She has the high voice of a child. We are planning Laura's memorial service.

"We think it's important that we not shy away from the word 'suicide,'" my father says. "She fucking killed herself. It's not like we're going to try and hide it."

At the memorial service that Saturday, Barbara Meyers gives a homily in which she says, pausing gravely, "It is important that we seek to learn from the person who dies from suicide."

Her voice drops as she says the word.

4. WHITE,

A day after, we are assembled in the living room—the room no one ever uses—where candles a decade old sit arranged on the coffee table with unlit white wicks.

"Your Great-Great-Grandfather Brownley killed himself," my grandmother says.

I never knew: at thirty years old, my Grandmother White's grandfather, Robert Brownley, drowned himself in the Chesapeake Bay for fear he had given his second wife, Emma Lee Jarvis, the clap. He tied a bit of cloth about his head to prevent the blue crabs from eating the flesh of his face—he was quite vain—and sank into five feet of brackish water and drowned.

And then my mother tells me, "My uncle, too."

My Grandma Breingan's brother, Clemente Bernasconi, killed himself in 1958. My mother does not know how or why Clemente Bernasconi killed himself. Her mother would not speak of it.

"And my great-great-grandfather," my mother adds.

Of Edward George Blackwell, the death certificate states only that in 1894 he died by "cutting his throat, being of unsound mind."

"It's in your blood," my grandmother says. "The child came by it honestly."

5. LAURA

Had she been named for our family, Laura could have been Ladie Alice, Dora, Elsey, Winifred, Maria Antonia, Apollonia, Wisconsin, Annunciata, Lucia, or

Florence. Instead, my sister's name was chosen on the basis of tolerability; my mother and father decided they could both stand saying "Laura" for the rest of their lives.

6. MARGARET

My Great-Aunt Margaret kept us for a night every summer when we visited my father's parents in Virginia. She lived in a tiny cinderblock one-story on North River. Her second husband, Howard, was a sea captain, and brought home gifts from places my aunt would never go. When he retired from the sea he took to his bed and stayed there the last eighteen years he lived. The house we visited was choked with the gifts he had brought her: glazed ceramic angels, reed-woven wine casks, mobiles made of white Jamaican seashells, tiny bamboo garden scenes from Japan, and delicate, brightly painted china birds in their china nests.

At night, Laura and I shared the bed that Howard died in, giggling as we inevitably rolled together into the deep hollow left by his body. In the morning, Aunt Margaret fried potatoes in a cast iron skillet and let Laura, her namesake, pick something to take home from the myriad of treasures cluttering every surface of the house. Laura always chose to take a china bird.

In Laura's bedroom in Fremont, everything is as it was left: the green-sheeted bed in which she slept, the narrow closet full of clothes too large for her waning body to fill, and the books she cried every time she read, so great was her desire to live in a world unlike this one. My now dead aunt's china robin, cardinal, bluebird, sparrow, and finch perch atop my sister's bookshelf, their china nests ringed in halos of dust.

7. SEX: F

26% of bridge jumpers are female.

8. BIRTHDATE: 06-14-89

My sister was born on Flag Day: June 14th. My father convinced her that the American flags our neighbors affixed to their garages and cars were hung in honor of her birthday. At six, Laura counted them aloud as we drove down Marigold Drive, whispering, "Happy birthday me, happy birthday me," at each flag she saw. Fourteen years later, we gather for the twentieth birthday she is not alive to celebrate. The flags hang on every house.

9. HAIR: BLN

At age 16, Laura begged my mother to let her shave her head. She had worn her hair cropped short and dyed shades of eyesore-bright pink and highlighter-purple for a year—an incomprehensible thing, as she hated to be noticed. My mother told her, "You'll look like a Nazi skinhead. Your teachers will judge you." She looked to me for agreement: "Right, Carolyn?"

I reminded her that her daughter's hair would grow back, whereas the numerous facial piercings Laura had been begging for would leave marks. My

parents often cringed at the sight of the hooked bone and glass earrings Laura forced through the stretched holes in her ears.

The next day, I drove my sister to the hair salon we had visited since we were children, and Laura asked Noelle to shave her head. I was struck by the delicacy of the flesh revealed. Her scalp was tender and new looking, like the smooth pink skin beneath a scab.

When my sister's hair grew back, it came in as curls of light red. My mother fawned over it. "She's such a pretty girl," she said to me, proud.

A correction: my sister's hair was not blond when she died. It was red as copper.

10. EYES: HZL

The officer might have seen Laura's eye color listed on her drivers' license. Or, the coroner peeled back her eyelids to reveal pupils the same color as my own. Or, she died eyes opened wide.

11. HEIGHT: 5'9

A correction: my sister was 5'10. She hunched to hide it.

12. WEIGHT: 150

At age 16, when my sister received her driver's license, she recorded her weight as 150 pounds. By 19, bulimia had sucked the fat from her flesh, leaving her skin taut and bloodless over the mountain ranges the illness had made of her cheekbones, her spine, her ribs. The coroner's report does not report Laura's weight. Instead, it tells me of her organs. Her heart weighed 252 grams when its beat stopped.

13. ON 10-03-08

My mother left the house in the early morning to walk by Mission Creek, beneath the eucalyptus. An hour later she returned to find Laura sitting at the kitchen table. Unwilling to be drawn into conversation, my sister rose from the table and went to the garage. She returned with her mud-crusted riding boots in hand and said, "I'm going to the ranch." My mother said goodbye, and Laura left.

14. AT APPROX. 1130 HOURS

Laura placed her purse on the grate beneath light pole 87, climbed over the rail, and jumped. She was alive for four seconds after her feet left the bridge. Her body hit the water at 75 miles per hour. She suffered subarachnoid hemorrhage, transection of her cervical-medullary junction, hemorrhage to her posterior neck muscles, a comminuted fracture to her C-1 vertebra, lacerations to her lungs and liver, anterior right rib fractures, internal hemorrhage, and an eight inch laceration along her left lower lip, near the corner of her mouth.

15. A PERSON JUMP FROM THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE

My mother says, "She's gone."

She rises from the kitchen table to fold her small, sharp limbs about me, holding me against her as she sobs into my shoulder. She clings to my body as if I am trying to run from her.

"She jumped off the bridge," she says, gasping.

"The bridge," I reply.

I understand what horror is. I had never known it.

16. INTO THE WATER

My mother sat back on the imported sand beach beneath the pines, her thin body slathered in SPF 89 sunscreen, as I walked into Lake Tahoe, its water as frigid as the biting spring snowmelt. Laura floated belly-down on a shiny black inner tube in my wake, her fat hands clasped about the rope I had tied around my torso over the pink paisley-printed nylon of my swimsuit. We headed towards to the buoyant, Astroturf-carpeted platform some 60 feet from shore. I was the water-horse to her rubber carriage.

My feet slid on the algae-coated stones and I threw myself into the lake, the cold shocking the air from my lungs. Laura's fair skin turned red where the shallow swells broke across the tube and onto her body. The ground gave way and through the clear lake I could see pine trunks, great and even as marble columns, felled and rotting. I surged forth and yelled, "We'll make it, Laura!"

Laura's inner tube bounced behind me and her eyes scrunched closed beneath her blonde fringe. The water grew deeper, the rocks and drowned tree trunks vanishing beneath us. All I could see was blue. Laura began to sob, "Stop, Carolee—stop!" I swam faster.

Once I had reached the floating platform I used my weight to dip its edge so that my sister could slide from the inner tube onto the Astroturf without ever touching the water. Still crying, Laura clambered onto the square of buoyed wood and plastic grass, graceless as a seal on land. She lay splayed on the green, water-worn turf of the platform, her hands spread flat. I stood above her, bouncing gently. I proclaimed, "See? We made it!"

17. BY LIGHT POLE 87

The Golden Gate Bridge Patrol uses the bridge's 128 light poles as reference points in its records. The most popular light pole from which to leap is the 69th, at the bridge's center. A recorded 55 people had climbed the rail there by 2005. My sister was the 21st person to climb the rail beneath light pole 87 and jump.

18. THE U.S. COAST GUARD HAD ALREADY BEEN NOTIFIED

"You know, they're not always dead when they pull them from the water," my father says. In two years, he has never told me this. "Sometimes they have to watch them die."

19. A GREEN PURSE

My father and aunt took Laura to Florence as her high school graduation present. It was hot and the city was empty of Italians; tourists filled the streets. My father took pictures of Laura in the ruins. In one, she emerged through a tiny stone door, smiling mockingly through an angelic expression. Her cheeks were already hollow with illness; in a year she would come to my parents with the shiny welts of lighter burns on her arms and say, "I've taken all my pills, but I'm not ready to die yet." In a year her teeth would be rotten and dark in my graduation pictures. In a year she would be locked away in the psychiatric ward, behind heavy, buzzing doors.

At the leather market, Laura chose a slender purse made of strips of soft, emerald-green leather.

20. LAURA MARGARET WHITE OF FREMONT, CA

I write my sister's eulogy.

Laura was not easy to know. She may have seemed distant, terse. We all knew her differently. Her family remembers her stubborn disposition, her strange, absurdist sense of humor, and her tendency to express her distaste with a squawk, a sound more befitting of a chicken than a child. She wanted to do everything on her own. As a toddler she said, "I do it myself." She walked with her toes curled under her feet, balancing across the knuckles, refusing to explain why or to stop. Her childhood friends knew Laura in the years when she was a runner, a laugher, a goof. In some respects they probably knew her when she was most herself, the little girl that came to live somewhere hidden away as she got older, and different, and sad. Laura did not want to grow up.

We don't know the exact moment that Laura's life changed. By the time of her death, a simple conversation was an excruciating ordeal for Laura. The eating disorder that would slowly destroy her health and sap her of her strength was Laura's way of trying to control the uncontrollable fear she experienced while trying to live day to day. The child we once knew seemed to disappear, to shrivel, and for years would only reappear in instants.

Laura wanted to be normal. Though it may seem like she did not want us to know her very well, I think that maybe more than anything else she wanted to find a person to know, and be truly known by. The waste is unspeakable. She chose to end her life having barely lived it. She may have someday had the ranch, the dogs, the great love, and all of her other wishes granted, but maybe not. Laura's desires were not outrageous. They were small, and sweet, and, to Laura, seemingly unattainable. Now, truly unattainable.

21. THE BODY OF A FEMALE, APPROXIMATELY 20 YEARS OLD

"I want to see the body," I tell my father.

He looks at me and says, pleading, "Let me talk to the coroner first. It may be something you do not want to see." He is wrong, but I agree to take the coroner's advice.

Laura's corpse will be fed to flame the next day, her 252 gram heart and smooth and glistening epicardium and 553 gram right lung and 1529 gram brain turned to fine white ash to be housed in a small brass box—the plainest urn the Chapel of the Angels Funeral Home has in its thick catalogue. I want to see the body, as if it will explain. I want to see the body so that I know my sister is dead.

The coroner calls and says to my father, "I don't recommend it."

The body is taken away and burnt.

22. DECEASED AT APPROX. 1155 HOURS

In Santa Cruz, I sit at Sushi Totoro across the table from my friend, Kai, who has ordered the 49ers roll, sushi made of globs of roe, melted cheddar cheese, and tomato sauce meant to mimic the colors of the San Francisco Niners.

23. SUICIDE NOTE

I sit on the queen bed in my parents' room and read what my sister has written on a single sheet of white paper, three inches by five. My father stands in the doorway, back to me, waiting. Words lilt on the page, the ink floating above the black, wide-rule lines:

After 19 years, this is where I meet my
end, where I finally discover what comes
next. I really am very sorry to do this
to all of you, this selfish and weak thing I'm
about to do. I know you were all rooting
for me, but I wasn't rooting for me. I feel
like if I don't do this now, it will only happen
later, probably within the next year.
I love you all so much and I hope you
knew that.

Am I scared? Hell yes. When you
actually consider taking your own life
seriously, that's when you find out what
you really believe. I will hope for the
best. I hope I get to try out a different
kind of existence, a different world. I never
really belonged here. Please try to let me
go. To my family, all my love.

Laura White

"She sounds so fucking young," my father spits.

I rest the note on my knees. "Not her best," I say. And he laughs.

24. THE VEHICLE WAS STORED BY CORTE MADERA TOW.

Three days after Laura jumps from the bridge, we drive to San Rafael to collect her car: the blue Prius. My father drives around the bay's shore, opposite the city.

I stare at the huge white cranes lining the water's edge, built to lift and stack the metal containers from the decks of the boats that dock at the shipping yards. As a child I thought they looked like great white longneck dinosaurs. Beyond these metal structures, across the bay, I can see the Golden Gate Bridge. I am unable to look from it. It emerges from the fog in red spires, the water beneath it blue as cornflower. It is beautiful. The bridge remains in sight for twenty minutes. I twist in my seat so that I may continue to stare at it as we round the bay and the hills threaten to obscure it. Finally, I see only dried grass.

When we reach Corte Madera Tow, a fenced asphalt lot at the heart of a labyrinth of highways and circuitous commercial roads, the sun-leathered tow truck operator says, "I am sorry for your loss," as he hands my father a full clipboard of paperwork. Laura's car sits in a big, cluttered garage, two stickers affixed to its bumper: "Obama 2008" and "Give wildlife a brake!" I walk away, my footfalls echoing.

Near the entrance to Corte Madera Tow, a white pit bull sits tied to a metal pole by a heavy chain. It whines. I look down at the dog and the plastic grocery bags and crushed soda bottles caught in the chain link fence behind it and I think, so this is where it ends.

25. RENE PUTMAN, NETHERLANDS

My father has frequently searched for Rene Putman on Facebook, but has not found him.

"That poor man," my mother says. "He was on vacation."

26. SAW A GIRL WITH RED HAIR CLIMB OVER THE RAIL AND JUMP INTO THE WATER

"The footage probably doesn't even exist anymore, but I think about it sometimes," my father tells me over the phone. "If you could watch it, would you?"

"You think the security cameras caught her?" I ask.

"Oh, I'm sure," he says, as if he's thought of it many, many times.

"But it wouldn't be of the fall," I say.

He does not pause. "No, but you'd see her go over the rail, probably."

"No," I say. "I don't think I'd want to see that."

It would be grainy, I imagine, the footage captured by a security camera mounted high on light pole 87. Laura walks into the frame with her odd, low-footed gait. She walks like she is gliding, her upper body held unmoving above long legs. She stops, looking over the edge at the water beneath.

I do not care to see my sister climb over the rail and vanish into the air, hurtling unseen towards the water.

I want to see her face. I have dreamed of it every night since she died—weeks now. In the dreams, I turn a corner in a familiar place, a crowded Santa Cruz coffee shop or hallway in my grandparents' house, and abruptly find myself standing on the bridge. Laura is standing with her back to me, hands spread on the red rail. Her hair looks like a flame. And just as she turns to face me, I go blind. I cannot know whether she smiled her grimacing smile. I cannot know

whether tears wet her freckle-spattered cheeks. This moment is one I cannot see.

"You're probably right," my father says. "I think more about the second after she let go of the rail—whether she regretted it or not. That is what I can't stand. The thought that she was sorry she did it."

"I hope she wasn't," I reply.

My father says, "Yes. I hope she was glad all the way down."

27. EVIDENCE:

From the journal of my sister, Alta Bates in-patient Laura White, July 2008:

So how did I end up here? I better figure it out on paper before someone else asks me. I was strong, I was solid. Then I went to Davis, alone. Fuck friends. Fuck trying. It's easier to go up and down on this rollercoaster high of drinking and being fucked and engaging in my ED and not eating and going to Summit hung over with unexplained bruises and burns. Enter parental concern. Enter sober me, enter conscience. I spill the truth to my dad; I spill it good. I cry for my daddy once again, dropping the act. Not a hot piece of ass after all, not a pro drunk driver, not a smooth party girl. So it all comes crashing down. I ask for help, and now I have it. But the pattern persists. I need those rollercoaster emotions again, or else, what do I have? Nothing, no one. Wrong, of course. This is the point where I could have chosen health and sanity. Instead, I choose destruction and lies. I am still a drunk and I go straight back to the Bad Guy when I can. I lie and cheat and it feels good. I never pause to let my conscience creep in, to see the moral wreck I have become, the worthless daughter, the destitute human. So why not end it? Better to float on to the next thing, leave this life trashed by the wayside. But no. Something in me screams now to hold on. I listen, feebly. I want to go home. I want a cat to rub itself against my calves. I want to listen to the adamant stomp of my mother's path through her domain.

I will not do this again. There, there it is. I will not. I am committed to this life I've been given, whether I come to regret that or not.

28. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

a. Before driving to the Golden Gate Bridge, Laura removed the FasTrak device from the Prius and hid it in the garage beneath her quilted saddle blanket. The car's toll tag records its passage through a FasTrak lane on any Bay Area bridge. Removing it ensured that her path to San Francisco would not be traceable. I wonder: Why would my sister bother to cover her tracks if she was sure she would jump?

b. When my father turns my sister's keys in the ignition, we find the mix CD. "Wake Up" by Arcade Fire plays. "You'd better look out below!" the singer shouts.

c. Laura took a photo of herself with her cell phone. The timestamp dates it October 3rd, 2008 at 11:25 AM—five minutes before Rene Putman saw her climb over the rail. I tell my father I do not want to see it.

29. NO SHOES

I think, *why did she take off her shoes?* And then I realize that they probably flew off when she hit the water. Like in Looney Tunes.

30. A MISSING/WANTED PERSON

Two months after she is dead, I call my parents' house and get the answering machine.

"Hi, you have reached the Breingan and White residence. We can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave a message after the beep, we'll get back to you as soon as we can," says my mother.

"Hi parents," I say. "It's Carolyn."

And I realize I have said my name when I no longer need to. There is no longer a person with whose voice they will confuse mine. They are my parents, and I am their daughter. No confusion left.

31. NOTIFICATION TO THE NEXT OF KIN

By 12:30, when Laura had not yet returned from the ranch, my mother called her cell phone. The phone rang, singing the chorus of Gnarls Barkley's "Crazy" over and over: "Does that make me crazy? Does that make me crazy? Does that make me crazy? Possibly." My mother went to Safeway to buy groceries to make dinner for my father and sister. She bought three boneless pork chops and a red pepper.

My mother rounded the sharp corner at Marigold and Mission Creek Drive at 2:15, and saw two police cars parked in front of the house. A male police officer met her as she stepped from the car onto the cement.

"Are you the mother of Laura White?" he said.

32. OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS:

I am sitting beside my grandfather on the porch of his home in Virginia. His brain is riddled with dementia. We sit in silence and watch the crabbing boats come in at dusk, their motors chugging across the smooth water of slack tide.

"Why do you think Laura did what she did?" my grandfather asks. He sucks at his tobacco pipe and looks at me intently. The ice resettles in his sweating glass of Talisker.

I think, *thank God he remembers that she is dead.* It is one of the last things he remembers—everything since wafts through his brain, ephemeral as pipe smoke. "She was sick for a long time," I say. My grandfather's face contorts as he tries to comprehend; this answer is not good enough.

Ten minutes pass and my grandfather asks, "Why do you think Laura did what she did?"

"She didn't think she had anything to look forward to," I say. He tilts his head from side to side, as if he is testing my answer's fit.

He will ask again. I will not have an answer to satisfy him.

Laura did what she did because:

David Clink

HOURGLASS

Patience settles inside you.

Your sand dreams of returning to the ocean
to dance in that salty den of sharks and coelacanths.

Glass is your horizon, your world where
wood is both a ceiling and a floor.

A hand takes you by the waist.

Julia Herperger

ON THE WAY TO REDBERRY LAKE

A constellation of stones
in a dry bed

where the river was:
water-logged sticks, plastic
bags tangled in green reeds.
Who knows

what I'll find? Sea glass,
tossed pennies, some talisman
I can keep on my bedside table,
like the tin

Dad found in an abandoned
house on the way to Redberry Lake.
The house slanted

to one side, sun-bleached
grey in a field of rye.
My parents

before they were my parents, younger
than I am now. Dad told this story
so many times

it seems I was there, watching:
he steps into the house while she waits
just outside the door in a blue

sun dress, strawberry-blond
hair to her shoulders.
There are windowpanes in jagged
shards on the dirt floor, dust

sieved though
cracks in weathered wood,
and, in the corner, a silver

wink of sunlight
on metal.

He brushes off the dirt,
finds the initials O. N. J.
scratched into the lid

of the tin.
Sun-blind, he steps
back into the field,

hands it to her. It nests
in her palm like a small bird.
Neither of them say

anything. Open space and silence,
everything still before them.
His memory

already turning into a photo
he'll pass on to me.

I think about
where the future begins—
every moment opens
into it, here

for just long enough to see it, before
it turns into the past, the memory
of green fields and heat.

Jeff Musgrave

INSTRUCTIONS FOR MY FATHER

(black & white photograph of my father on a beach, taken by my mother, 1967)

Leave the woman taking
this picture, Dad;
dive into the water and
swim for your life.

Crawl onto the beach of
the next village and
marry the prettiest
girl you see. That night,

when I come to you in
nightmares, please stay
calm, as I will bring
scenes from your foregone future:

holes the size of fists
in closet doors, and
choirs of rum bottles
on window sills.

Feel better by going for
a walk on the beach.
Peer across the water
and imagine

the boy from your dream,
smiling and waving. He is
happy that, for you,
he simply never was.

Jonathan Mendelsohn

LAST TRAIN TO TAKARAZUKA

UMEDA TERMINAL, 11:56 PM

Yamamoto had not wanted to break up the work party, which is why he stayed until its end. When he arrived at the station there were only four minutes to spare before the last train of the night would set off.

None of his colleagues had known Yamamoto wasn't feeling well, sitting tall in his charcoal grey Armani suit in the izakaya booth. But then none would have claimed to really know Yamamoto in any personal way at all. They certainly wouldn't have known that at the best of times going for after-work dinner and drinks at the pub wasn't exactly the thirty-one-year-old's favourite hobby. That he only ever drank a single glass of beer at these all too-common-outings was of course joked about, but Yamamoto was such a good sport, laughing along, no one realized the young manager would rather have been at home.

The guys from the office liked talking about sports, baseball, soccer, so Yamamoto, who sometimes worried he came across as too work-oriented, would talk about his fitness routine: weight training and swimming 1500 metres every day before work. He liked describing the specifics of his exercise regimen; it was easy conversation that wasn't gossip or overly personal. Better to answer his colleagues' probing questions about fitness than deal with inane ones about appearance. His co-workers, old and young alike, often made wisecracks about Yamamoto's looks, and there was always an element of truth in their envy-tinged teasing. A favourite witticism involved asking about the quantity of seaweed he'd eaten as a child—the old myth about seaweed doing wonders for the lustre of one's hair. But really, what was his secret? They wanted to know. It was genetic, wasn't it? Yamamoto had to admit it probably was.

One thing he didn't share with his coworkers was his love of reading, in particular long nineteenth-century English novels. He read them in Japanese, of course. He'd never been strong with languages. It didn't matter. There were plenty of good translations, especially for Dickens. His favourite, though, was Trollope. Trollope for the everyday details of English life that took Yamamoto to that far off place. Trollope and a cup of English tea in his armchair by the window of his carpeted living room—that was the young salaryman's idea of a perfect night. But he knew his colleagues wouldn't understand. As he wasn't yet married, they'd think him strange choosing not to join them more often.

On this night, though, a rather wet and muggy Thursday, he had to be out. Had to go along with his department at least a couple times a month. And as per always, he did so with good posture and social grace, his new navy silk pocket square in place to match the shiny blue of his new tie. He knew how often to smile and when to laugh, all the cues necessary to assure everyone that he was having a great old time in the downtown Osaka izakaya. Anything not to burden the group, especially with something as embarrassing as a little

stomach discomfort. It wasn't easy, however, to hide the wince-inducing churns his stomach kept going through. Hard to laugh in that kind of situation or not feel a little isolated from everyone else. His head kept repeating its concern over the cramping. And now there were bouts of nausea as well. Was it one of the dishes he had eaten? The oysters?

Rushing off the escalator he shook out his long black umbrella with three quick, hard shakes, before wrapping it tight and buttoning it up. With equal deftness, he swiped his train pass through the card reader and raced down to Track Four where his train was waiting patiently. There were still three and a half minutes, but Yamamoto hurried, hoping to find a seat, afraid he might otherwise faint out on the platform in his best suit for all to see.

Up ahead an older man walked quickly, clearly on the same seat-finding mission. A thin-waisted man, he wore a chocolate brown corduroy jacket over a beige shirt tucked into brown pants he had hiked much too high. His grey sneakers had big looped laces, also grey, that flopped with each step he took. Instead of a briefcase, the old man had a white plastic shopping bag hanging from his wrist, banging against his leg with each step. The ojiisan walked at a good clip for a man his age but Yamamoto knew there would be no competition. He passed the old man easily, accidentally bumping him with his briefcase as he did. In fact, he bumped the ojiisan rather hard, and would have apologized had he not been so desperate to sit.

It was the last seat on the last car of the train, a narrow space in the middle of one of the soft moss-coloured benches that ran from one set of car doors to the next. Yamamoto squeezed his way down between a high school girl in her tartan uniform and a heavy middle-aged man wearing a forest-green suit that looked two decades out of style. The man, in glasses with gold frames so big they covered half his cheeks, reeked of whiskey.

The doors hadn't yet closed when Yamamoto was hit by another round of nausea. People continued streaming onto the train, but Yamamoto didn't notice. He had hung his head in his hands to close out the world, anything to block out the smell—the rank, sour smell coming out the pores of the drunken fat man beside him—a stench too similar to his father's for Yamamoto to ignore. He took a breath to calm himself.

Closing his eyes tight, Yamamoto tried to concentrate on his stomach. He just had to control it. Just control it. Like the waves of nausea that kept coming up, so too now were childhood memories he wished would go away. Sickness was not something his father would abide. Crying was even worse. Yamamoto berated himself, commanded himself to swallow it down and just, Sit up straight! It didn't work. The nausea was making him dizzy, as if he were caught out on a small boat in the middle of a dark windswept sea instead of a still unmoving train. It felt like a nasty bit of karma when he opened his eyes to find the ojiisan he'd bumped on the platform was standing right in front of him, holding the rubber ring above him. Yamamoto quickly averted his eyes, afraid the guy had come to stand there and glare down at him. Only after he braved a quick upward glance did he realize the old man wasn't even looking in his direction. Yamamoto saw the hunched way the man stood, the frailty of the old man, of old men. The shopping bag hanging heavy from the man's wrist. Through the plastic,

Yamamoto could make out six small hard-covered books weighing the tired old man down. Of course the ojiisan had to be a reader, Yamamoto thought. The scruffy mismatched clothes, the plastic bag. Why did so many of the men who read on trains have to look like pathetic old homeless people? And why did this old guy have to carry exactly the kind of antiquarian books Yamamoto found so handsome? He hated how curious he suddenly became. Did the ojiisan read Trollope? Was he also a fan?

Yamamoto knew he should give up his seat. He would have too if he didn't have such a stomachache.

TAKARAZUKA STATION, 8:10 AM

Nakamura was seventy years old but still worked everyday except Mondays when he left the house only to grocery shop and go for a walk up to the temple on the hilltop near his house. Long before work, still lying in his bed half-asleep in Takarazuka that Thursday morning, Nakamura knew it would be that kind of day—when artificial lights would be necessary the gloomy way through. It wasn't raining yet when he awoke. The only rain that would fall throughout the day would fall in a thin drizzle that couldn't satisfy the low hanging clouds with any sort of release. The morning commute into the city was more unpleasant than usual, what with the humid weather and the lack of air conditioning. The Hankyu Railway wouldn't turn it on until May; it didn't matter how hot the last few days of April had been.

Nakamura tended the book shop himself. This wasn't what bothered him; in fact he knew to be relieved at the distraction work brought. To pass the quiet, grey morning he stood at the store counter with a cup of coffee, his radio tuned softly to a classical station as he scoured the newspaper movie listings. It was after work that he was preparing for.

At twenty past seven in the evening, after Nakamura had swept the floor and dusted the counter and bookshelves, he locked up his shop and took with him yet another selection of books he had still to read. Like the walks he took on Mondays—always Monday and exclusively up the narrow stone path that led to his neighbourhood temple—Nakamura was compulsive about his need for a wide selection of books to choose from each night when he read in bed. Dependent on his mood he would pick from no less than the 15 or 20 books he had going at any given time, often forcing himself to try authors and periods of English writing with which he was unfamiliar and not unabashedly in love. On tired nights when a new plot or overly modern style just seemed too much, however, he would return to his beloved classics of old.

Financial constraints usually kept him eating his dinners at home, but he could only make a late show tonight, and didn't feel like he could wait till afterward to eat. It had always been a shock to his late brother that he could cook. His ex-wife and her friends—her friends because she had known them first and because they stopped being his friends after the divorce—used to tell him he had a knack for Italian food. They had adored his carbonara, and he had loved making it for them. Now though, he cooked only simple (usually boiled) Japanese dishes for dinner, much hotpot through the winter. For lunch he liked

to make himself omelets. He preferred making foods that didn't go well with wine. He didn't drink anymore. Hadn't for years. Now when he was blue he went to the movies.

Wet, and still angry with himself for losing yet another umbrella (left somewhere on that morning train between Takarazuka and Umeda), he brushed through the curtained entranceway of a tiny yakitori place and sat himself on a stool at the counter. There were no tables in the place. There was only enough room for the wooden counter, skewers of chicken sizzling on the hot grill behind. Nakamura wiped off his hands and face with the cool, wet towel he was given and, after ordering his food, released a large sigh. Two young salarymen looked over before resuming their conversation with the proprietor. Nakamura wished someone would have a conversation with him.

After dinner, he bought a bottle of cold green tea and a two hundred yen box of chocolate almonds in the sterile white glare of a convenience store. He took them through the mild rain and into the darkness of the giant old movie house in East Umeda. Nakamura loved this place for its grandiosity, for the red, velvety curtains that framed the screen. The screen felt miles away, the place was so big. It was a Korean melodrama, lots of tears and beautiful people. The film was supposed to be tragic but it was so pretty and far-removed from reality. Nakamura enjoyed the escapist ease of it.

The sinking feeling returned when he exited the cinema and saw the drizzle coming down under the street lamps. Couldn't he just snap out of it? More than anything, Nakamura wanted the day to end. He looked at his watch and realized he only had a few minutes to catch the last train of the night.

He moved quickly along the sidewalk, hot and frustrated by the feelings he had no explanation for, his plastic bag of books swinging by his side. As he was boarding the train his shoulder was nearly knocked off by a rude young salaryman who hadn't even apologized as he rushed by. No one apologized these days, Nakamura thought, as he side-stepped through the crowd and onto the train. He hadn't noticed the selfish young man when he first walked over, but when he did, it was a strong temptation indeed to glare down at him. It was a rage Nakamura felt building—a feeling he thought he'd outgrown—a rage at the self-centered ways of the world. When he looked around it was as if the whole train, everyone, looked angry or sad or drunk-awful. No one cared about anyone else anymore. Nakamura knew to catch it though, this angry wave of heating thoughts. He'd put too much conscious effort into his reactions to let something this small work him up. So young people never gave their seats to the elderly anymore—what else was new? He could stand; it was good for him to stand. He'd spent too much of the day sitting anyhow. But still he let out a sigh. Could it never be easy?

HOTARUGAIKE STATION, 12:12 AM

The familiar musical warning trumpeted along the platform and in through the open train until its lingering last note when 24 sets of car doors closed simultaneously. The train started with a thrust. Yamamoto's grip tightened on his briefcase, which was on his lap. He looked up as the train exited the terminal

station into the spring night. The old man and the other ring holders were bobbing toward Yamamoto and back again in rhythm with the jerky movements of the train. Seeing the outside world suddenly seemed terribly important, like getting an eyeful of fresh air, but the standing crowd blocked any possible view. Yamamoto couldn't see a thing. He heard it, though, when the train shrieked and took a sudden turn.

He hurried to unzip his leather briefcase, burrowed his hands deep inside, finding and clenching the empty plastic bag he had used to take fruit to work. He didn't pull the bag out; he didn't want to believe he'd have to use it. He closed his eyes, swallowing and swallowing as he did. It had to have been the oysters. He was sure of that. He was less sure he could hold them down all the way home.

It came up the way a train makes its sudden start. A jerk followed by a thrust. Yamamoto barely managed to hold on to it, sealing his lips and feeling the soft warm-wet food, like porridge, fill his stretched cheeks. That was the jerk. The thrust came as a second jolt went through his stomach and up his throat and out his mouth like a jaundiced waterfall. He retched into the plastic bag, but not the one he had been holding. He hadn't had time to get it out of his briefcase. It was instead the bag of books the ojiisan standing in front of him had opened and offered for him to use.

The vomit didn't all land in the bag; a good deal of it splattered across the old man's one pant leg. The ojiisan wiped himself off with his handkerchief and then offered Yamamoto a hand. "Do-zo," he said and helped the boy up as the train slowed into the next station. "Here you go."

Everyone on their car stared as the young salaryman walked through the crowd, wiping the dribble from around his mouth with the sleeve of his Armani suit. He couldn't use his hands as they were holding shut the two sides of his unzipped briefcase.

Nakamura glared at the onlookers. "Mind your manners!" He was still shaking his head as he helped the young man off the train. "They think it's a bloody television program they can just stare at."

There was a men's toilet off the platform and Nakamura quickly moved the boy towards it, hurrying him into the only stall in the empty bathroom.

Yamamoto dropped to his knees at the oval hole that was the squatter's toilet. He could feel the old man crouch behind him and put a hand on his back as he threw up all over again. There was no way for Yamamoto to move or even arch his back out from under the man's touch. He was too busy convulsing with aftershocks. Then came the bile. After that nothing but empty gagging. While he stroked Yamamoto's back, the old man hummed a familiar bit of classical music. It wasn't Mozart. It was sadder music, gentler even. Chopin, perhaps? Dvořák? The music helped calm Yamamoto. So long as the ojiisan kept humming the slow and haunting melody. Take him to that other place. It was enough to keep him kneeling there, even after he'd finished gagging, hunched as he was so close to the floor, his hands—two fists—supporting him against the rubber pads meant for feet on either side of the squatter toilet. But he didn't move. He didn't want to, listening to the old guy's repeated refrain, like a gentle lullaby.

Only when the tears came did Yamamoto open his eyes again. He'd not regained as much composure as he hoped, but already he heard himself saying, "Sumimasen. I'm sorry." He was still facing the toilet, but saying, "Gomen Nasai. I'm very sorry." He tried sniffing the runny snot back up his nose, tried braving a look round, but he was quick to turn back after catching sight of the plastic bag still hanging from the old man's wrist. The ruined books! Suddenly he was that eight-year-old boy all over again, his face twisting up in the awful anticipation that came before you got hit for making a mistake. The pain inflicted for "feminine" weaknesses, as his father called them whenever Yamamoto began to cry.

"I've ruined your books." The flat manner with which Yamamoto delivered the line was on account of the fear he was working to hide. The flinch, however, was all instinct—what he did when a man came in towards him, as the old man did now, to cup a hand over Yamamoto's shoulder.

"Sh sh sh. Don't worry about that now. You'll be OK," the ojiisan said. "You'll be OK."

"Please," Yamamoto said, more harshly than he intended, pressing hard with the back of his knuckles to wipe away the wet from his upper lip and nose. "Just go." He shut his eyes tight and the way he was pursing his mouth, his fists, the way his nostrils flared with the air pumping in and out of them. When it came it came to him in full. A complete vision. He saw just exactly what he would do and how easy it would be to do; he heard the cracking sounds, and how seeing the old man's blood on his hands after would satisfy something very deep and wrong inside of him.

"I'm happy to help," the ojiisan was saying. "So please, don't you worry." The old man was still talking and swaying with rhythm, staying just as close—to Yamamoto. "Don't you worry now. You're gonna be OK."

Yamamoto felt the man's breath at his cheek. He didn't hesitate a moment longer. When he got up, he was so quick he nearly knocked the old man over in the act. He grabbed his briefcase like he was yanking the hand of a misbehaved child. The bathroom stall was too narrow for him to pass the old man, though, desperate as he was to leave, to get away so as to protect the ojiisan and keep a promise he once made himself as a boy long ago. Yamamoto had no choice. He had to wait for the old man to hoist himself up off the floor in the slow way old men will. When finally they walked out of the stall, Yamamoto watched as the old man tossed the bag of books in the bathroom's trash bin.

"Old and used, anyway, eh?" The ojiisan laughed.

On the long escalator ride up Nakamura asked the young salaryman where he lived, if he was anywhere near Takarazuka so that maybe they could share a cab. The young man didn't look up when he apologized that he unfortunately lived near Uneno off the Nosé line.

"Naruhodo. I see. Never mind then," Nakamura said. An idea had occurred to him. "I think I might just walk then."

"Walk?"

"Sure." They had gotten off the escalator and were standing by the turnstiles at the station exit. "Why not?"

"But it would take you almost an hour from here!"

Nakamura smiled "It very well might."

"But it's raining."

"I think I'll survive," he said and offered the young man a wink. The heaviness that had been bearing down on him all day was finally beginning to lift. And now this spontaneous little plan of his. It was such a meager thing, but the very thought that he could walk now—at night, in the rain, so outside of his routine— it felt wide open with possibilities, like boarding a big ship bound for the open sea.

"Please." The young salaryman took a five thousand yen bill out of his wallet and moved in toward Nakamura. "For your trouble, so you can take a cab home."

"Thank you, but I genuinely would rather walk. I could use the exercise."

"You don't even have an umbrella. Please. I insist."

"Now who's worrying about who?"

They walked out the station together. It was drizzling but warm. The young man apologized and said he had to go. Before he did he opened his expensive-looking umbrella and held it out for Nakamura.

"It's almost big enough for two," Nakamura joked. This time, though, he didn't refuse the offer.

Before the young salaryman set off, Nakamura rummaged through his pants pockets and produced a dog-eared business card. "Because who isn't in the market for an old foreign book?" He said it with another wink. "Truly, you're welcome at my store any time. Have a cup of coffee and a chat, eh?"

Yamamoto thanked the man with a deep nod and stepped into a waiting cab.

"Evening," the cabbie said.

Yamamoto closed the door. "To Takarazuka," he said. He looked out the rain soaked window that he unrolled just a crack. Finally alone again, he looked down at the card the ojiisan had handed him.

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Yamamoto closed his eyes a moment and took in a deep breath. He turned round to watch as his taxi drove by the old man. In the light rain the ojiisan was walking brisk and tall under Yamamoto's umbrella. The old guy looked like he really was enjoying himself out there. Yamamoto watched him a long time before facing forward again. He checked the rearview mirror to make sure the cabbie wasn't watching, and then dropped the business card out the window before shutting it tight. He didn't want to get wet.

Elena E. Johnson

BEFORE SLEEP

These nights are mostly sunset.
We amble into long-johns,
arrange our cocoons without flashlights.

Wind keens the ropes
that tie small shelters to stones.

Before sleep we switch
the bear fence on—
each pulse through the wire
a faint click.

EDGE EFFECT

Each landscape leaves its mark—
a scratch at the heart, faint
as a pole-scar on talus,

sunk like a boot-print in tundra.
    (Oh how the sphagnum springs
    and springs, how it soaks and soaks
    again.)

ALONE AT THE BASE

The "door" of the cook-tent
unzipped. It blows shut,
blows open.

The other tents
flap, flap, flap. No one
is ever coming back.

Jean McNeil

THE SKELETON COAST

DAY 8

The drive from Uis to Hentiesbaai is poles, road, poles, road; a melon sun. In the truck we are chastened into the silence that grows, as the moment of departure draws closer, between people who will soon never see each other again.

It is September, early spring in the southern hemisphere, and we pass under the mantle of coastal fog that extends 10 kilometres inland, a product of the refrigerated Benguela current that flows all the way from Antarctica. The fog intermingles with sandstorms, turning noon into sepia twilight. Just visible in the murk are glossy ribbons of kelp, fur seals, the hunched shaggy forms of the beachcomber hyenas who eat the fur seals, fishing shacks, knackered bakkies and hulking remnants of ex-ships.

We've been walking 150 kilometres over seven days in the Namib desert on the fringes of the Skeleton Coast National Park. The Ovambo called this place "The Land God Made in Anger." The Bushman called it *Bitterpits*. I read this word first in Stephen's poems when he was alive and all was well and thought: that sounds like the place grief lives. I should go there.

This is my second visit to Namibia. The first trip, in March and April 2010, was almost on a whim. I was living in South Africa then, and was captivated by the idea of the empty country to the north: a desert in southern Africa stocked with anomalies like the horned adder with eyebrow scales that make him look like an enraged elder statesman, the gemsbok which have their own air-conditioning system in their nasal cavities which allows their brains to keep from exploding in temperatures of 45 degrees, and the desert elephant with its feet specially adapted for walking on burning sand. All eking out a living in dry-cut valleys where rain hasn't fallen in hundreds of years, drinking the dew condensed from a cold Atlantic.

It is not yet over but already I know I will write about this trip, and that it needs to happen in reverse time. *In the beginning everything is possible; in the middle one or two outcomes are likely; the end is inevitable.* So said Aristotle, the first theorist of narrative.

But if we reverse this chronology we start with the inevitable and end with the possible, we see more clearly what has been discarded or lost along the way. We glimpse the ghost of luck, map the path not taken. Why should be this way? we ask, retreating along our path, as if we have seen a lion. Everyone in Africa knows this is what you do when faced with a lion: stand your ground, then back slowly away.

DAY 7

The last of our nights in the desert, our campfires the only warmth against the chill. Fires burn bright at the beginning, then wither.

For these last six days we've walked 20 to 30 kilometres every day through dune grass swaying in the wind. It looks not at all like land but an empty sea. I see only him, the horizon, the dog bending into the land.

Eight or nine kilometres beyond the Rhino Alert camp the finish line awaits. This is such a trifling distance for us now that Jan doesn't even put on his trainers. His feet are swathed in bandages, as are mine. Alice, the Frenchwoman who does logistics for Médecins Sans Frontieres (so not a delicate creature) has a centimetre-wide hole in her head from when the metal peg of our spinnaker-shaped shade tarpaulin hit her in a freak accident, and the tip of Helen's toe will fall off within the next two days. We've even had to bandage the dogs' paws; Tiki, the little herding dog, pads along on Band-Aids.

Last night we'd sat around the campfire; as usual only Jan and I drank. Alice was still recovering from her confrontation with Jan, two—or is it three?—nights ago now.

She comes up to me when the others are eating around the fire.

"Don't you think he drinks too much?"

"I'm the wrong person to ask," I say. "I drink too much. I'm not a good judge."

The problem is Jan's volatile moods. Here I can't fault him—I'd be furious, too. But on the other hand there is a collusion in my response which is not only a drinker's camaraderie, it has a tinge of self-sabotage. This has been with me all my life. Its periodic reappearance is never a good sign, I've learned. It means my allegiances are misplaced and they will not be repaid in kind.

On our way to the Rhino Alert camp we stop to taste desert lettuce. It is a succulent; in Namibia many plants survive on the sea mist which drifts inland from the Skeleton Coast. The lettuce tastes of the sea.

An explosion from the river grass. A creature sprints past me, pursued by Omukuru (the Herero word for God, or divine creator), Jan's dog. It's a kudu, a dusk-coloured antelope. The kudu and Omukuru tear down the sandbed of the Ugab, an ephemeral river, so-called because it flows only a few days a year.

"Will he catch it?"

"Not on his own," Jan says. "If there were three or four of them, maybe." His voice drips with a calculated boredom. Nothing I say will interest him now.

My relationship with Jan, if that's what you can call it, has deteriorated over the past two days—a sharp decline that might have nothing at all to do with me personally and everything to do with his preoccupations. We'd started off talking while we walked—about the fate of the Bushmen, Laurens van der Post, the corruption of the ANC—all the reliable southern African topics. But now that voice of his which teeters between provocation and scorn has tipped in the favour of the latter. *You're mad as a box of frogs! What do you want to know the name of that for? Walk, won't you*—he shoves me on the back when I get in his way.

Anxiety fizzes in my stomach, my head, everywhere. I deliberately fall behind and walk at the rear.

We are doing this trek in support of the organisation Jan founded, which works to conserve the endangered black rhino, an animal that has recently come

under renewed and sustained threat thanks to a snake oil remedy trade in Asia which prizes rhino horn for sexual potency. The rhino hasn't got long to last, I can't help but fear. The rhino themselves remain phantoms. We see only their spoor and dung.

This week we have all turned brown and lean like kindling. Jan has gone beyond tanned; his face, caramel at first, is rubber. Two tourmaline eyes stare out from it. He looks like one of those hard men in *Grand Theft Auto*.

All week dark holograms of anger swirl from him, also a stringy, unstable elation. Around him the air is electrified but unhappy. I keep watching him, trying to figure out his essential code. He is alert, taut, but there is something of the same surrender of the language of this place in him, too: *succulent, ephemeral.* Such voluptuous words for a thorny place. Like the buffalo thorns that attach themselves to us, driving an inch down in to our flesh, we absorb them until they are dissolved into our bodies.

DAY 6

Before dawn we rise and stand by the fire, shaking off mist, dew, scorpions. Waking up after surviving another tentless night among hyena, jackal, elephant and leopard feels like coming unpeeled into the world. The spring sun rises by six. We watch Orion fade with the night westward, into the Atlantic.

We walk all day. What do we think about while we walk? For once I don't think. The wind roams through me and this is enough.

My life now is blisters, zinc smear of sunscreen, trying not to sit under the tick bush nor step on a puff adder, migrant fears that waft in and out as I try to take the measure of the emptiness of this place. Scar of bustards in the sky. Jan picks up petrified ostrich eggs for me. The ground is covered with the shattered detritus of a lost culture—flint from Bushman arrows, used Bushman's candle, last touched by a human hand six hundred years before.

There is an undeclared reason why I am doing this trek. I am not an habitué of secrets; it just didn't feel right to tell anyone. Everything I see and feel on this journey has been coloured by this. It has to do with a friend of mine, a writer who chronicled this landscape, or one much like it, long before I came here.

These days have been an ordeal but also never long enough. I remember my near miss five days ago, or was it six? At night I don't dream of snakes at all but of us going sand-surfing on windsurf boards mounted with spinnakers; imprinted on them are the names of Damaraland, the Kaokoveld: *Koppermyn* and *Mon Désir*, *Torra Bay* and *Sorris Sorris*. Such reckless yearning names for drunken hamlets with an Engen station and a bottle store. There is some formula driving this, I feel, an attempt to solve that persistent equation between lavishness and desolation.

February is the hottest month in the Cederberg. Tourists are scarce—not many people can take the heat; during the day it is over 40.

Eskom, the electricity company, is doing work on the line and have cut off

power to the entire district between Calvinia and Clanwilliam for the day. I have to shove everything in the freezer and not open it if I want all the food and drink I have bought to last in the heat.

Outside a rainstorm brews. Cold cobalt clouds amass over the citrus farms that stretch for hundreds of kilometres in all directions. The clouds are rolling in from the north, all the way from Namibia. If I got in the car and drove for another five hours I would reach the Namibian border. And if I drove for a further ten hours after that I would be back in Walvis Bay.

I don't know I will walk 150 km in the Namib desert in six months' time—that decision is still ahead of me. But here, nearer the border, I feel its pull; an insistent tug of unfinished business. Not good business, rather it has the grating insincerity of something I must return to do in order to expunge it from my system.

As for this trip to the Cederberg, I've come here alone against the advice of friends (this is South Africa and it's not safe) in another kind of bleak sympathy, this time with a friend who is dying.

I met Stephen some years ago. We were colleagues, both writers; last year Stephen invited me to teach at the University of Cape Town. Stephen is a mountaineer, a walker, a marathon runner, a swimmer and like many men on the Cape physically perfect, with thick veins rushing oxygen from one quadrant of his body to the other as his heart performs feats of endurance.

A prolific poet and essayist, he'd published what many people considered his best collection, *Return of the Moon*, in 2000. These poems were based on the Bleek/Lloyd translation of the San (Bushman) language and lore, now stored in the archives at the University of Cape Town. The Bleek/Lloyd archive amounted to nothing less than the record of a lost culture and language. When, in 2004 the South African poet and journalist Antjie Krog published a collection based on the same archive, Stephen publicly accused her of plagiarism, igniting a bitter controversy in the cloistered world of South African poetry. I only met him years after the fact.

"I've mellowed now," he told me, in an oblique referral to this chapter in his life. "I'm not quite as uncompromising as I once was."

He'd taken his share of criticism too, I knew, accused of being a conservative poet because his work did not overtly position itself with the struggle against Apartheid. "I refuse to write about politics as my primary subject," he'd told me. "Probably because that's what I was supposed to do, or required to do." Then he'd given a rebellious giggle.

The shadow of his death creeps across this place, even if at this point, here in the Cederberg in February 2011, Stephen is still alive.

Sitting on my stoep with only a Windhoek beer for company, the rainstorm approaches. I wonder if the Cape leopard still treads these roads. To the north is Namaqualand; I love the word *Namaqua*—its sound like pieces of split wood, like water running over stones.

Stephen has camped alone here. He set himself physical challenges, epics of austerity to feed his poetry, as if an internal code needed to be established then stiffened like a core. He wrote a famous essay about this place, "Bitter Pastoral."

In it he calls the Cederberg "the land with no fat."

"It takes an unusual person to see beauty here," says Haffie, the dowager owner of the farm where I am staying. "Most people want green, they want the coast." So do I, I think. Then why am I here?

I wanted to write but I find I can't here. I am writing a book narrated by a man who falls in love with another man for the first time in his life. Neither of them are gay. "They must be a little bit gay," teases my friend back in London, when I tell her the scenario. What I mean is that for both men it is a personal scandal, what they feel for each other, a surprise and also a revelation.

"Why are you writing about men?" my London friend asks me. I don't think I manage an answer. It seems so obvious to me: *I am a man, these men are me.* Even if in life I very often provoke the worst possible instincts in men. I don't know what they see in me, but they feel shortchanged. They are expecting something from the outward package, and upon opening it find a creature too close to their nature to be trusted.

The nights are rough. I feel alone and vulnerable. It is 28 degrees at midnight and I have no fan, so I have to leave all the windows open. I wake before dawn and open the curtains to see that the shale of the Cederberg has ignited. A hungry red bores into my eyes. Today it will be 39 degrees.

DAY 5

"What do you think of my Bushman's feet?"

We sit around the fire bundled in our downfilled jackets, but our feet are bare in sandals. I had noticed Jan's feet, of course, when I first met him a year and a half ago. *Who is this annoying guy with the lovely feet?*

Since I was last in Namibia I have had many dreams in which I come back only to find he is not here. He doesn't live here anymore, he's had to leave. The dreams were their own warning: *don't go back.* Something about this place, or this man, or both, has its hooks into me, into my unconscious.

Several things have changed since my last visit to Namibia: Stephen is dead. He died suddenly in April this year of stomach cancer. In February I spoke with him on the phone in Cape Town; he was so weak he could not have visitors. I never saw him again after that day in St James when we climbed the mountain and he told me that I would come back to teach with him and I thought, *no.*

Things have changed for Jan, too. There is a problem with his work permit and he can no longer be in the country for more than two months at a time. Just as in my recurring dreams of returning, he doesn't live here anymore, in fact only by chance have our paths crossed. Yet everything he owns is here: the business he built from scratch, his house, his partner Elise.

"Why did you come to Namibia?" I ask as we walk up and down dunes.

"Why did I come here?" He repeats the question, his voice sounds of wary offhand boredom. "I was so tired, tired of people, everywhere. Tired of their little powerplays, their ego, striving, university degrees, their..."

"Acquisitiveness?"

"Yes! That too."

That night he leaves the campfire. Later when I go to lay my bedroll in a

hollow on the karst plateau where we sleep I see him lying on the rock far from camp, propped up on one elbow, looking up into the stars. It's not a normal tableau of a man gazing with wonderment at the sky. There is a collusion between them; a current travels down from the sky as much as upward. The stars know him, or know something about him. I wonder what it is.

All night I hear jackal and hyena. Hyena make scoping sounds, almost a coo, like whales communicating underwater. I wear a British Airways eyemask against the Cyclops glare of the moon. When I wake I shift it to see Orion's boxy eye criss-crossed by shooting stars. The Bushmen said "we are the Dreamer's dream:" they believed we are being dreamt into existence, which we mistake for reality, by a far more advanced consciousness. It's not hard to imagine a remote intelligence in these dark skies curdled with constellations.

All day we've been seeing remnants of the Bushman's existence: the stone hunting circles where they would crouch and aim their slender bows at springbok and eland, the flints they used as tools and which Jan ingeniously spots on the rocky plain. But the Bushmen are long gone, driven out by the relentless migration of Bantu peoples from the north.

Tonight Alice and Jan had a confrontation. Alice asked that we walk more slowly and take account of the landscape.

"This is not a bloody safari!" Jan bellowed. "And don't tell me how to walk on sand! I've been working in the Namib for sixteen years." Alice had lived in Mauritania; she knew a thing or two about walking on sand.

For the whole day we'd seen only ostrich. This area of the Namib was formed when the Atlantic retreated 300 million years ago. By day we walk through eerily vacant Gondwanaland plains.

"Ten years ago this place was teeming, man," Jan tells us as we rest under the only tree for fifty kilometres in all directions.

In the 1800s, homesteaders in the area would be unable to open their doors, walled in by springbok herds that stretched from one horizon to the other. Now weekend hunters come from Windhoek or Swakopmund in portly 4x4s. So far we've scared the living daylights out of a lone mother giraffe with her calf and scattered a few nervous springbok. All eyeing us, stiff with the threat of slaughter.

DAY 4

We walk for seven hours with hardly any rest. The last hour is a 30-minute vertical scramble. The rains have been so plentiful this year we have been walking through undulating sable curtains of grass, so beautiful that I forget to look down. This momentary inattention is what led me to my near death experience, two days behind me now.

At the top of Messum Crater, Jacqueline plays Sinatra's "Fly me to the Moon" on her mobile phone. The view is so impressive it takes on a calamitous aspect. A khaki plain stretches to all horizons, punctuated by anvil-shaped drumlins.

I take Stephen's poems from my backpack. I hadn't noticed before how *Return of the Moon* is suffused with dreams—the dreams of the Bushman, of stars and the moon and its steel light, of rain and wind and oryx and eland. In the Namib my dreams are atavistic and strange, they dissolve before the first

green ribbons of dawn appear on the horizon.

In my usual life as a teacher of writing I often give my students this question, as an exercise: What dream did your character have the night before the story started? It's about the overture as much as the unconscious, the last moment before we were aware that something was going to begin, the very next day.

Things that happen today: Alice gets walloped on the head by a metal tent peg which the wind rips out of the ground, tearing the flytarp, our only protection against the sun in this treeless place, over our heads where it whips, a giant kite. Alice's head pours blood and we marshal one of our precious ice packs, long and thin like those ice cores glaciologists coax from the Antarctic ice sheet, to stem its flow. We are four hours away from a hospital. There are no helicopters to pluck us out.

And later, once Alice has been attended to and we are sure she is not going to die of a brain injury/bleed to death, Jan looks at me. I come to sit across from him around the unlit campfire. He never sits next to me. Then again I never sit next to him. I sit in my chair and shake out my hair and lift my head to speak to him and his eyes are already there. In a long arrested moment we stare at each other. The look in his eyes is familiar: curiosity, distaste, and an element I can't identify. I meet his gaze with a questioning one of my own: *Why do I feel so close to you? You don't like me, do you?*

Jacqueline joins us in our little semi-circle of camp chairs, and we look away.

Haffie's Cederberg farm is a 30-minute drive from Clanwilliam on a recently tarmacked road. The drive takes you first high above the verdant valley of the town into a mountain pass. Here twisted cedars defy the wind. Strange boulders, wind-carved, line the highway like statues. Then the road plummets into a wide flat valley, as far as the eye can see. I pull up under huge drooping trees and book in at the farm office.

For the last eight months I have felt a pull to return to South Africa, as if I had to return to make sure this landscape was real. Not only the Cederberg, but also Cape Town, Noordhoek, the places I frequented last year when Stephen was well and we were making plans to work together in the future.

The day before I left for Namibia last year Stephen took me for a walk on the mountain. We reached the top and he turned to me and said, "You see how easy it is to become obsessed with this place." We were looking out onto False Bay, into the bony mountains that stab the southern ocean on either side. It was a Sunday in April, early autumn, but a thin heat remained.

"You'll come back next year, and we'll do this again," he said. In his eyes was a rigid note. Possibly the obsession for this place he was speaking of.

I had to stop myself from saying, "Stephen, I won't. Something will go wrong. I don't know what, but it won't be like that." The feeling was there, automatic, pre-scripted, I didn't need to think of it at all. An alarm trilling through me, powered by an uncertainty: what will go wrong? I knew, I think.

Not what would happen, but what would not happen. I wonder if this counts as oracular knowledge. A premonition.

DAY 3

"She's trying to recreate the trek she did two years ago," Elise says of Helen, who is the oldest among us and is finding the terrain difficult.

But Helen is not making it easy for herself: she rejects all our sorties of friendship or offers of help. Each night around the campfire on her iPhone she reads out the blog that someone on the trek kept of this same journey two years ago. "Dave brought me up to walk behind him," Helen says, and her eyes mist over. "I was number two all the way." I can't help but feel sorry for her. We have perhaps committed the same error, summed up in that old adage: *never go back to somewhere you have been happy.*

DAY 2

As there is a constant flow of light we are born into the PURE LAND. This is the title of the painting by New Zealand artist Colin McCahon that hangs above my desk in London. It is a horizon-awed canvas, a single Rothko line between a muted sky and land.

Ahead of me for seven, eight hours a day, I see this painting. Jan cutting through it with his angry seigneurial stride. But he is delicate, too, almost balletic. He moves in wider circles than the rest of us. The air eddies away from him as he approaches while we are fitting ourselves into envelopes of space, trying to slide in neatly, hoping it will let us in. He hurls himself into time like you would a wall. I like this burning conviction. You can tell a lot about a man from the way he walks.

Stephen, he gulped the ground. He wrote that the body of the writer absorbed the message the landscape was broadcasting. For Stephen, Hemingway, about whom he wrote with great insight and affinity, was the embodiment of this idea. He would never have written the books he wrote had he not grown up in the woods and lakes of Michigan. He had absorbed the savagery and the wild intelligence of that place. For Stephen, Hemingway was not so much a masculine writer as an open-hearted one. He declared his allegiances. He knew what he loved and was not afraid to say so.

They have similar eyes, Stephen and Jan, gas-flame blue against a darkening face that week as we all crisped in the desert sun. The eyes of a man walking away from you, always or eventually, into the horizon, into adventures, other women, another cold beer at the beach bar where he will bask in the admiration of men and women alike. Even toward the end of our walk when we are fed up with each other, Jan still stares at me with those beacon eyes of his. And we stop, each arrested in the moment of discovering an adversary, or is it another self? As you would stall in front of a mirror, shocked to find it is not your own countenance looking back.

DAY 1

It is quarter past seven in the morning when I nearly step on the snake.

The spring sun has been up for twenty minutes. We walk across the northwest face of the dune. That is why I don't fully believe in the snake: he should be on the east slope, facing the sun.

I think: just a horned adder. No, it's not—

By then it is too late and my feet are above its plug-shaped head.

I know very well what you are supposed to do when you encounter a puff adder: stop dead, back away. The puff adder strikes at 300 kilometres an hour. That's faster than a jet departing the runway.

Instead I step over it thinking, oh, that's a puff adder.

Almost unique among snakes, the puff adder doesn't move at a human's approach. "I'm going to kill you so why bother" sums up their world-view. If it does bite you, the result is very often death. If you are lucky and don't die you can be crippled permanently through tissue and muscle damage inflicted by the cytotoxin in its venom.

Jan lifts the snake up on the end of Jacqueline's walking pole. The snake unhinges itself and dangles by the throat to reveal the biggest puff adder I have ever seen. His thick belly is a vanilla bronze. It glitters in the early morning sun. "I used to play with these guys but then a mate of mine got bitten on the hand and we had to cut off his fingers so he wouldn't die."

After he has put the snake down Jan comes toward me; we exchange an uncertain look. He makes to put a single finger on my shoulder, as if to say, *you're bloody lucky*, or, *I'm glad you're not dying right now*. But at the last moment he draws his hand away.

Up and down dunes all day. There are no shadows in this land. The sun cauterises them. For seven hours in 38 degree heat I see Jan, the horizon, khaki grass, Omukuru, the gleaming citadel of the flytarp. At night temperatures plummet to near zero; the 40 degree temperature differential means we migrate between winter and summer in a day.

This is when he tells me his story, how he was a commando here 22 years ago, in the dying days of the Border War. He was only 18. His father, a conservative Afrikaner, forced him into the South African Defense Force, where he trained as an officer.

"No one knew where I was," he says, running a hand through his hair as he marches in front of me. 'Not even my father.'

Jan came to this country first in war. He has made it his home, but now he has been banished. His two months are almost up.

In southern Africa people say *stay* when they mean *live*: "This is where we stay," they say, pointing to the house where they have lived for 25 years. There is something itinerant and non-committal in this verb choice. As if at any moment they could get up and leave.

We are in the same position, I realise. He can't stay here either, even if it is his home.

Evicted into a cool wind we walk twenty kilometres in silence.

Back in Cape Town over the next week I will battle strange lashing panics. A black fear will dervish around me, looking for exit. Why is this happening to me? I didn't know Stephen that well, we were only friends. He's been dead for five months now.

But grief will saturate the months to come so that my mind will feel as if it has been flensed from itself by unseen knives. Grief is waiting. Waiting for what? For the moment to return, the moment in which you felt alive, if not loved. The moment in which the natural obscurity of life, the dark and the shadows, is illuminated. Waiting for the lean figure to appear on your horizon once more. To come bounding back from the edge. Waiting for the sunset, to drink sundowners as the light is swallowed by the mountains.

I never felt desire for him, for either of these men in fact, or not desire for possession. But I did feel a companionship, and although one will burn you alive and the other is the east wind that blows in the Namib morning, they might be the same current pitched on a different frequency.

"Desire is a great builder of inner space within human lives, hollowing us out, making resonant places we originally thought vacant," Stephen wrote in one of the essays collected in *The Music in the Ice*, which would be his last book. Suddenly inside us there are grand vistas flooded with sun. We say, I never knew this place existed.

3:40 in the afternoon. At this hour it's too hot to walk. Jan and I read under the flytarp while everyone else sleeps. All sounds are magnified by the silence: Helen's sleep murmurs, drone of bees, jangle of the copper bracelets and amulets that encircle Jan's wrist, fizz of Jan's cigarette lighter, rake of desert wind.

In Stephen's poems the Bushman says that a man is truly dead when his spoor fills with rain. All people who die become stars:

> There are whole clans of people—
> Men, women and children—
> Long since become stars.

I sit up and look into the yellow wind of the Namib. I see how he absorbed the tense, resinous tone of this land so thoroughly. I understand now how walking and poetry are twinned. There is a space inside me now which I did not know was there and which must be filled. This space has been prised open by the desert, which demands I fill it with emptiness.

I put down his poems and stare at the dun hills.

Stephen's voice—as a poet, as a person—still rings in my mind; its intensity so out of place with those languid Capetonian vowels, the humour that always

loitered at the edges of even the most sombre sentence, his near-cackle of a laugh. Only when you stop remembering what someone's voice sounds like are they truly dead.

I don't know yet how, on our last day of the trek, we will file through rocky cuts that will lead us down into the riverbed. It will be 40 degrees. The sun will sting our arms. The red walls of the canyon will close in on me. This is where Jan will shove me as casually as he boots Omukuru's behind when he gets in his way. We will pass lone eland and oryx standing sentinel in sand rivers with those cool nodes in their heads preventing their brains from exploding.

We will be so near now to the Skeleton Coast. We will feel its coolness, feel the presence of the wrecks that bleat like scars, the *Eduard Bohlen*, the *Otavi*, the *Dunedin Star*, beached spacecraft lost in the fog Angolans call cassimbo. The Land God Made in Anger. Anger can have a velocity, even a beauty. Jan will be angry; I will be angry. I will have absorbed something of his fury.

Suddenly our feet are walking on sand.

"Ah, the Ugab river," Jan will sigh.

That means we've made it; it's over.

That night we make a fire in the middle of the Ugab, where the river would be if there were water. Our legs ache from the effort of the day, when we have levered ourselves in and out of canyons, walking a thin game trail etched by the delicate tracks of Hartmann's mountain zebra.

He materializes from the darkness and sits by the fire. I can't see his face, only his legs. Here the dark is so total that if we do not sit within a metre of the fire we disappear.

Jan tells us he has a trip he needs to do, through Mozambique, with two vehicles. One of them needs a driver. He asks all the others in our group if they will come—Jacqueline, Caro, Helen. I offer encouragement to them all. He says nothing to me and I am careful to say nothing in return. But in the end I make a mistake, offering a random comment about road trips and his voice comes out of the cordon of darkness.

"Be quiet. You are not invited."

A self-protective response would be: I didn't ask to be invited. Or, cut it out with the power plays.

I say, "Yes, Jan, I know I'm not invited."

I sit around the fire for a few minutes more, then go to bed. I crawl into my sleeping bag and am asleep immediately. I didn't know I was so tired.

DAY 0

The night before our walk begins we sleep on a grassy plain under a full moon. Only yesterday I'd flown back here from Cape Town in a sandstorm so fierce it

threatened to divert our flight. Don't worry, the pilot had said on the intercom as we keeled in over the cold ocean. The engines can take it.

I wake in the middle of the night from a dream to the gurgle of jackals hunting in the shadow of the Brandberg. In the dream I am in my flat in Cape Town and there is a stranger, a man, in my shower, naked apart from a pair of chocolate-coloured Ugg boots. The man is flimsy, urban: writer type. Nothing like Stephen or Jan, the men who I will watch as they move in front of me—one alive, one a ghost—until they consume all horizons.

I feel such anguish at not being in the desert I say to the dream in a bleak panic: Take me back, take me back please! I wake up in the Namib and the relief is like waking up from a nightmare in which someone has killed you to find you are not dead after all.

There is always a dream the night before the story starts, but we don't always remember it.

Jim Johnstone

TRIBECA

Bryten Edward Goss, 2006

At dusk, smoke rises
from Tribeca
like an ampersand,

a cirrus cloud
riling sentinels
from the rooftop

where we hover,
Janus-faced
at the sight of flame.

It was Matthew
who warned
that beasts would turn—

and turning, pass
from body
to body until the city

began to burn.
In the conflagration
your dress

swells, peels back
like the mast
of a tall ship—

the marquee dwarfed
by the advancing
proof of motion.

Shifting frames
I submit
to its constraint,

the petal-shaped
hooves
of your composite.

INTERCESSIONS

"Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle,
the theatre is not possible."
—Antonin Artaud

True hunting is over.

*

Behind an arcade I tear your dress and tie my arm off with a sleeve—pulse embossed, free to address your fingers' reach.

*

A tangible lilt: the Ganges defers the dead to its margins.

*

An abbey blanketed with fur.

*

Lion, leopard, wolf.

Joel McCarthy

THREE TOWNS OVER

We made our love Sunday mornings. It was a good day for that, at least that's what we figured. The most practical day of the week. We were always home and there were never any plans. Our sex was better on a Sunday. It didn't have all the hype and obligation that Friday or Saturday nights carried. Those were nights where we felt like we had to, and that just made us not want it. We were like that. We didn't have to do anything; we didn't need to be told what was what, where we should go, how we should be. We fucked when we felt like fucking, and that happened to be on Sunday mornings when the church bells at the end of Mill Street rang out.

We never married, and though I don't think she'd ever admit it, it's why it ended between us. We acted like rebels, like we were against the grain, happy to live outside of conventions, outside of what our families wanted. We said we'd never have children. We'd never enter a church. We'd never reserve a banquet hall or call a caterer or hire a band. It made us special compared to everyone else, and we felt like we were really sticking it to the lot of them by making us work. We lived together with separate bank accounts and we made love on Sundays. It was ours.

I told myself it was perfect but knew it wasn't. It wasn't what she wanted and it wasn't what I wanted. We played as rebels for as long as we could. We were stubborn, and it wasn't compatible with the relationship we thought we'd perfected. I would've proposed and she would've accepted, but neither of us budged. After a while we stopped making love on Sundays. That's about the time we knew it was gone for good.

She ended up marrying a mechanic three towns over. I knew this because I kept in good contact with her brother, Ben. Ben was a good man and I told him that he was too good a bud to lose over what ended between his sister and me. We stayed talking, but not like before. At least we were still talking.

I moved above a pet store. The rent was cheap because there were birds along the back wall of the shop that squawked every time there was something for them to squawk at. I got used to it, and when it felt like too much I always had my headphones. They were these big padded things that gripped your melon like a vice, blocking everything out. I'd play tapes that I didn't listen to when I was with her. It was a lot of 70's stuff from college radio, stuff that she hated, progressive guitar stuff with flakey drum patterns—stuff that gets you thinking the beat is in four when it's really in seven or nine or something like that. Tricky stuff. I'd clamp my head and turn up the volume and think about moving into a big city, or to an island where the weather changes every ten minutes, and I'd let the music trick me into thinking the birds weren't squawking. I thought about the broad who ran the pet store below me, how I wished she was half as

attractive as my ex. It occurred to me that I could barely remember her face now. I'd ditched the few Polaroids we'd managed to pose for. I wondered if she had kids now, got fat, lost the glow in her cheeks, the fullness of her smile. I didn't know if I'd gotten fat. I never bothered to replace the bathroom scale she took with her, three towns over.

I got beat up late one night after the pet store was long closed. I heard glass breaking, and the birds started their squawking. There were these two kids below me, emptying out the register, stealing whatever they could carry. I went down and caught them before they got away. I got a hold of the one's wrist, a black kid, and I twisted it until he screeched like one of the parakeets at the back wall. I lost sight of the white kid, though, and that wasn't a smart thing to do. He smashed a fishbowl over the back of my neck and I went down and they took off.

I got up, went back upstairs, picked bits of glass out of my neck and hair, and brought down a broom to clean up the mess. I called the broad who ran the store.

She wanted to take me to a hospital, but I said it was alright. My neck hurt some and I had a headache, but any blood had already scabbed over. I had this piece of plywood resting up on milk crates that I'd been using as a coffee table. I brought it down for her with a six pack, and I nailed it over where the front window had been. She thanked me and we drank. I took her up to my bed and we fooled around until morning light spilled in through the window.

I left her a wad of cash for when she woke up. It was my last rent payment. I labeled the envelope as such because I didn't want her to feel like a whore. I never thought of her that way.

Three towns over was an hour on the road, and I didn't think my car was going to make it. It did, and I didn't know what to do when I got there. I expected the thing to die. I called Ben, but he didn't pick up, so I went for lunch at the café on the main street and ordered the special: turkey sandwich and soup. The coffee was hot and it tasted soapy. I paid at the front counter, and asked where the mechanic was at.

When I drove the car in, I saw him. He was Asian, with hair like a helmet and coveralls that told me he'd worked on his fair share of engines. He shook my hand when I got out of the car, but made sure to wipe his own before reaching out. I noticed the ring on his finger, felt the callused flesh that had grown around it. He couldn't have taken it off if he wanted. I had to wonder if he ever wanted to.

It took me a few seconds to answer when he asked me what the trouble was. I told him the battery light kept coming on. I told him the battery was new and I figured it was the alternator, and asked would he check it out for me? He smiled, told me it wouldn't be a problem, and he pointed to a row of chairs and a stack of magazines along the wall of his shop. He spoke with no accent.

I picked up a magazine, but wasn't reading. I watched him when I knew he wasn't watching me. He whistled something familiar, but the tune stopped once he set the hood open, so I couldn't figure what it was for sure. I browsed the walls, looking for any sign of her or the family that I wasn't sure they'd made

together. He pulled the voltmeter from a large tool chest and connected it to the battery, positive to red, negative to ground. Were they in the red? Were they in the ground?

There was something on the counter in front of me, next to the register. I'd seen it before. It was a paper weight, glass, a fake monarch butterfly trapped within. I remember her buying it. It was off a dirt road, somewhere west, wherever we were. There was junk sprawled here and there about a yellowing lawn, a wooden sign spray painted. It said "Antiques & Treasures." When she picked the thing up, she smiled, said it wasn't antique, that none of it was, but she was good enough not to let the owner hear. She bought it anyway, paid full price, though I'd tried to get her to haggle the thing down another dollar than it was going for. It sat on her side of the room on a night table until the day she packed everything up.

The mechanic looked at me, his brow furrowed. He said the battery was charging normally, and asked if it could be something else that was giving me the trouble. I got up, put the magazine back in its place, telling him it was alright, that maybe it was nothing. Maybe the trouble had passed, I said. He looked at his shoes, shrugging, not knowing what to say. I pulled the wallet from my back pocket, telling him thanks for checking things out, asking what I owed for the time. He laughed, shaking his head, his thick hair not moving. He told me no charge, that it was okay. He told me to come back if things started to act up again. I nodded, telling him I doubted they would, knowing it now.

As I pulled away from the town I heard church bells, and in the mirror saw a swarm of whippoorwills dancing in the gray sky. I clicked on the radio, catching only static, but it was all right. It was enough to mute the bells. It was all right, and it was enough.

Caroline Wong

BONES AND SEEDS

after Thomas Heise

My birthright I have exchanged for an alphabet
tablet and a dirge. I have pawned my Confucian
ink stone for an amber the colour of unpreserved bones.

If I could sail on an ox bladder on a vertical
ocean I would burn my nostalgia to honour
the cinnamon peeler in the moon.

For some of us, home is a leprosy
we carry throughout our journey west
bereaved of Monkey's eight fold tests.

I sleep today. My mother, long dead, cracks open
her sarcophagus to make room. "Ma, I'm not ready yet."
In answer she bestows upon me three blessings.

The sun beams seeds of incandescent catastrophe.
A stick girl plants flamingos in a broken lawn.
It's no one's birthday. Some stars are not born yet.

GIRL FROM NERUDA COUNTRY

Half out of the sky, the gibbous moon
floats between branches of dogwood.

No chance for the stars to break through.
Clouds and grass a rain-stitched

carpet on which to fly straight into the pool
of drowned longing.

Rise, my lotus girl, who sits shy and sweet
fecund with Pablo's leaves.

Plug your ears against the courtier's serenades
bled now of concretized lies and heat.

Go where a stranger's touch, his wordless pleading
will not move you

where the one worthy of your heartbreak
pens:

> *The green grass in the meadows*
> *Grows long with your absent shadow.*

Li Qing Zhao (1084-1151)

ON PEACOCK TOWER

Translated by Caroline Wong

In the gilded censer the fragrance is cold.
The silken counterpane tosses like waves.
Rising, a heaviness in my limbs.
My hair hangs in unwashed tangles.

Dust from habit layers over my fine things.
Outside the curtains the sun has burned up half the day.

The aches inside, so much I wish to tell you.
But never mind.

This new thinness—
comes not from autumn
or from too much wine.

But never mind.

You are gone—
A thousand songs of farewell have not detained you.

Never mind.

Thinking of you on your way to distant Wuling.
The wall of smoke and mist in between.
I'm grateful for the river flowing past Peacock Tower
witnessing my watching.

Watching thus adds a new length of sorrow to the long road.

Pasha Malla

THE ACTUAL

1.

And so it was in the town of L----- in Ontario Province that everyone became a god. This happened less celestially than with a natural, earthly progression: the citizenry went from masters of their own domains to lords of private castle to heads of PTAs to full-on gods, with the requisite special powers and elaborately flowing garments. Robe-tailoring concerns started moving serious units. Leather sandals went on back-order. Razor companies, despite stuffing *even more blades* onto their space-age designs, found L----- a dead market: big, shaggy beards became all the rage for men, and the women let their legs and armpits grow ivy-wild and free.

While each person was a god their talent as such, their magic, was limited to one realm so no one stepped on anyone else's toes. Meaning that each deity had a specific power: this god was really good at tempests, that god was the God of Video Conferencing, another one was fierce into hoedowns, and then there was the god who'd crafted an exquisite, divinely manicured front lawn that no one could hold a candle to, no matter how feverishly even the God of Pyromania tried—fireproof, that lawn.

There was an arcanely titled God of Stuff who with the help of tiny, tiny elves made miniature simulacra handicrafts of real-world things, which when fired in an enchanted oven and removed, and painted, and glazed, would transform into the real-world thing, replacing the real-world thing in the real world. Basically stealing it with a sort of proprietary voodoo. For example: this god, whose name was Morris, had his elves manufacture a dinky-scale ceramic copy of a minivan he'd seen another god, Arlene, driving, and which Morris liked very much. Arlene was piloting her kids (whom she'd crafted herself; Arlene was the God of Pregnancy) to soccer practice when poof, it disappeared, and Arlene and her kids had to navysealroll out of traffic to safety, while the minivan rematerialized in Morris's workshop and the elves danced and cheered.

Or there was this other god, Julie, the God of Boring. No one was quite sure what she got up to in her split-level duplex, but every so often the always-drawn curtains in the front window would flutter and you'd see the shadow of a face there, or at least a shadowy head-shape which probably housed some make of face, and a great beige pall would fall tediously over the land and everyone's life got a bit duller for a few days.

Stuff like that.

L----- was a fair-sized town, with far too many gods to tell about here. And while there were literally thousands of gods, there was no Allah or Zeus or even Brahma-equivalent, no head honcho-type figure who called the shots and did the smiting (Barry, the God of Smiting, mostly just smote roll-your-own cigarettes, went the local joke). Every god pretty much did his or her own thing. Whether

it be conjuring a maelstrom of snakes from the sky or kicking out hot jams on local radio.

Yet there existed no ethical or political divisions between gods, no teaming up, no allegiances of Light vs. Dark or Naughty vs. Nice or Shirts vs. Skins, etc. Each god was just a cog in the same wondrous machinery of the town of L-----, which was in many ways like any other place in human or heavenly history, except maybe Sodom or Valhalla, in that it comprised everything, one big sloppy jumble of stuff, good and bad and kind and evil and sweet and stinky, and it functioned as such, as best it could, and sometimes L-----ers were happy, and sometimes they were sad—or angry or frustrated or envious, or whatever.

Still, like everywhere, people (gods) got pissed off at one another sometimes. But it was agreed that in order to represent the "huge vast glowing and snarling complexity of humankind," as per the Town Charter of Commandments, it was necessary to include and respect vengeful gods, wrathful gods, petty hateful gods that were cruel or full of avarice; the covetous, the snivelling, the bitchy and mean. There were plenty of kind, fun gods, too: the God of Beach Volleyball, for example, whose name was Liz, and the God of Making the Th-mes River Run with Chocolate Milk, and this other quiet god nobody knew too well but just smelled really, really amazing all the time.

What else? Oh, when the God of Pregnancy, Arlene, blessed the other gods "with child"—a simple process, just a form you had to fax her—and said children were born, they were at first coddled as any other babe-in-arms might be, and cribbed, and breast- or bottle-fed, depending, and burped, and so on, until they were school-age: five. Then every boy and girl was placed into a local madrasa, where they began a theologically inclined study of all the R's, as well as subjects that were not R's like music and gym, etc., and twelve years later from this holistic education they would emerge with some idea of what type of god they'd like to be—as in, of what. So they'd "declare" and attend the local polytechnotheological college to specialize, to learn their craft, and graduate a fully certified god, ready to do that unique and holy thing that no one else could do, or had done, ever. And then they'd do it, *for*ever.

2.

And then, and then, and then: so things went in L-----. The kids grew into gods and the gods exercised their powers, and life wasn't that unlike life in any other mid-sized town in Ontario Province, such as H------- or B--------, excepting of course the frequent acts of divinity, and the fact that nobody died. Oh, because of the mortality rate (zero), housing was a problem—that is until an enterprising kid named Ailsa decreed herself God of Housing Gods, and within the week was conjuring great towering literal skyscrapers that pretty near tickled the moon. The apartments were really nice, too, with feng shui flowing through every unit like a soothing, Zen-filled river.

Ailsa's work was commended by urban planners and architects alike—even the God of Demolitions, Gina, resisted getting up to her old tricks. And so L-----ers had comfortable places to live, and were happy. In a laudatory profile, the L----- Free Press praised Ailsa as "Best God Ever," and contrarian letters to

the editor were hugely outweighed by those pledging support.

This success continued and Ailsa stayed busy. Then, when she was in her late-twenties the God of Love, Mike, hooked her up with a fellow named Lucan, and soon they were an item, a couple, a married couple, wife and husband. Lucan was the God of Money, a position he'd defaulted into due to the glazed look he got at the smell of hot paper and which his madrasa teachers had mistaken for passion.

But gods don't really need money. When Lucan and Ailsa's friends came over, out of collegiality, or pity, they might fold a few bills into their wallets with sombre promises to "spend it wisely." But Lucan knew it was a ruse; he felt ineffectual, especially considering all the fame and furor afforded Ailsa, or even the prosaic utility of someone like, say, their neighbour, Medway, who laboured doggedly within the realm of fibreglass insulation. Truth: Lucan was angry. His life felt like a compost bin; every day he stomped more guck into the squelching brown sludge, reeking and rotting in the depths of his soul.

Despite the anger, because of Mike's fine work Lucan did indeed love Ailsa very much, and she loved him right back, and perhaps it was precisely because of all that requited love that Lucan suppressed his rage, or at least sublimated it into the Sisyphean task of cranking out sheet after sheet of totally useless currency. Ailsa, for her part, was so busy with her work, and all the interviews and photo shoots attendant to celebrity, that she remained oblivious to her husband's turmoil and decay. And then one day she came home and he was standing in the kitchen wearing nothing but hi-tops and said, flaccidly, "Ailsa, let's fax for a child."

With passive aggressive tactics Lucan coerced and Ailsa listened, or at least was quiet, while mentally sketching blueprints for a Fuller-inspired geodesic dome on the derelict fairgrounds. Finally she said, "Okay, if that's what you want, but you're carrying it." And so Lucan faxed Arlene, was soon enough impregnated, and nine months later a team of various medical gods caesarean'd a squealing baby boy from his midsection. Ailsa and Lucan named this child Elgin, and Elgin progressed from soiling himself at every turn to a plastic potty to being cheered as he mounted the big boy toilet to secreting his bodily excretions—of all sorts—beyond his parents' jurisdiction altogether.

Into his teens Elgin evolved into a pasty, mincing young man in a helmet of brown hair so persistently greasy he appeared dipped to the temples in gravy. His beard grew in patchy and pubic; whiteheads glistened within it like pearls. Elgin had one friend, a boy two years his junior, Iqbal. Together they shut themselves in Elgin's room for hours and hours. Ailsa and Lucan weren't quite sure what they got up to in there, though it couldn't be anything naughty, as their son expressed as much interest in drugs or sex or anything archetypally teenage as he did in, well, everything.

Life to Elgin seemed akin to queuing with bad groceries at some purgatorial supermarket: onward he trudged, holding in each hand a warm, damp lettuce. And so he trudged. And in his son's trudging Lucan recognized his own similar trudge, as though in re-run, and this isn't what he'd hoped fatherhood would be. Lucan had believed raising a child might transcend his empty, moneymaking existence. Instead: Elgin.

3.

On the evening of Elgin's graduation from the madrasa, he and Lucan and Ailsa went out for a celebratory dinner at a downtown restaurant run by Gladys, the God of Tex-Mex. Iqbal was not invited; this was just for family. And while his demeanour might have suggested sulking, Elgin always slumped around in a silent malaise, like a masterless henchman or an off-duty mime.

First, drinks (wine for the adults, grape soda for Elgin), then everyone ordered—Elgin by pointing listlessly at the menu. As the waitress trotted away Lucan stared at his son. "What did you order, boy?" Elgin mumbled something. "What, what's that?" "Steak fajitas, too," said Ailsa. Lucan's eyes widened; he thumped the table with a fist. "Damn it, that's what I ordered—you couldn't have got something different?" Elgin shrugged. Steely-eyed, Lucan emptied his glass and signalled the waitress for another.

The food came: vegetarian nachos and two platters of fajitas, sizzling in stereo. After everyone had cleaned their plates in tense silence, Ailsa asked The Question: "So, Elgin, school's done—what are you planning on doing?"

"Time to declare," said Lucan. "Everyone else does at your age, you're no bloody different."

Elgin said nothing.

"Out with it, boy," growled Lucan. "What are you going to do with your life?"

Elgin took a sip of grape soda.

Ailsa said, "What about grape soda? There's no God of Grape Soda."

"I don't even like it that much," said Elgin, staring into his drink, fizzing and violet.

"Well what do you like, goddammit?"

"Easy, Lucan," said Ailsa. "Blaspheme not."

Elgin said, "Nothing, really."

"Nothing," Lucan sighed. "The boy likes nothing. He's interested in nothing. Well you can't very goddamn well be the goddamn God of Nothing."

The air above the table shifted.

Elgin stopped chewing.

Ailsa locked eyes with her husband. "Can't he?"

In a voice trembling equally with irritation and wonder, Lucan whispered: "My son: the God of... Nothing?"

4.

Here was the thing: Elgin was an atheist. That might seem a counterintuitive position in a town like L-----, surrounded by so much evidence for the powers of the divine, but Elgin, in his lethargic way, was steadfast. He just didn't believe, and he couldn't fake it. The whole business of gods seemed only exhausting, all that showy providence—it just couldn't be real. From mass delusions to tricks of the light, possible explanations were outlined in The Actual (working title), the manifesto he and Iqbal penned together, and which they had so far secreted from everyone in town—especially Elgin's parents.

At the time of Elgin's graduation the manifesto was a 1500-page doorstop hidden in a hollowed out edition of the municipal bible (released annually, roughly the size of a dozen stacked phonebooks). Though manifesto was the wrong word for The Actual, which lacked not only disproof of things godly, but also a basic, cohesive argument. As Iqbal's 128-page introduction suggested, this was precisely its point: "An argument," he'd written, "is an attempt to convert someone's opinion to your own. Conversion is a religious practice. We don't want to do that."

It wasn't even nihilism the two boys were advocating. Despite its length, The Actual was less epic and rambling than a steady, brown drone humming without cease. The document was about getting thoughts and feelings on paper—for posterity or their own integrity or what, Iqbal and Elgin weren't even sure. All they knew was that they didn't believe, and writing about this, together, seemed the right thing to do: and they did so compulsively, almost pathologically.

The Actual aside, the morning after that Tex-Mex dinner, Elgin's father marched him down to the registrar's office at the polytechnotheological college. "My son's going to be the town's first God of Nothing," Lucan announced with a flimsy sort of pride. The registrar, Pauline (The God of Registration), handed over the appropriate forms, which Lucan completed with requests for a thesis supervisor (gods of Quantum Physics, Buddhism and German Philosophy), while Elgin slouched nearby, staring forlornly at the untied laces of his sneakers.

5.

Perhaps revolutionaries aren't born, or even chosen. Perhaps the rebel spirit lies dormant within all souls, and it takes only a spark, some ignominy or injustice, some cause or reason, to kindle it into a conflagration. In Elgin's case, his lethargy often infuriated others into action. Certainly he vexed and perturbed his professors. "To be the God of Nothing, you have to become one with nothing, not just do nothing!" Dr. Lao hollered, brandishing chalk. Elgin shrugged.

Word spread around campus of the kid who, for reasons no one could fathom, didn't care about godliness. In the cafeteria, in line for the bus, in the crowd at the Homecoming Game that October, Elgin could feel the lingering looks, hear the whispers, sense the speculation. Once someone even came up to him after a Books of Creation lecture and asked him outright: "So you think you're better than everyone else?" To which Elgin replied: "No, of course not. Obviously worse."

Rumours began to circulate beyond the campus's ivy-shrouded walls. Ailsa sensed among some of her more reactionary clients a palpable reticence and frigidity; some even cancelled orders. Still, no one came out and demanded what she suspected was on all their minds, i.e. how someone of such godliness might have failed so terribly as a parent.

One evening in October, while Lucan fed another day's-worth of dollars through the paper shredder and Elgin perched at the window waiting for Iqbal to come over, Ailsa sat swirling wine on the couch and wondered: maybe she'd been too career-driven, maybe her absenteeism had allowed her husband's cynicism to encroach unencumbered into Elgin's subconscious... But no, that wasn't it,

she thought, watching Elgin peer into the L----- night. There was something different about the boy that transcended both nature and nurture.

When Iqbal, who had recently taken up with a teenage sect that hung around the town's various shopping mall food courts, finally showed up (with a freshly pierced nasal septum) he deflected Elgin's embrace into a limp soulshake, expressed no interest in working on The Actual, and absconded forty awkward minutes later with Elgin's favourite pen. At this Lucan gloated—though it was a brief triumph, as the next day the L----- Free Press featured an editorial about his son.

Lucan read the piece ("Renegade student so impudent to refuse even Nothing!") aloud to his wife and son over breakfast: "'What has our city come to that a boy of such strong matrilineage'"—here Lucan cringed—"'might forsake the very foundation of what it means to be a L-----er? To wit: what sort of dark soul might reject godliness? Elgin was lucky to be born in this town, and not some heathen backwater where nary a soul perchances to dream. Yet this boy chooses to ignore such a privilege. An apostate,'" Lucan read, glancing up and meeting his son's eyes, "'is the only name for a practitioner of such blasphemy. Cast him out!'"

Elgin slurped his wet cornflakes.

"Boy!" hollered Lucan. "You're disgracing this family. A God of Nothing—it can't be that hard! Just do what they tell you, graduate, and then you can sit back and perform as little magic as your heart desires. Why drag our family through the mud?"

"But I don't want to do nothing," said Elgin. "I don't want to do anything."

Lucan threw up his hands.

"Elgin, sweetie," said Ailsa. "All we're asking is that you try."

"But I don't want to try. And the more I don't try the more it feels like trying."

"So stop trying!" screamed Lucan.

"But then," said Elgin in a measured voice, "isn't that the same as doing nothing?"

6.

A paradox, then. Yet there was no time to contemplate paradoxes when the town of L----- was in an uproar. The Free Press missive had divided the citizenry into partisan camps: on one side the collective, Elgin: Cast Him Out (ECHO) hosted a candlelit vigil so fiery that the God of Flame Retardants had to intervene before all of downtown was burned to the ground. ECHO was opposed by the surprising (to Lucan, at least) Pro-Elgin the Atheist CollectivE (PEACE), who, if not explicitly in support of the boy, at least advocated a general theo-/democratic right to agnosticism.

Morris, the God of Stuff, became PEACE's spokesperson, mostly because his elves had plagiarized a high-tech megaphone that made his voice resonate and glisten with a digital sheen. "People," he hollered from the rooftop of the Children's Museum, "it is not for us to decide how each person believes. This is no caliphate! We are not fundamentalists! Our gods live free. If the boy doesn't

want to lord over Nothing, we must let him..."

The local public access TV station hosted a debate between Morris and ECHO's representative—perversely, Maureen, eyeing her purloined minivan in the studio's parking lot. Ailsa, Lucan and Elgin watched this broadcast with interest. Points were made and vigorously rebutted; the rhetoric was fierce, turning personal when Morris quipped about Maureen's impending bus-ride home.

The next day, one of PEACE's members was jostled and mocked in line for lottery tickets; this incited a brief riot that culminated in the looting of the adjacent Bulk Barn. Later that week an ECHO rally was dive-bombed by diarrheal waterfowl—clearly the work, Maureen claimed, of PEACE's God of Birds, a certain Howard "Hitch" Rosenstock. A few days later the brakes went out on Hitch's Prius and he had to be lifted to safety by a flock of seagulls.

And, just like that, war was declared. The town's central thoroughfare became a line in the sand: on the east side, ECHO stockpiled weapons, which Morris's PEACE-committed elves swiftly appropriated in their west-end workshop. Maureen recruited the God of Smiting, Barry, who between cigarettes smote God after God from the enemy ranks. Fortunately PEACE included the God of Resurrection, who revived each felled fighter; they awoke blinking and staggered about like foals in the sunlight.

Elgin's parents sided, naturally, with PEACE—though Lucan assured Morris that his talents were best suited to "producing funds for the war effort," while Ailsa crafted ramparts and flying buttresses and all other manner of cover for PEACE's frontline soldiers. The attacks intensified. Many of Ailsa's buildings, which housed members of both factions, were reduced to rubble. Throughout the town fires burned and were extinguished and then rekindled and alarms screamed through the night.

Despite the chaos, things seemed destined for stalemate. Each god's powers were negated by some other god's: fecal tempests summoned by the God of Shitstorms were sanitized by the God of Sewage Treatment; strikes from the God of Astigmatism were remedied by the God of Laser Eye Surgery. In an act of desperation, on October 28th a faction of pro-Elgin reconnaissance agents were nabbed from a foxhole on the tenth fairway of the S-nningdale Golf Course. Iqbal, learned Elgin, was among them. Two nights later PEACE retaliated: the God of Hydro cut power to the west side of town, instigating an act of divine vengeance from the God of Natural Gas.

On Halloween night the town of L----- was reduced to total stasis. The streets were empty, everything sat in darkness, and with neither heat nor light; even the malls shuttered their doors. PEACE and ECHO agreed on a temporary ceasefire. If they were honest, few people on either side could remember what they were fighting about; general assemblies were required to remind one another before resuming battle.

While meetings convened at the rival factions' respective headquarters, Elgin sat in his usual perch by the front window. As ice cubes chimed in a glass of untouched grape soda in his lap, listlessly he flipped through The Actual, thinking about its missing co-author, his only friend. How was Iqbal faithful

enough to fight under Elgin's name, yet still seem so indifferent to Elgin and their old common cause? What did he really believe in? Was there anything in L----- to believe in at all?

Out the window, the streets were lifeless and dark. What a metaphor, thought Elgin: the town without power as all the gods were rendered powerless: no one had any powers at all, so efficiently was each divine act rendered moot by some diametrical force. Elgin stopped flipping pages. He listened. Downstairs, his father cursed faintly while his printing press whirred. But otherwise, the night was silent.

"It's happened," he said aloud. "Nobody's anything anymore. Everything's just...nothing."

At this a pang of sorrow lanced his heart. He thought of Iqbal, out there somewhere in the night, perhaps held captive in a dingy, ECHO-held root cellar, waiting patiently for the God of Hostage Negotiations to turn up and work her magic. But then what? Would things return to normal? Was that good? Elgin himself could think of no answer: other than suggesting that L----- was vacuous and silly, The Actual had, by its very nature, never proposed an alternative to collective divinity. Faced with the prospect of a clean slate, and without Iqbal to celebrate or even confer with, Elgin felt overwhelmed, anxious, exhausted. The book in his hands grew heavy.

Just as he was beginning to lose all hope, the doorbell rang.

Three children waited on the stoop: one was draped in a white sheet punctured with two eyeholes; one wore a construction paper-and-felt attempt at a witch's hat and robe; face rouged with lipstick, the final child brandished a rusty pitchfork—the poorest excuse for a devil Elgin had ever seen.

"Trick or treat," said the children.

Elgin stared back. "Did you make those costumes yourselves?"

"Yeah," said the witch shyly. "We know they're not very good, but..."

"We don't have any powers yet," came a voice from within the bedsheet.

"Trick or treat," said the devil.

"But I've got no treats," said Elgin.

"What about your pop?" said the witch.

"Oh," said Elgin. "Well, okay."

He handed the glass to the ghost, who lifted her sheet, swept the drink inside, slurped, and passed it along to the devil. Once the soda had made the rounds back to Elgin he took a sip to complete the ritual. The flavour was diluted and the bubbles had lost their fizz. But it was still cold, and the coldness woke Elgin up a bit.

The devil pointed his pitchfork at the book under Elgin's arm. "What's that?"

"Something I was writing with a friend. But we never finished it."

"You mean it doesn't have an ending?" said the witch.

"No, not yet." Elgin considered the shoddy triumvirate on his doorstep—the devil's absurdly blazing visage, the witch's hat-brim crinkling, the ragged twin hollows from which the ghost surveyed the world. "Know what?" he said. "Why don't you finish it for me." And with equal feelings of resignation and relief, he handed The Actual over.

"For us?" said the witch.

"For you," said Elgin. "Give it a good ending, okay?"

"Sure," said the ghost.

"We will," said the devil.

And the three trick-or-treaters—the witch, the ghost, and the devil—took Elgin's life's work back down the driveway and off into the moonless night.

Elgin stood on his doorstep watching them go until they turned a corner and disappeared. He was left with a view of the neighbourhood: lightless houses, cars dormant in driveways, and, smoldering just above the skyline, the ruins of one of his mother's massive towers. This, a remnant of what had been, was the only sign of people, gods, or anything like life. The town seemed abandoned, at once shrunken and limitless.

And somewhere a dog barked—once, sharply.

And then there was silence.

And Elgin felt sad.

And then, in what seemed a small, benign miracle, the dog began barking again.

Michael Patrick Jessome

GHAZAL: FINGER BOWLS

When the car entered the fog, branches of hardwood went as veins in a wrist. It's like blowing dust from an old dictionary, like finding pressed leaves between "mallet" and "mandrill."

In an atlas, it may be possible to span the fingers so they cover five oceans at once. Afterwards, bend at the knees and drop under. Start on the cold bottom and heave the largest rock.

There might be proof of a pond in the attic. It's the kitchen ceiling sagging after rain. Call us lucky. There's green water on the dinner plates and infant hand-smudges that bloom in the plaster.

One seagull has its mind tucked into its wing. It's all fish hooks, a bit of netting. Still, the sound of its feathers is the sound of turning pages.

In her grip the cake pan scoops air like a shovel. She takes it outside to the sandbox. After winter we find it turned, spotted and gouged from salt and ice.

matt robinson

FEBRUARY AFTERNOON, NEAR TAMPA

unsteady—not quite anxious—from the limp of this
deck furniture's scuff-addled vantage, this small, prefab
balcony's whitewashed aluminum rails: strobe-frames the inflatable beach
slide's flaccid blue end-of-day posturing—captures everything
here, uneasy; collapsing; folding in, on itself. and there
is near nothing as far as wave action goes; the water sleepily-dimpled,
the gulf a sun-soaked newsprint facsimile of overworked levi's.
afternoon's now a breezy, disinterested sigh; nameless
near palms struggle to grab the air's pay. checked, the view's a strip-mall
waffle house, segmented and greasy; you can't un-stick your eyes'
thick lids for all the air's syrup. the beer's not quite warm.
this, it would seem, is america. you sit here. you lounge
in a favourite shirt worn and washed once too often—
the seams ready to give, but no one's willing to wager, just now, on
quite how.

CONTRIBUTORS

Tammy Armstrong's poetry has appeared in literary magazines and anthologies in Canada, US, Europe, UK and Algeria. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, the Governor General's Award and short-listed twice for the CBC Literary Prize. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of New Brunswick, studying North Atlantic poetry and critical animal studies.

David Clink has two collections of poetry published by Tightrope Books: *Eating Fruit Out of Season* and *Monster*. He edited an anthology of environmental poetry: *A Verdant Green* (The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, 2010). The same publisher has recently released *Crouching Yak, Hidden Emu*, a book of David's humorous verse.

Julia Herperger has had poetry on CBC Radio, and in magazines such as *Arc*, *Room* and *The Antigonish Review*. Her work has been included in the anthologies *Listening with the Ear of the Heart: Writers at St. Peter's* (St. Peter's Press), and *Fast Forward: Saskatchewan's New Poets* (Hagios). She lives in Saskatoon, and is at work on her first full-length manuscript.

Michael Patrick Jessome was born and raised on Cape Breton Island. Currently he lives in Fredericton and is completing a Master's Thesis in Creative Writing at UNB. Michael has been an assistant editor for *The Fiddlehead* and was the poetry editor of *QWERTY* for two issues. Michael will also be published in the fall issue of *CV2*.

Jessie Jones is a writer and editor living in Victoria, BC. Her work has previously been published in *CV2* and is forthcoming in *filling station*.

Elena E. Johnson has been a finalist for the CBC Literary Awards, the Alfred G. Bailey Poetry Prize and *This magazine*'s Great Canadian Literary Hunt. Her work has appeared recently in *The Fiddlehead*, *Arc*, *Dandelion* and *The Literary Review of Canada*, as well as three anthologies. The poems in this issue are excerpts from "Field Notes—Alpine Tundra," a 22-poem series written during her time as writer in residence at a remote Yukon research station. She lives in Vancouver.

Jim Johnstone is a Toronto-based writer and physiologist. He's the author of three books of poetry: *Sunday, the locusts* (Tightrope Books, 2011), *Patternicity* (Nightwood Editions, 2010) and *The Velocity of Escape* (Guernica Editions, 2008) and the poetry editor at Palimpsest Press.

Kotori Kawashima, born in 1980, is a photographer based out of Japan. He was awarded the 42nd Publishing Cultural Prize by Kodansha for photography. Some of his photo-books include *Miraichan*, *BABY BABY* and *Myojo*. With over one hundred thousand copies of *Miraichan* sold, it is highly regarded in the Japanese

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Jeff Musgrave has published short fiction, non-fiction and poetry in a variety of journals and magazines, including *Grain*, *The Queen Street Quarterly*, *subTerrain*, *Crank* and *The Antigonish Review*. He lives and writes in Toronto.

matt robinson's most recent collection is *Against the Hard Angle* (ECW, 2010). Previous collections include *no cage contains a stare that well* and *A Ruckus of Awkward Stacking*. He works at Saint Mary's University in Halifax. Among other things, lately he's been revising older poems and dog-sitting.

Andreas Schroeder is a freelance writer who has published 24 books, including creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, translations and writing for young adults. His work has been included in 59 anthologies and his articles have appeared in most major serial publications in Canada. He holds the Rogers Chair in Creative Non-Fiction in UBC's Creative Writing Program.

Carolyn White is a Californian who found her home in tidewater Virginia. As an MFA candidate at American University, she writes short fiction about imagined families, those they have lost, and the stories they keep on telling. She writes non-fiction about her own.

Caroline Wong came to Canada from China in her early teens. She is a recent graduate of the Writer's Studio at Simon Fraser University. Her work has appeared in the *Prose Poem Project* and *Ricepaper*. Caroline lives with her family in Burnaby, B.C.

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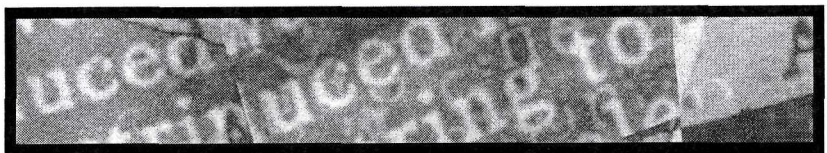

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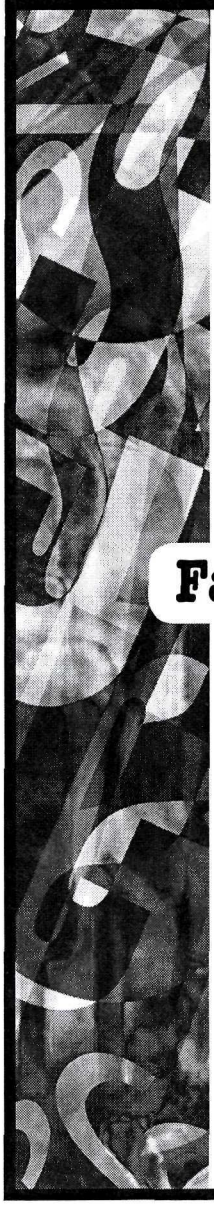

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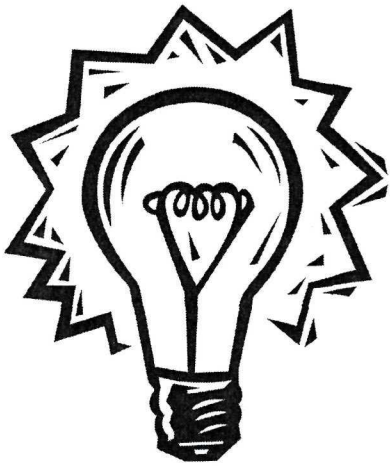

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