PRISM INTERNATIONAL

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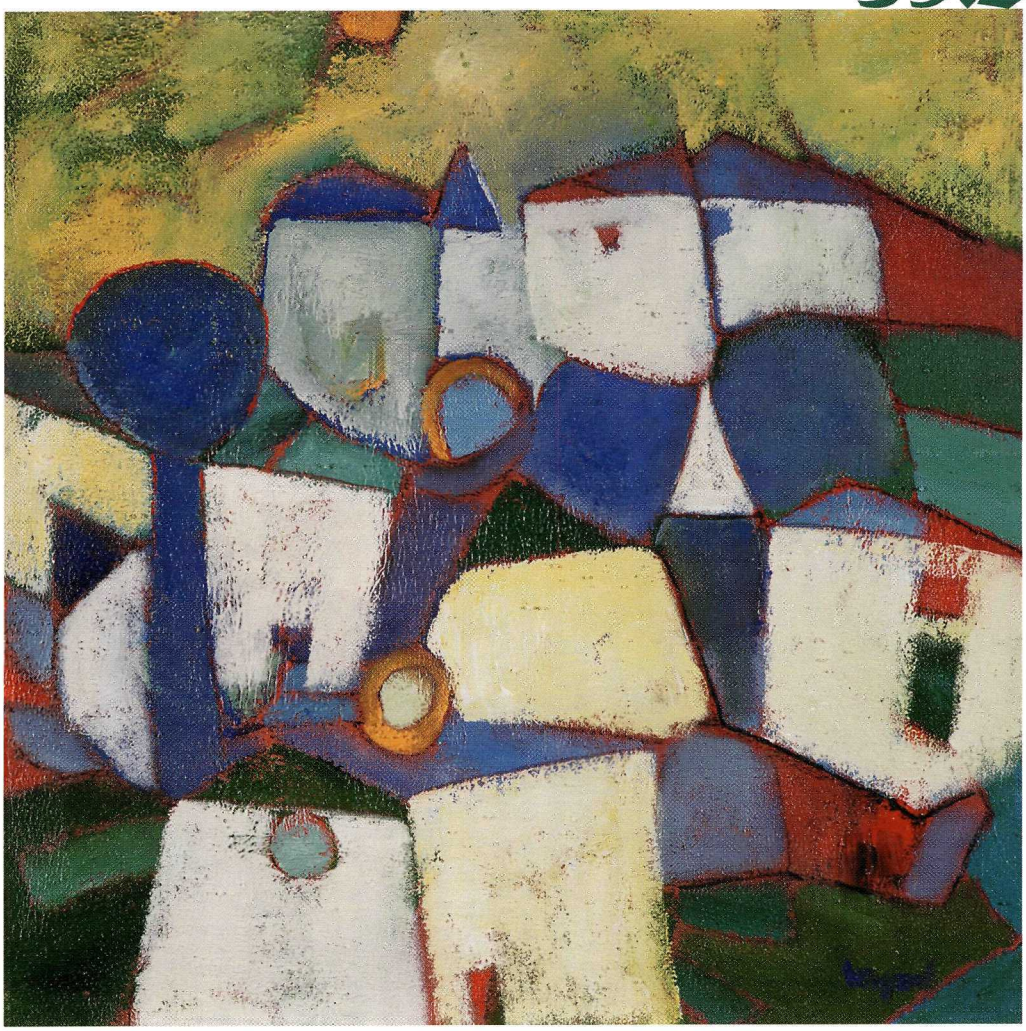

Contemporary writing
from Canada and
around the world

Winter 2001

PRISM INTERNATIONAL

2000 MACLEAN-HUNTER ENDOWMENT AWARD FOR LITERARY NON-FICTION WINNER

GRAND PRIZE – $1,500

"Bear on a Chain"
Mark Anthony Jarman

RUNNERS-UP

"A Spring Garden"
Leslie Sheffield

"Good Guys"
Maureen P. Stanton

"Rearranging the Furniture"
Patrice Melnick

PRISM international *would like to thank runners-up*

Leslie Sheffield
&
Patrice Melnick

for allowing us to publish their works in this issue.

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Lynne Bowen & Andreas Schroeder

Pushing the Bounds

One of the purposes of the Maclean-Hunter Endowment Award for Literary Non-Fiction is to encourage the writers of creative non-fiction, who are labouring at their desks all over the North American continent, to show us their wares. Last year we saw an impressive number of entries. This year we saw even more, several of them superb examples of the genre. This increase in number and quality was apparent in the number of entries set aside by the contest manager for final assessment by the judges. In addition, the contest has supplied the editors of PRISM *international,* who have been looking for stellar non-fiction for some time, with several pieces that they will be publishing within the next year.

The name of our winner will be a familiar one to readers of PRISM. Mark Anthony Jarman won the contest last year as well. With "Bear on a Chain," Mr. Jarman has experimented with the genre and produced a personal essay that is profound and innovative. As for the runners-up, each pushes the genre in different ways. "A Spring Garden" by Leslie Sheffield is deceptive in its simplicity and troubling in its message. In "Good Guys," Maureen P. Stanton takes a fresh approach to the language and revolutionizes the use of the much-maligned footnote. Strong structure and original images make "Rearranging the Furniture" by Patrice Melnick delightful to read.

It has been a pleasure for me to read the work of the finalists. The quality of the writing reinforces my belief that literary non-fiction is experiencing another in a series of renaissances that have occurred since the redoubtable Michel de Montaigne sat down at his desk to write in sixteenth-century France.

Lynne Bowen

* * *

My first reaction on receiving this year's provisionally shortlisted works of creative non-fiction was considerable delight. There were almost twice as many finalists as last year. I'd been waiting for some demonstrable proof that creative non-fiction is indeed on a roll in this country. Perhaps this was it.

My second reaction confirmed my first. Not only were there more

finalists, but our final shortlist was significantly longer. And virtually everyone on that list was a serious contender. The final choice was satisfyingly difficult.

My third reaction, was, of course, astonishment mixed with just a touch of incredulity when we discovered who the winner was. He turned out to be none other than Mark Anthony Jarman—the New Brunswick author who'd won the inaugural Maclean-Hunter Endowment Award for Literary Non-Fiction last year.

Obviously, we've got a taste for Mr. Jarman's kind of writing.

Actually, we're prepared to admit to an even stronger bias. When I was asked to judge *Event's* prestigious Creative Non-Fiction Competition in 1992, I expressed the hope that competitions such as these would finally encourage Canada's writers to stretch the definition of literary non-fiction. I hoped it would lead to more experimentation, more cross-pollination—perhaps acts of brazen literary cross-dressing. I envisioned hybrid forms that would totally undermine the Dewey Decimal System.

Unfortunately, it didn't happen. Most *Event* readers apparently considered literary non-fiction just another label-of-convenience for conventional memoir. Eight years later, that impression still seems to be enjoying considerable popularity. And while we can get as enthusiastic as the next person about splendidly written mainstream autobiography, it's probably time to admit that the Maclean-Hunter Endowment Award for Literary Non-Fiction was really founded in hopes of widening the concept; of fomenting a little literary subversion; of driving librarians to despair.

Mark Jarman's "Bear on a Chain" is taking us in the right direction. And as far as I know, Jarman even likes librarians.

Andreas Schroeder

Mark Anthony Jarman

Bear on a Chain

The iron of the railroad bridge now allows happy pedestrians and cyclists across the big river. Train whistles and steam engines no longer echo up the valley, and the rails of Barrow Steel have melted. The hewn hemlock ties are torn away, but a cinder path still lingers behind pointed Queen Anne towers and *beaux-arts* manses, a narrow shadowland tucked behind turreted Second Empire carriage houses and Gothic wrought iron widow walks.

Your eye knows the railroad formed that gently curving footpath, blue-grey gravel crushed by section gangs, tamped to last longer than a Roman road.

Your NEVER be forgoton

Walking over the railroad bridge I discover dozens of felt pen messages covering one section of the bridge's new wooden railings. *Trev RIP.* The notes to Trevor are all scrawled on the east railing, the side of the bridge he fell from and disappeared, drowned. The river flows east and south to the next bridge, flows to Indiantown, the pretty ridges and dairies of Belle Isle, the polluted reversing falls, the Bay of Fundy's thirty-foot tides.

Man you were so cool to hang with that is what everybody told ME I wish I could of hung around you but no one ever told me about you until you died

This is my favourite felt pen note—it's somehow both comic and touching.

I'm curious why he was the coolest. Because he died young? Am I jealous that he's so cool? At first I wondered if it was a suicide.

I'll love ya 4 life & i'll never forget cha
Trevor I don't know you I have heard you are the man and that you were everyone's best friend no one will forget you and when they die they will be with you

Trevor was a skateboarder—the rolling clatter and leap to get air. Was he

stoned out of his gourd? He'd been drinking in Officer's Square. He was walking on the rail. Was he skating on the narrow bridge rail? I have that image fixed in my head, a bent-kneed elbows-out silhouette, his last evening buzzing like a gall wasp.

No one saw his long drop, no one saw him slip and fall from the narrow lip of the wooden rail, his friend just heard a splash at dusk.

Trev was from the north side of the river, by reputation the rougher side, working class, the hard tickets, Boss Gibson's side, Penniac, Marysville, the old cotton mill, Rolling Town, Nigger Hill where last century a great black man had a house on a hill with a black bear chained to a rattling post—the other side, the other, the bridge a link between different shores.

Trev fell in the middle of the relentless river that is simply always there like a convenience store, river like an empty parking lot waiting, our eternal *Fleuve Saint-Jean* granting grace and bubbles.

Voices echoing on the bridge in the lobster-red sunset that night, waves radiating all points of the compass, the livid light going, and no islands close, no shore, no rescue.

As I walk on a nice day, golden sunlight smashes the river. At night city lights crawl the moving river, red spidery maps and blood orbits bending in the top of your head. Light ratchets through water, sways; light can bounce and return untouched to dry air.

Imagine coming to a body of water before there was such a thing as swimming, and no lessons, just the primal fear of water—like a primal fear of a bear's big teeth, of a wolf's eye glowing, or river gods below you waiting, biding their time.

A cat will swim, a cow can swim, a moose, a dog swims innately, an eel. My kids take lessons and get nowhere and the instructors roll their eyes. Trev had no lessons. We are amazingly unequipped for this world, yet we've flourished to the point of ruining a world that tries so hard to ruin us.

TREVOR, ULIESE, TIMOTHY, HASHEY Jan. 28/ July 8

He flew: did he ever fly in a plane? Trevor went off the rail. I'm told it was an accident, not another teen suicide. The worry of copycats. Trev a dropout from grade 11, dropped out of sight. The police put out a Marine Distress Call to boats on the river. The papers spell his name differently than those on the bridge.

In Orlando, Florida a "drifter" drowns trying to ride bareback on Tillikum, the killer whale. They find his naked body the same morning the divers find Trevor's body.

The famous conductor drops from his balcony, wants a way out from his cancer. Trev wants back up (rewind the film), arms flailing like a helicopter

falling from the aircraft carrier, from a bridge, weightless again, a long lonely drop to wait for the world to kick in again, stoptime, stepped out of the office for a moment into the eels.

Someone on the bridge thought he seemed disoriented after he hit the water. Maybe he hurt his ribs, an arm, his back, was in shock. Someone on the bridge had a cell phone, called it in. But a teen I talk to says they had to run to houses, bang on doors for a phone. One newspaper claimed Trevor fell more than 100 feet, but the bridge deck is not that high.

My friend Jennifer drove by in her new Saturn and wondered what was up—police cruisers and lights by the bridge and river. Tales from the riverbank, a dark night, no moon, police cars parked on the grass generating as much white light as they can, and lights on the river from boats. They are looking on the bright side, but where is the coolest guy?

Cops hate the skaters and skateboarders hate the cops, but it's the cops who come looking, who probe the night, who dispatch the canine unit to the riverbank, transmit the Marine Distress Signal. They "secure" the bridge, vans at either end, and an RCMP helicopter buzzes the shore like a nose-heavy dragonfly.

YOUTH MISSING AFTER FALL

Fall weightless but become weighted: baggy gangsta pants heavy, shoes, weight like age on him. He'd been so light before, always got lots of air on his skateboard.

Make this your best trip

Beth, the same age as Trev, said he was swimming, but looked lower and lower in the water, then disappeared. Her friend Mark disagrees with Beth: Trev was trying, but he didn't know how to swim.

Another bridge's ethereal arches float to the south-east. Trev came from the north side, ended up on the south side, had no lessons. And the course is pass-fail. He dropped out, they lost him on the radar.

A northsider tells me that your lungs fill up with river water and you sink down with the new weight, lower and lower and gone.

How stunningly simple to leave our corner of the world, how fast, how easy—*poof!* Blink and you miss it. I demand more time, complications, pomp and circumstance, demand more paydirt.

Walk along the river, drive in a car over the river, see it everyday for x number of years, mundane as an insurance office, an ordinary postcard, then one day you fall into the boring postcard and the boring postcard kills you.

Those on the bridge are dry, feet on wood boards. Do they laugh at first? Do they panic, run and yell? Nothing there to toss (I see an image of a lifebuoy tossed, of panties tossed at a bad concert). Running shoes on

hollow-sounding 2 x 6 boards.

High school girls weep by the river and walk the bridge, some possessing such tiny shoes, as if feet bound by the Chinese, and a schoolgirl eye that shuns you, and tiny hips that don't seem capable of childbirth.

> *TREV: You were one of a kin a no one could ever re place you I remember all the times we got in shit with the cops. Well i'll always remember you and I hope that I c-ya again everynight I will think about you. until the day that I die I will LOVE you always. (Nathalie)*

There is a small heart drawn to the left of Nathalie's name. The French spelling, perhaps Acadian. Nathalie has left the most messages on the bridge. Did Nathalie become a minor celebrity? The bereaved teen widow drawing felt pen hearts. In my mind she has dark eyes, speaks French, dark hair draping shoulders white as a statue.

This river used to be the only highway, wharves from Waterloo to Smythe. Now a boat ploughing the water is a rarity. Harleys with no mufflers roar over the new concrete bridge upstream. I'm told a boat tried to find Trevor, but ran out of gas. The papers do not mention this boat with no gasoline. KC Irving's giant white oil tanks squat on the north shore. Irving owns us.

I am new to this river town haunted by United Empire Loyalists who fled the Thirteen Colonies, fleeing liberty, some tar and feathering, a few shots, a little ethnic cleansing, the right to bear arms, to peruse automatic weapons at the gunshow.

The Old Loyalist Burial Ground: *Across This Flat Lyeth British Soldiers Who Died* (we'll never forget you). The military compound had a high wooden wall around it, not to keep an enemy out, but to keep deserters in.

This land seemed new back then. It's new to me.

The Irvings and several families, a family compact, have their hand in everything now, like a Central American oligarchy, a banana republic inside Canada, a banana republic tucked inside the skin of a banana republic.

The junior high is beside the Old Loyalist Burial Ground and students smoke coffin nails in among the graves, trying to speed up the process. The rebels buy smokes from a machine, the rebels depend on a corporation. The wigger rebels are fed Hollywood ghetto lines, say, *Whassup guy?* as I pass.

Not much, I reply walking past, and then hear *whap whap whap*, wigger rebel hitting his palm with his fist.

EASTERN HEAT WAVE KILLS 71

And Zionville: Who would pour diesel into Anna Doiron's well? She had to

drill a new well. I'm sweating in the humidity. On a country road two eastern lynx stand, necks out to sniff, ears rotating like radar, two lynx looking curious and alive. They're supposed to be extinct.

At the Sally Ann I buy five long-sleeved shirts all the same size and all with the mandarin collars I like and can never find—a dead man's shirts I decide, imagine his widow boxing them up for the thrift store.

Upstairs in The King's Shilling I look at the park where Trev drank. I drink, order a dark beer from Halifax called Black Pearl. The label shows what seems to be weir stakes in a river or ruins of a wharf in golden light, a dark moist pearl in the foreground, bigger than an eyeball, bigger than a clitoris, and under this compelling clitoris the words *Cream Ale*. The bottle sweats moisture.

Down the street stand stone barracks from the 1700s garrison, each stone a different size, high mansard windows, and behind it the sandstone and granite guard house and a row of cells with air vents and the trapdoor to the damp underground hole they threw you down for solitary for weeks and you came out and right to the hospital.

How you doing, I ask the stonecutter's ghost.

Functional, he replies.

The bartender intimates that the Hell's Angels own the massage parlour next door, recently charged by the city with being a common bawdy house. The judge fumes, *Nothing but a whorehouse*. The city trying to cut their power, their phone. Their pink and blue neon sign always says *OPEN* but I never see anyone slip in. Never. Ghosts.

The bartender with the paperback says they do a good business; sometimes they'll come to where you are. I never see anyone go in.

Why didn't someone go in and help the poor kid? asks a woman swimming at the YWCA. Why didn't someone jump in?

Current's too strong, says another woman.

Not that bad, argues the first, maybe ten miles per hour.

I wonder: Would I, would I jump?

Mark says he has jumped off the bridge to meet a motorboat, to swim and climb in, says he's in the river all the time and the current is no problem. Others talk of summers spent jumping from high bridges, or diving cliffs into quarry pools.

Tom sits behind me at the play. At the cast party he says the current is stronger on the south shore because that's the inside of the curve, and it tightens on the inside of the curve, speeds up. The newspaper, however, insists the current is strongest in the middle, right where Trevor fell.

A diver tells me he hates this river—too silty, can't see. Trevor must

have had mud in his lungs, like Alden Pyle, the quiet American.

Tom tells me he didn't want to walk on the bridge after Trev drowned, then Tom felt better seeing the messages from the teens. That made him feel better.

I walk the sunny bridge unconsciously humming *Ode to Billy Joe* by Bobbie Gentry, her 1967 hit tune about a guy jumping from the Tallahatchie bridge.

I realize Trev's last name is pronounced the same way as Tallahatchie. T Hachey. That's an odd coincidence, me singing that old pop song, my brain dredging it up, a perverse, personal jukebox.

Families in the area spell their name Hashey or Hachey, an old Acadian name, Acadian families who shifted down from the north shore bays and woods to work in Boss Gibson's brick cotton mill and eat eels and crow stew, down from the Mirimachi to work his Dye House, tannery, kiln, icehouse, grist mill, lath mill, shingle mill, double sawmill and gang saws and Nashwaak scows and booming grounds.

The grist mill burnt in 1902. The sawmills burnt in 1920, and the flames went higher, the flames took out houses on River Street.

Bobbie Gentry was a sultry woman clutching an acoustic guitar awkwardly, sexily, her big dark hair puffed up and falling down over her downhome Chickasaw County check shirt tucked into her tight pants, her tight pelvis, knees flexed—I would have been eleven or twelve and how I loved her and her sombre little ditty and her thick auburn hair, how she was packaged for my consumption by the Glen Campbell Show and Capital Records *(jumped off the Tallahatchie bridge)*. I fell for her.

Trevor's fall reminds me of a British Columbia man who fell off a ferry into the Georgia Strait. His windbreaker trapped air, his jacket a lifejacket and he floated in warm water from the Fraser River, a toy bobbing out in the strait all night, gazing at cabin lanterns on the islands, but he can't thrash his way shoreward, the man held fast by the current moving him south to the American islands, floating alone and thinking all night of myriad foodchain creatures under his dangling legs.

American fishermen, out early, picked him up where the warmer river water is finally lost in the freezing ocean water, plucked him from the sea just in time.

The silty river water and his jacket full of air saved him. The river saved him. No such luck for Trev, though both are in the water the same amount of time.

Adam, you shouldn't only feel bad about Trev but good because you were the last person to be with him. If you need anything just call Sharon and get my number. I would really like to meet you if possible.

What sneakers did he wear? Did he demand cool-hunter name brands, curse his acne, his parents, and what favourite junk food and what fine music lived in Trevor's head? What music when it's 4:20, sparking up blunts in the railroad lands' ugly trees by James S. Neill & Sons Ltd. yellow brick warehouse, the spray-painted warehouses at the wrong rusty end of Church Street and listening to the next shit, ugly urban missives on the headphones, not Bobbie Gentry's ho down home girl, but on the bridge Trevor's brand new soundtrack is rudely interrupted, trouble in river city.

I haunt a strange town, move down streets named after dissolute princes and distant daughters and mad kings. Did Trev ever leave this town with its sidewalks shattered like crackers? Did he ever walk a beehive-buzz metropolis or burn out his shoes in foreign countries and flight paths?

A red kite stuck in a tree by the iron bridge, by the war memorial for the bloody salients, for Sanctuary Wood and Desire Trench, hard by the statue of Robbie Burns. A taxi cruises by slowly at night and a passenger yells at me, "Hey Skipper! Come here."

I've never been called Skipper before. I must purchase nautical outfits to match the new nickname.

"What?" I say finally.

"You know any other ma-ssage parlours around town?"

Trev you well always be the man
Love ya cutie
Every night I will think about you

How many girlfriends had he slept with? Everyone assumes teens today have sex early.

I hate to think of him going under in the cold not knowing what it's like to be so warm with a woman who likes you more than she lets on, to move in her (and not move in the river), move languidly, *there will be time*, a soft bed, old-fashioned, queen size, think and don't think, not furtive, not backseat.

Iago's supple beast with two smooth backs, the mystery dance in the city of elms, lost elms, the lost white music of her shoulders and skin planing south down two breasts pushing different ways, no one else home, the slight slight independent sway of each breast suspended in cotton ribbing, suspended in an afternoon above a summer belly that pulls a camera-eye down gold contours between the smooth hipbone's concave shadows, and farther down in silk where the silk road narrows to a fine line, a wispy line the width of a drowned teen's tiniest finger.

Lightest finger on that fine line, brushing just the surface of the closed garden, she pulls you, a home, none I think do there, current tighter, a warm world, she pulls you down and you pull her down.

She wants to push aside the silk, just the tip, but the river water pulls you down away from the bridge and none I think do there embrace, not fine and private, figures watching, they run, dial a number, watchers on the bridge, watches glowing, heads on the rail, dumb witnesses, running shoes to the shore, the riverbank, but no one saves you, and the black water is freezing, the shroud, sheets, and a silver van waits for you on the shore.

And then in daylight friends and strangers trek back with black magic markers, their *never forget you*.

And I'll go see if the hard October rains take the messages away, freezing rain into the river where the Star Line steamboats slid against the slip, paddlewheelers, *Antelope* (burnt for its iron fittings), *Aberdeen*, *Forest Queen* with a walking beam engine, *Reindeer* rocking at the Regent Street wharf 100 years ago, 200 years ago, and the rain brings up the bridge's creosote smell, the hewn railroad ties of last century's cedar and hemlock, sleepers a foot square hidden from us where we walk.

We *will* forget, is what they actually imply with the magic marker messages, what they struggle with, what they deny. In twenty years half of them will forget. What was that guy's name? You know. That guy.

Why do I insist they realize this, why do I want to rub their young faces in it? To me, high school is nothing, steam, a blip unrelated to what I now do, live, feel. I was that person, but not that person, cut off like the north side from the south side, a bridge attempting to join cleaved halves, weld old and young, iron and creosote.

Man you were so cool.

Remember me, asks the dead king from the clay world, the prisoner in the hole under the jail. The divers remember.

They find Trevor with his mouth open in four metres of water; they find the skateboarder resting with his head on the bottom, his parents standing only thirty metres away, all night his fingers drawing circles in cold mud, his brain gone still as wine in an old Dutch shipwreck.

TREV 4 LIFE
TREV KING OF KINGS

I see a negative: black lighthouse lifting from last century. The bridge's empty white girders up into empty blue sky. I wonder if the divers stepped on him in the silt, if that's how they find you.

There are dams upriver, the Saint John is not a freeflowing river anymore.

No cotton ribbing over a breast's slight sway and no underworld of underwear, no farmgirl leads me into the blueberry bogs or potato barn, and no Pollyanna pulls up in a 1940 Hudson that used to be the Marysville taxi, and no mermaids singing each to each. Is it purely egotistical to desire hands on you most minutes of the week? Yes, but there it is.

Trev 4 Ever
RIP Trev Ski it up bud

I fought with Trev's skateboarder friends down by Picaroon's doomed brewpub. His panhandling phyletic companions of King and Queen Streets harassing me as I walked past and I turned, swearing and shoving one in the chest, pushing him off his board, and I left in a rage (*dissed me*), weeks after still wanting to kill the skateboarder (*you the man your the coolest*). I now officially hate youth.

The brewpub closes doors soon after I arrive in town. The usual pattern: what I like goes under. The brick bar in the sun is a block from the river, but you don't know the river is there, the brick town turns its back on the river, like a relative you don't talk to. The town constructs windows and doors on the main street but turns blank red walls to the river.

To get to the river I dodge speeding cars, run lanes of traffic to walk the river's quiet banks, zooming cars noisier than the moving water.

These river towns flood every few years and burn down every few years, a river wandering into the church basement like a lost tourist, into the Bishop's mansion, the library, diocese archives lost in water, wharves submerged, the bottom bowl of the valley covered. The big flood of 1853, local roads eaten, and 1854 again, and riverboats lost in the Saxby Gale of 1869, a flood in 1902, and the dam smeared away in 1914, the big freshet of 1923, and 1936 the railroad bridge wrenched apart by ice and logs, and 1940, a farmer's beautiful barn floating whole until smashed to red splinters on a bridge pillar, and the freshet of 1961, and the big flood of 1973 still much discussed by shopkeepers on Queen Street, floodwater pouring into the town from all sides.

At the wharf in 1865 the steamer *Heather Bell* caught fire, burning its heavy hemp ropes until nothing holds it and the fire drifts on the water to shoals on the other side of the river, Trevor's side of town, and *The Royal* burning in her first year, or ships in mid-river and the boiler from Scotland explodes into a full ship, pilots killed, raftsmen killed, women in their long skirts swept away into the rocks and churning rapids.

And wooden towns on fire in 1825, the colony's forests all on fire, no more masts for the King's navy, families fleeing into the river in the middle of the night, and fire in 1860, and fire in 1877, wooden shutters burning on their iron pintles, the sash and door factory on fire, the schoolhouse burning in 1895, this river's cool millions of gallons flowing inches from the silhouette of a flaming town's spires and mills.

Our river named for St John the Baptist by the explorer Champlain out of Dieppe. Some Canadians went back to Dieppe's stone beaches centuries

later. Did Champlain name our river in 1604? Shakespeare was alive. I forget these dates, though I took it a million times in school, took the fur trade every year in history, social studies—*we'll never forget.*

Trev king of kings, his baptism, and Trevor's parents stand by, their separate lives entwined again in panic, disbelief. Does the father regret the fights now, the slammed doors?

My kid, she moans by the bridge, and the boat flung back and forth, divers down, boat back and forth in its white wake trailing each time like a bridal gown.

> September 1844: *The steamer will leave Indiantown on a pleasure trip to the Celestial City for the special behoof of our sequestered villagers, a rare chance to rub off the rust of our monotonous existance and expatiate ourselves with the aerial splendours of the great metropolis.*
>
> *Every lover of fine scenery, fresh air and good fellowship, and concord of sweet sounds should prepare for this excursion. What with the kindness of our friend the favourite Captain Wiley, our own steamer, our own Band, the aquatic amusements to which the dignified Cockneys of Saint John are to pull the lusty oar for our amusement, we are assured the liveliest expectations of pleasure.*

Lightning and the river trees. This hot drought summer, he was the coolest. The river cooled Trevor, the river caught him, found him out, drew a crowd (with felt pens, his felt pen teen tragedy die young mythology—*love ya always, never forget*). No one was prepared for the excursion.

His parents waited all night by the river, the river low in summer, the canine unit there searching, his mother wanting to wade into the river, feeling she *must* find him, she's his mother, the policeman leading her back from the water's edge, but maybe they should have let her go in the river.

Trevor's father quiet, the two parents on shore all night wrapped in flannel sheets, *never forget,* bridge an iron giant above them, the dive-boat passing back and forth. *My kid.* Trying to be warmed by sheets and your boy cold in the river somewhere so close.

> *You were the best cousin to me. Even when you and Dad didn't get along it didn't bring us apart.*

They pulled the divers from the river at 10 p.m., too dark, a safety issue.

The south shore: two giant weeping willows over the two parents, and a generous strip of tended grass sloping to a border of rougher scrub along the water's edge.

Dawn, bridge to the east becoming visible, river more visible, empty, can't see their son but he's there, Waterloo Row at dawn empty of people, copper steeples close by, my landlady's Anglican Cathedral where she sings in the angelic choir, sings *The race that pined in darkness,* sings *In the grave they laid him,* sings *Now the green blade rises.*

Divers back in the water at 8:30 a.m., and they find the body at 10:25 a.m. The river bottom, not far from the bridge. I thought you would drift farther, miles and miles, like a piece of wood floating to the ocean. He stayed close to home, close to his parents. The silver van holds his young body. The TV commercials seem so far away. His mother steps to the rear doors of the silver van, the mother and child reunion, for his mother must ID her son's body in the silver van, yards from where I will buy a house if I stay in this town. Its windows aimed at the bridge.

In the fall I walk the silver river, a solitary male, become my old uncle taking windy walks in a long coat, watching eastern birds, writing letters to the west. He never had a son. I have temporary work here, I am temporarily depressed here, and trying to decide whether I want to stay and whether anyone wants me to stay. I am skating a rail.

People jog by me on the river path, trying to live longer, eyes trapped in their face, working like a horse, eyes trapped in old face (*So this is permanence, sings Joy Division*). I am temporary. We're all temporary.

Would my grey eyes stay open after drowning? The terrifying terrified Grand Guignol face someone must find or step on, try to hold an ankle, a forearm, a wet shirt. The search for the body and the body in its search.

In this town I met a blonde woman who searched for bodies at Peggy's Cove, for the tiniest parts of flesh, of someone's child, someone's parent, wondering about each pebble, each piece of glass, each person, what was a person, and I met a woman from Newfoundland who mapped the underwater crash site of Swissair 111, mapped a grid on the blurred stones and sand under the black sea. And the divers remember.

In Halifax a room full of dead passengers' suitcases, jackets, pens, passports, laptops, ballcaps, shoes, jewels, toys, dolls.

Military reservists expected to be tough, to take it, to just pick up the pieces of 229 humans at Peggy's Cove, bags and new Tupperware containers piled on shore, a Tupperware party combing the rocky shoreline, and they did it, walked the walk in their spit-polished boots, but the blonde woman emphatically does not want to talk about that scored shoreline. But they remember their mapped secrets.

He is my life. Asthon.

Asthon's name is encircled in a heart.

Is Asthon a rival to Nathalie? I see her as blonde. Like Veronica and

Betty. Once I was Jughead stuffing my face. Now I am Mr Weatherbee. *He is my life.*

The New England Journal of Medicine argues that roughly 10% of drownings have no explanation, that a genetic defect may disrupt the heart's electrical system, triggered by exertion or shock. Long QT syndrome. A daily dose of beta-blocker can help prevent potentially fatal rhythm problems.

My mother always believed that when her father drowned in a canal outside Dublin it was because his heart stopped, wants to prevent it in me. In California a honeymoon couple is swept from shore at Lover's Point. The groom watches his bride pummeled by wave after wave. She weakens.

In Bible Hills, Nova Scotia, Nolan Ralph Cady beats his spouse with a stick on the front steps, breaking her ankle and several bones, and in Bible Hills she tries to get away and he attempts to strangle her and their two-year-old son, their bundle of joy. Perhaps a syndrome or such.

A steeple means nothing to some of us at Lover's Point, in Bible Hills, in Zionville, a steeple no different than a telephone pole. Once it had such power, stared at you. Where did that power go? Down the well. What kind of stick did he beat her with, I wonder stupidly. Night after night the police climb down into their growling cruisers, prowl up and down King and Queen, and their weak light reflects on our dark river.

> *Trevor your the man. everyone that knows you will always love and remember you from now until the end. from somebody*

The newspaper calls for lifeboats, lifebuoys, lifelines. A phone booth is installed at the bridge's south end.

Ole Larsen took a beautiful black and white photo of the Edward Sinclair Lumber Company at the North West Bridge on the Miramichi River. Behind the mill you can see the masts of square-rigged sailing ships, and on the sawmill's roof ridge you can see a line of wooden barrels: barrels of water kept on the roof in case of fire. A large wooden structure. Water held up top, just in case. But can you really hope to keep enough water above you, to take your beta-blocker for your heart, that your tank will actually move on the stone beach at Dieppe, that your yacht won't blow up off the coast of Ireland? Can you always be ready?

No lifebuoys on the bridge. The day is gone you can leave a good lifeboat by the water. It'll get stolen or holes kicked in it or burnt. By the same skeletal skateboarders who knew Trev and spray-paint 'Smoke Da Weed' and '4:20 All The Way' and burn the green vinyl sofa by the ruined warehouse. How original.

Citizens walk out on the iron bridge to watch the sunset upriver, eyeball

the shooting stars, the Leonid storm of freak streaks and dashes, and the valley's stars are vowels you can't use, panels of pink light pinned in your head.

Adam, you shouldn't only feel bad, but it's past 4:20 and our summer soundtrack goes on without Trev, the soundtrack goes on without me in a way, too, in my forties. On the oldies satellite channel *she is moving somewhere far away not slow* and *where have all the good times gone*?

My childhood music speaks in the greasy spoon over my 3 p.m. breakfast and lying on my bed at midnight Sterolab sings Baudelaire and I play Godspeed You Black Emperor, play The Handsome Family (*and jump from the Golden Gate Bridge*), play Joy Division's *Love Will Tear Us Apart*, play the fugue song over and over on my pawnshop headphones: the band's bass descends, notes down a ladder, a figure falling in air, and the band's suicide singer windmills his arms on stage, a slow riot for a New France, an Acadian boy falling from a high railroad bridge, weightless again, and a grey shadow in the best part of town, a perfectly engineered shadow, but that train don't stop here anymore.

As it gets colder I buy gloves and a black tuque (*prepare for the excursion*). The bass descends like winter. Signs on hundreds of houses in the Celestial City: **DANGER FALLING ICE**.

Some signs show a concerned fellow with a giant icicle sticking out of his skull. With a black felt pen I alter the signs to read: **DANGER FALLING MICE**.

Summer humming when Trevor went underwater, but now this blue river is framed by yellow leaves. Worn hills, small trees travelling to the horizon. Snow soon.

In an autumn lens this pretty valley reminds me of river valleys in northern Montana or southern Alberta, the Elbow, the Oldman, the Marias, the Milk, the Missouri. Someone else says Ottawa.

The mother waits, moans in her sheet like a ghost, chained to bank like the bear on its post, any mother and son chained to each other, the boy pinned to the bottom (*so cool to hang with*), the long drop from the womb to the cold river.

Water beautiful and startling blue when I stand on a far hill, but up close it's different—green-purple water moving chocolate silt to the sad lowlands, the water impenetrable and my feeble eye can't push an inch into its mysteries.

I always loved his backflips. One of the best times with Trev was at Grand Lake.
Until the RCMP came

A year after he fell the felt pen messages are excised from the bridge rails, words on wood shaved by a city worker with a grinding sander, pressure-treated sawdust trailing lazily to the water where Trev last wandered.

But I still possess them, a stranger, a landlord holding a binder-twine suitcase in case the prodigal tenant returns to the chamber on Church Street.

I loved watching Trev skate,
he always had so much energy when he skateboarded
and lots of air.

Posing

Because in photographs no one
speaks. Motionless, permissive.
The undone button, the slant
of light under the door. Suspended
in the inevitable facts.
Take time away and what's left
is matter, like a woman
waking up naked, the chest
of drawers staring openly.
A woman who doesn't hide
her breasts because
she thinks there's no one there
anyway. In her underwear
she waters the plants
in the study. The window's
been left open, the room filled
with the smell of rain, and she feels
self-conscious for the first time:
the smell an invitation
to think of rain, where it has been, what it has
left, the trace of bareness.
Nothing moves. She pauses,
water jug in hand.

Twelve O'clock

heat lingers
at midnight, an insect on the edge
of a finger, folding
and unfolding its wings

lilacs shiver, droop,
hang like caught breath;
abandoned gardening spades float
in mid-air, flowers, whole
houses buoyed up

bees are insomniac, can't resist
the pollen, how it bubbles up
in the dark
        the hum
of their wings interferes
with sleep, our bodies' burbling
dreams: we waken, sheet
knotted on the floor
        no one picks them up
instead we wait

for the unknown insect
to fly from the unknown
finger—for the bright
invisible flicker,

the thimble that drops
to the floor

Norbert Ruebsaat

Muscle of Soul

A woman in the Challenge of Love Seminar looked and smiled longer than was customary in such circumstances at a man sitting on the floor across the room from her, and this caused the man, after first looking away out of politeness, to glance back, only to discover the woman to be still looking and smiling at him. He supposed then that she might want to go out with him, and when he approached her later, and she confirmed his supposition by suggesting that they get together some time, he agreed, and three days later he phoned her and they arranged to meet at a coffee shop. At the coffee shop the woman who had smiled at the man longer than was customary drew a circle on the table with her finger to describe those "areas" of her life which she had explored, and then she drew another circle to describe those areas which "still needed exploring." The area of love was in the second circle, she said, after having indicated, with reference to the first circle, that the areas of profession, money, and power in the world had all been successfully dealt with. The fact that she did not have children was another area, she said, which she had not explored, and it was an area of sadness for her and an enigma. She did not draw a circle on the table to describe this area of her life, nor did she ascribe it to either of the existing ones; her eyes moved instead into her lap and rested there when she spoke about this subject. The man, who was breathless from being in the presence of such large topics on a first date—a "coffee date," as these institutions were called in the "singles circuit" in which the man and the woman moved—continued listening nonetheless because the woman's intensity and her business-like manner in approaching complex subject matters excited him.

Shortly after the coffee date the woman invited the man to dinner at her house and she fried him a thick pepper steak which she served along with wine in oversized glasses and a salad tossed in a wide blue bowl. She set the latter on a table tastefully arranged with blue and red checkered placemats and serviettes which matched not only the bowl but also the blue and red checkered curtains that half-covered the windows in the dining alcove of her hardwood-floored open-area kitchen; the kitchen's centerpiece was a free-standing range with pots, saucepans, frying pans, lids and utensils suspended from a metal grate above it in an arrangement resembling a giant

wind chime. The red tulips the man had brought stood in a pink vase in the middle of the table, completing the ensemble, and the man and the woman sat, ate, and talked about love, relationships, work—she was a biologist, he was a writer; she was beginning to write, he had from boyhood on dreamed of being a biologist—and the meal proceeded well. The woman who had looked at the man longer than a woman normally would said she loved taxonomy, the naming of things, and the man who had approached her in response to this look said he liked birdsong. The woman said she could identify birds by their song alone, which statement sent a thrill into the man's spine, and the two began talking excitedly about angels. The man said, "You know what I'm talking about, don't you?" after he had told her in a roundabout way that the voice might be the muscle of the soul (a friend of his, who he thought was an angel, had once said this to him). The woman said, "Yes," and held the man's eyes in the way she had first done in the Challenge of Love Seminar. "I like the way you hold your gaze," the man said, looking straight back at her. Their eyes remained locked for longer than one would expect on a first evening together, and the encounter only ended when the woman dropped her gaze into her lap, saying she had never felt intimidated by a man or felt weaker than one: she had never "felt the need to back off or escape from men." The man said he wanted to be "met and feel engaged" by a woman, and when the woman said nothing in the pause that followed, the man added that he didn't know exactly what he meant by that phrase, but he hoped that something might occur as a result of his having said it.

They got up from the table and the man helped the woman clear the dishes and rinse them and put them in the dishwasher, and the woman wiped the counters and also the free-standing range above which the metal grate with its instruments quietly swayed. The two chit-chatted, constantly changing topics, and then the woman showed the man into the living room where a fireplace composed of huge river stones cemented into a heap formed one whole wall, at whose base a whale vertebra with outspread bone spurs lay by a black leather sofa on which the man and the woman sat down. The woman showed the man photos of her travels—to Borneo, to Nepal, to the Amazon—and told stories at whose adventurous details he marvelled. Her eyes seemed with each phrase to travel into the very distance her words were describing, and the man followed her voice as if he were reading a book.

When they had finished this segment of the evening and the woman got up, which seemed to signal the end of the date, and the man got up, too, and the two embraced tentatively at the front door, and the man thanked the woman for the dinner, and the woman thanked the man for the tulips, the

woman turned her face away ever so slightly when the man moved his into a position which signaled that he might want to kiss her, and so the man immediately turned his face to the side also, and only grazed the top of her cheekbone with his lips. He was holding her hips and he felt this portion of her body press against him even as the woman's upper torso and head veered in another direction.

The two saw each other again a few times, desultorily. Once they got drunk together. She drank more than he did; she liked wine, was a "connoisseur," as she put it, while he was at a point in his life where especially red wine gave him headaches and indecipherable hangovers which felt like small madnesses. He had a hangover after that date, and many thoughts, some of which he wrote down and some of which remained inchoate. When they went on a birdwatching trip some weeks later, on what was to be their next-to-last date, every word that came from the woman's mouth seemed to the man a kind of terminal statement. Her lips came to a point at the end of each phrase as if she were speaking a period. The woman told the man that the robins they heard singing were claiming territory: only the males sang, she said, and each was engaged in a contest with the other males over how much space he could claim. At the centre of this sung-space, the woman said, was a female robin who listened, and this female could tell from their tone of voice which males were stronger and which were weaker, and she would make her nest in the center of the territory marked out by the strongest male. The woman told the man that each robin had a unique call, which every other robin, male and female, could recognize, but which humans couldn't.

When the woman who had looked and smiled at the man longer than was customary and the man who had responded by approaching her met for a final time at a restaurant that served spaghetti which was lukewarm and slightly matted, and whose noodles were overly long, the woman said, "When you told me you became easily infatuated with women who appear to you like younger sisters (he had told her this on the second date, the one with the tablecloth and the napkins, the wine glasses and the tulips and the angels) I thought, 'I'm stronger than this man. He scares me.'" She paused and then said, "I want a man who's ahead of me, but it doesn't necessarily mean I'll follow." When the man asked her why, if she felt stronger than he, she was afraid of him, and why she wanted a man who was ahead of her but in whose direction she then did not want to move, she looked at him and said nothing, and the man noticed that the woman's gaze was now quite unlike the one he had first encountered in the Challenge of Love Seminar.

Instructions for Gardening

Begin with tools,
anything wooden
or older than
your oldest fencepost.

Gather seeds.

Look under any bush or tree,
slip your fingers
into the mouth of a lily,
remove its tongue,

plant it.

You'll need a hole,
deep as a crow's feather,

use a crow's feather to dig,
if one is available.

Cover the seeds with dirt.
Before covering, you may wish
to bury something alongside,
a medallion, a tooth,
or a buckle.

These things rarely flower.

Once the seed is hidden,
add water and egg shells.
Press down lightly,
and whistle.

To avoid temptation,
avoid apples, or anything red
as an apple,
poppies and cranberries
will only attract thieves
and bulls.

Finally,
do not rush the harvest.
Each turnip and onion
will rise to you in time,
the corn will turn its ear
to your voice,
and if you sing,
the bleeding hearts
will beat again.

Four Poems For Breast

1.
Rain has become
the signal has
become the static
has become the
distance
between desert
and your mouth.

2.
That morning
when Janice peered
inside her mauve pyjamas
she wondered, if this too,
was not the work
of some fledgling
tooth fairy
and was indignant.

3.
With these
and other swellings
I will fill
what is hollow.
Even now
your concave
leans into collapse
without me.

4.
You think Artemis,
Amazon,
trade for trade.
I think
lump.

From which generation
of warrior
have you risen,
girl without quiver?

The Day They Bombed The Berlin Zoo

1943,
sapphire tail feathers
from surprised peacocks
are glued to crumbling cement.
Birds, still living,
squawk and shake clipped wings
into the dust,
while rhinos and elephants
lift great bleeding heads
over the flames
to high-step through melting cages
like overwrought ballerinas.

A doubtful parade of emus,
alligators and pink flamingos
strolls out of the Tiergarten,
blinking with curiosity,
while frantic mothers pull children
into the half-standing doorways
of the Reichstag, and away
from the more purposefully striding
panda bears and anteaters.
Gibbons and gorillas swing like bandits
in boughs that line the Elbe river.

Drunk soldiers pitch rubble
at the flanks of limping camels,
and under the Brandenburg Gates,
as if forging into Siberia.
A hippo settles in Alexanderplatz
between piles of half-burned novels,
and empty shells,
while grinning families watch
through knotholes in the planks
across the bedroom windows.

Leslie Sheffield

A Spring Garden

A gust of wind tears at the Virginia creeper vine above my front door and sends a spray of water, slap, against my face. I'm in the front yard soaking the roots of my cedars so they'll have enough moisture to make it through until spring. Already some sprigs at the centre of the trees have started to turn brown.

The leaves are all off the elms now. Some lie by the curb, soggy and ground into a paste, but most are in piles on the boulevard. My son, Stephen, is across the street playing in them with his friend. For the moment they are happy. I watch as they scoop up fistfuls of curled brown leaves and hurl them back and forth. In mock ceremony they fashion them into two enormous mounds and bury themselves, bursting from their crackling coffins with shrill cries. I want this moment to last for a long time. Yeah, I'd like to have life roll along easily for awhile.

My hands stiffen on the hose nozzle. Stephen has just snatched an armful of leaves from his friend's pile and added it to his. "Loser, loser, loser," he gloats. "My pile's bigger than your pile."

"Give 'em back!"

"Loser, loser, loser. Loser, loser, loser," he chants in a crazed voice I hardly recognize.

"I'm telling on you."

"Loser, loser, loser!"

Next thing I know they've scattered like the leaves, my son continuing to yell insults, his friend wailing. Another fight. I twist the nozzle as far as it can go and aim a hard jet of water against the fence. It hits with an angry ripping sound, rebounds, and shoots back into my face.

***

The temperature dipped way below freezing last night and I've come out to the garden to inspect the extent of the damage. Every surface is silvered with frost, and I slip as my feet hit the slick paint on the front steps. I have only a fraction of a second to record the absence of ground beneath my feet before I feel the bite of the steps on my arm and leg.

My garden is ruined. It looks like a large tank has just steam-rolled through it: the yellowed fronds of the irises lie flattened and lifeless; the begonias have shrivelled up and keeled over, their faces smashed right into the ground; and the Queen Anne's Lace has been pounded into a slimy

green soup.

I know I should move back into the house, but I sit on the steps instead. Any moment now Stephen will come looking for me. All day long, every few minutes, he calls out, a desperate, high-pitched sense of urgency in his voice, "I love you, Mom" like a breath inhaled, suspended, waiting for the exhalation of breath, the response, "I love you, too." And if I don't hear him or neglect to answer, he panics, gasping, "Mom? Mom, where are you?" as if disconnected from his life source and suffocating.

I inspect the garden once again and discover the cat hidden under the hedge in a pile of musty leaves, stretched out and cleaning herself. With long deliberate licks she wets the side of her paw, then rolls the dampened edge across her face. Next she moves on to the soft woolly nether parts under her tail, holding her leg aloft in a gravity-defying position. She looks so funny I have to laugh. Head bobbing, she sets to work, spitting, biting, tugging—her tongue a precise flash of pink carding her fur into a fluffy halo. With each lick my shoulder muscles relax. There is something comforting and reassuring about the predictable rhythm of this motion.

Maybe I'm making too much of a small thing. Maybe this is a stage all children go through. I should take life easy, like a cat. Find a nice sunny spot somewhere in the garden, get busy, clean up the mess, and stop worrying.

***

It grows worse. The hour before bed is the most disturbing. It's not so much what is said or done as the relentless frequency of it: the ritual of clothes being placed on top of my head as they are peeled off, shirt, pants, socks, and underwear constructed into a headdress as I lay out his pyjamas; pee, poop, diarrhea chanted endlessly as I brush his teeth; my hands, arms, and face being smothered in kitty licks while I read him his bedtime story; and, when I bend down to kiss him good night, "I can see your breasts, Mom."

"Why are you acting this way?"

There's no answer. Just a clown face with a large false grin.

And how many times in the past week have I heard him say, "You hate Sarah, don't you, Mom? You love me more than her. Don't you?" Maybe a hundred.

Maybe a thousand.

***

He grabs my hand and pulls me upstairs to show me what he's been working on all evening, alone, in his room. He sits me in his chair and tells me to close my eyes, that I will like this surprise.

"Ready," he shouts finally, "you can open your eyes now." Then, with much rustling, he brings from underneath his bed two large cardboard cutouts, one figure with horns, the other with a halo.

"These are for Sarah and me," he says proudly. "For Halloween. I'm going to be the devil and Sarah's going to be the angel. 'Cause she's nice and I'm not. What do you think, Mom?"

***

He performs a curious acrobatic maneuvre—a kind of Ninja kick or half cartwheel. Friends tell me it's cute, idiosyncratic. They reassure me with hearty laughs and worn-out cliches: *Boys will be boys* or *I wish I had that kind of energy.* A sick feeling grows inside me. In my stomach, a fluttery beating of fear, and in the back of my throat, a sour presence that makes food taste bitter and unpalatable.

It's not this odd little movement that disturbs me; it's that he'll do it *anywhere.* Coming down the stairs, in the grocery store, or even crossing a busy street. He tells me this isn't a Ninja kick or cartwheel. It's something he has to do. His body just wants to do it.

***

First there was the Ninja kick. Now it's head turning, a brief glance thrown over his right shoulder. He says suspiciously, defensively, "What are you looking at?" Then later, with intense hostility, "Stop staring at me."

I fear these movements are tics and I read voraciously on the subject. The literature advises me that tics can disappear as spontaneously as they appeared if no one draws attention to them.

I pretend not to see, even though his tics intensify, with the head flicks stretching further and further to the right until they grow into grandiose twirls of his whole body—three, four, five twirls at a time. Twirls while getting dressed, twirls while playing Nintendo, twirls while sitting in his chair drinking hot chocolate.

And hops. Hops to the TV, hops to the refrigerator, hops to the car. Hops and twirls together.

And grunts. Soft bleating grunts. Florid, snorting piggy grunts. Grunts and snorts. Twirls and hops.

Stop staring at me.

***

A howling wind has drifted the snow into peaks and valleys. Beside me, balanced on a crust of mauve-shadowed snow, is Stephen, turning circles. The light is starting to fail and it is cold. *Quick,* I say, *let's go home before it gets dark, before we get lost.* But he keeps circling, slowly sinking into an ever-deepening trough. *Hurry, before it's too late, Stephen.* A few more steps and the snow crust fissures, revealing a bottomless cavern. We fall and fall until I fall awake.

***

Outside large snowflakes fall wetly from an oddly pink sky. It's a calm, still

night, a few days after Christmas. Stephen is in the bathtub, surrounded by an armada of sailing vessels and Playmobil little people, happily dropping washcloth bombs on his fleet with loud, explosive noises. I have just come in to check on him, when suddenly, without warning, he begins screaming at me.

"Get out of here."

"What on earth is wrong?"

"You're useless. You're the worst mother in the world."

Despite the heat of the bathroom, my skin grows clammy. "Please tell me what's wrong," I say softly.

He glares at me and I add, "If I've done something to hurt you I'm very sorry."

Then his face crumples. He throws his arms around me and says in an anguished voice, "It's not you, Mom. It's not you. It's me."

I grab a towel, scoop him up dripping wet, and carry him onto the rocking chair in his bedroom. Tenderly, I hold him against my body, gently stroke his cold, slick hair, afraid of what he is going to say.

Finally he lifts his head and asks, "Don't you see?"

I shake my head. I pretend ignorance.

He eyes me with disbelief, then starts to sob. He hides his face against my chest and tells me about being teased in school, about being different from everyone else, about not wanting to do the things that his body makes him do.

I must pretend no longer.

***

Sweat drips coldly from my armpits; I am a faucet leaking acid rain. I feel the dampness mushrooming under my arms, which I keep pressed closely to my sides and I smell the peculiar odour of my sweat, a mixture of baby-powder deodorant and something corrosive, like Drano or Lime-A-Way.

Stephen is being assessed by Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Services and I am left alone in the waiting room, where the methadone patients nervously gather and pace. With sidelong glances they eye me and speculate whether or not I'm a new addition to their group. I flip through last year's *People*, the pages on Madonna smudged and greasy, and stew about possible scenarios with the psychologist. I imagine her approaching me with condemnation, loathing, and a spate of angry words, each one more damning than the last:

"*He's a very angry and disturbed child.*"

"*The tests show he really despises you.*"

"*You're the cause of it all.*"

Of course this doesn't happen. After an hour she serenely whisks Stephen back. I look for signs of disapproval: a narrowing of the eyes, a

tightening of the lips, a stiffness in the jaw, but her face is inscrutable. Politely we schedule the next appointment.

***

Sarah snuggles deep into her bed as a cool breeze sends the sheers ballooning outward. She tells me I'm the best mother in the world and Stephen is the best brother.

"I love Stephen, but he hates me," she confides.

"Of course he loves you," I reply quickly.

"No, he hates me. He tells me that all the time."

"He doesn't mean it, Sarah. His tics make him say that."

"What are tics again?"

"Things your body makes you do over and over, like hop or twirl. They also make Stephen say he hates you. Those are his thinking tics, his head tics."

Sarah traces a line down my nose and around my lips, her eyebrows furred together into a fuzzy caterpillar.

***

A pale green butterfly rests momentarily on a burnt orange day lily, its two wings pressed into a still papery sheet. Sarah lunges forward over the iron railing with cupped hands, grabbing at a handful of air as the butterfly skitters away. Her friend Emma scoops at a ladybug and captures one in her plastic container. With a whoop of pleasure she exclaims, "Gotcha!"

Sarah turns to Emma. "Do you know why Stephen is so mean? It's because he has head tics. He can't help it. It's his tics' fault."

"What? He has ticks in his head?"

Sarah doesn't answer. She flutters down the steps, arms outstretched, and zigzags across the cool wet grass to land near the day lily, nuzzling her face deep into its throat, emerging with an orange-dusted nose.

***

"I think we've a little mouse here," Shannon from Parks and Rec. says with a grin as she stirs a tub of blue paint. Another high-pitched squeak splits the air. Her hand freezes mid-stir. Puzzled, she surveys the group of kids who have gathered for a street-painting event, but no little mouse owns up.

It's humid and the air is ripe with the smell of elm sap fermenting in glossy puddles by the curbside. From time to time sap rains down on us, sticky as hairspray.

I know what's happening. A month ago Stephen's tics disappeared. Completely. Just like the snow in spring.

The only problem is they've come back.

Now, in a space so dangerously packed with people and pots of paint, Stephen has forced himself to suppress his twirl. In its stead, a squeak has

erupted.

Stephen throws me a worried look.

You'll be okay, I try to say with my eyes, and with a flick of my head I motion for us to make our getaway. But as we leave, his twirling tic catches up with him and sends him air borne. He spins and crashes down on a small boy who lands flat on his stomach and starts to cry.

He points to Stephen. "He—pushed me—*on purpose*," he sobs, gasping for air.

Stephen's face twists in pain, as if he's the one who's just had the wind knocked out of him.

***

Seeing as there is no couch in his psychiatrist's office, Stephen has taken to stretching out on the floor. He starts with a spot under his chair, where he can break off the fraying threads that dangle underneath the seat. Next he moves to the centre of the carpet. With his head propped up by his hands and his legs crossed at the ankles, he recites his favorite strips from *Calvin and Hobbes* and shares the best one-liners from *The Simpsons*. I long for Stephen to sit properly in his chair. I force myself to look away.

An image comes to mind. A few houses down the street from me is a small blue spruce with a trunk that curves back on itself, giving it a hunched-back look. Recently the owners have roped the tree to a shallow wooden pen built around it, the tethers obviously designed to bend it back into an upright position. This bonsai approach seems to be working. But it makes me think of something I once heard. That some trees should not be staked when young. Some must build their strength by being able to bend whichever way the wind blows them. If throttled, if forced to conform to conventional lines they lose flexibility and snap when stressed.

***

Just as farmers look to thicker coats on animals or subtle changes in the vegetation to help predict blustery weather, I have become adept at reading the tell-tale signs of an approaching tic storm.

I take note of the increased restlessness which sends him leaping off radiators, jumping down stairs, seven or eight at a time, and climbing up door frames; as well, there's the sound of his feet banging on the wall long after we've gone to sleep, and the state of his bed in the morning, the sheets twisted into a tight cord, a life-line, spilling onto the floor.

There are other clues. Heads of Lego people are severed and stacked one on top of the other, while hands are plucked out and abandoned in a pile. Action figures are mummified with masking tape and turned into mobiles that hang from dresser tops and windowsills. Fragile domino-like structures are built out of books, cassette tapes, their plastic containers, and blocks of wood to descend from his room, out the door, and down the stairs,

and which he sets off and watches topple. Elaborate mazes are designed where some poor protagonist is perpetually lost and seeking his way out. And potions of toothpaste, paint, dried grass, and rusty nails are mixed, left on his dresser top, and "fed" every night.

Language as well grows tangled and talking in opposites becomes the only way to converse:

"I hate you, Mom. *You know what that means.*"

"No. You do?"

"I do. Not.

"I'm confused. You do or you don't?"

"*Don't ask me anymore. It fires up my tics.*"

And then, of course, there's Mr. Mole.

A large brown orb with elephant feet and a mouth fixed in an eternal primal scream sits atop our TV. This is Mr. Mole, Stephen's cartoon creation, come to life in three-dimensional papier mache form, a perennial bad guy who likes television, fame, money, candy, blood, dirt, fellow moles, and who dreams about paying back the "good guys" for always winning. Although always present in his thoughts, at times Mr. Mole will become the only thing Stephen can think about: his whole day at school will be spent writing screenplays for Mr. Mole; once home, he will draw or carve or scratch his image onto any surface he can find—a leather chair, a copper pot, a wooden spoon, the condensation on the window pane, the dust on a lamp shade.

Mr. Mole is a tic.

***

I'm with Sarah and her friend in our old burgundy K-car station wagon. It's an abused vehicle, with dents everywhere and paint missing in long snaky ropes. Candy wrappers, bits of plasticine, and anaemic-looking fries are wedged between the seats. Amid the old debris lie the remains of last night's supper from McDonald's—ketchup-soaked fries that were too squishy to eat, limp hamburger buns, and the outside part of the hamburger, which Stephen dislikes and calls the "rind."

The buzzer sounds, marking the start of lunch break. I'm stiff, coiled, waiting for Stephen to burst out of the doors, a ball from a cannon. I've a dose of sugar all ready, a neatly packaged granola bar, and I've put on my happy face, but I know this isn't good enough. Something will displease him. Perhaps we'll be parked in the wrong spot. Perhaps he'll want a Fruit Roll-Up instead of a granola bar. Or perhaps I'll say hello and he'll not want me to talk.

He spots the car, his face showing strain, then collapses into agony when he sees Sarah's friend.

"I don't want to ride with anyone else," he greets me. "Why do you always do this? Just once I want to be able to come home alone." His voice

starts to escalate with righteous indignation. "Tell me why? Why? Why do you always do this?"

"That's very rude, Stephen," I reply tartly. Sarah's friend is staring, and I am embarrassed. "Be thankful that you have a mother who picks you up, brings you a treat, and offers rides to those who need them. Count your blessings instead of always griping."

"Don't talk to me," he snaps back.

"If you can't be polite you can get out and walk the rest of the way home!" I hate the sound of my voice. I don't want to be stuck in this pointless argument. We're like an old married couple, squabbling over how much salt to add to the soup while the house is burning down.

Once home, the bickering continues. Except now he starts in on Sarah.

"Man, why do I have to have a sister? How come I'm so unlucky? I bet you wish you only had me, Mom. You know, Sarah, Mom loves me better than you. She wishes that you were never born."

A hint of a smile hovers on Sarah's lips. She's come to expect insults and she knows how to get even.

"Tag," she says provocatively, tapping him on his arm. "You're it." She runs out of the kitchen shrieking wildly, knowing she has activated his touching tic, knowing he has no choice but to pursue her.

"Both of you stop it!" I command, but it's no use. Sarah is leading Stephen in circles at breakneck speed around the dining room table, taunting him with cackles of glee. I'm dizzy, caught up in the whirling force of their energy, powerless to stop them, and I've only a second to catch my breath before they're off, spinning me in the opposite direction.

"Sarah," he begs, "Please—it's my tics. I have to touch you. Please let me touch you."

"Please Sarah," I beg as well, "so that we can all sit down and have lunch."

Sarah consents, but instead of just touching her he pokes her hard in the ribs, bringing tears to her eyes. However, she merely lifts a hand to her lips and blows him a cool kiss, once again setting off his touching tic and another mad dance.

"Stop it!" I bellow. But no one hears.

***

I turn to my garden for solitude and escape. I enjoy the absolute authority I wield over my plants. Completely unable to get control of my children, I am determined to subject all my plants to my slightest whim. "I want you all in a row, no one out of line, faces forward. You go here. You stay. You're out."

Yanking, pulling, plucking, clipping. Unruly green shoots are decapitated with strong snips of my shears. Spent blossoms, their silken edges shrivelled, are tossed into a hidden corner of the garden. I uproot plants from one spot to another, constantly seeking the perfect compliment of colour,

the consummate place for size and height. Every time my neighbours see me I have a spade in one hand and a plant in the other, my fingers tight around its throat, leaves wilting, exposed roots dangling and dripping dirt.

***

Stephen and I are walking to the corner grocery store to purchase some deli meat and buns. This should be a ten-minute excursion, but I soon realize it will take much longer. Stephen, who is extremely tired, can't walk on any of the cracks. He has to hop over them, and if he steps on one, has to go through a complicated ritual of touching his heels with his toes, stopping, then back stepping. This occurs every few seconds at first, but as he becomes more agitated and his tics intensify, it happens so frequently we seem to be standing still. By the time we're on the last leg of our journey, a scant four houses from home, his tics are actually taking him backwards.

Suddenly his body grows slack. "You must hate me. Nobody would want a boy with these stupid tics."

"Let's run home," I say. "We'll fly over the cracks."

"No, Mom. I can't. I can't go on."

Terror grips me. Here we stand, completely immobilized, trapped by a web of cracks, unable to advance, unable to retreat. I wonder if we'll ever make it back home. I begin to see the sidewalk, with its benign concrete slabs and tiny hairline cracks branching in every direction, from his skewed perspective—as a treacherous landscape of traps and cages.

Step on a crack and you'll break your mother's back. More like my heart. Why I don't think to say, "Let's walk on the grass," I'll never know. I keep wondering if I'll have to piggyback him. Will I then be allowed to step on the cracks or will I also have to avoid them? I don't know the rules.

Fortunately I've some strawberry candies in my purse and I dole out generous amounts to him. Sugar is a magic elixir for Stephen, freeing his demons and settling his soul. Slowly, laboriously, we're now able to make our way back home.

***

Fall has come early this year. Discouraged by the wilted forlorn look of my garden, I've hacked all the irises and hostas down to stubs, given brush cuts to my lilies, dumped the soil out of my clay pots, and swept the patio and stairs free of leaves. Now it's time to clean the porch.

Around the porch windows the cobwebs are as thick as trampolines, and loaded with the tattered carcasses of moths and flies. I sweep the sticky fibres with my broom, but a clicking sound stops me. In one web a dragonfly is still alive, twitching, trapped by the tip of one wing and a leg. Every time it manages to wrench one leg free, another one adheres. A thick-bodied spider lurks nearby.

"What are you looking at?" Stephen asks, peering over my shoulder.

He is stricken by the sight.

"We have to rescue it," he says.

"How?"

He runs to the kitchen and returns with a paring knife. One hand delicately secures the trembling body of the dragonfly, while the other saws at the webbing stuck to the wing. There's no sign of his touching tic—his fingers are all poised precision and deft skill. But for some reason the sight of his bitten-down, ragged fingers moving with such concentration brings tears to my eyes. He keeps on working for many long minutes. Then, with one final slice at the leg, he sets the dragonfly free. In silence we watch it skitter off, a bit wobbly.

***

It's 3:00 a.m. and I'm unable to sleep.

Night sounds keep me awake: the swoosh of traffic, the occasional squeal of tires, the click of the second hand circling the clock face, the pulse of blood at my temple thudding against the pillow. Night sounds and my thoughts.

"Would you love me more if I didn't have tics?" Stephen demands when I come to tuck him in. His eyes are swollen and damp.

It's a question I've been expecting a long time and one I have vowed to answer honestly. But why does it have to be tonight?

Stephen and Sarah have spent the whole day fighting over the cat. It went like this: Every time Stephen saw the cat, he felt compelled to touch her; and every time Sarah saw Stephen touch the cat, she felt compelled to pick her up. Which sent Stephen off to touch the cat again. After hours of this Sisyphean struggle Stephen finally shrieked, "Don't you get it? It's my tics. I have to touch the cat *last*."

Now it's bedtime and my body is limp with exhaustion. All I want is to be asleep. To not think. I sigh.

"Answer me. Would I be a better person?"

"Not better," I hedge. "Different." How to explain what I don't even fully understand myself? I reach for his hand but he pulls it away. Next I try to smooth out the creases on his forehead.

"Stephen, it's impossible to subtract the tics from who you are. Your tics make you—" I pause, searching for the right word, "You."

"Yeah, a crappy me."

Behind Stephen's head is a patch of bare wall where he's peeled off the wallpaper in the shape of Mr. Mole, and something else, perhaps a pot of candy. Spread across his bed are several action heroes, duct-taped together and spray-painted gold, their hands linked as if they're astronauts floating in space. On his dresser top are the many jars filled with his murky potions.

"Your tics make life hard," I say at last. "Very hard. But they've also given you a gift. Your creativity. Look around. It's everywhere."

I reach for his hand and this time he lets me. "I don't want to change you. I love you the way you are."

"Really?"

"Really."

***

A huge harvest moon bearing the haughty upturned face of Alfred Hitchcock follows us, surveying our journey. We're heading out to a friend's cottage, driving down Highway 59, listening to the hits of the fifties, sixties, and seventies, the only music my golden oldie car radio can pick up. In the back, Sarah has fallen asleep, her head slumped against Stephen's shoulder.

The cloud of despondency that's been hanging over us has lifted; in fact, tonight we are almost giddy. Stephen's tics are still present, but in such a mild form we hardly notice them. Maybe the meds have finally kicked in, or maybe it's just the nature of his tics. Waxing and waning. I don't know why. All I know is they'll be back.

Three songs in a row—"These Eyes," "Eight Days a Week," and "Hang on Sloopy"—rasp into the car, crackling with static. I sing along in a schmaltzy falsetto and at the end, give a brief drum roll on the dashboard.

"And now, the million dollar question. What do these songs all talk about? The clock is ticking."

"I know," Stephen answers eagerly. "I know. Love."

"Is that your final answer?"

"Yeah. Isn't it always about love?"

***

The house is quiet except for the rattle of the refrigerator and slash of ice rain against the window. Now that Christmas break is over only the cat makes demands, jumping onto my newspaper to remind me her food dish stands empty. I scratch her ears, my fingers finding all the itchy patches as she rotates her head in small circles. But I'm not paying attention.

Instead I'm looking at a picture taped to the kitchen door that Stephen made when he was six, the year his tics first surfaced. It's a picture of a garden, painted on black construction paper, and although most of the black has been wiped out by bold oblongs of orange, blue, white and green, its presence still lurks in a thin black line crayoned around each shape. It's a spring garden. In it, oddly humanesque flowers wave a shy greeting, small plants peek out and beckon, and many-tentacled trees eagerly hold aloft buds swollen and ready to burst open. And as I sit listening to the smack of ice pellets, I wonder what this garden will look like when it's in full bloom.

The Panchen Lama

Somewhere in a room without windows
the Panchen Lama sits
imagining the time of day, remembering
the fall of light across his mother's face
the afternoon the soldiers took them,

how she had to close her eyes against it,
sunlight coming in through the canvas flap
at the back of the truck, the dust
from the road catching in their throats.

This is grief and something else—
a longing that exists outside the body
it is the way birds want to be the wind
they pass through, the way we hold
what we cannot contain.

The room is cold and the Panchen Lama shivers.
He is just a boy from a small village,
a child without means to count the years.
Later he might remember

the number of times birds settled on the roof,
how the cooing pigeons calmed him, he might
go back to the one day they led him out
into the back garden, how there were colours
blooming there he thought he'd never seen.

A way of accounting, each petal
reinvented in his mind, the whole
of a single flower months in the making,
a face from the village a matter of years.

He knows they will never free him
and they cannot kill him, he is given just enough—
the sounds of birds, wind storms, a door that opens
when the woman comes to feed him,
a glimpse through the window in the room beyond.

Outside he knows there are knots of long grass,
a dirt path that heads towards the city
and somewhere foothills
that ache upwards, out of themselves,
turning in the far distance to mountains.

Mendel's Garden

The garden is a language, an old tongue he is trying to learn—
stigma, stamen, sepal, the pure red of the petals in front of him,
Mendel in the far beds behind the monastery, saying the words
over and over again, a latinate hymn, an invocation,
campanula, matthiola, fuchsia; the bright eyes of God watching him.

A carpet of flowers this summer, the garden ready to burst,
the bees burrowing themselves in the throats of flowers,
the cloister wall hidden behind the climbing rose bush.

He is avoiding the greenhouse.

The garden peas give him nothing these days but grief.
And he is always on his knees in there, has spent half his time
at the monastery leaning over, tying pea stalks to lattice,
measuring their growth, reseeding them, transplanting,
whole generations the work of his hands.

This is penance, a desire for order in a chaotic world,
or his own petition, day after day watering the plants
as if he could coax them out of their dark secret.

His hands on them, his breath on them,
but in the evening he goes to bed with their scent on him,
sweet must, wet earth, remnants of pollen. Pisum sativum,
pedicel, placenta, in his dreams the garden peas
climbing up towards the glass ceiling of the green house.

There is no one else to do this work, no one with the patience,
they are only peas to them. But Gregor sees something else,
how like us they are, savouring the comfort of the womb,
but born anyway, into their own ingenuity, variation,
the propagation that is almost speech.

Vision of My Mother as Saint Catherine

She is ten or eleven, standing in the playground,
a blue fluted summer dress, hands in pockets
watching the other girls as they grab the rusted railing,
dig their sneakers into the sand,
push the merry-go-round until it's really spinning.

She has ridden it too, in the park after hours,
coming across the street with her sister
who pushes faithfully while she holds the bars,
leans out as far as she can, the whole of the park
turning into a blur of field and trees.

It takes concentration but sometimes she can see
the street lights leaning in the distance
the playground swings anchored in their stillness,
the sand box as open as a grave
and her own tenebrous fate,

a boy who will change her, who will take her
even though this is all she might ever want—
this reeling, the feeling she gets stepping down
as if this world is no place for her, as if it cannot hold her,
how walking she barely touches the ground.

Distance

We are standing in an old metal shed
on the hill behind the monastery.
Twenty feet away the friar who built it is buried,
along with the old cat who'd followed him in
from Lumsden one winter, begging for scraps.
There is a telescope here and a cut-a-way
in the dome of the shed, the night sky a swath
above us, the Perseid meteors skimming across it
like the stones we tossed over Old Wives Lake
that summer when I was four and you were ten,
and the spear grass grew up past my shoulders.

A group of us huddles around the telescope,
near-strangers moving closer for warmth.
The wind coming over the field rattles the walls,
the odd tin flex sounding out like made-for-tv thunder
while the astronomer shows us star clusters,
binary twins, a bright nebula uneven and blurry
like an oblong birthmark set against newborn skin.
Then he names the near galaxies, recites distances,
the number of years it takes a point of light to reach us.

It will take me two hours to get to Saskatoon
if the roads are clear, although I can count the number
of times I've turned around, the miles between us,
the fields fanning out between farms,
the porch lights like familiar constellations.
The stars know nothing of this, how we get to these
awkward orbits, how we once stood outside this shed,
two months married, eyeing the perigee of the moon.

The door of the shed has been left open, and outside
brome and meadow turn under September,
grassland bending into itself as far as the eye can see.
I walk towards the car knowing the impassable
still stands between us, and for the first time
I can measure the distance from this patch of prairie
to everywhere else I have ever been.
It is that dark stretch bridging stars, the fields
of wheat heading into the night around me;
those stalks leaning over in the fist of wind.

Rick Maddocks

White Plastic Chairs

Perhaps the road had always been dirt. Either that or a slow slide of earth and vegetation had settled over tarmac and left behind a new road entirely. It was now nothing more than a narrow swath of mud cut into the side of a small valley. A steep embankment reached up on one side and on the other the land fell down and away just as steeply into a tangle of trees, underbrush and thorns. In the middle of the road, sunk into a deep puddle, was a rented hatchback of indiscernible make. White once upon a time, it was splattered almost to the roof with mud and its wheels were half-submerged. The driver's door swung open and a pair of legs emerged, jeans and new white running shoes that hung there above the puddle until their owner thought better of it and drew them back into the car.

"Maybe not." The man laughed awkwardly, reaching unsuccessfully to bring the door to. The young woman sitting beside him pretended not to notice. She wiped the window free of condensation and stared through the wet smear at the embankment beside her. Brush and trees, green and black and dripping.

"Sorry," the man said. "I didn't catch that."

The woman closed her eyes and then turned a quick glare at his long, serious face. A camel's face. High forehead, thinning blond hair. He raised his eyebrows self-consciously, hoping perhaps for a smile, but she merely glared at him. "Maybe not," she said.

"That's what I said."

She turned back to the window.

"Here we go," he sighed.

"Where?"

"No." He gripped the steering wheel and levelled a look at her. "You know what I mean."

"Whatever."

When she turned away again she met herself in the window's reflection. Delicate features, black eyelashes that were sure, complete as her blueblack hair. Past her own image she saw him smiling to himself, as he often did when he was angry. He drummed the steering wheel lightly. Patches of moisture shone on the moulded grey plastic. "So," he said. "What do you propose we do?"

"We?" she asked the glove box.

"Uh-huh."

"*We* didn't want to take this trail in the first place. *We* were on the highway back up there, where it's paved and flat and it's got yellow lines down the middle, like every other road around here except *this* one. *You* had to take this joke of a scenic route, even though—"

"First of all," he said in a calm, patronizing tone proven to make her blood boil, "there are plenty of dirt roads around here. More than you can count. Second," a finger rapped the steering wheel, "this is the only way to get there and it always *has* been the only way to get there ever since I can remember, unless you count parking beside the highway and wading through two miles of forest and swamp with all our gear on our backs a better way to get there."

"And the difference now being...?"

He sat back and nodded, looked over at her once, twice. After a minute he said, "I like your glasses. Pushed up back in your hair like that, they make you look, I don't know, debonair."

She gazed out the window. "That wasn't a compliment."

They both sat for some time inside the silence of steady drizzle, the still-clicking engine. The man shifted in his seat. This silence of hers a physical, palpable presence. "Hysterical silence."

"Huh?"

"You've mastered the art of hysterical silence."

She brightened suddenly and said, "Hey, that's pretty good. I like that."

The man reached out and pulled the door handle. The door slammed shut with such violence that the car sank even further down in the mud. Panicking with the key, he tried the engine again, working the gas, but when the car made no headway he swore to himself and shut the engine off.

"You happy now?" she said.

"Nope."

"Me neither."

After a minute the man nodded at the sodden bend of road before them. "My sister killed a deer here once."

The woman was surprised but she spoke flatly. "Did she drown it?"

"Ha ha," he said. "No. One night she's coming up to the cottage with her boyfriend *du jour,* Ward. He's driving his pick-up, a red Jimmy, I think. A deer darts out of the brush and before Ward can lay on the brakes, he broadsides it. It's all over the front of the truck, blood splattered against the windshield, carcass hanging off the grill by one hoof. So there's Kath standing in the road a minute later watching Ward get his hunting knife out and start cutting away the deer. The hoof's wedged so tight in the grill, it's not going anywhere, so he has to cut the foreleg just above the hoof. Kath's

white as a ghost when she gets back to the cottage. But Ward just starts raving to me and my parents: 'You know the crazy thing about it? It didn't do any damage to my truck! Not a dent!' he says. 'And good thing I got a red paint job on her last week!'"

"That's so sad," the woman whispered. She was staring into the dripping trees once more.

"Yes," he laughed, tired. "Sad." It was a word she used often, and her penchant for it had become an old joke between them, or at least for him, until he'd become bored of it. "They broke up soon afterwards," he said.

"Because of the deer?"

"No," he said. "Because he was an idiot." He nodded toward the left side of the road, where the land fell away sharply and the thin torsos of birches, their scars wet black, filled the grey air before misted flat farmlands. "The bones are still down there somewhere," he said. "If you go over there now, slide down the hill a few yards, clear away some of the undergrowth, you'll find that deer's skeleton picked clean, perfect. Ribcage like a white hull of a boat, ants and potato bugs busy on it..."

"Very nice," she said. "Very cinematic. Especially the first scene with the truck. Present tense, etcetera. Kind of morbid though, eh? And the last bit—what would that be, an epilogue or just a voice-over? Black-and-white or sepia, do you think?" Then she added sharply, "Would that require any research?"

He shot her a look. "Very funny. Well, I'm sure you'd do a better job. It's your territory."

"No, no," she smiled against the meanness tightening her chest. "This is *your* territory. Remember?"

His eyes flashed emptiness, the same eyes that pretended not to catch hers back in their apartment, what was it, two months ago now? She'd come home early from work and found the front door unlocked. She stepped quietly into the hall, her ears pricked up. She heard the hum of a computer, and this caused her to relax somewhat. He was probably home, yet there were times when he would go out and leave the computer on because he always said it took more electricity to reboot than to leave on for hours. So she stepped lightly down the hall, peering into the living room, bathroom. Nothing. When she reached his office she could hear the computer crunching; she breathed a sigh and stood in the doorway and was about to say hi when she saw naked bodies frozen on the screen. Women tied up and hanging from walls, crouched on chairs, their legs open, leather straps and buckles. He was totally absorbed. Both his hands were on the desk, one holding the mouse. The next site he clicked on was a gallery of pictures. Each photograph was too small for her to make anything out, and for that she was grateful.

She tried to clear her throat but nothing came. She stepped forward and

was going to speak when he turned slightly and his eye caught her just quick enough for it to seem that he hadn't seen her at all. He gave a fake stretch, turned back to the screen and shook his head. "Sick," he said. He exited the internet window and turned around with a sad smile, still shaking his head when he looked at her in the doorway. "Oh," he said. "You're early."

"What are you doing?"

He looked back at the computer. "What? You mean...?" And he laughed. "I guess it looks bad, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "It looks bad."

"Yeah," he nodded.

He told her he was doing research, for a new screenplay. She would have found this scenario amusing if she hadn't been the one walking into the room. What happens, she asked, and before he could answer, she said of course, it's about a man whose wife catches him looking at porn, and he tells her he's doing research, right, for something he's working on, right? He stammered something that she couldn't recall, and he kept on talking about it long after she was finished and wanted to forget about it. All she remembered him saying was, "Yeah, but we're not married." She was sickened but most of all she felt sorry for him. She spent the night turned to the bedroom wall, curled up in silence.

And now here he was, with her, in this stranded car, talking about chairs of all things. "Even here," he said. "It's getting worse. After the sun goes down, it's a little creepy, sort of primal. Some cottages are getting burned down. An elderly woman was attacked last summer in her home. Other times it's just theft. My folks are worried because they decided to get Adirondacks custom-made the end of last summer, put the old white plastic chairs away..."

She frowned.

"Adirondacks," he said. "Nice wooden slatted chairs with curved backs. They're popular around here, give the old folks something to be excited about, you know, take their minds off death." She watched his face change, loosen with the chairs, but then harden again.

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know, I was just—"

"Why are you even bringing me here?" she said. "You don't even like me anymore."

"What are *you* talking about?"

She searched his face. "You need help." She tugged her blue rain slicker out from under the bags in the back seat and got out of the car. She struggled the coat on, trying to keep her face blank. Breathless and cold, she stood beside the car for a minute and stared at his blurred face before

turning away. She stepped up on the steep incline, slipped, and then groped for rain-blackened vines and ferns and fescu grass. Stripping branches clean, their leaves balled up in her fist and then released, falling without a flutter quick and wet to earth.

He got out after her. "What are you *doing*?" he laughed, his face unbelieving. She slipped down and her face scratched against the torn root of a birch, her royal blue coat smeared brownblack. "Hey!" he shouted. "You all right, babe?"

"Fine, thank you," she said firmly, struck by her absurd politeness, the way she brushed back her hair from her face in a fussy, practiced manner. They had almost always been polite to one another. "Stupid," she laughed to herself.

"What was that?"

"Stupid!" She tore out a clump of earth and threw it blindly at him. "I said stupid!"

She slipped three more times on her way up the slope and then came to understand that for the whole climb she'd be falling down and that perhaps this was what she had always done and always would do, but no sooner had she resigned herself to this probability than she stopped falling and grabbed onto another vine as if it were the next rung of a ladder, and her rhythm became steady and assured, her breath distant yet in unison with this grasping hand on bark, this foot planted in earth. Like the breath she heard last night when she woke from dreaming she was on a mountain path where she was afraid that if she looked across the valley at the sun it would wake her. Stirred from sleep by a muffled cry in the next room, how she got out of bed, climbed over the rumpled sheets where his body had been when she'd fallen asleep. She pushed open the bedroom door that had been carefully brought to and she heard the garbled mess of sound and every so often a sharp static belch and then a woman's voice moaning, her breath rhythmic and hollow and a yeah that curved up at the end then crying, "Yes, ah fuck, yesss..." And a low grunt in delayed response, sparse, almost methodical, until he moaned over and under the woman's squeals, and she walked into the living room aflicker with sick green light, an oil slick on screen, flashes of red with static and the naked bodies melted and distorted grinding one another like ripe sinuous orange dogs on the scrambled television channel and there he was on the couch with a blanket pulled up to his shoulders and she could see his knees were drawn up too and he wore a dull, blood-thumped look on his face, fast asleep.

Before she knew it she was at the crest of a hill. She looked back down, almost straight down, and saw him standing by the car, gazing up through the bracken, his open mouth the only visible feature inside the dark green hood. As if it were the only rational thing left to do, he looked down at his running shoes, submerged in the puddle, then began a slow, clumsy jig,

ploshing about on the spot, his arms and legs jerking mechanically up and down. When he looked up the hill again, she was gone.

She came up to the crest of the hill and, over a driftwood fence, there was the highway which traced the edge of a small lake pewtered and pockmarked with rain. Across the lake, on the far shore she could make out the warm orange windows of cottages, their muffled mirrors on the water, the odd pier here and there, and a washed-out margin of sand that curved around the water. Here the water was muddy grey yet still wore a dull sheen, more alkaline than anything, glugging up a milky grey froth against the reeds that blotted out any hint of sand. There were no birds. *Sad.* The word fluttered on her mind, comfortable, familiar. Dark had eased itself slowly down, bringing a quiet meanness to the air, a cold that seemed to settle into the earth, as if some vessel up there, holding all the sky's low pressure, had suddenly capsized and sent its cargo plummeting down here to the bottom. And suddenly she was afraid, not of the creatures lurking out there. Out there it was only humans and no other creatures. No deer, no birds, no fish serene under waters, not even insects, only humans, gathered by the thousands in stadiums watching other humans. Humans talking on cell phones to humans. Humans watching other humans in various positions. There were only humans. Humans naked in a field, not knowing what to do.

She crunched along the shoulder until there, straight ahead, a building loomed in the rain, its form melding with a dark ridge of deciduous trees. A squat steeple fluttered among the leaves, dark upon dark. She rushed across a muddy gravel parking lot to the archwayed entrance but before she started up the steps she saw it was boarded up and not only the door, but the whole arch was meanly shut away, though the plywood was half rotted. She grasped a chewed shard of wood, ready to tear it all out plank by plank and huddle inside, but then let her arms drop, no more dramatics today.

She circled the church, solid red brick as so many edifices were in this old region. From the outside it still appeared to be in perfect condition, yet every window and door was boarded up. Behind the building she came to a small graveyard which held once-white tombstones. Rain was a hush over the ceiling of trees and there was the murmur of insects too, calming her a little, and in the muted light cobwebs shone gossamer, one laced in her way, another hanging straight down, a sliver of leaf twirling quickly on its end. The fungus-ridden stones wore archaic, mystic phrases like "Too Good for This World" and "On High" and "Gone Home." A pioneer cemetery, no doubt. No sooner had this conclusion formed in her mind than she stepped upon a mound of loose earth and, looking down, she realized it wasn't earth at all but a bundle of fur, soft and hollow. She shuddered and jumped back. It was a sodden and dirty thing, all colour washed out of it, a shag rug, or a

blanket perhaps. She felt sick to her stomach and before she knew it she was running, over gravel and puddles, back along the side of the road.

The highway curved along the rim of the lake, towards those warm squares of orange light. There was no traffic to be seen or heard and she soon found herself quickening her pace against the rainy silence, slipping in the matted-down grass beside the highway. She didn't know for how long she kept up this speed, running at times, but as in dreams, her progress never seemed to realize itself, so the lights of the cottages were as far away as they'd been five, ten minutes before, and it was only when she heard the streaming hiss of car tires on the highway behind her that she slowed down, not wanting to draw attention to herself though she was a woman dressed in a bright blue raincoat alone on a country road at night.

She slowed to an absurdly nonchalant walk. The car flicked on its high beams, her shadow cut like a black diamond against the white grass. She stiffened and pulled the coat tighter to her chin. The car slowed beside her and out of the corner of her eye she saw a figure lean over from the driver's side and roll down the passenger window. "Wanna buy a car, lady?"

She looked down at the gravel shoulder. "I'm fine, thank—"

"Aren't you cold?"

Her gaze met the driver's eyes. He was smiling at her, his eyebrows raised beseeching, and her heart sunk gently. "I'm always cold," she said. "You know that."

"Please, babe," he said. "Jump in. I drove it out of the swamp special."

The car was now almost black with mud, spattered up over the windows and even on the roof. It was a wonder he could see through the windshield at all, let alone the back window. They would have to take it back to the rental place in a week, but for now she found it impossible to hide her surprise.

"How'd you get it out?"

"Piled a bunch of small branches behind the back wheels and—you know that bag of charcoal Dad asked me to pick up? Dumped it out on them and then I reversed out."

She frowned at his face, flushed, alive. She'd never seen him do a practical thing in the five years she'd known him. "It worked?"

He nodded happily. "First time. Okay, seventh time."

"Where'd you get *that* idea? Some movie?"

"Read it in a book," he said. "Research."

"Ha ha," she said, and climbed in.

"Don't dirty the—ah!" He shook his head at her mucky boots on the floor.

"You've got to be—"

"Yeah," he said quickly, driving back out onto the rainslicked highway. "I'm kidding." He pulled a U-turn so that he now drove back against the

grain from where she'd come. She gazed at him, exhausted, and slid down comfortably in her seat. He told her she'd walked a good mile further than his parents' cottage. There was no production in his voice. He merely drove the short distance back in silence and pulled onto the highway's gravel shoulder. He got out and started unloading some of their belongings from the hatchback. After a minute she was wordlessly helping him, looping her travel bag over her arm. "Don't forget the computer," he said absently. She gave him a dull look before picking it up, along with the cooler. "Nuh-uh. Not everything," he said. "We'll have to leave the rest till tomorrow."

She slumped under the weight, staring at him and his sudden take-the-matter-in-hand manner. "Why?"

"We're going down there." His arms were full so he nodded toward the trees, the same steep slope that had risen above the old road they were stuck on before, yet now it fell away from them, sudden and dark and absolute. She shut the hatchback hard with her elbow and then started off first through the weeds and long grass. At the top of the embankment she stopped and looked into the darkness below. She pulled the hood off her head, but still she could see only dark, save for pinpricks of light distant through the trees, perhaps the shimmer of another lake. "It's only a hundred yards or so," he said. "You want me to hold your hand?"

She shrugged away. "I'm fine." She took a deep breath before starting down the slope. Smell of thick dead leaves, sap, woodsmoke. She was drawing beads on birches now, barely visible in the black as her boots moved over twigs cracking, wet leaves squeaking, until she tripped over a root or vine and fell forward, her face lashed by a branch, but he caught her by her hood and she was nearly strangled, then she straightened up and was back on her feet in a sudden miraculous jerk. "Fuck!" she shouted. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Yes," he said. His breath was warm at her ear. She leaned back, against his chest, her breath ploughing through her. She took his hand then, clammy like hers, and on the rest of the way down they fell, the both of them, not once but three times. "Over here," he said. "This way," he said. "Almost there." She followed him toward the warm lights of the cottage. She heard an electric buzz nearby which, every few seconds, crackled loudly. When they reached the bottom of the slope they had to jump a murmur of creek. There, clear of the trees, they found the rain had stopped. They crossed a glistening expanse of grass, sopping wet, which made no difference in their sopping shoes. She saw something hanging from a small tree up ahead. A phosphorescent purple rod, vertically housed in a thin, long cage, that sparked brighter as they approached. "What is it?" she whispered.

"Bug zapper," he said. The thing razzled loudly as if in response. As they passed it she could make out a shimmer of insects circling, spinning, drawn

to the light.

"It's so cruel."

He put on a redneck voice. "Don't got those in yer big city now, do ya?"

It was her turn not to listen. As if he hadn't been living in the city for years now and he hadn't said before coming here that every time he came back it was as if it never really existed, that they merely brought out all the props, recited the lines and once he was gone back to the coast he could picture them packing up the sets, the backdrops, wiping off the makeup, and as if she wasn't always struck by his perverse self-centeredness.

"Here we are," he said. She found herself laughing nervously. Beyond the purple shaft of light she could see the bright screened-in cottage porch. The figures of a man and woman rocked back and forth in a shared swing; its rhythmic metallic grating rang through the air. The man said something in a low, clipped voice and the woman let out a high, melodic bubble of a laugh. Before them, in the light spilling off the porch, potted flowers flaunted their bright, gaudy colours. And there, alongside them on the grass, luminous and perfect, sat a pair of white plastic chairs.

"Oh," he said. "The Adirondacks were stolen."

The couple in the swing froze. The old man's silver head perked up. "Who's that?" A softened English accent. "Who's there?"

She had never met his parents before. She stopped in her tracks, so suddenly that he bumped into her from behind, and she found herself digging in her heels. "It's us," he called, laughing. She was surprised. She'd expected him to say something strange, funny, because he'd told her his family was all kidders, maybe *it's just a deer.* Even when he took her by the arm and drew her gently toward the older couple now standing before the porch swing, she expected him to say it but he only smiled in the low light with his pale, encouraging face and said, it's us.

Susan Stenson

Blossom Count

The calendar plays tricks. It's February in Victoria and we count blossoms before the temperature says it's too early, fools, who do you think you are? With our heads down, shoulders braced, we calculate the crazy spring. Japonica, yellow and dripping blossoms blatant and fixed in full-throated light, singing *look-at-me, look*. The daffodils open in a fit of reaching—*this is a lie—surely, there will be frost*, we say against the wind. This is an abrupt and coloured season; a sun so strained in its morning dress and gumboots, show the white legs shaved only last night. There will be women carrying brooms to the funerals in summer. Thousands of brides have lost their husbands to the backyard. These women want a warm bed, not the smell of fresh-cut grass, not rows and rows of lilies and ornamental shrubs, not the sore backs to treat with liniment, stained, good-for-nothing sheets.

Sam Generoux

Kitchen Poems

(Shungiku no Ohitashi)
Chrysanthemum Leaves

burnt
the eggs this morning
while I was dreaming of
toasted chrysanthemum
                leaves
            rolled up in your tongue
        I dreamt my tongue
coated in dandelion oil
moved
like a spatula
across your
        earlobe

(Sakura Gohan)
Cherry Blossom Rice

white bowl of
cherry blossom rice
hesitates
on the counter

balanced
the tongue wants
garlic

I want to swallow
cloves—whole—
like the fired hearts
of little birds

I want to
tear
salt-preserved
cherry blossoms
(including stems)
into small pieces

to grind this brain
like *enokidake* mushrooms
through grating teeth
& appease the stomach's growl.

(Ginnan no Kuzutoji)
Gingko Nuts in Thick Sauce

A light-catching
translucent
sauce

embraces the gentle green
of the
gingko nuts.

1. opening the window light stirred & reflected for a moment then placed itself among the golden honey on yesterday's spoon.

2. remembering the green leaves of the ferns on the smooth almond skin of the arbutus tree.

3. carefully watching,
what seems like the last raindrop slip
from a leaf
outside grandpa's window,
then running outside to play.

4. hissing the green head of a match turns red.

5. looking, with one eye, through the green glass of a wine bottle; my idle pen on the table
bends—a child's illusion.

Patrice Melnick

Rearranging the Furniture

In one recurring dream I have, Formosan termites eat through the soft wood of my house until the floors and walls weaken and collapse. I wake up to feel my heart racing. The next day, my friend, Sarah, looks up house images in her dream book and tells me that in dreams the house is one's body. I imagine the HIV medicines I take nesting inside my body, digging tunnels as they gnaw at the grain of my flesh, the veneer of my skin.

***

I had just turned thirty-seven when I first noticed a single, pronounced vein running down each of my arms. I realized that as my limbs grew thinner, the veins bulged like raised termite tunnels and criss-crossed down my legs like blue earthworm highways. On the backs of my calves appeared tiny veins like inky office doodles or badly drawn tattoos. I wondered if these veins were simply the ugly hereditary gifts of my mother, or was the infamous AIDS wasting syndrome kicking in?

"Nice veins," the hospital phlebotomist says when I have blood drawn. She taps one vein on the inside of my arm, admires how it stands out, as if offering itself to the needle. I have noticed that if I become dehydrated, my veins stand out even more, as though the ebbing of an ocean of skin reveals the life below. It's hard for me to drink enough water because I get bored with the taste, so I drink lots of lemonade with mint to help the tide wash back over the seaweed tangle of veins.

Meanwhile, my middle seems to thicken, but I am not positive if the changes are caused by genetics, age, HIV, or the medicines; or perhaps these are simply perceptions from my body-conscious, American, female mentality.

***

I have been cleaning and decorating my 100-year-old New Orleans house in an attempt to control something in my life, as if straightening, cleaning, brightening, can improve my body, cover the blue veins, bring colour to my cheeks and eyes. I rearrange paintings and wall hangings as though this will counteract the effects of the drugs, make my limbs grow thicker and my torso thinner. I have lived with HIV for twelve years and have somehow managed to stay healthy—no Pneumosistis Pneumonia, Karposis Sarcoma,

Thrush or the other frightening diseases that have plagued so many, and that I continue to fear. I have seen my T-cells rise significantly over the past year, and fortunately the medicines have suppressed my viral load to undetectable levels and I am grateful for these indications of good health. But then I glance down at my calves and try to read the blue hieroglyphics, possible side effects from years of taking nelfinavir, ritonavir, efavirenz, abacavir, didanosine...

***

I admire the cut flowers in the centre of my dining room table. I like the way the pink carnations look with the blue irises. I shift around the sunflowers and baby's breath until the cluster of colour seems to radiate from the middle of the room. Then my eye catches the article on lipodystrophy in the copy of *Project Inform*, an AIDS journal of medicine developments, that lies open on the table. I had been reading it earlier while I ate lunch.

This article discusses the side effects of various HIV drugs. This is when I begin to believe that my body is growing thinner as a side effect of my medicines. The protease inhibitor class of drugs can cause lipodystrophy or "truncating," where the fat redistributes, like a glacial migration, leaving the arms, legs, butt, and face thin, while the stomach and breasts grow larger. But I thought I only imagined these changes until recently.

***

"After a break-up, first thing, rearrange the furniture," my oldest sister Alicia advised over the telephone after my boyfriend moved out.

I put on a Talking Heads CD—*More Songs about Buildings and Food.* I turned the volume up loud, percussion pounding to drown out my thoughts as I shoved and dragged beds and dressers around on blankets.

Jud-y's-in-the-bed-room, in-ven-ting-sit-u-a-tions
Bob-is-on-the-street-to-day, scout-ing-up-lo-ca-tions...

It seems like a feminine urge to shape and reshape our bodies and environment. I recently helped a friend haul a futon couch into her house, all the way to the back room that she uses as a home office. It was quite heavy and later we both had aching back muscles. When I returned the next evening to watch a video with her, she told me that she had single-handedly maneuvered that unwieldy futon back into the living room—she didn't like it in the office. I laughed at her for being so particular with her decorating scheme even if it meant she had to haul furniture alone. She told me of a friend whose petite mother dragged a grand piano down a set of stairs by herself. I imagined the picnic-robbing ants in cartoons, a single one carrying a banana, twenty times his size.

I angled my bed across a corner and then shoved the chest of drawers in

front of the tall window. I slid the dressing table by the other window and filled the empty drawers and shelves with all my stuff. I spread out my books and clothes as heart-rhythms thumped steady in my head and chest. David Byrne and I chanted:

Here's-that-rhy-thm-again.
Here's-my-shoul-der-blade.
Here's-the-sound-I-made.
Here's-the-pic-ture-I-saved.
Here-I-am.

I jumped up and down to the song, rolling my hips, and sing-shouting while my large black Labrador retrievers turned in circles and bark, bark, barked at me.

***

Every morning and evening I take the pills out of the little pill containers that have days and times marked. I think of my late grandmother pushing her pills into piles with a frail finger. The easiest to take are the small blue or yellow capsules. The large coffin-shaped white chalky ones stick in my throat. The tiny pink ones shriek with bitterness, even if I wash them down with Coca-Cola. First thing in the morning, on an empty stomach, I chew four chalky, wafer-like double-quarter thick pills. I try to wash down the sticky residue with water, as a river washes silt through a river bed. In my drowsy state, I barely notice the nasty-sweet taste.

The pills have names that sound like insect species, and I imagine them climbing about in the overgrown garden in my front yard:

"The winged Didanosine thrives in tropical climates, where it can be seen partying in Spanish Moss."

"With powerful mandibles, the Efavirenze feeds primarily upon palmetto palm stalks, and tastefully decorated old New Orleans homes."

"By injecting a nauseating venom, the Ziagen paralyzse its prey of beetles or streetcar passengers, then taunts its victims before sucking dry their life juices."

***

I remember, when I was a little girl, listening to my older sisters and mom talking about their low-fat diets of fish and vegetables. My parents and sisters all seemed overweight at one time or another. But I can't distinguish the feelings from the reality. At nine years old, I felt excluded and would stick out my stomach and mimic, "I'm so fat."

"Don't joke," my big sister Vikki said, "some day you may be." Perhaps I associated diets with womanhood.

I grew up feeling fat, though in retrospect, I suspect I was always average.

But the small incidents cling to my imagination. I remember my dad noticing my plump stomach hanging over my corduroy jeans, and he suggested that I needed to lose a few pounds. A worried look showed in my mother's eyes one summer when she suggested I might want to go on a diet. "I don't want you to become obese," she said, and that word, *obese*, frightened me, implying that I would grow into a grotesque, fat-jiggling, ground-shaking monstrosity. That night Mom invited me to go with her and Dad for ice cream, and I remember resenting the mixed signals, but went anyway and ordered a Swenson's pink peppermint cone rolled in chocolate jimmies. My parents went out for ice cream almost every night in those days.

When I was twelve years old, my sister Alicia said that if I lost ten pounds she would buy me a bikini, an idea that delighted me. I think I only lost seven, but she took me shopping at J.C. Penny's and I wore that emerald green bikini for two summers before I could no longer deny that my body had developed out of it, no matter how tightly I tied the top. But most of my adult life I always struggled with my cravings for rich foods like ice cream and buttery rolls, which inevitably brought about thick thighs and a flabby stomach.

***

When my long-term boyfriend had moved out, he left bare spaces on my book shelves, in closets and drawers, the rooms of my house and in the corners of my days, of my life. The break-up was a familiar one: after five-and-a-half years together, I wanted something more permanent, and he didn't. I asked him if fear of HIV kept him from staying. He said, "No," he just wasn't ready to make a commitment. So I asked him to move out, which he did quickly and efficiently.

About a month later, I looked into the bathroom mirror one morning, and noticed the usual morning wrinkles that crease the left side of my face, the side which I sleep on. Then I saw dark patches on my cheeks, as if an impressionist painter had smudged a solid blue-gray patch beneath each of my cheek bones. I tried to wash with soap and water, but the dark areas remained. I thought the room too dark, so I turned on the overhead light, then the lights that encircle my bathroom mirror, and I leaned closer, but the dark shadows still clung to the chiseled landscape of my face. I didn't understand. I knew I had been eating less in my new loneliness, and the swampy summer heat robbed my appetite too. I had not yet turned on my air-conditioner because the summer electric bills are very high in these drafty old southern homes. I found my own drawn face frightening. This sudden thinning was surely unnatural. Concern over weight loss was one I had never experienced in my life. After all, as a young American female, early on I had learned the mantra: Thinner is better, thinner is better, thinner is better. Was it time to learn to wear the makeup I'd shunned all of my

life, in a desperation to hide my real, hollow-cheeked face? My mind flashed to the faces of evening news AIDS victims with their corpse-stares. Had my face really become so emaciated, my head a skull with wild Halloween hair? My own mortality stared back at me, with that sunken-eyed skull-face. Eventually I sat down at the table and began a shopping list of fatty foods to buy. In my frustration, I also began a list of house chores.

***

Take out the dust mop and sweep the soft dark clumps of dog hair into a pile (there is hair enough to stuff a dozen pillows). Dust the shelves, file bills, maps, travel brochures. Put photos in photo albums, put away letters, cut and tape recipes onto file cards.

***

I have always wanted to be one of those women who can eat anything she wants without gaining weight. Although the first time I noticed myself thinning, my stomach sickened with alarm. I soon began the hedonistic eating orgy of which I have always dreamed. I went out to Mexican restaurants and ate cheesy enchiladas, chalupas, fried flautas and burritos and chimichangas, and sopappillas dripping with honey. I ordered regular cokes, spooned honey into my tea and munched popcorn with butter at the movies. I stocked my refrigerator with sour cream and cheeses. I stuffed Dove dark chocolate ice cream bars in the freezer and munched greasy Zapp's potato chips with my sandwiches. I didn't gain weight and have continued to indulge. I devour delicious food with the same pleasure I take drinking in vivid colours of cut flowers and the bright shades of paintings in my house—I take it all in.

It seems that I have two contradictory inclinations. On one hand, I try to keep control of the inside of my house as I try to control the disease and the appearance of my body. And yet living in doubt of my future, I want to indulge myself, to live my life as fully as possible for I crave delicious foods, music, flowers, art, and sex.

***

I had a fine date with a handsome man a few weeks ago and as he and I sat on my couch, becoming romantic, I felt energized. He massaged my feet and admired my cobalt-blue painted toe nails. He ran his piano-player long fingers over my bare, tan summer-legs, complimenting my calves and thighs. I felt a glow as he stroked my calves, felt as though the beauty of my home flowed into my body that night. I hadn't yet told him that I was HIV positive; he only knew that he was wooing me, could have no idea that he was soothing a particular part of my body that I had begun to feel anxiety over. He didn't seem to notice the blue veins. This sexy moment returned to me the feeling of being vibrant, human, normal.

***

My old bras have become too snug, the next size larger a neat fit. Perhaps if I were a skinny, small-breasted woman I would be grateful to fill out my figure. But I already feel self-conscious. As I walk down the street, sometimes I believe I notice men staring at my chest and I feel like I am a sex freak, a pair of breasts walking around on spindly legs.

A couple of years ago, when I was vacationing in Charlotteville, Tobago, a native woman told me people in town had been discussing me, the American, noting how unusual it was that I was so small, with large breasts. I imagined people laughing over glasses of rum in steamy bars, gossipy women chopping fish and plantains at kitchen tables, sweaty, talkative fishermen in the market, all talking about the body that I thought was personal, mine. At times I feel like I am in one of those dreams where I am nude, parading proudly in a florescent-lit shopping mall or hiding from co-workers behind office furniture.

***

I primp and stare, feeling the deep creases in my face. I wonder if my worry shows. I suppose it is a sign of progress when I am more concerned about the effects the drugs have on my appearance than the effects of the disease—when I fret over my looks, instead of merely trying to cling to my health, my life. Perhaps this vanity, brushing my hair in front of the mirror, painting my toe nails bright colours, flaunting slender white sandals and a glittering silver anklet, is a part of being alive. Or do I fixate on these superficial concerns to avoid thinking too deeply about the virus that courses through my veins, and swarms throughout my body?

***

In casual conversation at work one day, I told Sandra, the secretary, that I felt good, having written a poem. I admitted I had felt depressed the day before.

"Why are you depressed, Trecie?" she asked pointedly. I realized I had said too much and she knew something was wrong. I suspected she had noticed my worried look and thinning body. I felt frightened at that moment, to be so vulnerable, so visible.

"I've just been tired," I told her. "You can tell?"

"You wear it," she said, "you wear it."

I felt embarrassed, and wondered if she might think I wear my emotions on purpose.

"People are worried about you," Sandra said. And I began to worry more myself.

Later, that same week, a co-worker, Valerie, asked to speak with me alone. I followed her into her office.

"Trecie," she said in a calm but serious voice, "I notice you've looked

distressed, you've lost weight."

I felt a desperate wish to hide at that moment. But I have never been able to hide my feelings. I laugh loudly during Steve Martin movies, smile open-mouthed during a spirited brass band performance, and grin into my partner's face when I Zydeco dance—but I cry easily when I feel sad. I was afraid I would break into tears, and felt the urge to reassure her there was no need to worry.

"Tell me what's wrong, please," she said as her kind brown eyes looked into mine.

"I think it's just the heat," I said as I shifted in my chair. "I finally turned on my air last week, shouldn't have waited so long."

"Well," she said as I got up to leave, "people are very concerned about you."

With the word "people," I imagined small meetings where friends talked about my body changes and once again I felt that nude-in-public-dream feeling.

As friends and colleagues continued to confront me one by one, I felt turned inside-out like a mango peel, my emotions exposed and pulpy. I didn't know who to talk to or what to say. If I had discussed the ex-boyfriend, I would have burst into tears like a lovesick teenager, right there in the office. If I had mentioned that I have HIV, I was afraid these concerned friends would have panicked. And I wondered if others then would question my ability to do my job. They might wonder if I was contagious, if they should avoid sharing office space, pens, or a dessert over lunch. What might my colleagues imagine as the cause of my subdued behavior and weight loss? Clinical depression? Breast cancer? Ovarian cancer?

I felt a need to protect not only myself, but to protect others from worry. I didn't want to be thought of as a person who burdens others with her problems or craves attention and sympathy.

But the worries of others increased my own, and at the time, I didn't know why I was thinning. Also, I was alarmed to have my appearance change, during a summer when I was scoping out possible new romances at clubs and parties, trying to fill the empty shelves in my love life.

***

Hang the beaded voodoo flags, polish the leather-covered coffee table, put the green table cloth and straw placemats on the table, dust ceiling fan blades, grandma's ship-wheel clock, and the stained-glass lamp, put marigolds in the cranberry glass, a rose in the glass bud vase, straighten pictures: Native American abstracts with bright cubist faces, huge 6 x 4 primitive paintings with blue people, fire-eyed dogs, burning buildings. Burn "desert rain" incense, wash the dog-nose smudges off the windows.

***

Reverend Harris, next door, has Alzheimer's disease and a nurse takes care of him every day. His wife, Mrs. Harris, is frail and stays inside the house most of the time. The nurse and Mr. Harris sit on the front porch together, but she gets restless, goes into the yard to push the lawn mower and clip the edges of the lawn. One day she cut the new shoots of my rose bush that grew through the chain-link fence into the Harris' yard. I glared at her, told her that if Mrs. Harris didn't want the roses growing on her side of the fence, I would be happy to put up a partition. But Mrs. Harris had told *me* she didn't mind. I had been nourishing the bush by giving it fertilizer and mulching around the roots. Whenever I cut the crimson buds to bring into the house, I carefully clipped down to the junction as my mother had instructed me, so that the bush would produce new growth. In my fury over the snipped shoots, I considered putting up a trellis, or an ugly bamboo fence between us. Maybe a gray cinder block wall.

"So sorry," the nurse said, but she didn't look sorry. She kept tugging at untidy weeds by the front fence. I noticed she had even dug up the begonias and day lilies that had lined the Harris's house. As Mr. Harris sat, strapped in his wheelchair arguing with visions of deceased relatives, she stabbed a pointed shovel into the garden, daring anything green ever to grow in that soil again.

Nurse Kill-It-All squatted low to pull, clip and shovel, as she began to tell me about her sick sister with liver cancer, and a nephew with sickle-cell anemia. She said working in the yard gave her mind ease. Loose flesh jiggled beneath her busy arms as she tugged and trimmed and clipped and mourned hopeless situations that rooted in her mind. Meanwhile, she was snipping the yard into a sharp-edged square, neat as a new placemat.

She tried to cut back wild growth, to limit the green life, as I was trying to nourish and promote new growth. However, I must admit, tropical plants flourish out of control in my yard. Greenery grows and tangles as thickly as an Amazon jungle. It might not be surprising to see an anaconda uncoil from beneath the thicket of wild petunias, or to witness a jaguar peering down from the roof through the dark rubber tree branches. An anarchy of white ginger blooms seems to spring upward like a fragrant geyser. In the night, the sweet scents of the ginger, the night-blooming jasmine and the Angel's Trumpet compete and overwhelm the air.

If I don't cut the grass soon, I thought, I might need a machete to hack my way from my doorstep, through the small front yard and to my truck each morning.

I decided against the cinder-block wall and Nurse Machete never clipped at the shoots of my rose bush again.

***

In another dream, a tremendous thunderstorm pours water into my house

through the holes in the roof. I look for the phone number of the roofing company that just installed the new roof, but can't find it. A worker had been walking on the roof, and left piles of slate, the job unfinished. I feel angry and helpless in this dream.

***

As a teenager, I attended an expensive, private high school with tall, slender, *Vogue*-beautiful girls. I thought of myself as plain and unfeminine. By the time we were seniors, several of my friends had fought bouts of anorexia. I remember one girl as stocky and athletic, another full-faced and beautiful. Then one by one, each began dieting, until their energy and beauty had drained away leaving terribly thin, frail girls. I felt disturbed and worried about them. As for me, on one hand I felt rebellious against the pressure to always be thinner. And yet I, too, was haunted by the tall, waif-like ideal of beauty. This ideal crept into our minds as we flipped through shiny glamour magazine ads, overheard the comments of our peers and parents, and watched the popular high-cheek-boned beauties who sauntered about during morning assembly.

As I look at myself in a full-length mirror, my thick, self-image competes with my concern over my skinny butt and legs. I can't remember how I used to really look, or see how I look now, and I see image upon image like a pile of transparencies, based on what I hear from my friends and family, and what I *think* I see in the mirror, what I *think* I remember I looked like years ago. My stomach has always protruded, like my mother's—is it more distended now? My childhood friend Teresita says I've always had skinny arms and legs, though I know the bulging veins are new. She says I just look like I work out, and this thought comforts me. My mother has "chicken legs" with blue veins. I can't distinguish with any certainty the results of aging, drug side effects, my natural body type, depression over a lost love, or my fickle memory and imagination.

***

I cover my legs with citronella bug repellant before I go outside to weed the garden, trim night-blooming jasmine, wash the dogs and comb their fur so they will shine. I transplant coral-blossom Angel's Trumpet, hang baskets of yellow walking iris, baskets of fuscia desert rose, baskets of crimson begonias. The small, tiger-mosquitoes buzz hungrily around my ankles.

***

In the summer that the boyfriend moved out, the summer of a sweaty house, rearranged furniture, empty shelves and fresh hollows in my face, I went to a small family reunion at my parents' house in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I was nervous about the journey, wishing I could disguise the diminutive self I had become, and hide from my parents and two sisters.

They, of course, knew of my having HIV for all these years, but I always felt the impulse to protect them from difficulties such as a cold that lingered too long or my fears of ending up in the hospital, or worse. Only with hesitation would my mother ask about my health, and only reluctantly would I offer information. I tried to tell her mostly of positive signs such as rising T-cells or good health despite working with sickly colleagues during flu season.

When I arrived in Albuquerque for the reunion, I walked past the crowd of turquoise-jewelled strangers to the baggage claim carousel. My bag was one of the last ones to come up the chute, and just as I hauled the strap over my shoulder, my mom appeared. She approached with a smile but it looked to me like her eyes were studying my face and body. She hugged me tight, and then began complaining that my father made them late because he had to stop at the post office to mail some packages, that Dad said it wouldn't take very long, but it did. He was waiting in the red Nissan Pathfinder, parked in the five-minute zone. Their Malamute mix, Stormy, was looking out the back with dark-ringed eyes. Dad got out and hugged me, his beard scratchy against my face. His pool-green eyes looked tired, surrounded by a Sahara of wrinkles. Dad took my bag and put it in the back with Stormy.

The hour-long drive to Santa Fe was quiet, peppered by careful conversation.

"How was your flight? Uneventful, I hope," my father said.

"Fine," I said, as Stormy drooled on my shoulder.

"Those jeans got pretty loose on you," my mother said, glancing back at me.

"Lost some weight," I said.

"Wish *I* had that problem," Dad said as he whipped into the left lane and sped towards Santa Fe. My father doesn't ask about my health often, nor mentions any body changes that he may notice. He settles into a serene bed or cloud of silence, broken by occasional questions or smart-ass comments.

As we talked I could hear strands of concern in my mother's voice even as she chatted about the wildflowers that had bloomed in her yard. Over the years, my mother has made only occasional inquiries into my health. Mom described virtually every single gray jay, junco, bluebird, yellow warbler, gold finch, black-capped chickadee, and red-breasted grosbeak, that had landed on her bird feeder in the past month as my father swung in and out of lanes with his death-defying Indianapolis 500 driving style. Her bird monologue was punctuated by an occasional gasp, which my father pretended not to hear.

Since this weight loss was uncharacteristic for me, I was glad for any distraction.

We arrived at the house to the hugs, smiles and wise-ass cutting up that my family revels in. But my sister, Alicia, changed the tone with, "You've lost a lot of weight."

My aunt looked me over, but she didn't appear concerned—she didn't know I had HIV.

I began to tell Alicia about the heat and humidity, but she wasn't listening, she never does. Her eyes filled with panic as she said again, "You lost a lot of weight, Trece."

I tried to use a casual tone to tell her about the boyfriend-depression, but I knew she was thinking about AIDS.

Alicia led me into the back bedroom and shut the door.

"It's the drugs that do this," I said. "They make me lose weight, Alicia. My doctor doesn't know what to do about it."

"You know, working out with weights can help with wasting..." she interrupted.

Then I became angry that she dared use that word "wasting"—a word I associate with AIDS, hospitals, dying. I was annoyed that she didn't hear my explanation and we retreated into a familiar, stubborn, sisterly standoff, this time born of concern, fear, frustration, and love.

We seemed so far from the day she had rewarded me with that bright green bikini. "Thin" used to mean healthy, beautiful and successful in my family, but now it suggested "AIDS Victim," even if that wasn't exactly the case.

***

"Look at this," I show my doctor the veins in my legs.

He notices the veins on my calves, as well as the deep lines etched in my face. We spend little time discussing my T-cell count, which has risen from 139 to 278 in the past year, and viral load remains undetectable. I beg for solutions to these body changes.

My doctor nods, but doesn't have an answer. Researchers don't know the reasons for the lipodystrophy and there is even some controversy over exactly which drugs, or drug combinations cause this wasting effect. He tells me about some studies that will begin in the coming months, and then hesitantly suggests I try eating more fats.

"I do," I say, and then run through the list of Mexican foods I have been devouring.

He smiles at my pleasure.

But I am still frustrated by my appearance, and I don't tell him about my growing urge to attract handsome men into my life—it is not always food that I crave.

***

Glue arm back on the kachina doll, polish cypress fireplace mantles (1/3 linseed oil, 1/3 turpentine, 1/3 vinegar), wipe down baseboards, wash underwear, wash, dry and fold clothes, iron skirts, run the dishwasher and put away plates, scrub soap scum off the royal blue bath tiles.

***

I planted seedlings at the start of the summer, and now I have three sunflower plants, only one of which is blooming yet. That one has a large black disk center and blazing yellow petals. The marigolds are just about to open, and a hanging basket overflows with hot pink portulaca. I have piled cedar chips in the front garden to keep the soil moist.

I brought home a full bouquet from the store—there are not yet enough blooms in the garden to cut. I fuss over getting the right balance of reds and yellows and blues in the vase. In some ways my life feels like borrowed time and I find myself hungering for the sensual, the fabric of life. Perhaps this uncertainty makes me more selfish and determined to live life more fully. I crave a heightened sense of experience and I want to devour colours, flavours, music, textures, scents, the factors that make me more human. I hunger to be as alive and as human as possible by experiencing and feeling as much as possible.

***

When I was in 8th grade, I drew a collection of pen and ink drawings, which I showed to my art teacher, Mr. Skora. He complimented the line quality. One of the drawings was of an electrical outlet with vines and feathers growing out of the sockets. Mr. Skora said he thought the drawing represented my sexuality coming forth. He explained that an outlet represented female anatomy, and said the plants represented my blossoming sensuality. At fifteen, I blushed and discounted his explanation, it was just a cool drawing to me. But now, I feel that I am that outlet with electricity and greenery springing forth out of my life. I believe this sensitivity, sensuality, sexuality, makes me feel most alive. And I hope to keep the power flowing, like the blood in my veins, despite threat of illness, like power surges.

With the improvement of my health, my demands for quality-of-life grow like the cries of a spoiled child: I want a smooth face, and bigger legs and arms. I resent the blue squiggle veins. I suppose I am trying to postpone mortality and hold onto my life and youth long enough to embrace a future.

I think this hunger for life causes me to let the yard bloom and become a mass of tangled growth in the summer rains. I crave the flavours of rich delicious foods, and wish to fill my home with bright colourful flowers. I feel appreciative that I *can* enjoy the beat of Samba music blasting from the stereo speakers, and the scent of night-blooming jasmine oozing in through the doors and windows. I feel driven to dance around my kitchen singing loudly as I stir a pot of curried lamb. I want to smell spices and incense, feel the touch of rose petals, or a man's hands massaging the bottom of my foot. I think this greed is a natural tendency for me. When I think of the HIV hiding silently inside my body, my drive for life intensifies until I am immersed in the heat and colours of a life that I adore.

matt robinson

i imagine middle age; paint with my hands

—the small brown, unlocked luggage
that's completed its work in this world.

—Albert Goldbarth, "Suitcase Song"

the small, brown unlocked luggage
of the plot (that has, for the moment,
stopped its wormy tumbling at the edge
of this backyard garden—clotted briefly,
like the urgent seething tangle of passengers
leaving a railcar at the end of the broken
concrete platform at the end of a long, dry
voyage) is intriguing. it begs questions with
its haphazard spilling and clumping. it seems,
at first glance, used up—like something

that's completed its work in this world—
like the shade of brown that results, when, as
a child, one would mix all the paints together
in an attempt at creation. and now my hands
are still, years later, filthy. soiled not with
an experimental innocence, but instead with
the dogged clawing of years. i have convinced
myself i need to plant, to nurture something,
before (for all the earth, concrete, and drying
skin) i can no longer distinguish my hands.

Michael de Beyer

Saturday Ventures, East

The way the butcher's daughter
scrapes the sweat from the meat

is an art. Noon in the market. Fresh
brushed teeth. The stink of cheeses.

Here, in the crux of the L,
I'm waiting for you. My own bag

a bag of potato blues.
And hearing your voice there,

from the squash wagons, buried deep
within the fleshy meat of the fruit.

Bibiana Tomasic

Our Three Autumned Sons

Grey air approaches as it must. It is time to undress
into the leaves, lie supine under the turning dogwood.
In rain, all five of us disintegrate into the memory
of this season when Opa died, when one of us tried to.
Regardless of how we worked to protect you, your father
and I pressed fallen leaves into your hands as a baptism,
placed the papery thin smell of death on your tongues
as communion. Unintentionally, but with trust prolific
as lemon balm, in a green and gangly faith,
we made you human.

Bill Gaston

Comedian Tire

Buddhism says there's no beginning nor end to suffering, so in that sense there's no beginning nor end to this story—which is also about how humour lives in the very heart of suffering, and pops up like a neon clown from its big black box.

The background to the story involves my brother, Ron, who a year ago at age fifty had a stroke. He survived with huge holes in his memory, dragging a foot, slurring, and utterly pissed off. Apparently strokes at his age aren't so rare. But, though he's ten years older than I am, in the ugly stew of emotions his illness brewed for me, one of the worst was a sense of my own mortality. And then my guilt at that. Watching him limp around in morbid despair, how could I possibly think about myself? But he looks like me. At the root of myself I felt my own death.

A month ago it got worse. Ron had a series of heavier strokes, was now truly demolished, dying—could die at any time from a next stroke—and was placed in extended care with elderly people who are similarly bedridden and waiting for death. Ron can no longer walk, talk, control his bowels, eat on his own. I can see he recognizes me, but my arrivals lift his spirits not one bit. Waiting for the final oblivion, he stares at game shows with the other, older residents, unable to ask someone to please turn off this pap and stick in a decent movie. Or whatever. I don't know if he could follow a movie, or if he wants one, but from his eyes I know that he hates what he's watching, the canned laughter filling the room and its dying, demented, warehoused bodies.

With Ron in Vancouver, and me on the Island, my monthly planning involves working out when next I can steal two days to ferry over and visit. Kyle's soccer tournaments, our baby daughter Lily, my wife Leslie's work schedule, not to mention my own; plus dentists, doctors, barbeques—all fight my attempts to get over and see Ron, who I don't really want to see, and who maybe doesn't want to see me either. Add to this mix my car—an '89 minivan—which lately had been stalling. My wife Leslie has demanded a tune-up for some time now, using the words "dangerous" and "Lily" in the same sentence. In my list of things to do, underlined was the note, *Fix van, visit Ron.*

I'm within walking distance of one of those red and white retail establishments with the red garage bays, and I took it there for that reason. I'd heard

general warnings about the place, but in other cities I'd gone there for basic servicing and nothing bad had come of it, aside from being dinged the expected unexpected extras. Lots of cars sat out front waiting to get in, a good sign. The van needed a tune-up is all, and anybody with dirty fingernails can do a tune-up. I asked the man behind the counter for an oil change, and tune, and to call me if they found anything big. Maybe I could catch the ferry that night, visit Ron in the morning, then stop by his apartment and load up. That was part of the reason I was avoiding this next visit: Ron would not be going home again and his apartment needed cleaning out. He would no longer be needing his clothes, furniture, CDs. My parents were pressing me. Either I come pick up his stuff or they'd "just go put it out in the street." I didn't want to go and sort through his stuff because then I would have to think about Ron. My connection to Ron.

Ron, you see, is a hard-assed guy. A racist right-winger. We've never agreed on much. We've used our age difference as an easy excuse not to talk. But to put Ron in a nutshell: when I was nine, and he was nineteen, Ron went to the States and enlisted to fight in Vietnam. (Over a thousand Canadians actually did that.) I vaguely recall him talking about "gooks," and remember thinking the whole idea pretty cool as I marched off with my crooked stick to shoot at shadows in the woods behind the house. Though he didn't see action he returned as gook-hating as ever, despite the peace movement in particular and the Age of Aquarius in general.

In the years we both lived at home, I never did get to know him well. I remember closed doors, lots of being ignored, a few bored shoves when I got too close. Years later, smirking, he bought me and my friends our first case of beer. In fairness I'll add that he was never unkind to my mother, and he had the sense to keep quiet about my father's summer in Kelowna. Ron and I communicated with severe, silent eye-contact over that one, and I believe that's as intimate as we ever got.

It's been hard to admit to myself that I'm in no hurry to see him again, my own brother. The last time I visited extended care it was excruciating to watch him being lifted out of bed for his bath. His eyes were sunken and he'd lost his muscle. They use this wheeled crane that hoists a body up in a canvas sling. An attendant on each arm. Slowly airborne, Ron began to panic, or maybe it was pain—eyes bugging, he whimpered and slobbered and both hands clawed and convulsed minutely. He looked pleadingly to me and all I could do was avoid his eyes and smile a smile so hollow it said that all was fine because now he was going to have his nice bath. Half the horror came out of questions coming at me over the hum of the crane-motor: How do I feel for this man who is my brother? What is carried in genes and what does the word "brother" mean? Here is a man I'd avoid if I weren't related to him. He is suffering in ways I can't comprehend and might be better off dead. Do I want him dead? For what reasons, exactly?

The garage place called me late that afternoon, saying they'd indeed found serious problems. As a matter of course they'd conducted their "21-point inspection" and found the van lacking rear brakes, the emergency cable was frozen, and the horn didn't work. The total cost would be $700. "The stalling," I said. "Did you find the reason for the stalling?" The brakes had been feeling okay to me, and I'd known about the emergency cable, rusted in place by New Brunswick road salt some six years ago. I guess I never used the horn.

"It's stalling?"

"I brought it in because it's stalling. When you stop at a light it idles really—"

"That's your basic tune-up," he said.

"Okay. I just want the tune-up. And an oil change please."

"I really, really, wouldn't advise you driving it off the lot with no rear brakes." He paused, during which time I closed my eyes. "I couldn't help noticing your baby-seat? It's not my business to say, but—"

"Okay. Forget the horn, forget the emergency cable. Go ahead on the rear brakes."

"Go ahead then?"

"Yes."

He said it would be ready by noon.

That night I was telling Leslie how odd it was, Ron's present situation. At his age so feeble, and him a man who'd always valued, and assumed, his physical strength. He'd worked mainly in heavy equipment (pretending he was driving a tank, I joked to myself), for the last decade building local wharves with a pile-driving outfit. He often had his shirt off, and grease on his considerable chest muscles—he was one of those guys you see yelling to other guys over the roar of machinery, their shoulders glowing bigger than their hardhats.

But what I was describing to Leslie was that virtually all the attendants in extended care were Asian. Here was a man who'd never seen fit to distinguish between Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, whomever. They were small, sly, and in his country for no good reason. I'd not heard the word for awhile but: gooks. And now, bedridden, unable to move or speak, Ron was being looked after by gooks.

I described the scene to Leslie. Ron, already pissed off at his traitorous body, and here's this endless stream of Asian care-givers—most were Philippino actually—dressing him, sponging his private parts, feeding him his baby food, and keeping up a gay, accented banter: *Okay, Ron! How you do today! Boy, you big! You getting bigger I think!* Talking to him like a child as they stripped or sponged or fed. I found I couldn't begrudge them their lack of sincerity. A job like that, it was amazing that they managed to feign cheer.

But the look in Ron's eyes. As if he were assessing a persistent bad dream. I tried to describe it to Leslie. She used the word "karma." I pictured one of Dante's poetic hells.

Ron's situation—his being attended to by cheerful, fast-moving Asians—is something I would have liked to talk to him about. I tell myself there's lots about Ron I would like to learn, but I wonder if that's because now it's impossible.

At noon the next day my van sat out on the lot, ready. I entered and announced myself. A long and detailed receipt chugged its way out of the computer. A fellow with "Kyle" on his chest, but no grease under his nails, cheerfully told me I owed $950.

Leslie says I don't stand up for myself. It's true: while not exactly a wimp, I do shy away from confrontation. Without going into too much detail here—it's the kind of garage-hell everyone has experienced, after all—I'll just say I did myself proud. First I calmly stated the obvious logic, that since I'd told them to do *less* work than the $700 quote would have paid for, the amount I now owed could not possibly be *more*. Kyle cheerfully said he'd add up the figures again, and did.

"Nope, it's $950," Kyle chirped. He showed me, jabbing his finger on the receipt, how they'd replaced my emergency cable, did my brakes, the horn, lots of stuff. At the head of the list was the 21-point inspection, for which I was being charged a cute $21.

"I told the guy on the phone to change the oil, tune it, and the rear brakes. That's it. Not the other stuff."

"Well, no sir, you were talking to me, and you said, 'Go ahead and do it.'"

"No I—Well, yeah, go ahead on *the rear brakes*." I jabbed my own finger onto the sheet. "I'm *not* paying for that inspection because I didn't even *want* an inspection, I wanted a *tune up*." By now the trap door in my gut was hanging wide open, and I was well into that icy sweat of futility.

"Not what I heard, sir. You said—"

"Even if you *did* all that stuff, it still can't be more than $700. That was the quote. It can't *possibly* be—"

"It was an estimate, sir."

And so on. In the end I loudly threatened (a first for me) to tell my friends about this; I had a lot of friends (a lie) and they all drove shitty cars like mine and used places like this frequently but would no longer. I almost said that I was a writer and that *I'll write about this place*. I did say I would pay no more than the quoted $700, I would drive my van away (though my key hung from a hook on his wall behind the counter), and they could call the police if they wished. In fact, please do, because *I want to report a crime*.

Two other customers watched me, perhaps entertained. Kyle wore a

practiced poker face, not a tiny muscle of which had yet twitched. We stared at each other. I sensed victory. He said he'd "go through the numbers and see what he could do." After five minutes of crossing out and typing, and a new bill chugging out, he told me he'd been able to get it down to $750. I stomped out clutching my key, feeling utterly defeated in victory, having paid $750 for a tune-up. Well, I had new rear brakes and an emergency cable I might one day use. Maybe I'd honk at someone.

My van was surrounded by other cars, shining in the sun. The garage bays were empty. It struck me that all these parking-lot cars were decoys, brightly-painted mallards floating on this cement suburban pond, luring in foolish ducks like myself. Driving the two blocks home, I felt I was riding in a fragile creature, a victim of unwanted transplants.

That evening I phoned my parents, who worried when I hadn't shown up. Again they berated me for "letting all Ron's things go to waste," though there were still two days before the end of the month when his apartment had to be cleared out. It struck me how the elderly hated chaos, what they called "leaving things to the last minute." Maybe the notion of "the last minute" takes on fatal implications. I didn't explain my hesitations about weeding through Ron's private stuff. Since his second wife left he'd been living alone for almost ten years. I didn't tell them that poking through my brother's things would feel like climbing right up into his angry armpit. I said I'd leave tomorrow morning and be there in the afternoon.

"Good," said my mother. "Ron really wants to see you."

The next morning when I started the van, stepped on the brake and put it in reverse to commence backing out, the brake pedal went *smish*, right to the floor. I *smished* it several times in disbelief. I turned it off, got out, saw the thin stream of brake fluid running the length of the driveway to the reddish pool on the street.

This was good, this was comedy—$750 to have my brakes *broken*. What if I'd driven right out into traffic? I stomped inside, swearing and laughing, Leslie shaking her head saying, "You're kidding!" and little Lily starting to cry. I phoned the garage. It wasn't Kyle, but in about twenty words I got my message across and the fellow, blandly apologetic, said a tow truck would be there in minutes. Lily was loud now and I could hardly hear myself demanding that the car be driven back to my house when it was fixed, and I wanted this done by noon. I was all-business, macho, a new me. I'd never considered Ron a role model, and didn't now. Him looming up behind me, a smirking spectre, likely had to do with how much he'd occupied my thoughts lately. What would Ron have done? Well, he wouldn't have taken it *there* in the first place. And he wouldn't have given them a fucking *dime*. In fact, he would've just tuned 'er up himself.

Two that afternoon I called the garage asking where my car was. (I had to restrain Leslie from taking the phone and yelling at someone. She could do that sort of thing with ease.) The man checked and said it was just coming into the bay. I said I was promised noon, I said I needed it now. I almost, *almost*, said something about needing to catch a ferry to go see a dying brother.

The van was delivered at five. The driver, a kid, and oblivious to the history of injustice, was no one to yell at. He seemed to expect thanks for this special service so I thanked him. He said, "Your right drum coupling wasn't on right, so out she came." He looked at me as if I should have known that.

I phoned my parents, tried to explain but ended up apologizing. Tomorrow, I promised. My mother got in that Ron had really wanted to see me today.

In the morning I repacked my day-bag, and was throwing some rope and bungees into the van (I figured to bring back a chair or dresser of Ron's, if only for show) when Leslie hurried out with Lily in her arms. Lily had thrown up, had a high fever, and Leslie had arranged a quick visit with the doctor. She'd be back in an hour. I nodded and kissed Lily's hot little head. Leslie smiled sadly for me, knowing intimately my dealings with Ron and my parents, having heard about it so much. She looked big-eyed and feverish herself.

I went back inside to make myself a proper breakfast. The phone rang as I was flipping eggs. It was my mother. Her voice sounded oddly firm, full of strength.

"He's had another. We're at his hospital. They think this is it this time. It's affecting the swallowing and the breathing."

"Is it—I should—"

"You should be here right now."

I said I was on my way, and I hung up. Staring at the clock, my heart beating, I calculated doctors' waiting rooms, traffic, ferries. Behind these calculations, something else was weighing my desire: did I want to see Ron die, or did I want to miss it?

But the comedy that had begun a couple of days ago was accelerating. Timed like *deus ex machina,* the phone rang again. It was Leslie and she was hysterical.

"*We almost—The car—almost killed us—These bastards—*"

"What's wrong? How's Lily? What happened?"

"*It was hardly running, and I was passing, right by, so I turned in—It stalled—A truck had to screech to—We almost—*"

I got from her that they were at the garage. I ran the five blocks. The van was parked haphazardly, at a diagonal, blocking two garage bays, the

driver's door still open. I was huffing and dizzy as I pushed in the door. What I walked into instantly cleared my head.

My wife held Lily, who was red and mouth-breathing. Confronting the young man behind the counter, my wife was red too and breathing heavily herself. She had been yelling. The young man, a comedian wearing the overalls of someone named "Lisa," was smiling defensively.

"No, no. I worked on that van," he told her. "So you're saying you want a tune-up?"

Spontaneously, my wife vomited. Angrily, her eyes on him. I don't know if her joining the comedy was deliberate. It's the kind of thing Leslie could probably do if she wished. But there in the aftermath stood "Lisa," and Leslie, and Lily, and me.

I think we'd all stopped breathing. And in that second before anyone could move, the world was clarified for me. Clarity, no meaning to it at all.

Everyone knows a place that, for a moment, rings vastly crystal. Mine was a garage waiting-room. I could feel the slight squeeze of shoes on my feet, I took in the candy machine with its three glass offerings of peanuts, cashews, and jelly beans. I understood that my van's engine had been built in Asia. I could feel my complex hurry to see my dying brother, who I would never know if he was worth knowing, or if he had a sense of humour for moments like these. Here was feverish little Lily, my feelings for whom were absolute and unthinking. Here was my wife, who likely had the flu herself but was possibly enjoying herself in ways I couldn't know. Here was this guy "Lisa," who lacked training in what had just happened, and what was happening now.

Mostly I knew that soon enough we would be in Ron's shoes. The comedy of bodies and cars breaking down, the junk that lives do become. Which of course is only absurd. Easy to laugh, but hard to smile. In this garage, with "Lisa" in control, we can think or feel or do whatever we want, and nothing will change. This red garage.

Contributors

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Rick Maddocks was born in Wales and grew up in Ontario's tobacco belt. He now lives in Vancouver, where he writes and performs music. *Sputnik Diner,* his collection of linked stories, will be published by Knopf Canada in Spring 2001. His story "Lessons from the Sputnik Diner" first appeared in PRISM (33:3).

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This is grief and something else—
a longing that exists outside the body
it is the way birds want to be the wind
they pass through, the way we hold
what we cannot contain.

— Aislinn Hunter, Page 44

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