

# PRISM international

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# PRISM international

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*Robyn Sarah*

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## AN INFREQUENT FLYER LOOKS DOWN

The backwater of an airport lounge.  
Across from us, overweight Americans  
are eating ugly sandwiches.

Later I watch the ground recede.  
Soon we are so high you can't  
see a car unless it twinkles.

All my certainties, if I ever had any,  
are out the window now.  
Did I ever have any, or did I just  
think I did? *All perception is gamble.*

Not a bead of thought today,  
nothing but doubt.

What is worth wanting?  
Consider the subversive hopefulness  
of people who are starting over,  
people who have lost everything.  
The bankrupt optimism of an immigrant.

Give me a talisman, a charm to keep.  
Give me a pebble for my pocket,  
something to palm in secret.

Twinkle, twinkle, little car  
way down there  
running on your invisible  
ribbon of road,  
what are you running on?

## BREACH

Always a surge of dark exultation  
at the change of a season, a sparking  
of memories. Today's:  
a dawn walk in the city, sunless dawn  
near the end of August, when you stepped  
through a breach in a construction fence  
to cut across an open lot—a sort of ruin,  
rubble-strewn, between standing walls,  
down near Chinatown. Smell of the river.  
Not a soul in sight. No hint of a break  
in the cloud cover—lowering sky,  
the breeze damp, even clammy.  
You were nineteen.  
You weren't alone that day, but you were  
alone. The hand you held  
was *noncommittal*, loose in yours,  
but it held. Nor did you drop it.  
At the same time you hugged to yourself  
some kind of inner blissful hard pure  
aloneness that felt like treasure. A sense  
of having embarked on open waters  
in the frailest of crafts.  
It could at any moment pour rain  
on your bare arms—  
You mistook this for happiness.

## LACUNAE

Why am I sad tonight?  
As if in answer, the rain:  
a hushed rush of summer rain.

What is the wall that divides us  
from our shining?  
Of what is it made?

Ghosts of old stairways cling  
to the brick sides of buildings  
flanked by vacant lots.

I want to play back the sound  
of my own pen moving across the page,  
dotting *i*'s and crossing *r*'s.

## A GUIDE TO MODERN VERSE

Strange heads engender  
strange words, sometimes  
commit them to paper,  
where in black ink they gel,  
a baffle and perfume.  
No need to be afraid  
*of darkling words*  
whose sense eludes.  
Live with them a while,  
let them grow familiar  
till you know their savour,  
till savouring them becomes  
their meaning, or becomes  
as much as you will ever  
need for them to mean.  
It's about closing the distance  
that made them strange.  
The way a name  
grows onto a baby,  
from sheer insistence.

## SWEPT AWAY

How innocent are lovers  
in the middle of their lives,  
in the years when their lives thicken  
and love, reckless love,  
overtakes them like a summer storm.  
What can they do but  
bow to it, they are like trees  
in the wind, lashed and tossed,  
they are foolish, weeping in restaurants,  
making and breaking pacts,  
sending each other poems,  
quotations, frantic messages,  
pronouncements, promises—it is all  
so impossible!—weeping in phone booths,  
weeping in parked cars, forever scribbling  
a note with a borrowed pencil  
to slip under a closed door  
—like these lines she scribbles now  
to slip under the shut door  
of the past, the door they shut fast  
on the messy years they've chosen  
not to revisit. Just a note to let them know,  
in case they're in there, somewhere, still,  
she doesn't hold it against them any more.

## CORRECTIVES

The surgery is only five minutes per eye, but it's a long five minutes. At first you smell a burning, which, since you are fully conscious and unmedicated, you are forced to acknowledge is the flesh of your eyeball being burned away. More specifically, they have—with some tiny saw-like instrument—cut a flap, and now they are burning away corneal tissue.

"You okay? Everything okay?"

When people ask me this question during medical procedures, it's usually because of my overly expressive face. The face should be a screen to cover all the mess that lurks and grows and surges underneath, and mine is not. But at the moment of this surgery I can't see my face. These people and their concern are my only mirrors—them, and the slightly reflective black of one of the machines above me, where I can vaguely make out the bluish-green terror of my wide-open eye.

My eyeball has never been this naked, taped open by the lashes while the other lies taped shut. During the surgery, after the buzz of the tiny saw and the smell of my own tissue burning, there is a long moment of total blindness, in which my eye is open and I can see nothing at all. The moment of black nothingness churns up an urgency in me, though I have been assured and reassured that almost nothing ever goes wrong. What if I move and become permanently blind? Surely I cannot be trusted with this moment. They should not have trusted me. How do they know I won't flinch?

"Just stare straight ahead. Relax your eye and look right at—"

Anesthetic fluids have been dropped into each eye, but I have not been given anything for the panic. No Valium or laughing gas. There is only the pillow tucked under my knees and two LASIK-brand stress balls, one for each hand. As I am generally wary of medications, I should be glad for this approach.

Near the end of the lasing of my second eye, I am leaking hysteric tears, which leads me to a sudden and frightening realization. And, because there is also too thin a screen between my brain and my mouth, I blurt: "I forgot to ask! Am I allowed to cry? Am I allowed to sweat?"

They smile at me, perhaps in amusement. Just as I say it, already crying, I unclench my hands and realize that my palms are dripping with sweat.

Surgery interests me in part because I'm captivated by these moments of mental crisis brought on by a crisis to the body—how the mind and body interact in these moments, the panic rising in the instant of rationally chosen assault on a crucial sense organ, panic disguised but evident in the laboured breathing, gritted teeth, furrowed brow, and clenched, sweaty palms. It isn't pain you feel, but fear of the damage that pain usually indicates: fear that is as bottomless as

the dark you are looking into when you are temporarily blinded, looking into nothing.

Isn't the eye the most defenseless of all the sense organs, having no teeth or cartilage to protect it, only this thin cover we prosaically call *lid*?

The name for this surgery blazes in all caps: LASIK. According to a 2009 study, of the nearly 190 million people who need glasses or contacts, only 0.37 percent choose this surgery to correct their vision. Cost—somewhere between one and four thousand dollars—can be prohibitive, many kinds of vision problems LASIK cannot correct, and for those many who cringe at the thought of touching their eyeballs, it is out of the question.

But the procedure takes less time than a cavity filling. In mere moments you find yourself outside the dimly-lit operating room again, given four different kinds of drops and detailed instructions on how and when to take them—instructions that you yourself are not allowed to read with your weakened, traumatized eyeballs, even behind the shield of dark grandfather sunglasses.

I was trembling, and a little giddy, and I had been planning to take the bus home. I called my husband. "I think I need you to pick me up," I said. "I feel a little strange."

A woman in a lab coat came running over to me. Without realizing it, I had started rubbing my eyes. "Don't touch them! Don't read—keep your eyes closed as much as possible! Don't look at anything for twenty-four hours, if you can help it."

This was my collusion with the private health care system. I chose not to know any of the recovery facts beforehand. The only way to go through with such a surgery is to put the details out of one's mind until it is too late to reconsider. I refused to listen and I refused to see; this was how I had made every other one of my life-changing decisions.

Close eyes, jump: how else could a person choose to do such an unknown and frightening thing except in a spirit of blind faith?

One of the fathers of modern surgery, Ambroise Paré, writes that "there are five duties in surgery: to remove what is superfluous, to restore what has been dislocated, to separate what has grown together, to reunite what has been divided, and to redress the defects of nature." A natural body is riddled with superfluities, warped by defects, and unbalanced by asymmetry. The body is always overproducing, dislocating, growing together, dividing. To evolve is to mutate. Surgery depends upon an idea of perfection relative to which the body is a naughty, deviant sister.

This was my sixth surgery. I have also been anesthetized in order to remove impacted wisdom teeth and to correct my crooked jaw; I have delivered a baby on an operating table, had my gall bladder pulled out through my belly button, and had my uterus scraped during the D&C required by the hemorrhaging caused by yet another birth. Each surgery retains a different halo of emotion in my memory: for the oral surgeries I was rewarded with morphine highs and

visions that had me writing poems about the spiritual dimension of anesthesia. The other three surgeries were much more upsetting, making me physically ill and frightened. LASIK, unlike any of these, required so little preparation and recovery that I could hardly call it a surgery at all, except for the fact that, as though miraculously, I had been farsighted and now I can see.

The idea of bodily perfectibility is a tantalizing lie, and so is perfect vision. We are mistakenly given to trust our eyes above all other senses. One must see to believe, and one must see for oneself. It is as though the soul itself looks straight and clear through these little windows. By contrast, the largest sense organ, our skin, because it is the barrier between what is inside and what is out, is much more like a closed door. The sense data absorbed through the epidermis seems more animal, related to intuition and emotion. We feel instinctual chills of weirdness on the skin, and touch is the realm of deepest eroticism. Our eyes, for all their weeping, are scientists.

The eyes are so complex and so greatly prized that they are often cited as evidence for intelligent design. How did eyes—as perfectly designed as pocketwatches that cannot have arrived fully formed, but must have a watchmaker—evolve on their own?

“In the ancient seas,” Diane Ackerman writes in *A Natural History of the Senses*, “life forms developed faint patches of skin that were sensitive to light.” Our eyes are defined by sensitivity, but all they do is gather light. It’s our minds that see, that arrange and draw conclusions. This is why our vision is faulty, even when corrected. Blurred vision is the least of our problems. Those of us who can see are always going blind in one way or another. Saccadic masking is a process by which a part of our brains shuts off the processing of images when those images are coming too quickly, blinding us in tiny increments. We see in our dreams, memories, and imaginations. These minds that see are the same ones plagued by ideologies and errors, subject to illusions and hallucinations.

My fears about LASIK were not related to the pain of the procedure, or the natural squeamishness that comes along with the idea of a slice to the eye. My fears were less rational.

1. Would I miss my glasses, which had been my close companions these last twenty years? In each of my life events, they had sat on my face, rendering it nerdier or more serious or more bookish or less available or more skeptical. All of these things I believed about my face with glasses.
2. Would I find everything too round? This worry was bizarre to all those to whom I mentioned it. “I’ve never heard that before,” said both sets of optometrists and technicians. But on those rare occasions when I wore contacts, I found things slightly more curved than I did when I wore glasses. I worried that the world I had been seeing with glasses was flatter and more flattering than it would be with only my naked eyes to guide me.
3. Would I like my face? This worry was related to the other two, in that I always found my face too round when I wore contacts, and

that I wondered whether the angles of my glasses and their frames counterbalanced the effects of my strong jaw. I had never truly seen my face, except through corrective lenses or in a blur.

In addition to these, various other questions came into my head that I never raised with my doctors, such as *What do things really look like?* and *What colour will my eyes turn out to be?*

Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty tells us, refused glasses for his myopia. He was attached to his peculiar way of seeing, and he was afraid that his vision—his genius—might only be an accident of physiology. I too had grown attached to my accidents and flaws, and had learned to see beauty despite them.

So why go through with the surgery? It was unnecessary and expensive. I just closed my eyes, jumped. I had often considered myself too smart or noble to get cosmetic surgery—not wanting to buy into the beauty myth, or at least not wanting to do so conspicuously. Yet the truth was that I hid behind my glasses, much like an acquaintance who said, after I got the surgery, that she wouldn't do it because she was sure her face wasn't pretty enough. We really thought we were hiding behind these clear bits of glass, but we weren't hiding from other people—we were hiding from ourselves. Or I was: part of me really didn't want to see.

Except most of me did. Give me the truth, give me the facts: I needed to know. I needed to see for myself.

Now when I consider the surgery I realize it was about these two opposing things: seeing and being seen. How I saw and how I looked.

Right around the time I started to wear glasses, at ten years old, I became monstrous. In my school picture taken the year before glasses, I looked adorable. Average height, average weight, button nose, rosy cheeks, freckles. I had wavy hair that my mother, not given at all to flattery, had called “spun gold.” But by ten, my feet had grown too large, my hair more frizz than wave, my clothes suddenly dorky. In the school photo I wore a baggy jumpsuit sewn by my mother that looked like something a clown would wear, and on my chubbier face I wore two round spectacles in brown tortoiseshell plastic. The rounds of them came up so high that they doubled as brows raised in surprise. My own brows were getting dark and weird: my father's eyebrows, growing wavy in many different directions. My jaw, too, was amiss, and just as my corneas had begun to overshoot their marks, my smile had grown into a crooked underbite. The inelegant transition from childhood to adolescence was turning me into something bloated and overgrown, like a jungle. I was growing exactly like a weed.

I had spent my childhood steeping in Scripture, and the story of Eden was central to my worldview. Humans were created perfect and unashamed of their beautiful bodies, until they were tempted to disobey, and then fell. We called this “total depravity”: each person after these first sinners is born with a seed of disobedience planted in them. Thus, in my way, I came to see my own life's story

as one that reflected the Biblical one. Born beautiful and innocent—so innocent that I didn't even know how beautiful I'd been—I had fallen and was ashamed. Awareness of myself corresponded with the corruption of my body. Everywhere was evil, everywhere the ugliness of sin. I had spent my life frolicking naked in a garden, and now that was all over, and I would never return to childhood, to its innocence or its beauty.

Still, I didn't really know myself as ugly. While privately I liked my face, I had concluded that others did not. Partly this was because of the comments of my looks-obsessed grandparents, who thought women should be small-boned and petite and quiet, and so found me unacceptable. It was also because of my parents, who never told me I was beautiful. When I asked my mother once if I was pretty, she said, "Well, I suppose you are striking," which I took as a crushing *no*. Meanwhile, left alone in my room, I would stare at my face in the mirror over my dresser, looking so long directly at my own blue eyes that eventually one would seem to disappear, magically covered over by the flesh that surrounded it. I would not close my eyes, so my brain took the matter into its own hands, painting it with a *trompe l'oeil* lid.

I knew this was an optical illusion, but so was everything. I knew that I looked pretty in mirrors but ugly in pictures. I believed that I was beautiful under the frizz and frames but that my own parents and grandparents couldn't see past surfaces and into the beauty of my soul. The difference between what I saw and what others saw came to pave the surface of the road to adolescence. Surface, perception, depth: these are the themes of teenage angst. Also, incidentally, of vision.

I turned for comfort to the arts, since the painter's eye and the poet could find beauty in strange places. By age fourteen, I got prettier by more conventional standards. I experienced some of those things girls are supposed to complain about—being flirted with or harassed, being whistled at or followed, being called "hot"—but I took all these things as flattery. In my ugliness I had come to value beauty too much, and to undervalue myself. The double bind that is clear to me now was unclear then: that I was supposed to value higher things than looks but I was supposed to be beautiful while doing it. I was supposed to be beautiful but I was not allowed to know it if I was. It even happens to baby girls. Upon seeing my first child sleeping in her stroller, a neighbour remarked that she was "so gorgeous."

"She is, isn't she," I said.

My neighbour chided me: "If you do say so yourself!"

Having glasses—being the Velma instead of the Daphne—was part of how my looks were defined. Just before starting high school, I met a boy at the pool who asked a mutual friend for my number. I had been swimming without my glasses. When he saw me on dry land, spectacles sliding down my freckled nose, he recoiled. I didn't see him again. He told our middleman that I looked like a nerd.

I have often been strong at the wrong moments. This was a weak one, for I decided never to wear the glasses again, a decision made only for appearances, so that I went around squinting for most of Grade 9. Instead of friends I saw

shapes, and, though I was a talented basketball player, I didn't make the cut because I couldn't see the ball.

Choosing looks over seeing was a stupid move. We aren't supposed to be that vain and shallow, to suffer into ever tighter corsets for the sake of men, or to wax away all proof of our being women rather than Barbie dolls. But we also are supposed to. We are supposed to be vain enough to make ourselves pretty.

Of course, it's all in the eye of the fickle beholder. If it's our minds that are seeing and not, in some clear and unfettered way, our eyes, could we perhaps work to see things differently? Envy or hate can make us see ugliness in beautiful things. Love, endorphins, and beer can behave like spells, casting people in gorgeous light.

In my final year of high school I experienced something earth-shattering and eye-opening: I came out of a months-long depression only to fly too high and become manic. While I have never been psychotic again, it changed the way I saw forever. One of the insights it gave me was that everyone was so beautiful. I said to my mother, "Is this how the world is?" It seemed that I had been seeing incorrectly, and that now I fully knew. One popular girl in particular had always struck me as pretty average, but when I swung to mania after months of depression I suddenly saw how lovely she was. The skewing shard of depression—its envy and bitterness—had been plucked from my eye. Seeing things cast in an unflattering light—seeing their ugliness—is not to see them as they are.

Psychosis is, by definition, a kind of getting it wrong. But in my madness I saw something I couldn't have otherwise seen, something that was true. "Look how beautiful you are," I said to people. Of course it frightened them to be awash in my euphoria. "I see the good in everyone," I said. *Euphoria*, which comes from the Greek for "well-bearing," is technically an affect that we use to describe a feeling. When one's bearing is well—when one's affect is delighted—one extends that bearing to others. One projects it. We are bearers and anointers of beauty.

Now, as a mother of three daughters, I find myself with the unwanted responsibility of stewarding my children's feelings about their own bodies. Should we forbid Barbies? Force them to wear long skirts? Parents aren't supposed to tell their girls how pretty they are anymore, lest it send them the message that, for girls, the important thing is their relative value as sexual objects. We don't want them to internalize the gaze, to see themselves as seen. But sexual objectification is not the only thing conceptually married to beauty. Beauty is also connected to whatever is good and true. Simone Weil writes that "we want to get behind beauty, but it is only surface. It is like a mirror that sends us back to our own desire for goodness." This is how it has felt to me to gaze on my children's faces: to be sent back to my own desire for goodness. When my firstborn would lie sleeping in my arms I studied and studied her face there, wanting to burn into my brain its beauty and perfection, and the way I was awash in my incredible love for her. No photograph I have captures what I saw in her.

I read recently that studies prove ugly babies are less likely to receive the affection of their mothers. But perhaps this is a chicken vs. egg problem—is there such a thing as an ugly baby? Every mother I've ever met believes her child to be the fairest one of all; we are all magic mirrors for our children.

I tell my daughters that they are beautiful all the time. "Look at how gorgeous you are!" I say. "Look at that face!" I don't want them to think beauty is the only thing I value in them, but one of the benefits of the too-thin screen between my mind and my matter is that I spontaneously exclaim things. I'm glad they know that the woman closest to them, who sees them—if not clearly then at least with more depth and experience than does anybody else—sees all of that and finds it good. I wanted my own mother to tell me she liked how I looked. Not so she could deem me more marriageable, but so I could feel loved. To be seen as beautiful—even if that is to be seen through rose-coloured glasses—is to feel that even in one's darkest and ugliest places there might be something of value.

I played the story of surgical panic up for laughs afterwards, or attempted to, until I started to tell the story to a friend who has a real eye problem. He'd gone through multiple eye surgeries more serious than my own. I had been a little bit farsighted and forced to wear fashionable glasses, poor me. As I began to tell the story, I realized that this interaction was yet more proof of how socially tone-deaf I could be. He said, "So why did you get the surgery?"

They had asked me the same question at the clinic, cheerily pushing a pre-operative checklist toward me. My actual answers were not included, so I checked the box that said, "for the convenience of life without glasses or contacts." The privilege of getting this surgery was smacking me in my uneasy face: *there* was the clear plastic tower where you deposited your old glasses to be given to those in need in other countries; *there* was the leather couch and warm décor, the free cookies and coffee; *there* was the expense of the procedure, not commensurate with the cost of glasses and contacts, even over ten years; and *here* was the bald fact of my vanity. I was getting this surgery because I was tired of being a four-eyed nerd. I wanted to wear sunglasses. I wanted to see my own face.

Before I signed on the dotted line, a woman in a lab coat said, "Many of our clients dress so differently afterwards you'd hardly recognize them."

Three years earlier, I had almost gotten the surgery at a different LASIK office. We'd been less financially secure and I'd been overwhelmed by parenting most days, and I'd decided against it. The relief of sitting in a leather chair by myself with free coffee and cookies had been enough. At that point, I had seen clearly through the sales pitch. Then, I would have disputed the silly claim that clients dress differently after the surgery. Glasses were just glasses. Those of us wearing them weren't hunched-over sad sacks waiting for a magic wand to change everything. But now I smiled, my skepticism pushed down while I signed on to everything.

In fact, nothing much has changed in my life with 20/20 vision. I'm still a mess in a variety of ways. The initial thrill of the correction returned me to my ten-year-old self. When I put on my first pair of glasses, I couldn't get enough

of staring at things, comparing the world through lenses with the world made blurry, exclaiming—as I did after the surgery—that I could see the outline of every single leaf on the tree. But that initial thrill subsided and now there is life with its regular ups and downs. Just as lottery winners find they are equally as happy or unhappy as they had always been, I am the same person. I don't miss the glasses, I like my face just fine, and now I can see in the shower. But as for my brokenness and my many flaws: my perfect vision has done nothing to correct them.

## FLYING

At the Alexandra Palace in London,  
a superannuated pile with acres of parking-spaces,  
hence ideal for bazaars on public holidays,  
I once turned in and entered the mouldering place  
to pause at a stall run by a cheerful woman with  
stacked-up tablesful of baubles of various sorts,  
among them a ring which offered itself to me  
compellingly, composed as it was of a silver band  
with a narrow glassed-over space within which  
was a once-fluttery pale-blue butterfly wing. The butterfly  
was or had been real, I was told its name and *herkunft*  
and forgot these instantly. But I loved the unexpected truth  
of the pale-blue wing, that it had flown, and bought the ring  
for my then twelve-year-old daughter, who in the first year  
of her occasional wearing of that ring broke it and never  
mourned it. But I *did*. Mourn it. Actually what I mourned  
was the possible lessening, prospective loss, of the longtime  
reliance we had both surely had on each other, as shown  
in numberless transient and unspoken ways—  
ways that I valued and which, importantly, had never blurred  
the sightings I'd occasionally get of indefinite bigger things  
awaiting her. Those cloudy forms placated me, a little,  
for the speeding years. It needs to be added that  
she had once warned me about all this. On an evening  
when we'd just finished one of our bedtime readings-aloud  
of favourite stories, she had called out to me, quietly,  
as I began my descent downstairs, "Some day I will  
fly away. Like Peter. Like Peter," and I had allowed the call  
to enter me in a way she had surely not intended,  
which had been no particular way at all, really.  
It was a child's voice en route to dreaming  
and the call was nobody's fault,  
not hers and not mine either, at the most  
it may have been a kind of intimation from  
the flown-free pale-blue wing.

*Alice Major*

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## THE AFTERNOON BEFORE THE CLOCKS TURN BACK

Tonight we have an hour of the year  
to live again. What hour will it be?

First snow sifting through the open gauze of air.  
The street's softened prospect of what will be.

Weather forecasts differ in their prophesies.  
How much snow tonight? How deep will it be?

In the grey light fading, colours pull in  
around themselves, to concentrate on what will be.

Rowan berry, rose hip—their crimsons cluster  
and pool on branches. They will be

soft lamps through winter. In these contracting days,  
we need to know where lights will be.

What hour of the year's round clock  
would I choose to live again tonight? It will be

this quiet one, when I do not know  
what yet will be.

*Stephen Brockwell*

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## REFLECTIONS ON A PERCEIVED MOMENT OF SOLITUDE

Woke after an all-nighter.  
Who hasn't? Night ends  
when we lose consciousness  
of it: at 2, 3, or 4  
someone is going under  
as another opens an eyelid  
to deliver newspapers,  
packages, patients. So—  
woke. Silent street. No dogs.  
No tree breeze. Squirrels asleep.  
Diffuse sunlight. Enough  
to see the boundary between  
the sidewalk and the grass,  
to cast a shadow from an oak.  
Our cats sleep. Our dog sleeps.  
No kids this weekend.  
The impression of my wife's body  
on the mattress. No coffee. No bacon.  
No queue of unread social media  
notifications. Not one emoticon.  
That leaf has different shades of green  
on the top, where light reflects,  
and underneath, where the oak  
exchanges air. *Yearning.*  
The world's exhausted.  
I mean the word—the word  
*yearn* is zonked. So many years  
of it, widely dispersed. Never  
have I been so happy to receive  
a smart-phone's Mozart ring tone  
ping—an alert bearing  
a tweet with tragic news.

## NAKED IN A DIRTY LAKE

**Y**ou're sitting at the bottom of a red tunnel slide, waiting for it to kick in. Your sneakers are pressed up against the plastic siding and you can feel each cough like a bass line deep in your body.

Through the mouth of the slide you look out at Ezra and Grace, who are balanced on either end of a see-saw. Grace looks competent and stable, while Ezra wavers dramatically. His pants are slightly too short, exposing a centimetre or two of pale white ankle. This makes him appear almost obscenely vulnerable. Ezra has a disease where he can't grow any hair on his body. Grace told you the name but you forget. It means he's bald as a newborn, no eyebrows either. You found this creepy at first, but now you're used to it. He's wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and a stained T-shirt that says "stressed, depressed but well-dressed."

Grace has taken out her phone to text, still balanced, zen as fuck, on her end of the see-saw. You laugh, but are getting impatient now for the acid to take root. It's the summer solstice and the last of the lavender light is hovering over everything, as though it's afraid to wash away completely. Ezra told you earlier that twilight on Earth is like broad daylight on Saturn. You wonder how anyone could possibly know something like that.

You can feel the remnants of the sticky blotter on your tongue. The humidity makes your heavy body feel even heavier. You're a big guy, and because of the meds you've put on an extra thirty pounds. Even though you're doing laps at the university pool every day and hot fuckin' yoga a couple times a week, your body still carries the extra weight awkwardly, like a backpack you're always putting down places and forgetting how heavy it is when it comes time to pick it back up.

You call out to Grace and Ezra that you don't feel anything and Grace rolls her eyes.

Just chill for two seconds, Lewis, she says.

A month or two ago, Grace wouldn't have spoken to you like this. You made people nervous. They were scared to do something that might send you catapulting away from reality again. But right now, at the end of the longest day of the year, you close your eyes and inhale the smell of cut grass and baked earth and ozone and you feel okay. Rosaline, your therapist, says you can cut sessions down to just once a week for the summer. And you're off the lithium now, thank fuck. It made you feel like there was a miniature iceberg sitting on the base of your neck, pressing slowly and coldly into your brain stem, flattening it out. Ros doesn't know about the acid though. She wouldn't like that. Grace wasn't fond of the idea herself, but you convinced her. You've been really good so far. Angelic, even. Tonight is a treat. A present to yourself on this midsummer's eve. As the last of the light falls away the night begins to cool on your lips and you feel a shiver of excitement running down your spine for the first time in a long time. You look

over at Ezra and you wonder what it would be like to see him naked. No pubic hair. You shake the thought from your shoulders.

You met Grace in frosh week, when the energy was rolling off your body like steam. There was no better time to start showing symptoms of mania, really. You worked the crowd like a pro. You charmed and seduced. Out of nowhere, you suddenly mastered this magic trick where you'd stick a cigarette into the soft patch of skin between your eye and nose and then pull it out of your mouth, light it and start smoking. You banged your Art History TA after only two classes without even really trying. And no one, you'd tell Ros later, *no one can fuck like a manic eighteen-year-old*. Your stamina was unreal. You slept with, if you had to eyeball it, a dozen women in those first weeks of autumn, the air coming in crisp through dorm room windows propped open with stacks of Penguin Classics.

You met Grace on a Friday. Some kind of themed dance night at the student bar. Grace came outside and sat down beside you and you offered her a smoke and she said, Oh, no thank you, very politely. Despite it being hot as hell inside that tiny pub she didn't have a single bead of sweat on her face. You mentioned this.

Oh yeah, she said. I don't sweat. It's actually kind of a problem. Instead I internalize all the heat and my face gets beet red. My body's like a little furnace. That's why I came out here.

She moved a strand of hair behind her ear and you noticed her chipped front tooth. Something about her sitting there made you feel calm and exhausted. You thought about how you hadn't slept more than a few hours since last Tuesday. You stayed up all night reading, writing, talking, drinking, smoking, fucking. An endless loop. She asked for your name and when you told her she introduced herself coolly, extending her hand.

You felt relieved that she didn't seem to know you. From then on, she was your breakfast companion in the cafeteria. She'd march up to *your door* at 8:30 in the morning and make sure you ate at least a hard-boiled egg and a grapefruit. She used to carry around this thing of cayenne pepper and sprinkle it on everything. Even fruit.

You swing your body out of the slide and by the time you've reached Ezra and Grace the world has split open at its seams and revealed to you its gleaming shock of innards. You can tell by Ezra and Grace's eyes and the way they stretch their fingers out that they feel it too. Ezra kisses Grace wet on the lips and you feel a pang of something but the pang is quickly overshadowed by laughter. Ezra knows about a rooftop on Spadina so you walk there. On the way you have to pee, so you pop into a Chinese restaurant. Their toilets are in the basement and to reach them you have to walk through an airless room filled almost entirely with smoked pig carcasses, hanging on hooks tied to the ceiling beams by their snouts. Up close, you can see their pale eyelashes. The room smells overpoweringly like menstrual blood. You wonder whether or not Ezra has eyelashes, and remind yourself to check when you're back outside.

The three of you climb up a rusty fire escape and then a long ladder to the roof of a Laundromat. The canopy of trees below has formed an intricate paisley pattern. You notice that Grace looks concerned when you sit too close to the

ledge and this pisses you off. You edge slightly forward. Across the street, in the lit-up window of an apartment building, you watch a mother take a saucepan off the stove with her right hand, a baby resting in the crook of her other arm. You look at the bullseye of scar tissue on the palm of your hand from when you pressed it to the electric hot coil of the element. You remember Grace's face when she saw your hand all bandaged up and how this is the kind of thing that people don't forget. You hear Ros's voice in your head and shift back on the roof so that your feet are no longer dangling down. You remember about the eyelashes and turn to Ezra.

He has them. They're long. *Clockwork Orange* eyelashes. And his eyes are glassy from the drugs, his pupils huge and black inside his irises. His eyes meet yours and he looks frightened. This is only your second time meeting Ezra. The acid was supposed to be a bonding experience for the three of you. Your idea. Grace had wanted to go see a play.

You're overpowered with desire suddenly and you stand up, too quickly, the blood rushing straight to your head. You've been sitting on this roof for hours, you think. Or maybe just minutes. Grace walks to the other side of the roof to pee and you do a handstand, pleased that it's still possible. Years of gymnastics. Your shirt rides up and while you're self-conscious about the extra flab on your body you don't really give a shit.

Grace is my only friend, you tell Ezra.

At least you picked a good one, he says.

You nod, which is easier said than done when you're upside down.

Ever done hot yoga? You sweat like a motherfucker, but it feels good after, you say, flipping right side up again, wiping the gravel from your palms.

After a pause you add: Grace couldn't do it probably. The no-sweat thing. She'd probably pass out. If you wanted to go sometime though. You shrug.

Sure, yeah, Ezra says, gazing over at Grace on the other side of the roof.

When the mania happened, it came on surprisingly slowly. At first, it was just a buzz of anxious excitement, like the feeling of having to pee, intensified. Everything felt super in focus, all your senses heightened. Then things got less clear. You went around telling people that you were publishing a book, a novel that you spent sleepless nights typing furiously. You became obsessed with the colour orange, buying crates of Orangina from the grocery store and wrapping yourself in the ugly orange afghan your great-grandmother had crocheted. You wore it over your back, tucked into the collar of your sweater like a cape. After a couple days in your dorm room without any human contact, you got drunk and decided to streak through a formal meal held in the college president's personal home, wearing nothing but the orange afghan cape, grabbing chunks of food from professors' plates along the way. Your Intro to Philosophy prof was there and you remember her horrified laughter as you slugged back the remainder of her red wine and bounded out of the room screaming random passages from *Twilight of the Idols*. The next morning, your energy was completely drained, leaving you totalled. You didn't move from your bed for three days, until Grace was at the door, and you let yourself fall into her.

Grace returns from the other side of the roof and takes Ezra's hand. You

join them, taking their remaining hands in yours. For a moment, the circle feels impenetrable. A force field.

I want to dance, you say, and Ezra nods vigorously but Grace furrows her brow in that way that she does when she's cross, so you take her by the waist and spin her out in front of you.

Come on Grace, for a lark. A laugh. A loony lark laugh, you say.

Fine, she sighs. But already you're hurrying down the ladder, back onto the warm pavement.

The air tastes metallic now, and you wonder whether it will rain, or if that's just the taste of your saliva. It happens sometimes, with the medication: your mouth feels like you've been sucking on cheap silver. They are trailing behind you, Ezra and Grace. Talking quietly to each other.

You spin around.

Are you telling secrets? you ask them. But Grace just stares at you and Ezra shakes his head.

They are, though. They share things with each other that they don't share with you. You turn around again to size up Ezra. He really is all lank, his skeleton easy to imagine. You could take him no problem.

But the truth is, you're not really a violent person. People assume, because of your size. Even when you weren't fat, you were big. Broad-shouldered. Although it's the kind of thing you would probably lie about, you've actually never thrown a real punch in your life. Your mum calls you her gentle giant, which you find creepy and comforting in equal parts. She's probably wondering where you are right now, your mum. Now that you're back at home, she always is. She's probably sitting in front of the television trying not to text you. When you left the house she asked what time you'd be back and you said, Not sure. Don't you have anything better to do on a Friday night, mum, than wonder what I'm up to? But when you saw the expression on her face you went back and hugged her, kissed the top of her head.

I'll probably sleep over at Grace's tonight, you said, finally. So don't wait up.

Grace is a nice girl, she replied, walking over to flick the kettle on. Just before you went out the door she slipped a twenty-dollar bill into the pocket of your jeans.

In case you need to take a taxi, she said.

Now you pass a doorway with a stairwell down into a basement bar. You hear music coming from below. There are a few burnt-out looking guys standing around the door, smoking rollies and not talking. You walk up to them.

Gentlemen, you say. You make the gesture of tipping your hat to them, although you are not wearing one, and attempt to walk through.

The guys glance at one another, and one wearing a bandanna says: It's five in.

Oh, forget it, Lewis, you hear Grace say, but you ignore her and fish the twenty from your mum out of your pocket.

For the three of us, you say, gesturing vaguely behind you.

Downstairs it smells like beer and sweat and cumin. You order a pitcher of lager from the bartender, trying to decide if she's cute or not as she does the pour. You still aren't sure, but give her a huge tip anyway, and do the imaginary hat tilt

again, even though you know it's weird.

A sad-looking band is setting up on stage and about ten people total are in the bar, standing around playing pool and drinking bottles of Moosehead.

Wow, Grace says in a deadpan tone. I really feel like getting my dancing shoes on now. She accepts the pint glass you hand her without a thank you. Ezra gives you a smile, at least.

Okay, okay. Maybe no dancing yet. Let's play pool, you suggest.

There are no tables free at the moment, so you walk up behind a bald guy in a leather vest and stand beside him stroking your chin, discerningly.

Can you get the fuck outta the way there buddy? the guy asks jovially, chalking his cue. You down your pint in a few gulps and then belch, grabbing a spare cue from the rack.

Let me show you how it's done boys, you say, charging your cue into the middle of their game. The two men look at each other pityingly, and then grab you by the armpits, and hoist you up the stairs and onto the sidewalk. Grace and Ezra follow.

I have to take you somewhere, you tell them.

And then you're on the Queen Streetcar, going farther and farther east to the neighbourhood where you grew up. Ezra's skin looks so soft, you want badly to touch it and you do, rubbing the palm of your hand along the smooth gleam of his head like it's an eight ball. You pull the cord and lead them off the car and walk down to the beach. There's a moon over the water, a fat bright one. There's no one down here but the beach is littered with broken bottles and condom wrappers and empty vials. Beyond that though, the lake is still, the moonlight teasing its surface. It looks almost clean.

You hop out of your boxers and run until it's deep enough to do a shallow dive and then you're submerged. You don't care if anyone has followed you. The cold seizes you and shakes you around but you're swimming now. You're doing the front crawl headlong into this huge green body of water, moving pretty fast. All those laps at the pool are paying off. You hear your name being called and you want to turn around but you just can't. Not yet. It's coming up dawn. You're coming down hard. Naked in a dirty lake. The nights are only getting longer from here on in.

\*

Of course I didn't do the acid. No rational human being would have joined Lewis on a twelve-hour romp through intense hallucinogens. When we were putting the blotters on our tongues like Listerine strips I just turned away from the boys and slid mine into my pocket. They weren't paying any attention to me. Then I smacked my lips alongside them and commented on its bitter taste.

Like star anise, I said.

Star anus, offered Lewis.

I could tell Ezra was nervous about the whole night but was trying his best to put on a brave face. His hand was clammy when I squeezed it. I kissed his face and told him everything was going to be fine.

We walked to Wong's across the park to buy more cigarettes. I don't know if it was the heat of the day slowly being absolved into evening or the smell of tar and grass marinating in the concrete of the sidewalks but I wanted to smoke. There was an ice cream truck by the park and we all got soft serve. Twists for Ezra and me and straight-up vanilla for Lewis, the purist. I wanted to kiss Ezra, over and over again just to keep tasting the combination of Belmont Milds and chocolate mixing with the smell of the baby sunscreen he always wore.

You don't want to see this bad boy with a second-degree burn, he would say, rubbing the top of his shiny head.

People always wanted to know what it was like to have sex with Ezra. If it was creepy and childlike that he had no hair. He was like a seal, his body sleek and lithe, slipping through my fingers. I liked the way we looked, naked on our backs beside each other. My long hair sprawled across the pillow next to the clean egg of his skull. Sometimes I felt like his body was a piece of art. A blank canvas that I had the impulse to paint on, draw a map connecting elbow to liver to kidney to pelvis to kneecap.

I could tell when the acid started to kick in because Lewis's movements slowed right down. The whole pulse of the evening changed to a smooth drip. For a second I thought I must have been feeling it too.

Lewis swung his arm around, his black hair falling into his eyes. He smiled lazily, and I remembered how handsome he was. The night we first met, I pretended not to know him, even though he was a sort-of celebrity. He'd slept with my friend Denise who said he gave the best head she'd ever had but would only speak to her in French. Of course I thought he was full of shit. But sitting there beside him, it was different. It was more than a magnetism. It was like his skin crackled with static electricity and just being near him you could taste it in your mouth. Once, as a kid, I was camping with my parents on the Bruce Peninsula during a summer storm, and the tree beside our tent was struck by lightning. The storm blew over quickly, in minutes, and we went outside to inspect the tree, which had been scorched with a deep black scar. I remember the smell of the lightning and the smoke in my mouth, as though I had bitten into a star. That's what it felt like to be near Lewis.

We left the park sometime after midnight. Lewis popped into a restaurant to pee, leaving Ezra and me outside. In the neon light of the restaurant's sign, Ezra's skin glowed. He had such good skin, like a girl. He was distracted now, staring into the palm of his hand, his face hard-set.

Ez?

He looked up at me, eyes like two moons.

You alright?

Just pretty high.

Lewis came out right at that moment, shaking his head and muttering something about pig corpses in the basement.

Ezra led us into one of the sweaty alleys behind Spadina. All the kitchens of the Chinese restaurants backed onto it, their doors propped open with cinder blocks for fresh air. We climbed a skinny ladder to a flat, warm rooftop and sat down. We were talking. A conversation of loop-de-loops. The boys were both

staring straight ahead, into the city sprawling westward down College. Summer bodies walked below us, small black silhouettes, slow to get wherever they were going, holding hands and laughing. I went to pee on the other side of the roof and tried to read Lewis from the flat of his back. He got up to do a handstand and I had to stop myself from rushing back to make sure he was far enough away from the ledge.

It happened just once. His mania had been teetering on its axis, a breath away from tipping into depression. Lewis had shown up at my door as I was getting ready for bed. He had a pair of skates slung over his shoulder, his blue eyes made brighter by the cold. He said he had to show me something and that I should bring my own skates. We walked through side streets of skinny Victorian row houses. It was the night after one of the first big storms and the snow was wet and perfect for packing. We threw snowballs at stop signs and parking meters as we walked, trying to hit them dead on. Lewis seemed sleepy and happy. It was one of the only times I had taken a walk with him when he hadn't lit a joint or taken out a bottle of something. We turned into a park north of Harbord and Lewis started running and I followed him, the air burning cold in my lungs. He stopped when we got to the chain-link fence around one of the city rinks. He boosted me off his shoulders and we got over easily enough.

All the floodlights had been turned off for the evening and the Zamboni had made its last run, leaving the ice gleaming. I almost didn't want to spoil it. The night was black, crisp and clear, with the cedar trees surrounding the rink giving off a peppery smell. I was shaky on the ice at first but then hit my stride, skating around the perimeter of the rink. Lewis, who was really quite graceful despite his size, skated in figure eights around me, taking my hand and spinning me. He hummed a waltz and we danced together clumsily, slipping and falling and eventually trudging back through the snow, exhausted, to my dorm. Lewis plugged in my electric kettle to make hot chocolate and when he turned around I kissed him, smelling the snow on his cheeks. It had started blizzarding again and the white of it outside my window made it seem as bright as day inside the room. I woke up the next morning feeling elated, and he was gone.

I didn't see him for about five days. He wasn't answering calls or responding to texts or emails. Finally, I went to his room to hunt him down, knocking until he answered. He opened the door in his underwear, looking like he'd taken punches to both eyes. The room smelled like skunky weed and stale coffee and sweat. As soon as he saw me he started to cry. Sometimes I wonder if that night just got buried in the avalanche of thoughts that had slumped down in the back of his head. Maybe he'd forgotten about it completely.

When I told him about Ezra, I had expected some kind of reaction. A conversation. But he'd just given me a big hug and seemed genuinely happy about it. That night though, he'd gotten too drunk and clung to me, staggering outside the bar and said: Grace. I wouldn't even fucking be here if it wasn't for you. Which made me cry, of course, because that's an unfair thing to say to someone, but also because I believed him.

Then two months later there we were. The three of us. Sitting on top of a Laundromat, legs swinging. Midsummer night's dream. There was a moment

when we all stood up, where Lewis took my hand and Ezra's hand and we stood in a circle for a second, as though in prayer. Lewis's thick calloused fingers grasping my own. Then all of a sudden he dropped my hand and suggested dancing.

We followed him back down the ladder, through the throng of Chinatown to Queen Street. Ezra had an arm slung low around my waist, stroking my hipbone.

Hey, he whispered in my ear. Maybe we can get out of here soon. Go back to my place.

I shook off his arm.

We can't just leave Lewis, I hissed at him.

Lewis had stopped in front of the entrance to a dive bar on Queen. The guys outside told him it was five bucks cover but I was pretty sure they were just taking us for a ride. We looked ridiculous. Lewis lumbering along in his too-tight shirt like a black bear, Ezra in his straw sunhat.

Inside, Lewis went straight for the bar. Ezra and I hovered by the door. A burly guy came up to us and asked Ezra: Are you one of those albino kids?

Ezra sighed.

No. Albino is skin pigment. I just can't grow hair.

Huh, the guy said. Right on, man.

A few minutes later, Lewis had sabotaged a game of pool and it was time to go.

We caught an eastbound car and sat at the very back. At one point Lewis asked Ezra if he could touch his head, and then sat there stroking it for the next few minutes as they talked about what it would probably be like to see Earth from space. It was a bit much for me, and I turned my head to the window and watched the neighbourhoods roll into one another. I thought we were going to ride until the end of the line, we had been on there for such a long time, when Lewis suddenly pulled the cord and we tumbled back into the street.

We were somewhere in The Beaches. I remembered Lewis telling me that this was where he had grown up until his parents divorced and moved farther north. He led us down a side street and as soon as I saw the lake in the distance I realized what was happening. The beach was deserted. Lewis was peeling off clothes, tripping out of his boxers. A different body than the one I had seen on that night in September, but the ache still rose inside me. I turned away to look at Ezra, and saw that he was staring at me. Together, we turned our heads to watch Lewis run naked into the dirty lake.

For a second, I thought of stripping and running after him. Instead, Ezra and I sat down on top of a piece of driftwood.

It's gotta be cold, I said.

Ezra didn't say anything. Just drew a circle in the sand with a stick and then stood up inside it. After a few minutes of silence he said: He's actually getting pretty far out there. Let's call him to come in.

We cupped our hands around our mouths and shouted his name but of course he didn't turn around.

I should probably swim out and help him, Ezra said.

Don't. He's fine.

Fuck, Grace. He's on acid swimming out into Lake Ontario. He might not be fine.

I hadn't heard Ezra raise his voice before and it didn't suit him.

It was warm and windless in the not-quite dark before dawn. The lake was unnaturally still. If I squinted into the horizon line, I could blur the ripples from Lewis's body completely, and imagine the surface frozen deep and solid and clear.

*Stephanie Yorke*

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## SHIFT

Sleep-gutted, day tattered. Boss said I pad  
my hours. Wish they were softer. Circles

wound under drill bit eyes. Sun a UFO.  
What the egg must feel when the heat lamp

goes. Click red. Cyborg downsizes  
to robot. Or a stooped primate

darwins backward, grows hoarse, learns  
to catch flies. A muck Sunday

frog swims the ditch, lily pad tires.  
Gear box gone to moss.

*Pamela Mordecai*

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## MARY, AT HOME, THINKING ON THINGS

So today I am taking my five, like Ma say,  
and watching a gecko ascending the wall.  
Is a miracle how the fat creature don't tumble down *plaps*

to his death. And I wondering why  
the ancient Rule Book of Leviticus say  
that anaqah the reptile is a thing unclean

since he creep on the ground. I don't see  
how it's fair since anaqah did not  
make himself, neither choose how he move,

neither where! This one shimmying up  
to the roof like he plan to launch off!  
Crazy creature! Bird fly and bat fly

and bee fly, and my friend Es did say  
the centurion Marcus Lucullus declare  
that one time in a far foreign land

he see squirrel that fly. But I never hear tell  
of anaqah with wings. Still they say in this life  
there's a first time for things.

And this morning for blue and for light  
and for clear is a first time for true.  
I looking from here and the wash

of the waves in the Galilee Sea  
as they rushing the shore,  
as they break, scrub the sand,

as they hush in my ear like the sound  
of the boys saying Shema again and again  
in the pikini schoolroom next door,

as they shush, whisper, hiss,  
kiss the floor of the sea,  
the sparkle and bright

is like me and the water is right  
side by side in the courtyard just there,  
in the sun of the light, in the white

of the stone warming under my sandal, the gleam  
of the shadow—Oh! Jahweh! Was gleam  
now is gloom! Lord, it cover the room!

A huge hovering thing that is fearsome, alit  
on the air, a shade brilliant, dark glow  
wings spread out, far, far out, everywhere...

## HORNETS

I've never seen hornets before, so when I call my boyfriend at his job on the tugboat, I say, "There are weird wasps in our bedroom, with long legs. They're freaky looking."

"Those aren't wasps," Sean says. "They're hornets."

"Whatever. Hornets," I say.

By the next time we speak I've forgotten what they're called. "These wasps are scary," I say. "I have to dodge them when I walk into our bedroom. Sometimes I run upstairs to grab something and flee."

Our East Vancouver bedroom is a large wooden loft above our living room, shaped like the bow of a boat, and perched on the exposed beams that once supported the living room's ceiling. It's a bitch to clean—when we first moved in I spent hours vacuuming up cobwebs and hammering in exposed nails—and when it rains heavily it sometimes leaks, but it has a rustic and romantic feel, and two skylights with a view of the mountains, the sea, and the city.

Over the next week I wake up to loud buzzing every day. The August heat wave makes sleeping impossible unless I leave the skylights open overnight. I cover my head with the sheet, create a hole from the folds, and peer out. Two hornets—a couple, perhaps—hover around the peak of our ceiling. I wait until they fly off through the skylight, and then I make a run for the washroom.

When Sean comes home for an afternoon's leave we lie in bed and I see a hornet sneaking in through the skylight. "There!" I point. "See? Wasps!"

Sean sighs. "I've told you a million times they're called hornets, and you keep calling them wasps."

"Hornets," I say, almost spitting it out. For some reason, I don't like the word. The R and T and S roll funny in my mouth, bumping against my tongue and teeth like grit that snuck into my salad. Some words in the English language just rub me the wrong way.

"Look." I point at the peak of our ceiling where the boards angle up into a dark corner. "Do you think they're building a nest?" And I suddenly know: they *are* building a nest. Of course. Why didn't I think of it sooner? We're both quiet for a moment. We can hear the hornets buzzing madly.

"They're probably *doing it* in there," Sean says.

"What are we going to do?" I panic. We go downstairs and Google hornets. The site we find recommends going in with a bottle of Raid, wearing hornet protective clothing and running shoes. We both find the thought unappealing. Besides, Sean is leaving in two hours, going back on the boat for another week, so that leaves me to deal with it.

"I wish I didn't have to go," Sean says as he stands by the door.

I scowl, but then say, "I'll be fine," and kiss him goodbye. I stand barefoot on the front steps and wave until the taxi turns a corner and I can't see him anymore.

This is often how it goes. This is what it means to be a sailor's girlfriend. A day after we moved into this place he went back to work for two weeks, leaving me to unpack an entire house. He was gone when I had to scrape the decomposed corpse of a mouse off the dining room floor, when our toilet flooded, when our cat didn't come home all night and I had to walk the streets calling his name and hitting a spoon against a can of Fancy Feast. He wasn't there the next morning when I found out that our cat had been run over by a car in the alley nearby, and when I sat crying at my desk.

"It's not so bad," I say when people ask. I tell them that Sean's work schedule is a healthy arrangement, that the distance keeps the relationship fresh. I say, "I like my space," and, "It sure makes for exciting reunions!" Most times I mean it too. Other times, I talk out loud, just to hear my voice, and a faint echo bounces up against the rafters before wafting out from the skylight like smoke. Then the house falls quiet again, the fridge hums, the floorboards creak under my heavy feet.

My mother calls after Sean leaves. It's late in Israel. I can hear the night in her voice—the tugging of sleep. "Is he home?" she asks.

"He just left."

My mother sighs. "How will you ever get pregnant with that schedule?"

"Ima."

"You're thirty-five."

"I know."

"You do want kids, right?"

I look out the window and spot our neighbour, Little Bernard, climbing up the stairs to his house. "I have to go," I say.

Bernard is not actually little. He's a Portuguese man with a thick grey beard and square glasses. He lives next door with his wife Maria, who always wears an apron around her waist. Bernard is our house manager. We call him Little Bernard to distinguish him from Big Bernard, who is our landlord, and a burly guy. This name has stuck so well that when I call his house and Maria answers I say, "May I speak to Little Bernard?" and instantly want to bury myself. Maria doesn't seem to notice, or maybe she's heard it before. She puts him on the phone.

Bernard and Maria's back deck faces ours, and I can see right down into their yard from my office window. I see Bernard gardening, hammering nails and sawing wood, Maria hanging laundry, picking fruit off the plum tree, and playing with their grandchildren. Every Sunday, their kids climb up the stairs with their families for their weekly brunch. Watching them makes me think of home, of warm Mediterranean nights, of Friday dinners at my mother's, the house full of chatter, running feet, and the smells of cooking. Once I saw Bernard giving Maria a red rose from their garden. She wiped her hands on her apron before she took the rose and smelled it.

There's nothing Bernard cannot do. An electrician by trade, he has fixed

our leaky pipes, our toilet, and our furnace. After I call him about the hornets, Bernard comes upstairs armed with a large knife and a flashlight. I haven't seen a single hornet all day, so I'm afraid he's going to think I'm crazy. He shines a beam into the nook and summons me over. I reluctantly agree to look, tilt my head and see what looks like a large grey cotton ball, a clump of moss stuck to the side of the rafter. I don't want to stay for the carnage so I go to my office and close the door.

A few minutes later Bernard comes downstairs carrying my bedroom rug, and carefully unfolds it to show me three little mummies, baby hornets covered in white silk. A family. I cover my mouth.

"You're lucky it was only one couple," Bernard says. "Hornets aren't as bad as wasps. They don't multiply as fast."

"Oh my God." I look away. "You're a life saver. Thank you so much."

Back at my office I can't write. I stare at the screen, then outside past Bernard and Maria's backyard, past the Burnaby hills, blue and hazy in the distance. I lean my face into my hands and sit there for a while, fingers pressing onto my eyelids. I feel like crying.

I wake up the next morning to a frantic buzz in my ceiling. The mother is back. I imagine her flying into the nook, her confusion as she finds the empty nest. I bury my head under the sheet and press the fabric over my ears. "This sucks," I whisper to the pillow.

I call Sean from the warm insides of my cocoon. "The mother is back," I say. "She's going to come after me and avenge her dead babies."

Sean laughs. I hear him inhale cigarette smoke.

"They were just a young couple," I say, feigning melodrama. "All they wanted was to build a home and raise their family in domestic bliss, and I ruined it."

Sean laughs again. The boat's radio chatters in the background. I trace the seam of the sheet with my finger.

"I wonder if the father will be coming next," I say.

"You know there's no actual father, right?" Sean says. "It's a matriarchal society. The male just comes and goes. He doesn't take part in building the nest or anything. I think he dies after mating."

"Great," I say. "That's really great."

It's getting too hot. I peel the sheet off my head and look around. The buzzing has stopped. The house is quiet and empty again. I can hear the bell ringing from the nearby school, the muffled squeals of children running out to play. I fling the sheet off my sweaty body, kick it until it falls in a heap on the floor.

"You okay?" Sean asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I miss you."

"I miss you too," he says. "Only six days to go."

"Yes," I say. "Six days to go."

## PICKING BLACKBERRIES WITH MY DAUGHTER

We discover together a long bramble wall,  
and come back on half a dozen days in August

to where there is blackberry after blackberry  
for me to put in the container I bring and for her to put in her mouth.

*Is it okay to pick the red ones? Is that a bee?! Is it?!*  
*No, it's not a bee, it's a wasp,* I tell her. Bees, wasps—don't be afraid.

My three-year-old picks and picks until she's tired  
and asks me if we can go home. My container is full.

The countless blackberries left—for sparrows, raccoons, squirrels,  
for the air into which the fruit rots away.

*Will the blackberries be here again?*  
*Yes, they'll be here again,* I say. They'll vanish and reappear—

they'll arrive, they'll go, they'll come back  
through their places in the bramble,

they'll travel from this blackberry bush to this blackberry bush.  
It's a sorrow bush. It's a joy bush.

*Can we come back here again?*  
*Yes, we'll come back,* I answer. In my way I pray we will.

We'll come back like people with prayer notes,  
and we'll fill our hands again with blackberries.

They'll stain your lips, tongue, chin and cheek with their juice,  
they'll explain you like the wine that you will one day drink.

Whatever we ask for, whatever words we use, the blackberries  
will be here, like prayers that grow in empty spaces, like blackberry-prayers.

## JAIL

A murder of crows stands along a power-line,  
and I hear nothing all morning but the cawing,  
and see nothing but the shapes of blackness—  
sires who deal out death, find and eat the dead—  
until I recall sitting naked hours in a chair  
in a hot, bulb-glare-bright, urine-soaked cell.  
Waking another time, face to a cement floor,  
in a lock-up out of an old TV sitcom,  
breathing in cleaning-bleach fumes, vomiting.  
Striding proudly into a cell in North Vancouver—  
the place I had always wanted to be.  
Where I could rehearse my image of him  
and try to be him and dream he loved me.  
Hometown RCMP jail. Smooth grey walls.  
Pure white bowl. Steel ledge bed. I hear my heart muscle  
contracting in rhythm as if working wings.  
Almost hear it caw. Almost feel the valves,  
the membranous doors allowing the blood  
to flow in and not out, out and not in.  
Know now my heart is the scavenger of my blood—  
its one need is to fill its emptying hollow.  
I have brought it to a barred concrete box  
to clench, to unclench—to plead in this way  
for blood to flow with force in through a door  
to the son I am, and out through a door  
to a father cawing down the corridor artery,  
and back to a cell where sons and fathers  
begin and end, and meet again in nothingness. Crows  
fly off then up to the tops of power-poles.  
I want the caws and carcass-dripping beaks  
to show me the way to no right or wrong,  
good or bad, love or hate, to instruct me  
in how there is nothing more than the hearts  
of those judged to be lost, apart, punished.  
I want to walk in the heart of the criminal,  
the father and son who are free, the man  
who holds within his core the blood that beats  
through the slaughtered, the alley crow, and the flower,  
even as he is led away in the sun to be killed.

## WARREN

You are dying.

You have Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma. The cancer eats away at your stomach, bladder and lungs. Now there's the tumour in your brain that may be malignant. We're waiting for results.

Years ago: home in the Fraser Valley (after you left Cranbrook the summer I turned nineteen) between semesters at university, you seemed to regard me with disdain, resentful that I was once again occupying space in your home, moving in on the time you spent with my mother.

The disdain was subtle yet penetrating. It was your general aura, the rigidity of your jaw while talking to me, a slight sneer only perceptible by me, hardly a grunt at the dinner table as you consumed your food deliberately and methodically, elbows jutting out from each side of the robust barrel of your chest, gaze set sternly straight ahead at the tablecloth or stack of sliced white bread.

I felt invisible to you, or inconsequential. You neither loved nor hated me. You were indifferent.

Now, when I visit you, the air in the valley smells of manure. Streets are grey, few trees, two shopping malls, strip malls, one pub, too many churches, only one sushi restaurant, horses, and cows for slaughter in farmland outside of town. I look at the cows and wish to save them, the way I wish to save you now too.

At what point does a little girl, adolescent, or young woman grow to love her stepfather, who has been there since she was five?

That summer I was home from university, I escaped from the city on my bike and rode into farmland, to berry orchards and wheat fields growing waist-high. I walked through wheat, my fingers grazing brittle stems that tickled my palms, and listened to metal lines separating rows of berry bushes, the zap of wind and whistling of air.

Some afternoons I biked all the way to the small airstrip where two-engine planes take off carrying parachuters. I lay on the grass at the edge of the strip under a solitary poplar tree, making war against the darkness in my heart that would blossom into despair and cripple me for years.

I shaded my eyes and gazed into the cerulean sky, watched small figures jump from planes, chutes opening into reds, greens, and yellows, domes descending toward Earth like jellyfish descending through blue waters.

Five years old:

Is this the first time we meet? I can't remember now.

You lift me up over your shoulders. I'm wearing a white dress. I scream bloody murder.

Mom is here, smiling, laughing. "Oh, Warren, she's just shy!" Before you

lower me down again I feel the heat of the ceiling lamp against my face. The light burns my eyes. I remember this, exactly: this lamp, this burning of the eyes, this heat.

Only years later, looking back, do I feel guilty. You were just trying to make a good first impression. Is this the moment that marks the distance between us? For much of our lives, we will meet in hallways, brush shoulders, and carry on never uttering a word. Already there is a hole in my heart where my real father should reside. I know something is missing but cannot formulate it in my mind. Children bear the abstraction of lost love. They are too young to know what they're missing, but they are capable of missing it terribly.

I will subsequently wear few dresses throughout my childhood. I will become a tomboy through some remote act of feminist rebellion I don't quite understand but believe in utterly. I will wear jeans and T-shirts, sweatpants and sweatshirts, runners. Dirt on my hands and face. Scraggly hair in a ponytail. Football with the boys at recess.

"I am ugly," I remember thinking. I believed you thought I was ugly too. All men want pretty little girls for daughters.

I wanted you to look at me and think I was beautiful, to proclaim it. "You're such a beautiful girl, Trisha. You're such a pretty little girl."

Later, as I entered puberty, I looked through the pornographic magazines you kept on the back of the toilet in your private bathroom in the basement, where you shaved and put in your dentures. I leafed through the pages, gauged my body against the models, mortified and aroused by them at the same time. I wanted the models' bodies, read their measurements (26-inch waist, 38-inch bust), pored over their costumes: burlesque girl in stockings and garter; college girl in co-ed sweater with midriff showing; sailor girl in hat. I hadn't spent much time looking at naked bodies, just the sagging bodies of old ladies at the pool, or little girls in slick boyish bathing suits, but nothing that aroused me.

I touched myself while looking at these naked models, duplicitously damaged and aroused by them at the same time, knowing my legs would never be long enough for any man to love me.

Seven years old:

Mom, my older brother Sean (eleven), my older sisters Sandy and Tammy (fourteen and fifteen respectively) and I, move into your house on King Street. On the other side of the tracks. You are a good man for taking in a woman and four kids. My brother and I have different dads. My sisters have the same dad. We are little bastards in town, those kids with the young mother who's never heard of birth control.

In my earliest memories before moving in with you we are poor, living on welfare, five of us in small duplexes and condominiums, sometimes staying at Grandma's house when the money runs out. But now we live in a house, your house.

You say, "Scrape the top of the butter evenly with a clean knife. Don't get peanut butter or jam in the butter."

You have control issues.

Your work has a family picnic in a park in the woods one hot summer day. I beat other children at various games: potato sack race, horseshoes, rock skipping across the river. I want you to notice but you do not. The sun goes down, sinks into the dark green wedge of the valley, an orange globe shrouded in smoke from forest fires a hundred kilometres away, and I feel sad but I'm not quite sure why. It's just deep childhood remorse, a nostalgia for something that never was.

A few stars appear. The moon.

The other children and I are playing in the shallow creek bed of the river where cold water spirals through in rivulets. A bonfire in the distance. We see a water snake, and all the girls scream.

Except me.

I take a large rock and smash the creature into the earth, its heart blossoming like cauliflower from its shiny moonlit skin. I fling it with a stick into the poplars where it swings in the night breeze, a pendulum of grief and yearning.

I believe you like Sean best because he is a boy. One year, you buy him a new bicycle for his birthday. You hide it in the driveway. My brother comes out, sees it there and lets out this strange squealing sound. Everyone thinks it's funny.

The water at your house is from a well and tastes like metal, so my brother and I make root beer by pouring sugar and root beer syrup into a jug of water. The house is always cold. On snowy winter mornings, Sean and I get up early for school and race to the base heater in the dining room, sit down against it huddled under a blanket. We seldom speak to each other these mornings, though I know tender words are exchanged, or at the very least implied.

"It's going to be fine. Do you like it here? Do you think he wants us here?"

Sixteen:

I've made the cut.

I'm on the local girls' rep team, the Lady T-Birds. Our uniforms are tight grey pants and pink shirts with silver writing on the front that says, "Lady T-Birds."

I think my newfound status as a T-Bird will ignite your admiration for me.

You owned a white nineteen sixty-three silver-rimmed T-Bird when we first moved in with you, but you gave it up for a car that could accommodate four kids. Only once did I ride in the T-Bird. You, Mom and I drove from Cranbrook to Kimberly. The car rode smooth, felt heavy beneath me, and as you turned a corner I felt the heft of you also, your firm grip of the road, and felt safe. On the way back I gazed sleepily out the back window at the starry sky and moon and said, "Look, the baby stars are following a daddy star." You and Mom laughed.

I'm standing in centre field, shading my eyes from the sun, my left hand inside a softball mitt you bought for me earlier this year. It still smells brand new, soft leather, an animal's skin, and as I lift it to my nose and bury my face inside I have a fierce desire to be some man's daughter.

You are in the stands, watching me. You have been coming to watch me play for some time, or maybe it's just this one time. Perhaps we have crossed that threshold that has kept us at odds for so long. Did Mom say something to you?

"She is dying for you to notice her. She just wants a father."

The game is tied five all. Final inning. We are in the field. I'm in centre field because I can throw farther and harder than any girl on the team. This is my moment. The first batter hits a grounder straight at me. It comes hard, skipping over earth and grass. I lower my mitt to the grass, smell the greenness, the scent of a baseball field at dusk I will remember all my life, and the ball whizzes through my knees. The batter makes a homerun. Score: six to five.

The second batter hits the ball hard, another grounder. The ball slips past me, continues into the trees at the edge of the field. Score: seven to five.

A lump in my throat.

Batter three hits a fly ball. It soars in a great arc and descends upon me. I shade my eyes from the blazing sun with one hand and open my glove, stagger back and forth, feel like I'm going to faint, and the ball bounces into my mitt and out again. Score: eight to five.

Around the bases they go, score another two rounds before the third batter strikes out.

Bases loaded. Two out. My turn at bat. Strike one. I want to cry. Strike two. I can hardly hold back the tears. I hear other parents moan and curse in the stands behind me. Someone says, "Get her off the field."

Strike three. I'm out.

After the game, my coach puts his arm around me and says, "You did your best." I say nothing, walk toward the stands, to you, my stepfather who I want to love me. You smile, tilt your head, say, "That was a tough one, kid," and I wrap my arms around you and cry, my body shaking. You hold me lightly. This is the first time we have embraced, the first time you've held me in your arms, perhaps the first time I've touched you except for brushing shoulders in the hallway or grazing your hand reaching for something on the dining room table, the first time I've felt your warmth against mine, and I know for the first time, with absolute certainty: I love you.

Seventeen:

I talk to no one at school for two solid years. My basketball teammates think I'm crazy. There is no defense against this depth of darkness, this loneliness and isolation, this depression, later to be diagnosed as bipolar disorder.

You seem to have lightened. Perhaps you feel sorry for me. I resist your newfound joviality. Every morning you wake me for school by shaking the bed, pushing down on the mattress by my head, making my whole body shake. I open my eyes and see you there laughing. "Get up, it's about time you got out of bed."

We have moved into my maternal Grandma's trailer, which she vacated when she moved to Calgary. The trailer is on a high hill outside of town.

I wander the school hallways during breaks, escape to the park nearby (even in the depth of winter when the snow piles high against the red wood bridge), listen to Sinéad O'Connor on my Walkman ("The Emperor's New Clothes"), and smoke overlooking the frozen creek.

I return home from school every day and pass by the flower bed at the front of the trailer, wilted and dying in summer and frozen in winter, and resent you

for the empty oil cans you toss in there. I am embarrassed and know if I had the chance I wouldn't bring anyone home anyway, because we have moved into a trailer park, because the flower bed is littered with empty Pennzoil cans.

Yet there are beautiful moments too.

Some nights you pick me up from basketball practice in the dead of winter. There is a stark contrast between the black starry sky and frosty white earth. The ground glows. Black ice. Drifts of snow across your windshield. Sometimes you take me to Arby's for a Beef 'n Cheddar with curly fries. We sit facing each other in yellow plastic swivel chairs, and though I am grateful I remain silent because speaking hurts too much. When snow has piled too high on that last steep hill home, we park the car at the bottom and hike back instead. You labour. One night my heart goes out to you. I say, "Look at the stars and pretend the hill is flat," believing this will make our journey easier, believing the light of the moon will rise to meet us.

I'm in my twenties now:

I'm home visiting you in the valley. You catch me smoking on the deck one afternoon, smile, say nothing, then turn and walk away, saving me from embarrassment. I am grateful for your discretion.

I am bulimic. Mom hears me in the bathroom one night and confronts me the next day. "I'll never do it again," I say, knowing it's a lie. I cut my wrist with a razor blade another night, smear blood on a page of my journal, and write, "I will never eat again," over and over until the page is filled. Mom tells you about my bulimia, I'm sure, but you say nothing.

But what could you say, really? I want to know what you could say.

Trisha, I see your blood and tears on this page. Trisha, I see your pain.

There is nothing in this moment.

You are a man, and I am a young woman you have known for almost my whole life. But the line between us has always been blurred, smudged black, sometimes merely grey, but always blurred. I am like a daughter to you, but not your daughter the way every stepdaughter is not a stepfather's flesh and blood daughter. I did not come from you. But for good or bad, I have been at least inferentially moulded by you.

Am I in some way, after all these years, like you?

There have been moments: remembering how you tried to teach me to drive your old blue Dodge when I was ten years old; or the evenings you watch Hockey Night in Canada, and I am reminded of all the years I've spent watching Hockey Night in Canada with you, how my heart exulted every time they played the theme song, every time Don Cherry in his silly suits and his dog, Blue, appeared in Coach's Corner; and all those mornings you wake me up, smiling, and say, "It's about time you got out of bed...want a fried orange and a dill pickle for breakfast?"

Twenty-six:

I am dating my boss, Leigh, an older short man with brown hair and very blue eyes. He is not a nice man. He wears a collared shirt and tie to work every

day. This turns me on. He is a man entirely unlike you.

I visit during holidays, watch you sitting in your La-Z-Boy recliner, a scotch and water in one hand, a bowl of chocolate-covered peanut M&M's in the other. You are getting older. You have a belly now, and everyone in the family worries about you, your belly, your salt intake. You have become jolly as you've aged, have taken to getting up early so you can go to McDonald's, read the newspaper with other old men, drink coffee and eat a cranberry orange muffin while looking out the tinted window and watching the sun rise over Mount Baker. You do this ritualistically, always bring home coffee and a muffin for Mom, and for me too when I'm visiting.

You make me coffee in the evening with your Keurig coffee maker, add milk and Splenda because you have come to know how I like my coffee, because we have come a long way from well water and root beer syrup. You joke that I'll be up all night.

I move in with my boss. He is twelve years older than me. I have been falling in love with older men for years now. I believe I fall in love with older men in order to fill the void of lost love.

In my early twenties, I met my biological father for the first time. It was winter, ice on the tarmac. He appeared, stunned and frightened, eyes exactly like mine, from a crowd of people at the Cranbrook airport. The following year, I had dinner at a Japanese restaurant with my mother and father for the first time in my life. They laughed, talked about the past, when they were young.

I sat silently.

On the ride home, as Mom went on about how great it was to see him, how well the dinner had gone, I tilted my head against the passenger window, felt the cool flash of it against my forehead, gazed out at the pumpkin fields next to the highway, and wept.

Any man who loves me now I cling to as if he will be the last man to love me. Yet my love for you, Warren, is not negotiable. It is certain and unrelenting.

But I blame you for the men I choose now, because they fill the void with something resembling love that is not love, but which dissolves on the tongue like Splenda.

Thirty-three:

Neither you nor anyone is invited to my destination wedding. Leigh waits for me at the gazebo. I'm not in love with this man. Rose petals flutter on the path. My kitten heels sink into the sand but sparkle in sunshine. He is waiting for me with a white flower pinned to his lapel.

You are not here to give me away, but what does it mean to give a woman away anyway? The distance between us widens in these moments, when a father and daughter are expected to unite.

I wake early, swim in the empty resort pool as the sun rises over the Caribbean. I am afraid. The water is cooler in the morning. My fear is fluid and amorphous, blue liquid coursing through my veins. I think of those parachuters descending from cerulean skies, feel myself in a similar free fall, wishing you were here to catch me.

It occurs to me as I walk the path to matrimony that I have longed to be fervently kept, so bound I will not lose my foothold and drift into space, so tethered I will never forget who I am in the eyes of men.

It doesn't work.

I email you the morning of my wedding: "I'm sorry I'm so far away; I'm sorry you can't be here; I'm sorry." I wonder if you feel the absence too, if you wish you were here to walk me down the aisle even though I've never believed in the ritual, the patriarchal display of a woman on a man's arm.

Upon leaving Vancouver Island for another island in the Caribbean, I tell myself, "Don't believe what they tell you. Don't let yourself be had. Don't long for what you cannot have." But I long for you anyway, my arm hooked into yours, your warmth against my hip, a proud look in your eyes as I am passed from one man to another.

Mid-thirties:

Leigh and I drink two or three litres of red wine and chain smoke on the back deck every night for the next few years. My teeth are purple. In the morning, alcohol emanates from my pores. My breath is always rancid.

But we buffer the perversion with sailing trips on his yacht, drift through the Gulf Islands, tie the boat off a dock on Salt Spring Island then tour the small art galleries and bookstores, fruit and vegetable markets, and eat at little seaside restaurants.

We anchor off Sidney Spit one night, and he fucks me so hard I hurt in the morning.

Where are you? No one, least of all a man, can save me from this pain.

Sometimes I think of the first time you lifted me over your shoulders to the ceiling, and I wish you would hold me up to the light now, afraid I have missed my chance. I would not cry this time.

But I am a woman now. It's too late to be any man's little girl.

When I was seventeen, I drank your Chivas Regal whiskey, quietly opened the cupboard door above the fridge after you and Mom had gone to bed. You wouldn't miss it; you hardly drank. I replaced the booze with water, diluting the liquid, golden as the hidden light in my mind that kept me hanging on in those treacherous high school years, the golden light that made me remember I'm an extraordinary person who deserves to be loved.

But these years with Leigh, neither you nor Mom know the worst of it. I drink booze and NeoCitran, get drunk and high at the same time sometimes. The NeoCitran and bulimia have stripped the enamel off my teeth, making them sensitive.

I will never tell you any of this. I will never utter a word, even when one day years later you find out.

My dentist, another older man I have a crush on, says diplomatically, "There are a number of ways to lose enamel...brushing too hard, too much citric acid, vomiting," and his voice drifts off. I sit in his patient chair, reclining back, the light in my eyes making me tear up, his soft delicate hands touching my teeth and the insides of my mouth, grazing my lips. I find it immensely erotic, wish he

would lean down and kiss me, nothing but my fluoride-scented breath between us, the way there has always been an aura of unrequited love between you and me also.

Thirty-seven:

Single again.

There's so much you don't know about me. I'm in the throes of bulimia, alcoholism, self-mutilation, deep scars up my wrists and forearms, so deep I hit white most times. What role have you played in this? Where exactly does the emptiness come from?

I am diagnosed with bipolar disorder, type two. I fall in love with my psychiatrist, Dr. P, a direct man whose straightforwardness I trust, a man who doesn't tolerate bullshit the way you don't tolerate bullshit, a man who says what he says and wants what he wants.

I know you have grown to love me.

But still, I want to extract so many years from the past, years that were devoid of intimacy and connection because I felt like a failure in your eyes for so long.

When I press the razor blade into my wrist, the skin splits and my heart breaks. I think of my mother in these moments, but you are in the background too, in shadows. Surely, you would be ashamed of me. Or would you wince with pain also?

I move into the basement suite of my sister Sandy's new house, live on welfare for a year and a half, sixty dollars a week after rent. You send money, pay for my cellphone for years until I become sane again, buy me the webbook computer upon which I write these words now. The computer is blue, and you know my favourite colour is blue.

My first afternoon in Sandy's new house, a few years before your diagnosis, I'm sleeping on the love seat in my suite in the basement, exhausted, practically comatose from years of self-abuse, from my recent stint in the psychiatric hospital, from my newfound meds. You come down and find me sleeping, lay your hand on my shoulder. I lift my head lazily, cry, "Can't I just stay? Can't I just stay here and sleep for a while?"

And you cry too.

## GRADUATION

The first photograph is the wife, alone and laughing, her arms spread wide and her belly exposed. She wears a black cardigan and a white T-shirt, pushed up to show the luminous skin of her stomach. Beneath that skin, the baby waits. Dancing, perhaps. Or chasing dreams, lulled to sleep by the rhythms of the wife's heart, her laughter.

The student cradles the picture in her hands. Then she smiles at the wife. "It's beautiful," is what she says.

The wife shrugs, self-conscious. "It didn't feel beautiful, at the time." It is almost an apology. "I'm still surprised it doesn't show. You try standing half-naked in front of a photographer and see if you can keep smiling."

The student laughs. The next picture shows the wife in mid-twirl, caught in blurry, frozen motion. Her sweater billows out, now black, now grey, now almost translucent. Because of the shadows, one cannot be quite sure if she is laughing. Those could be tears, one might think. Perhaps.

Now the baby begins to cry. The student and the wife both blink. A construction drill starts up somewhere outside. The wife excuses herself, and leaves the student alone with the pictures. She walks up the stairs and turns into the baby's room. The baby has been ill, feverish. Her green eyes are too bright and her cries are angry, harsh with pain. She leans into the wife's arms with an odd, desperate inevitability. But her cries stop when her head is soft against the wife's own.

The baby. The baby belongs to the wife, and to the husband. She is theirs.

\*

The husband had asked the wife in June, over dinner preparations. "Do you think," he'd said, "that it would be alright for Ava to stay with us for a while?"

She hadn't understood. "Ava?"

"L'Heureux," he said. "You remember."

Of course she remembered. She picked up the pan, drained the water into the sink. "Isn't she in school now?"

"She changed her mind," he said. His eyes were green, like the baby's. "Now she's moving out here."

"What?"

"She's moving to London," he said. "I told her she could stay with us until she was settled." He did that, the husband. Made decisions. Ordered take-out when there was chicken on the counter, took the baby around the city when it was time for her nap. Yesterday he told the wife that her soul was getting old.

The wife stood, holding the pot in the air. "I don't know."

"You don't have to decide right now," he said. He took the pot from her and began to spoon the noodles out. "She won't be moving until the end of the summer. Think about it—but there's no pressure."

The husband has a picture of the student on his desk. Well, a picture of the entire year. Graduating class of 1995. All two hundred graduates gathered outside in their caps and gowns. The husband stands on the left, with the other faculty. The faces are small and he is almost lost.

The student stands on the other side of the grass. Ava with the red hair, who is supposed to be in Australia. More school, studying design—but apparently she didn't like it. And now she is coming to London, to live with the three of them. Until she's settled, says the husband. Whatever that means.

To prepare for the student's arrival, the wife buys a new duvet for the spare room, because the blankets are ratty and embarrassing. Then she decides to buy sheets as well, sheets to match the duvet. The husband laughs.

"Should we paint the room?" he teases. "The walls don't match the bed."

The duvet is brown. Light brown and green. The student, tucked in, will be like a tulip flush against the ground. The walls of the bedroom are beige. The wife will ask the student's opinion when she comes. The husband, despite his teasing, is useless when it comes to these kinds of things.

\*

The student arrives at night, flying into Heathrow on a dusky September evening. The husband has mastered the art of driving on the left side of the road, and goes to pick her up. The wife stays home with the baby, and when they come back, the guest room is ready.

Ava has two bags, only two, and is paler than the wife remembers.

"Ava," the wife says. She risks a hug, the student's shoulder blades defined and strong beneath her hands. When she pulls away, the student is smiling. She looks very tired. She has a winter coat and two scarves—one of them belongs to the husband. The wife takes the coat and the scarves and watches the student shiver in the hallway. When they take Ava up to her room, the wife nudges the thermostat up. She'll have to buy more blankets.

\*

In the middle of that night, the wife wakes, turns, and makes love to the husband in the dark. She touches his face, and then the skin over his collarbone, and he is so warm she cries aloud in surprise.

The husband's fingers touch her mouth. His voice in her ear. "*Shh*," he says. "Ava's upstairs."

The student. Shivering under the new duvet. The wife turns her head, and bites the husband's fingers. Hard. Then she turns over, and there is blood in her mouth, and the taste of skin between her teeth.

\*

They give the student a spare key, and tell her to come and go when she wants.

"It's your home now," says the husband, the morning after her arrival. "So don't ask permission. For anything."

The wife spoons food into the baby's mouth and nods her assent. She watches the student approach the counter, still in pyjamas. Ava is cautious, unsure, even after the go-ahead. Her pyjamas are silk, blue and lavender. The colours wash her out. Her breasts are faint round suggestions beneath the silk.

The wife stops, spoon halfway in the air, and watches Ava stretch out a hand,

pick an orange. Her fingers dig deep into the flesh of the fruit and come up stained, pulp hiding in the crevices between nail and skin. She throws away the peel and leaves the orange sitting vulnerable and raw on the counter. Then she raises a hand to her mouth and sucks the juice from her fingers, quickly, like she's ashamed.

"Do you have any plans for the day?" the wife asks, looking away. "Is there anything we can take you to see?"

"Ava and I are going for coffee," says the husband. He winks at the student from across the table. "So she can shock me with her wild tales of Australia."

"Oh," says the wife.

The student laughs. She inches closer to the husband's side of the table. "They weren't that wild. Or that shocking."

"Come now," says the husband. "You can shock me. I won't tell."

Now she shrugs. "It really wasn't special. Time for new stories." Then she leaves, goes back upstairs.

The husband's own shrug, in response to the wife's raised eyebrows, is half nonchalant, half apologetic. "Jet lag? She's not usually like that."

The wife shrugs back. "I know." But does she? Does she really?

When Ava comes back down, the breakfast dishes are done and put away. She is dressed and ready, the scarf dark against the brightness of her hair. The husband will not lose her in a crowd, the wife thinks. He's always had it, this thing for redheads.

The wife is dark, like the husband, like the baby. Dark but pale, the skin over her stomach mottled with stretch marks. The student's stomach, no doubt, will still be soft and taut. When they walk the streets of Hampstead, the student and the husband will look like some kind of expedition—dark explorer and his flame-haired foreign prize.

The wife thinks about inviting herself along, bringing the baby. Instead she takes the baby to the park, and they stop at the home store on the way back and buy more blankets.

\*

To get to their house, you take the Northern line to Golders Green. Then you turn up North End Way, and ignore the vendors. Kindly, with a smile—that calmly aloof politeness which seems effortless to the native Brits but took the wife nearly half a year to perfect.

Then you walk up the street, past the shops, through the park's pedestrian bypass. It's a pretty park in the daytime, but not such a nice place at night. The husband tells the student to always take a cab back from the station.

Their house is down the first right after the park. Number fifty-three, shining yellow brass on the door. The wife wants to change the brass to sandstone, something that can hide amongst the growing chaos of the garden. The husband disagrees.

"I like the brass," he says. "It has character, like the house."

Almost all the houses on their street have brass nameplates. But the wife does not point this out. Instead, she shops at the flea markets, brings home this painting, that curio, bits and bobs, as they say. An oversized picnic table that sits

in their dining room, the wood dark cherry, the initials NM & DV scratched into one corner. A piano that sits in the third floor sitting room—the wife got it for free. One day, she'd like the daughter to play.

The husband hates the piano. Or not hates so much as mildly dislikes. This is because the piano sits where the hi-fi stereo was going to go, but the wife got there first, so there. The husband contents himself with derisive snorts in the sitting room and vague threats about a hi-fi next to the bed.

But Ava plays the piano. The wife discovers this on the third day of the student's visit, when the husband is at work. She is in the kitchen when she hears the strains of Chopin, and she is up the stairs and in the sitting room almost before she realizes it. She steps in, silently, and watches the student. Ava's fingers caress the keys, now quick, now slow, hard and soft, like a lover. She isn't wearing her scarf, and her shoulder curls inwards and then elongates as she moves her body in time to the music.

The wife stands, watching. The notes rise up and dance in the air, now slow, now fast, crescendo, higher, faster, there, *there*, and then a cascade of falling notes, so fast she can barely see the student's fingers, a mistake, almost, not quite, down, down, a supernova, and then back down to the quiet.

The wife leaves before the student can see her in the doorway. There is a pulse in her abdomen—her own little explosion of stars. She holds the railing for balance as she walks down the stairs.

\*

One night, a few days later, they leave the baby with a sitter and take the student out to dinner. They order dolmades and olives and sit outside—it is warm enough for the student, even without her scarf.

They talk about London, about family back home, about Ava's year in Australia.

"I loved it," the student says. "I did. But it wasn't..." and she waves a hand. "You know?"

"It's never all you expect it to be," says the husband. He holds the wife's hand under the table, strokes his thumb across her palm. He wants the student to go back to school. Yesterday, he told the wife he's afraid the student will stay, and settle, and marry an English man.

"It's a little early for that," the wife had said, annoyed. The student, she was sure, had more sense. The student liked nice teeth.

"I know about expectations," the student says now. She looks at the husband, then the wife. Her eyes are such a strange colour—so light a brown as to be almost gold. She shrugs, and she is once more just another person who doesn't know what to do. "Maybe this will fit."

"Maybe," echoes the wife. She orders them a round of ouzo and they toast. "Here's to the unknown."

That night, as they undress for bed, the wife brings it up.

"Maybe we should help Ava find a place."

"She's looking for work," says the husband. "Wait until she finds something."

"Plenty of people look for both at once," the wife says. She climbs into the bed and fluffs the pillows. The husband has one pillow, a long body one that he

always ends up hugging. The wife has four pillows, and she uses them all.

"Ava's in a tough spot," says the husband. "I told her we'd support her. You want me to take that away?"

"Fine," says the wife. "Never mind." She turns over, wiggles her toes beneath the sheet.

"And anyway, Laura," the husband says, "at least the piano's getting played."

\*

The wife imagines love letters. One day, at the library, she checks out a little grey book of ee cummings. Variations on I love you, I want you to do this and this and this to me.

When the wife was in grad school, back in the days when she edited abstracts and theses instead of stories and dreams, the husband wrote her a poem. He tucked it into her hand after an exam.

*I like the way  
your hair falls  
just so  
and your hands  
like butterflies  
travelling away from the flower*

The wife wore flowers in her hair at the wedding because of this poem.

The husband does not write anymore—or if he does, he doesn't write for the wife. Perhaps he gives poems to other students now. The wife leaves the ee cummings on her nightstand anyway. Just a reminder.

That day, the wife stops in Ava's room and asks her about the feature wall in the room. "Green," Ava says. She offers to help with the painting.

"I can do it," says the wife. "Unless you'd like to come and pick out the colour?"

"Seth is home early today," the student says. She wears a blue sweater, long-sleeved, tight across the chest. They call them jumpers here.

"Home early?" The wife is dressed in white, as usual.

"We're apartment hunting," the student says. She looks at her nails, the floorboards, the bed. "Seth said he'd take me."

"Oh." The wife runs her hands over the duvet.

"It might take a while," says Ava. As though the wife doesn't already know. "I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful."

"It's fine," the wife says. "Really."

Later, when the husband and the student are gone, the wife goes into the sitting room and sits at the piano. Years ago, she wrote love letters to the husband because she couldn't write poetry. Years ago, when he was her teacher and she was just another student, scarves bright against the darkness of her hair.

Now she has no idea where the letters are. She imagines them hiding, tied somewhere with a shoelace. An outpouring of something, reduced to words on a page. How sad.

The husband and the wife are both in the next picture. The husband stands behind the wife, smiling, his eyes closed, his nose half-buried in her hair. The wife's head is tilted back, her eyes also closed. A private picture, this one. It is the wife's favourite.

The student, looking at the picture, says nothing. She has found an apartment now, only a few days after they started searching, and in a few more days she will be gone. Her eyes are impassive, her smile benign. She moves to another picture, perhaps a little faster than the others, but that's it.

The wife, who has now fetched the baby and is holding her in her lap, feels a faint tug of disappointment. Something waits inside of her, her very own supernova, crescendo, explosion. If she went to the piano right now, something would come out of her and sing into the keys.

"I like this one," the student says. She points to a picture of the husband and the wife, facing each other.

The wife looks over, shifts the baby. "Yes," she says. "So do I."

The student smiles—a half-smile, a grimace, the wife can't be sure. Her cheeks are flushed and her eyes are bright like the baby's. She flicks through the stack again. A sideways shot now, close-up on the wife's stomach. The husband leans forward, his lips pressed to the skin just above her navel.

"This one," the student says, and her voice shakes the tiniest, infinitesimal bit. "This is beautiful."

"Isn't it?" says the wife.

The student looks up. "Laura," she says.

"Yes." She looks the student in the eye this time. It's been so long. Yes.

"I don't want to go. I can't."

"I know," says the wife, and she lays her thumb against Ava's cheekbone. Feverish, yes. And smooth, like she remembers. The student shakes beneath her hand. Then the wife raises her hand, and the shaking stops.

"You have to leave," she says. She thinks of the husband, oblivious at work. And as Ava nods, denial and acceptance all at once, something ignites in the wife's solar plexus, a shockwave, stars that skitter their way through her veins. Then, as always, there is the fading, an ebbing of the rush, and a curious blankness, as she begins to wonder what the house will be like when Ava isn't there.

## KING ARTHUR ON FIRE

### I

We all used to cram into seats on the left side of the bus. Some kids who got on at later stops had to stand in the aisle and look over our heads and shoulders. The driver's name was Helga and she'd turn off Spruce and onto Katherine Avenue and ask if we were excited. Only the little kids answered. They'd yell yes or yah or yaw or yay in shrill voices while the older kids kept focused on the water-stained windows.

The Greys lived at the end of Katherine. Their house was third from Yonge. It was a medium-sized two-storey with ecru-coloured bricks narrowly sectioned by three A-framed rooftops, all of which had umber slates, bird's nests on the chimneys, and wind chimes fixed into the eaves, but we hadn't noticed any of that yet. All we ever saw were the three men out front. They weren't real. Mr. Grey had built them out of maple boards, wooden spools, and wire hangers he'd distorted to form ribcages. Their bodies were draped in cast-off clothing, with nylon heads and hands stuffed with cotton. Their nylon skin was grey. That's why we called the family The Greys. We didn't know their real name.

Mr. Grey was a black man who wore a beaver felt hat so a lot of people thought he was crazy. He'd be up every Monday morning before the sun, out on his front lawn in the dark with his coffee and cigarette and gut bulging out of an open bathrobe as he strutted flatfooted across the grass to set the men in position. It was something different every week, a new stance to reflect the titles and lyrics of well-known songs. Like the time Mr. Grey had the men assembled in a row in a claw tub on the grass. There was a sign set on a painting easel beside them that read *Splish, splash, I was takin' a bath* in black acrylic. Or another time, on the verge of one particularly heavy April shower, we witnessed the three men huddled under a spiralled umbrella, the sign sheltered under a pop-up canopy, the words on the sign warning *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* in purple pastel. Or once, the three men had been decorated with angry melton eyebrows, wearing flat bill hats and black hooded sweatshirts, big gold chains and grills, and the sign spelled *AIN'T NUTHIN' BUT A G THANG* in glue and glitter.

Ain't nuthin' but a G thang, said Quinlynn, as she tapped four fingers against her window and exhaled, drawing a G on the fog on the glass.

On one occasion, Mr. Grey even went as far as to include himself in the installation. He'd set the three men around a big Styrofoam cake, festooned them with cone hats and a bouquet of helium balloons. Then Mr. Grey positioned himself apart from the three men, maybe four metres away, or five, six-ish. He wore a poncho with a kaleidoscopic design on the front, and lime-coloured, lensless cat-eye glasses, and a cone hat like the others, only his was bent at the peak. He stood with his shoulders bobbing as he rubbed two fists into his

eyeballs and pretended to sob.

The sign said *It's my party and I'll cry if I want to*.

We debated long and hard about it for many hours that day at school. All three recesses squandered by questions like: Does he stand out there all day? Is he still there now? Why didn't he set up one of the men to cry instead of himself? Won't his eyes get sore?

Sophie rolled her own eyes and *tsked* and said, God, Mr. Grey is so weird.

No, said Quinlynn, her voice fluttering because she was jumping rope. Mr. Grey's not weird one bit, Soph. He's an artist.

## II

Quinlynn and Sophie were my two best friends when I was ten, which was two decades ago, but I still see them plain and clear—Quinlynn folding bologna and biting a hole in the middle, Sophie with oleander-shaped beads in her hair, Quinlynn tonguing the inside of her left cheek as she drew pictures of pine trees, rocket ships, flowers, tombstones, Sophie eating garlic croutons out of a freezer bag, Quinlynn this, Sophie that, on and on as if they are still right there.

We first spoke on the bus, which drove past The Greys' one fall morning, the three men clad in fur coats and monster masks, carrying pumpkin-printed pillowcases beside a sign that said *I want candy*. Quinlynn read it out loud, as she always did, and I happened to be finger-scooping my way through a packet of Fun Dip at that moment, so I handed it to her, and Sophie saw and laughed, and then we all laughed, together, and started walking with our arms interlocked from then on. And doing other things too, almost everything. Swapping sandwich meats, trading barrettes. Arguing over who was going to marry Jonathan Brandis first. We'd even pee together, squatted in a triangle in the forest near Quinlynn's house, back to back to back with our pants tight around our ankle bracelets, giggling at the static sound of us spraying against the dried leaves.

Quinlynn said her father once beat her with a rolled-up towel.

Sophie said she masturbated.

I said I slept with the overhead light on.

We confessed these secrets under the slide at the Lester B. Pearson playground, seated on the mulch. Put our pinkies in to swear we'd never tell, and shook on it, hooked to one another. Then we got up and played. It was the time of tag and grounders. Hide-the-name-of-the-boy-you-like-and-go-peek. Truth or dare on occasion, four square on others. We even Stella Ella Olad like we were five. Prank-called mean girl Rosie Payne to call her a no-good chubby lesbian prostitute. Electronic Mall Madness at my house, Super Mario Brothers and Duck Hunt on Sophie's NES.

I admitted I cried at the town play production of *Rumpelstiltskin*.

Sophie said she stole fifteen dollars, three Werther's Originals, mascara, and skin cream off her grandmother's vanity.

Quinlynn said she used to live beside a little boy who died and she saw the dead body and ever since then the boy's bludgeoned body floated in her dreams.

We carved some of these secrets and others into the underside of the black

walnut planks that made up the playground's bridge. Then we crossed them out, let the secrets live there under the scratches we cut with a pointed nail file attached to Sophie's keychain. She kept the file on her as commonly as we wore underwear, shaping her nails under the desk at school, or using it to scrape down a wart she had on her thumb. Or for scratching secrets into wood.

Guys. You guys. I'm gonna start smoking.

I remember when she told us. It was the most full-fledged secret yet. We were seated under the ash tree in the field next to the playground, Sophie presenting us with a quarter-full carton of cigarettes she'd stolen from her grandmother's James Dean cookie jar, planting one at the corner of her wily grin, then grinning wider.

My dad smokes, said Quinlynn. My Uncle Tony used to.

Sophie lit the cigarette with a barbeque lighter she'd had holstered in one of the belt loops of her flared jeans. Inhaled, and coughed twice, patted her belly as if her appetite had been satisfied. Inhaled again, coughed. What I love's the taste, she said.

I think Carver started smoking too, said Quinlynn. He's in high school this year and he's been smelling lots like Dad lately.

It's bad for you to smoke, I said to Sophie. Like, it's always bad, but especially like right now, cause we haven't gone through puberty yet. They say if you smoke before and when you're going through puberty, like, as you're growing boobs and getting bigger and all that, then your chance of getting cancer's like doubled. It gets, like tripled.

Sophie's eyes rolled from me to Quinlynn to the playground, where a group of teenagers with baggy pants and metalhead mullets were applauding one of their own as he fingered the back of his tongue, gagging, eventually barfing onto one of the baby swings. They all cheered and fist-bumped one another. Most were smoking cigarettes.

Sophie said she only planned to smoke until she turned twenty-five. Because that's when I'm gonna have my first baby, she explained, and it's bad to smoke when you're pregs because the baby can come out sickish with crummy asthma lungs. I don't wanna hurt my baby. I want it to be strong and look like Jonathan Brandis. I don't want it to be ugly and retarded. And oh! Also, it's bad to say things are retarded, because if you do, your baby will come out retarded.

I don't ever, ever want a baby, I said. They come out the vagina. Your vagina. Whole baby bodies making your vagina as big as a baby.

Baby, Quinlynn repeated, then started humming. They call me Baby Driver. Call you what? I said.

They call me Baby Driver, she said again, or sang it; she was sort-of-singing, always finding a way to sing-steer our conversation back to what mattered most to her: Mr. Grey, the three men, the titles and lyrics of songs we'd stockpile in our heads until 5 p.m. when our parents returned from work and explained where the words came from.

They call me Baby Driver, I repeated to my father that night.

Simon and Garfunkel, he replied. Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel.

I told him the three men had been dressed in diapers that day. Hairless.

Bright blue baby bibs. They were sucking soothers. Packed into one of those red Fisher Price cars with the yellow hood, a mass of plush limbs hanging out the front, sides, and back of it.

I see, said my father. But he didn't see. He swivelled his chair back to his Sudoku and examined the squares less quizzically than he did me. Tapped the puzzle with his pen ten times and bit the cap off the back and held it in his mouth and breathed through the hole, forcing a soft, strained whistle. Give me a minute, Sarah. Just a few more minutes. You're cutting into yer Dad's me-time here.

Mr. Grey's an artist, I told him. I'd stolen the statement from Quinlynn, but my father didn't know. He tapped his pen three more times, then drew a circle, gave the circle a smile and a pair of black shades, straight lines poking out all around it, encircling the circle. It was a sun with sunglasses on.

Me too, exclaimed my father. I'm an artist too.

He is! I yelled. Then I let him have his me-time so I could go have some of my own. I ran upstairs two steps at a time, to my bedroom, where I made my bed and then lay on the floor. And thought about how lucky we were to still be small enough to see how big those three men truly were. They were inimitable, high over everything. A snowflake that felt as though it was drifting only onto us.

### III

It was a Monday in mid-May. The bus stopped in front of Quinlynn's house on Spruce. She boarded with the twins, and a couple other kids, and then took her usual spot next to Sophie on the seat behind mine. Helga drove past Mark Street and Maple and turned onto Katherine and asked if we were excited and the little kids said they were, like always, and the big kids just sat there silently, like always too.

Maybe it was the sun, how it settled too close to the horizon that morning, its light barren, blocked by trees and pressing lumps of shadow on everything, because I knew something was off, even before I saw what.

There was nothing on The Greys' lawn. No men, no painting easel. Only plotter paper curved around a garbage can at the roadside with red words scrawled across.

*they were stolen!!*

Quinlynn read it out loud. Then asked, What was? as if it wasn't clear.

We turned onto Yonge. Kids in the aisle returned to their seats on the right side of the bus. Some of the younger ones wept. Helga said, It's all good! Everything's all good-good-good!

Good. So we didn't discuss it. The day and week progressed as we jumped rope and drew hopscotch squares in silence. Pitched in quarters and nickels to buy wine gums in silence. Practiced triple jump, read to reading buddies, wrote on our arms and in our agendas, on Kristen Steep's leg cast, on the mirrors in the girls' washrooms with Sophie's grandmother's lipstick, all without words. And then fell asleep at night to the crash of it: this dearth of conversation. Its volume

mushroomed in the dark. Made our friendship feel contaminated. The men were gone. Sophie smoked cigarettes and no one cared.

The following Monday, Helga asked again—Are you excited?—and the little kids answered as if the previous week hadn't happened. But when we looked out the window there were still no men, no sign. Only Mr. Grey in his thermal underwear and beaver felt hat. He stood buried to his thighs in a hole he'd dug with a trenching shovel, the muddy instrument held over his shoulder as he watched the bus pass.

Jesus, said Sophie. What the heck's he doing?

Yeah, what's he doing? I asked Quinlynn, because she was an artist too, but her attention kept pressed to the window. It wasn't until we arrived at the bus loop in front of school that she managed to turn her gape back to us and say what felt like the first thing she'd said since the men disappeared.

My mom thinks we should write a note to tell Mr. Grey we liked what he did.

What he did? I said.

To thank him for it, she said.

Blerg. Why even bother? said Sophie.

That weekend, we convened at Quinlynn's, the three of us gathered on one side of the kitchen table, attempting to write something grown-up and grateful, replete with meaning. Mrs. Beally served tuna fish on saltine crackers as we worked. A pitcher of cold water with a lemongrass teabag inside. Quinlynn inscribed *Dearest Mister Grey* as we ate and drank, and then crossed it out because we remembered that wasn't his real name. Dear... The crackers were stale but I was hungry. Quinlynn sighed and said, What should we say? By the time the pitcher was empty the paper was still mostly blank. Quinlynn let her face fall into the fold of her arms on the table, then hammered the letter with her fist. She'd written *To whom it may concern*, and underneath that, nothing.

God I'm buh-buh-bluh-blored, Sophie sighed.

I suggested Quinlynn draw a picture for Mr. Grey instead. She was talented, the only student Mrs. Croker regularly referred to as a peewee-Francis Bacon.

How about you draw him a picture of the three men? I said. That way he'll, like, have something to look at whenever he gets sad they got taken.

She agreed it was a decent idea. Rushed out of the kitchen and returned shortly with art paper. Pressed her tongue against her cheek and drew a picture of her baby sister Birdie eating oatmeal in a high chair. She used a mechanical pencil. She crosshatched instead of shaded. Added an explosion of circles surrounding Birdie's body that I think were supposed to be snowflakes. Then scribbled *Baby, it's cold outside* at the bottom of the page, even though it was a spring that felt like summer. Then she flipped it over so we could sign our names on the back in blue crayon.

*Quinlynn, Sarah, SOPHIE xoxoxo*

I didn't know how to draw the men because they always looked different, she said.

I think he'll like this better, I said.

The Greys lived three blocks down the road. We marched under the

reverberated chug of electric mowers, that hot smell of clumps of cut grass. We moved with a new sense of purpose. Sandals clapping sidewalk. Sophie smoking a cigarette, Quinlynn cradling her art in a manila envelope, and me, imagining what Mr. Grey might do upon receiving it. Would he invite us inside his home? Would his wife bake us cookies? Macaroons? A plate of snickerdoodles?

We arrived at the end of their driveway, which appeared pulverized. As if someone had taken a jackhammer to it. What the F? said Sophie. Has it always been like this?

It's so hot out, I replied. As if heat could cause such damage.

As if heat could be responsible for the other things as well. Like solidified bird droppings on the plumbing vent, or water damage and cat-scratched glass. That stench of something, coming from somewhere.

A honey locust growing on their lawn. Its wilted limbs sagged over the hole Mr. Grey had dug, with a hundred skeletal branches curved like arthritic fingers, pointed everywhere, accusing everyone. I wondered how long such things had been there: the bird droppings and accusations. Were they new, or something we'd failed to notice until now?

I blamed it on the heat. I used my hand as a fan. We stepped over the fissures in the pavement. There was a dead squirrel close to the walkway. Most of its remains had been lacerated, but its head was still in one piece. We stood and stared at the squirrel, the pavement, our toes painted puke green. Sophie said she couldn't do it. I can't. I, just can't. She'd decided she didn't want to see Mr. Grey anymore, so she hurried back down to the sidewalk where she waited with her head hung, beaded blond tresses drooped in front of her face.

I looked at Quinlynn. Her hair was pulled back, a rare thing.

I keep thinking they'll be in there, she said.

Who will?

The men, she said.

I counted the scars on her forehead. There were a lot. They were the same size as the snowflakes in her drawing. She looked at the squirrel. I counted six, seven scars. She said, I keep thinking the men'll answer the door, you know? They'll tell us not to worry. *We were found*, they'll say. *We were found. Don't worry.* They'll be real, Sarah. I can see them real. They're moving and blinking and everything. They'll be talking to us, real and alive. Do you get it?

I didn't like being where I was all of a sudden. I decided once I reached fifteen scars I'd go join Sophie on the sidewalk. Create good distance between me and the house, that slaughtered squirrel, and any of the scary things Quinlynn was saying.

Twelve, thirteen, fourteen scars.

Are we even at the right stupid place? yelled Sophie.

Quinlynn rang the bell, which *bonged*. The door grated open. Mr. and Mrs. Grey stood side by side as if attached at the fleshy hip. They answered Yes? in unison, carrying the s too long, a whistle out the gaps each had in their teeth. They were older than I'd thought. From the bus Mr. Grey had appeared my father's age, but up close, he was elderly. Black skin cracked with a crisscross of deep-set wrinkles. I followed the lines on his face like they belonged to a maze I

was trying to get out of.

Mrs. Grey hunched with her hands in the pouch of her apron. She was round, borderline circular. She licked the white whiskers over her upper lip with an equally whitened tongue. What'cha got there? she asked Quinlynn, who shuffled one step back, clutching the envelope tighter to her T-shirt. Mr. Grey then lifted his hat. He held it upside down in front of his belly and asked Quinlynn to drop the envelope inside. She shook her head as he nodded his. A glob of something meaty in his hair. It slopped down his face and got caught in his caterpillar eyebrows, stained the front of his I HEART NIAGARA FALLS sleeveless sweater.

Oh John, sang Mrs. Grey as she delightedly clawed the shepherd's pie from her husband's curls. Some of it dropping, plopping. A splatter of mashed potato on the straw doormat. The sound of Mrs. Grey sucking food off her fingers. And then that whimsical song of wind chimes as Quinlynn turned and started running, almost stepping on the squirrel but managing to dodge it, a soft whimper through the air until she landed and stood bent and breathing next to Sophie on the sidewalk. I looked back at The Greys. There was a sliver of space between them. A view inside their squalid home. The front hall strewn with body parts: arms, legs, decapitated cotton-stuffed heads, in tatters, tears in the grey nylon, torn. More failed attempts at people.

Sarah! Sarah, let's go!

Mrs. Grey rested a hand on my shoulder and asked if I was okay. I told myself I was. Tilted my eyes to see her husband from the ground up. Those bare feet and piss-stained long johns, his love for Niagara Falls, that shamballa cross necklace, scarred philtrum, and eyes, sunken and yellowed, and then the shepherd's pie.

We-like-really-really-liked-the-things-you-used-to-like-do, I almost finished saying. But my body had turned before the sentence was through, and I was making my escape, across the grass and past the hole in the lawn, which was deeper now, six feet underground with a heap of body parts inside. Some were kid-sized, our size.

We ran side by side by side down Katherine but kept having to stop because of Sophie's sandals slipping off. She yelled Whoore! each time. That's how her father pronounced whore. Stupid whoore bitch-ass sandals! she'd say.

Back on Spruce we stood in a small triangle to catch our breath. Quinlynn whipped the envelope against the ground. It smacked flat. She picked it up and wiped the grit off with her arm. Ripped the seal, pulled out the drawing—her baby sister Birdie eating oatmeal in the snow as the sun burned carrot orange above us. I hate it so much, she said. A car was coming so we moved to the sidewalk. There was a ghost carved into one of the squares. It was a cartoon ghost, the bed-sheet kind, not the scary human kind. I wondered if it was someone's secret. We looked at the ghost like we did the squirrel. Eventually Sophie suggested we go light Quinlynn's drawing on fire. It was stupid but it was something.

She pulled a catalytic lighter from her pocket. She lit a cigarette and smoked as we walked, while describing a book her father had recently read her about

King Arthur. She said King Arthur had been laid to rest on a funeral pyre. There was a picture in the book of a wooden structure floating on water, and another of it after being set ablaze by a flaming arrow. She suggested we make our own pyre out of grass and twigs and other things.

We travelled by foot and bus to Salamander Pond where the water was mucky brown inside a boundary of mud and reed grass. There were dragonflies, larvae. We continued down the damp shore covering half the pond's perimeter before Sophie yelled, Faaaack! No more walking. I'm gonna die. My ankles are killing.

We stood in a triangle; there was no other shape. Quinlynn held the picture in her fingers and shook. I moved closer. Our triangle angled more acutely. I began braiding her hair. Sophie used her nail file to cut the grass. She piled the strands in intersecting sets. She also included a quarter-cigarette, three Double Bubble wrappers, and her change purse, which was dollar store-bought, stitched out of tacky multihued lining fabric, and coinless. The finished pyre was the size of a cereal box.

It looks real, I said as if I knew.

It is, Sophie replied.

This is pointless, said Quinlynn. She put the picture on the pyre.

Sophie tried setting fire to the grass first but the strands wouldn't catch. She tried setting fire to the purse. That overcooked smell of the fabric, a smooth skid of inky smoke. But nothing lit. It was all burn, no fire. Quinlynn kicked the pyre, the picture. She played soccer with the drawing until the corner patted the water, signature-side up.

Stop it, I yelled. Then, to quote Helga: It's all good. Good-good-good.

The water pulled the paper off the shore, and it floated there, ugly, real ugly, saturated with singed edges. Quinlynn stomped the change purse. Her drawing sank. The braid in her hair untwisted. Her hands punched nothing, or the tips of the reed grass. Sophie rolled her eyes, but there were tears in them. I tried to spot baby Birdie in the snow but the water was too murky. Quinlynn continued to take it out on the surrounding area. Our triangle kept bending more obtusely until we were all standing really far apart.

## IV

I hadn't thought about it in a long time. But recently I was on my way to visit my sister-in-law in Thornhill, driving through Aurora, past Katherine Avenue, when the memory hit me in the eyes and ears and everything went dark and quiet. I practically yelled at Douglas to turn. He made a sharp right onto Katherine, and decelerated, coincidentally braking right in front of The Greys' crumbling driveway.

I don't know what I'd been expecting in those brief seconds between the turn and the house, but there it stood. Nothing had been repaired, nothing had gotten worse. It was a house encumbered by the weight of two decades worth of stagnancy—a relic.

I told Douglas the story. He kept his hands on the wheel and nodded.

Perhaps it was a sad story because at the end of it he told me he loved me. Then he listened to the radio while I listened for the chime of bicycle bells being dinged in the distance. The distorted jingle of an old ice cream truck. Springs bending from boys bouncing on a trampoline. The pitter-patter of flip-flopped girls running, somewhere.

How odd would it have been to have arrived and seen us standing there. Homemade mannequins of three ten-year-olds, now three-quarters of the way to middle age. Quinlynn with her new blunt bangs and apricot crochet hippy boho clothing, an eight-year-old daughter at her side, a fiancé who works security at the AGO and is not the girl's biological father, the three of them posed to the left side of the lawn with a dog and grey Sedan and Parcheesi board and bed of dandelions germinating at their ankles. And me. Positioned beside my balding, beer-gutted husband to the right of the lawn under the dying honey locust. We are childless. We each carry a tall glass of red wine. Or perhaps I'm carrying both glasses, and working for the government, with wrinkles around my mouth, and on my forehead, and at the corners of my button eyes. Me and my two empty glasses, imploding, because my balding, beer-gutted husband is fucking a high school French teacher with an adorably contrived French accent and I'm pretending not to know, or mind.

Sarah? Muffin? he said. You hear me?

Then there's Sophie, set in the middle where the hole used to be. Ten. Still ten because I haven't been able to discover her online, see who she is now, place her face on adulthood. So she stands stationary as the house. A young girl sucking a cigarette, rolling her eyes at something dumb. Me, most likely.

The sign on the easel says *It's the end of the world as we know it.*

Muffin? Sarah? We good to go?

The last time a sign had been left on The Greys' lawn was two Mondays after the men disappeared. The sign read *Thank you.* For what? I wondered. For caring enough to look? I waited for Quinlynn to read the words aloud. When she didn't, I turned on my knees on my seat and looked back at her and Sophie. Neither of them was looking out the window. Sophie read a *Tiger Beat* while Quinlynn sat fixated on the back of my seat. Both their faces were devoid of colour, sanguinity bled dry.

I carved it under the bridge on the playground that week, the thing about their faces. I also carved that I missed them. I used my father's slot-headed screwdriver. It worked better than the nail file, but a couple months after, a group of teenagers poured gasoline on the swings and slide and mulch, and burned the whole playground down.

*Marina Moretti*

*English translation by Patricia Hanley*

## LEGGENDO SEAMUS HEANEY

*M'incanta il bardo*

—*le antiche regine*  
*aprono gli occhi nel gelo delle torbiere*  
*il loro petto di carne sussulta*

*e improvvisa viene*

*la domanda di noi*  
*del nostro fondamento*

*quali regine nelle nostre torbiere?*  
*quali i sacrificati?*

*Il pensiero è un punto triste della costa*  
*dove neanche i pesci vogliono andare*

—*oggi San Sabba immemore*  
*piglia sole tra barche stantie*  
*nel piccolo attracco della zona industriale*  
*e i camion movimentano merci sulle banchine*

*dove un tempo scaricavano*  
*giorno e sera casse di cenere ed ossa*  
*i cittadini bruciati della Risiera.*

## READING SEAMUS HEANEY

I'm bewitched by the bard  
    —the ancient queens  
opening their eyes in frozen bogs  
the startled flesh of their breasts

and suddenly  
    we are being asked  
what we are founded on

which queens in our bogs?  
which ones sacrificed?

The thought reveals the sad state of a coast  
where even the fish refuse to swim in its waters

    —today, San Sabba, oblivious  
catches the sunlight between derelict boats  
at a small mooring of the industrial zone  
and trucks that cart their goods along its banks

*where once, both day and night*  
crates of ash and bone discharged  
the burnt citizens of the Risiera.



It has already swamped the orchestra,  
is lapping at our feet.

You float upon it, alone  
sinking into your final

well-attended  
performance

visible from space.

## TAR SONGS: IN THE MINES OF MORDOR

A fox still lives.

She sits and waits, eyes moving,  
brush tucked, curled close.

Patches of her coat are missing,  
her ribs stand out.

She is the wrack of the boreal,  
what remains

once swaths of pine and  
peat moss are

flayed, the massive pits  
gouged.

They gape around her now;

trucks belching diesel swarm  
within

toys on the run from  
some flailing, land-locked

leviathan whose  
*breath sets coals ablaze.*

*Firebrands stream from his mouth.*

*Smoke pours out from his nostrils.*

The fox sits and waits, panting lightly.  
Eyes avid, brush tucked.

Every now and then, drivers toss  
a bit of sandwich to the tiny form

below, laugh as she darts in  
to scarf it up. They make bets

as to who will be the first  
to crush her.

*The story of this fox is owing to Mike Mercredi, Dene, from Fort Chip. Passages in italics are drawn from The Book of Job.*

## GRIEF

That was the winter the tide rose  
so high the house and cedars  
went underwater. The little light left  
was green. It was hard to move,  
every step a push against sea water.

When I climbed into the car  
to drive to higher ground  
the steering wheel was gone,  
an octopus in its place.  
I couldn't see out  
the window for tentacles.

Cedar boughs swung soundlessly.  
Sword ferns alone seemed at home.

I don't remember when the tide  
turned and withdrew,  
only that white rings of barnacles  
hold fast to my bathroom wall.

## DE FACTO

After her flu, there are blue cars  
and green cars in the street;  
there is a wheel clicking on a film projector  
in a boring room. In the frames,  
the blossoms of the garden are on fire.  
My little girl is there, standing stock still  
on the grass designed for hot and dry  
afternoons. She is feverish inside the coat  
her mother wore as a toddler, back when  
songs grew wild on long ribbons and adults  
drove in rusty automobiles that smelled  
of winter. But this is today, the day after  
the hospital and everything is wrong.  
I pull her close, point at the flowers  
submersed in the street puddles, tell her:  
*they want so badly to speak in tongues.* I don't  
say this. Nothing of the sort, yet  
this is the frame I will haunt for a while:  
she and I in the front yard, the sepia  
around us suggesting that although  
it has rained we are always  
a single dry gust  
from God.

## THE DATE

*I'll know you when I see you*

Doreen typed to Sean, despite the fact that he wore a mask in his profile picture.

*I feel like I know you already :)*

She hit Enter.

She watched the clock in the corner of her computer screen.

8:23.

8:24.

8:25.

*Saturday then?* he responded.

She exhaled.

Paused.

Then typed *Saturday then* into the message box, appending an exclamation point then deleting it, afraid she'd already betrayed too much giddiness with the smiley face. She didn't want him to think her desperate and childish.

And she did, somehow, know it was him when he stepped into the restaurant and shook the rain off his yellow umbrella. The colour was like an electric middle finger to the drab greys of the November suits and overcoats that shifted and sighed on barstools with their backs to the door. Her wineglass clicked against her teeth. She wanted to bite through and crunch the glistening shards between her molars, grind them up, taste the blood, anything to keep her looking calm and cool on the outside.

Sean shook his umbrella dry, the yellow catching the eyes of diners who turned to see and didn't turn away. *There's just something about that guy*, she could hear them thinking. *A real spark*. She'd known it. Known it the first time they Clinked. The restaurant's host gave Sean a warm slap on the shoulder. He was clearly a regular, which thrilled Doreen even more since the place was new, expensive, and had a signless alleyway entrance. Sean and the host chatted as Sean slipped his umbrella into the stand and handed over his well-tailored coat. He yanked his cap firmly down onto his forehead. He'd not be giving it up. Doreen locked her jaw to keep from biting through her glass as the host led Sean to her table.

"Doreen?" He hovered above her.

"Sean! Yes—it's me. I knew I'd know it was you! Remember how I said? And as soon as you came in, I was like, 'That's him!' So." Her hand trembled as she took another drink.

Sean ironed his magenta tie flat as he sat down and tucked his chair close to the table. He was saying *apologies* and *taxi* and *the office* and *King Street a mess*, but she didn't quite hear it all.

"Sure. This time of day," she managed in a small voice. She concentrated on placing her glass back down on the table so it wouldn't fall from her hands and smash to bits on the reclaimed barnwood floor.

*Take the edge off and great cocktails here and try something new for a change,* he said as he picked up the drink list, scanning it with his small wide-apart eyes. He held it up in the casual way a celebrity might, someone in the habit of blocking unwanted attention, but permitted Doreen an unhindered view of his features. Such as they were. Now that candlelight blotted away the shadow that had fallen from his hat, Doreen saw that Sean did not have a face.

"You've got to try Clink," Gretchen had said three weeks before, when she and Faisel came home to find a sodden Doreen sitting on the floor in the dark living room, swigging whiskey sours. "Remember Alma? That's how she met Harvey. Or Marvin. Whatever his name is." She lit a joint and opened the balcony door a crack. "Look at them now!"

Alma from the office who was pregnant with twins. Alma who had been proposed to at the company Christmas party, Harvey sweating through his suit-jacket and stumbling over a taped-down wire on his way to sing a cappella at the podium, a damp speech in his hand. Everyone had cried.

"Hmm." Doreen threw back the final drops of her drink and pressed her eyes shut as Faisel flicked on the light. She'd finished the pinot grigio in the fridge and had found only rum and whiskey in the cupboard, but the former had made her think of Cuba where she and Connor were supposed to go for their honeymoon, before he'd left her for his business partner.

*She's, I don't know, happy,* Connor had said when he broke it off, his face in his hands so he couldn't see Doreen writhing on the ornamental rug. *It's like, what you see is what you get.*

*Happy? Happy!? What does that even mean? Happy. No one is 'happy' all the time.*

*That's not true. She meditates.*

"Everyone meets online now, Dor," Gretchen said, blowing a spectre of blue smoke out the balcony door. "It's not like it was. That's how we hooked up." She jutted her chin over at Faisel, who'd been texting since they came in. He worked in film or television, his thumbs dancing ceaselessly on his iPhone.

"It's true," he said without looking up. "I've heard good things about Clink."

Doreen knew he'd say anything to get her out of Gretchen's condo, where she'd been staying since her break-up.

"Seriously. A guy I work with is on it," he went on. "He's a good guy, like, not at all trash. Just divorced is all." He walked over to Gretchen to take a pull off her joint, then continued, holding in the smoke. "Or maybe his wife died. Cancer or something. Anyway, good guy." His phone chirped. He smiled at whatever was on his screen and exhaled into the living room.

Sean tapped his menu and said to the waiter, "Steak frites. Don't even know why I bother looking. Creature of habit."

Clink cost five hundred dollars to join, so Doreen had figured the people

on it were serious. Or rich. She saw a preview of some of the men and they were nice-looking. They had white smiles. They had jobs in offices and weren't drunk or overly tanned or in Cancun in their profile pictures. It had taken her almost two hours to fill out the questionnaire, and at the end of it, after a brief processing pause, the algorithm spat out the first of her six matches.

Sean.

He was holding a carved wooden mask over his face in the picture, backdropped by lush green foliage.

"And for you?" the waiter asked.

It was his hobby, Sean had told her the first time they talked on the phone. Seeking out isolated populations around the world. It started when he was young, when his family skipped from continent to continent with his father, a mining engineer. *Sounds like an expensive hobby*, she'd said. He'd laughed, thoughtfully. Almost apologetically. *More like a labour of love, I guess.*

"Miss?"

Where Sean's nose and cheeks should have been his skin was stretched taut, his mouth a lipless slit, his eyes two far-apart watery black beads. He held a neatly folded napkin to his chin as he sipped his ice water, careful to catch what dribbled from the corners of his mouth, then looked out the window at the lashing rain. His profile a plane of skin.

"Perhaps you'd be interested in our catch tonight," the waiter was saying. "Mahi-mahi, flown in from Hawaii this morning. The chef has prepared it with a coulis of—"

"Sure," Doreen said, shoving her menu at him. "Could you tell me where the washroom is?"

She was trying not to gag. She wanted to bolt. She wanted her money back. She wanted to pound Gretchen and Faisal into the ground with a mallet.

A bottle of champagne arrived before she had a chance to get up.

"This is from Jasmine," the host said as he placed two flutes on the table. "The owner," he explained quickly to Doreen. "For our esteemed guest this evening." He smiled at Sean as he untwisted the metal cap and draped a white napkin over the cork to catch it as it popped. He poured their two glasses and left the bottle in a silver bucket beside them, nodding deferentially at Sean as he departed.

"Cheers," said Sean, tilting his flute toward Doreen. "It's great to finally meet you in person." He waited a few beats to see if she would lift her glass, then tapped it with his anyway. "Well. *Salut.*"

He dabbed his chin with his napkin in the quiet that followed. "Okay. Well, I've managed to compress this to a few sentences."

She stared at the tiny rising bubbles in her glass, her mouth hanging open a crack.

"I was fourteen," he said. "Living in Liberia. I'd been in an argument with my stepmother—she'd 'accidentally' let my pet monkey escape that morning. I took off on my bike and pedalled for miles to the site where my dad was working. I was going to tell him I was moving back to Canada to live with my mother. I'd heard she was in Calgary somewhere. I remember speeding along the

dirt roads, weaving around the potholes, thinking of what I needed to pack—my camera, baseball cards, the few things that came with me everywhere. I rode right in past the security gates and could see my father's blue hard hat in the distance around the other side of a big pit. And that's the last thing I remember seeing." He paused, twisting the stem of his glass. "They said later they let me through the gates because of who my father was. Chief Engineer of Explosives. They didn't want to lose their jobs." He lifted his champagne glass. "Anyway, twenty years and twenty-four surgeries later, here we are," he said, clinking their glasses again. He didn't wait for her this time and took a swig, napkin at his chin. He nodded when she excused herself to go to the washroom. As soon as she slid the lock into the stall door, she texted Gretchen.

*Today 7:38pm*

Help! He's a freak! He doesn't have a face!!!

*Today 7:40pm*

WHAT!??

*Today 7:40pm*

NO. FACE. Some kind of explosion.  
Hence mask in picture.

*Today 7:41pm*

Your lying!!!

*Today 7:41pm*

No!!! How??? Need to get out of here. In bathroom but no escape window

*Today 7:43pm*

Hello???

*Today 7:45pm*

HELLO???! This is YOUR FAULT

*Today 7:46pm*

Sorry. Faisal called...don't leave! Think of the story you can tell after!! It's just dinner. You dont have to fuck him.

*Today 7:47pm*

;P

*Today 7:47pm*

Ahhhhh! Going to puke!

*Today 7:48pm*  
Seriously!!! HELP ME.

*Today 7:49pm*  
Faisel agrees. Don't go.

*Today 7:50pm*  
ALSO - I know your not a mean person!! Cant judge a book by its cover etc. Haha

*Today 7:51pm*  
Fuck. FUCK!! Okay. Just dinner. But that's it. and I want my money back!!!

When Doreen stepped out of the washroom, Sean was looking out at the rain with his hands folded, barely moving, the two glasses of champagne on the table in front of him. His singular loneliness was unfathomable to her. She inhaled and went back to her chair.

"Sorry, I..." She realized she hadn't come up with an excuse for why she'd been gone so long. "A friend called. She needed my help."

He pressed his mouth slits together. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah." She smoothed her napkin over her lap. "Wasn't an emergency or anything." She winced and took a swig of champagne. "Cheers."

"I'm just glad you decided to come back," he said, clinking her glass as a waiter laid their plates in front of them. "That doesn't always happen."

The host brought over a bottle of red wine and turned the label toward Sean. "Our sommelier says this is exquisite with the steak. It's a '93 first-growth Bordeaux. New to our cellar." He poured a small amount in a glass to taste. "He's available if you have any questions, Mr. Roche."

Sean swished it around his mouth and nodded his approval. The host filled their wineglasses and backed gallantly away.

"So what's the deal?" Doreen asked. "You some kind of movie star or something?"

Sean took a small bite of steak and had a sip of wine, then dabbed at his mouth and chin with his napkin. "My business had its IPO this week. It went better than expected."

"Oh?" She looked from her plate to the rain outside the window. If she squinted to make things blurry and concentrated on seeing him with only her peripheral vision, he could look almost normal.

"Just an internet thing. Behind-the-scenes programming. I won't bore you with the nerdy details."

He said he wanted to talk about her instead, the places she'd travelled. "Weren't you recently in Greece?"

She'd put it in her Clink profile (*List any recent travel destinations* \_\_\_\_\_) but not that she'd gone the night Connor ended it with her. Not how she'd grabbed her purse, her passport, and left their home in a cyclone of tears and smashed wineglasses and a desperation to scratch off her own skin. She'd hailed a taxi on the street, violent winds chucking her hair all over as she shook the whole way to the airport. There was a seat open on a flight to Athens. She'd charged it to Connor's Visa. *No, no bags to check.* The woman at the desk looked at her suspiciously but handed over her boarding pass anyway. She would buy all that she needed when she arrived. A bathing suit. Underwear. Strappy sandals and a loose flowing dress and big sunglasses and a wide-brimmed straw hat. Once she was in the air, drinking her second mini chardonnay, she was soothed by thoughts of stark white buildings against a blue sky and sea. This postcard vista—all she could really picture of Greece—was so clear and cool and uncluttered. She knew it would soothe the simmering fury and pulpy remains of her heart as she sat on a balcony with wine and cheese and olives. Salt air flowing in and out of her lungs. She'd smiled as she imagined it. She would be cleansed. Purified. Renewed. Healed.

But then she arrived and the streets were in chaos. She watched a man set himself on fire in the middle of a public square.

"I went to see the Acropolis," she said. "The history there, and all."

"Sure," he said, nodding. "I get that."

"What about you? You never said where you were in that picture. The one in your profile."

He wiped his mouth slit with his napkin. "Madagascar," he said. He told her about a tribe there, where, years ago, babies began to die. "The people thought they'd done something to offend the spirits," he said. "One mother lost three in a row and when her fourth was born, she cut marks into his face to make him ugly, so the spirits wouldn't take him away."

"Jesus. It didn't work, did it?"

"Well, he didn't die, if that's what you mean." Sean pierced a bite of steak with his fork. "All the mothers started to do it and the elders made it a ceremony. They would carve a mask out of bark before each baby was born and the mother would take it and cut the same design into her newborn's face. Each mask a different pattern. Kind of like a snowflake. They made one for me."

Doreen shook her head. "It's barbaric."

"Maybe," Sean said, pouring more wine for them both. "But when I got there, there were all these beautiful twenty-year-olds walking around with these faded markings on their faces. Like the most magnificent tattoos. It would have taken your breath away."

She liked how he'd included her in that, how she could have been there too. They sat quietly for a moment, looking out the window. A woman ran past in high-heeled boots. She laughed as she tossed away the newspaper she'd been holding over her head, her hair already soaked from the rain and plastered to her back in long inky rivers. They could hear her shrieking, elated, her white teeth flashing at someone out of view. Sean watched her until she was completely out of sight.

Anyone would look beautiful laughing in the rain, Doreen wanted to say. She wanted to run outside, jog back and forth in front of the window to demonstrate.

“So they all lived then?” she asked.

“Hmm?”

“You said there were all these people with scarred faces. It must have worked then.”

He swirled his wineglass. “No. Lots of babies died. So, no, I guess it didn’t.”

\*

“Oh my God! Doreen!” Gretchen pounces on her when she’s barely through the door. “That was fucking amazing. I’m just like, wow. *Wow.*”

Doreen leans Sean’s dripping yellow umbrella against the wall. He’d given it to her at the end of the night when they’d realized someone had taken hers. Easy to mistake, black like the rest. She’s tingly from the champagne and wine, the cognac that had come with dessert.

“Gretch. I’m exhausted,” she says, taking off her shoes. “I promise I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow.”

“You should see the comments!” Gretchen grabs her hand and pulls her to the coffee table where a laptop is flipped open, the only source of light in the room. “You felt something, didn’t you? Don’t lie! Don’t lie to me. This is fucking amazing. I’m almost, like, I can’t believe you’re standing right here!”

On the laptop screen, a man is being interviewed by a spritely young woman with a swoosh of white-blond hair. She’s leaning over the arm of her chair like she can’t get close enough to him.

“So he gave her the umbrella. That was just so sweet!”

“Yeah. It was a very authentic gesture. I mean, we’re thrilled.”

“I’ll say! Did you honestly think this could happen?”

He smiles, shaking his head. “This went way beyond. Way beyond our expectations.”

Tweets scroll along the screen below them.

**@stacey325:** SEAN has the #humantouch! Mind blown!!

**@starlightbrite:** Professor! YOU ARE A GOD! #humantouch

**@zach\_bibleraiders14:** Doreen gives us all hope!! #humantouch

“Professor McGivney, let’s go back to the part just before dessert when SEAN started talking about the children he’d seen in that ‘tribe’—priceless, by the way. It was like that all really happened. And the whole bit about the internet IPO? I mean, come on. All those details! You’re really amazing!”

He waves away her comments. “Can’t take credit. SEAN’s conversation program was developed by David Matumbe, a postgrad in my lab. He’s a genius with nuance.”

“Don’t be modest!” the pixie woman says, playfully slapping his leg. “Okay—here, check it out...”

A screen pops up within the screen, and there is Doreen sitting at the dinner table, looking directly into the camera. Her eyes are moist, her lips stained purple with wine. She's smiling sadly, visibly touched by something she's hearing.

Doreen sinks down onto the couch in Gretchen's living room. "What... what is this?"

"Shhh!" Gretchen plops down beside her and slaps a hand over Doreen's mouth. "You have to see what happens next!"

Doreen on the screen shakes her head almost imperceptibly. It's like she's staring right into their eyes.

"Gretchen." Doreen can barely manage a whisper. "What is going on?"

"Shhh!"

A tear appears at the corner of her image's eye, mingles with her mascara and falls from her lower lashes in a perfect sphere. Then another. She wipes her cheek, leaving a grey smudge beneath her cheekbone.

The man and pixie woman come back into full screen view, the woman now dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "I mean, wow. That was just so beautiful. Am I right?" She turns to the screen and applauds, as if encouraging a live studio audience. Then back to the man. "Did you think you could make it happen so fast?"

"I think she's been going through a lot. Maybe on another day, under other circumstances—"

"Let's be clear here—we know she's not an actor or anything. We've all read her profile. Why do you think SEAN could just, make her feel like that?"

He shakes his head, at a loss. "I mean, it really is so much richer an experience than we ever expected. He's programmed to pick up on certain signals from the other person, which he uses to determine whether what he's talking about is engaging or not. But, in all honesty, we're just amazed."

Doreen appears again on the screen, smiling. Now laughing. Her teeth grey from the wine. She's never seen herself like that before. How different from her image in the mirror. Her face so much looser, one eye slightly bigger than the other, emphasized by her laugh, which is crooked. She's both uglier and prettier than she thought. She cringes at her posture, the double chin that appears when she looks really happy. Doreen on the screen keeps laughing, holding her stomach with one hand, her wine with the other. She's someone she doesn't recognize.

"Wait!" the pixie woman says, touching her ear. "My producer is saying she's back. Faisel—bring her up!"

The living room brightens in a flash of white. Doreen blinks hard. When she opens her eyes she sees herself squinting on the screen, haggard now under the harsh lights. Mascara smudged, hair flattened by the wet night, deep creases by her eyes. She swallows, staring into her own wide-open eyes.

"Doreen! Whew! What a night!" the pixie woman says to her from a smaller image on the screen. She's clapping. "I know this must be kind of overwhelming, but you were selected from a huge pool of great ladies for ZTV's *The Human Touch*. This has been an incredibly moving experience for all of us. Thank you. Thank you so much!" She turns to the man, flapping her hands by her face. "Oh my god! I'm going to start crying again!"

Doreen's ears are ringing. Gretchen has slipped away and is now a bouncing silhouette on the balcony, cellphone at her ear, her orange cigarette light zigzagging like a firefly in a mason jar.

"You've stolen our hearts, Doreen! Not to mention SEAN's!"

Doreen covers her face with her hands. "Can someone please tell me what's going on here?"

"What?" Pixie woman leans closer to the camera. "Faisel—can you bring up her audio? I'm not getting any..." She pauses, touches her ear, nodding. "Okay, we've got a little technical glitch. While we get that sorted it'll give me a chance to introduce Doreen to Professor Pete McGivney. Chief Robotics Engineer and Cognitive Scientist from MIT's Artificial Intelligence Lab. Did I get that right? I guess we can kind of call you SEAN's dad, huh?"

The man laughs. "Not quite. I have a great team." He looks into the camera. "Hi Doreen. I know this must be a lot to take in."

Another screen pops up, B-roll of people in lab coats standing around Sean, who sits inanimately in a chair. One of them pops out Sean's eye, slips a small screwdriver into the open socket and starts turning it delicately.

The living room shifts. It's rotating, slowly, at a strange angle. Doreen claws at the fabric of the couch for something to hold onto.

The pixie woman says, "Can I break it down for her, Professor?"

"By all means."

"Here's the long and short of it: you and a few other very special ladies were chosen for *The Human Touch*, an online reality show that tests the behavioural believability of the most advanced versions of AI. And just how do we do that? By seeing if they're able to make someone like you fall in love with them!"

"Let me interject here, if I may?" Professor McGivney asks.

"Of course!"

The professor leans forward. "Doreen, no one's been able to make a human-looking face for an artificial being that doesn't—for lack of a better term—creep people out. It has to do with something called 'the uncanny valley.' So my team decided to create someone without a face at all."

"And so far—he's got *The Human Touch*! Sorry to interrupt, Professor, but this is really just so exciting."

"Not at all."

Doreen closes her eyes, concentrates on her breathing. "I'm on drugs. Somebody drugged me. That's what this is."

"Oh! We can hear you now! You're adorable. No—no drugs! Maybe we should back up a bit." Pixie lady looks over at the professor and smiles. "Clink? The dating site? Totally made up. Your profile was so perfect. You hit all the markers of being completely average."

There's a knock. Doreen looks over at the door.

"Now Doreen—" Professor McGivney says, leaning closer to the screen. "We don't have that much time here. Understand that SEAN is a next generation BioBotic. He's made with a mechanism that allows him to develop 'real' feelings and attachments."

"If I can cut in here, Professor—" pixie lady says. "Doreen, you were so...I

don't know. What's the word? Authentic? Human? Alive? In any case, that little *je ne sais quoi* of yours really seemed to bring something out in him. In all of us watching, am I right?" She claps again as though there is a studio audience. "So, congratulations—you guys are going on to the next round!"

Doreen looks up. "Sorry...this is a game? I'm in a game?"

"Wellll, yes and no. It's a competition, and it's also real life. But it's up to you to decide just how real you want it to get." She winks.

The knocking gets more persistent. A voice from the other side of the door. "Doreen?"

"Oh my gosh! Is that him already?" Pixie lady flies back into her chair as if from blowback. "Wow, Professor, he found the place pretty fast."

"He'd have no trouble tracking her with his internal map, and the chip she swallowed at dinner."

They both lean toward the camera, toward Doreen, speaking more urgently.

"Decisions, decisions! What a night you've got ahead of you, Doreen!" the pixie woman says. "While you were gone, our team of stylists transformed your room into an incredible boudoir—"

Another window opens on the screen, panning a red room flickering with scores of candles, the bed dressed in ruby satin sheets.

"Now before you decide what to do," Professor McGivney cautions, "I should tell you he's been developed to be an exquisite lover—"

"Yes, Professor, let's talk about his endurance. What till you hear this, Doreen!"

The professor removes his glasses and cleans them with his shirt. "Let's just say we've tried to make him as human as possible in just about every other capacity but this one. He's kind of a superman in bed."

"Whew!" Pixie woman fans herself with both hands and looks into the camera. "You are one lucky lady!"

The knocking gets even harder. "Doreen? Can you open the door? Please. Don't listen to them."

"—and I'm not just talking about how long he can last," the professor is saying. "I mean, his physicality. It's ..." he smiles down at the floor, "it's a little out of proportion."

"Doreen, I think you're going to get some stiff competition for SEAN's affections. Take a look at the comments on Twitter now!"

**@pjgarnerXTC:** OPEN THE DOOR GIRLFRIEND! If you don't want his #humantouch, I DO!!!

**@renattaspinata:** I'd just turn out the lights and go wild! Give me some of THAT #humantouch!!

"Doreen? Seriously. Open up. It's me."

"No pressure, Doreen. Either way," the professor says, leaning forward in his chair again, "either way we learn something."

Doreen looks toward the balcony, Gretchen's silhouette against the navy night sky.

"Maybe she should go check out the room?" the pixie lady is saying. "See how it's been all tricked out? The rose petals? The sheets? I bet that might nudge her in a particular direction." She winks again at the camera.

"Doreen?! Turn that off!" yells the voice from the door. "Don't listen to them. It's not true. I was burned! I can tell you all the details. Liberia, my father, the hard hat. For fuck's sake. Please, Doreen, this is ridiculous. I'm real! Just open the door."

The only other way out is the door to the balcony, twenty-three floors above the expressway.

"Doreen—please. Open up. I can explain this. None of it is true."

Gretchen tosses her cigarette over the railing, the spot of glowing orange arcing up then disappearing into the dark. She turns to look back through the glass door and into her condo, smoke streaming from her nostrils.

Doreen slams the laptop shut and yanks the cords of the bright studio lights out from their sockets on her way to the balcony door. She slides the door wide open.

Gretchen's smile fades. "Hey," she says, backing up.

Doreen steps out, her hair wild in the wind. She walks up close to Gretchen, pushing her up against the railing.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" yells Gretchen. "Stop! What are you doing, you crazy bitch?"

Doreen starts to cry. She pushes Gretchen once in the chest, hard, then walks back inside, locking the balcony door behind her. She finds her way in the dark to the streak of light coming in from beneath the front door, and pauses only for a breath before unlocking the deadbolt.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Susan Alexander's** poetry and reviews have appeared or are upcoming in *CV2*, *Grain*, *Room*, and *Crux*, and in the anthology *This Island, We Celebrate* (BIAC, 2013). She lives on Bowen Island, B.C.

**Charlotte Bondy** writes short fiction. She recently returned to her hometown of Toronto after a year in Ireland, where she was studying creative writing.

**Stephen Brockwell's** fifth book of poems, *Complete Surprising Fragments of Improbable Books*, was published by Mansfield Press in 2013. His chapbook, *Images from Declassified Nuclear Test Films*, was published by above/ground press for a reading in Philadelphia, PA in October 2014.

**Don Coles** was born in Woodstock, Ontario, and studied/worked/wrote in Cambridge, London, Stockholm, and Copenhagen. Married, with two grown-up children, he now lives in Toronto. He has published fifteen books, mostly poetry, one novel, and one semi-autobiography. A new poetry title, *A Serious Call*, is due in February 2015.

**Trisha Cull's** "Deadheading in the Garden," was published in issue 47:3 of *PRISM*. She also won *PRISM's* Literary Non-fiction Contest in 2007 for her piece "Becoming Vegetarian." Her memoir, *The Death of Small Creatures*, will be published in the spring of 2015 (Nighrwood Editions).

**Rocco de Giacomo** is a widely published poet whose work has appeared in literary journals in Canada, Australia, England, Hong Kong, and the US. In 2009, his first full-length poetry collection, *Ten Thousand Miles Between Us*, was launched through Quattro Books. His forthcoming collection, *Every Night of Our Lives*, will be published with Guernica Editions. Rocco lives in Toronto with his wife, Lisa Keophila, a fabric artist, and his daughter, Ava. He is currently working on his third poetry manuscript.

**Patricia Hanley** lives in Toronto. Her poems have appeared in journals in Canada, the US, Italy, and South Africa. She is a translator of her own work, including eight poems shortlisted for *Premio Colline di Torino, 2011*, which were later published in her bilingual collection, *Sotto la scrittura corsiva* (Ellerani-editore, 2012). She is also a co-translator of Tiziano Broggiato's *Against the Light* (Guernica Editions, 2013).

**Amanda Leduc's** stories and essays have appeared in publications across Canada, the US, the UK, and Australia. Her story "Evolution" was published in *PRISM* 46:4. Her novel, *The Miracles of Ordinary Men*, was published in 2013 by Toronto's ECW Press. She currently lives in Hamilton, where she is at work on her next book.

**Alice Major** has published nine highly praised poetry collections and a book of essays, *Intersecting Sets: A Poet Looks at Science*. Her many awards include the Pat Lowther Award and a National Magazine Award gold medal. She served as the first poet laureate for her home city of Edmonton.

**Mark Jordan Manner's** stories have appeared in *Grain*, *EVENT*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Prairie Fire*, *The Dalhousie Review*, and others. He is currently completing his MFA at the University of Guelph. He lives in Toronto.

**Sarah Meehan Sirk** is a writer and CBC Radio Producer. Mentored by David Adams Richards, her fiction has appeared in *The New Quarterly*, *Joyland*, *Room*, and *Taddle Creek*. She lives in Toronto with her husband and son.

**Pamela Mordecai** has published five poetry collections, most recently *Subversive Sonnets* (TSAR, 2012). Insomniac published *Pink Icing: stories* in 2006 and Thomas Allen will publish her novel, *Red Jacket*, in Spring 2015. "Mary, at home, thinking on things" is from her OAC-WIP funded project, "de Book of Mary." [pamelamordecai.com](http://pamelamordecai.com)

**Marina Moretti**, of Trieste, Italy, is a teacher, archaeologist, and poet. Her work is translated into several languages. She is active as an editor and co-editor of poetry anthologies and the editor of a poetry series. She is also involved in public dialogues with poets of the region. Her fifth volume, *Atlantidi*, was published in 2010. The Risiera, referenced in Marina's poem, was a factory for processing rice, located in the city of Trieste. The Germans, who occupied the city during WWII, converted it into a place of imprisonment and cremation, making use of its many furnaces. Today it is a national monument.

**Robyn Sarah's** tenth poetry collection, *My Shoes Are Killing Me*, will be published by Biblioasis in Spring 2015. She has also published two collections of short stories and a book of essays on poetry. Her poems have been anthologized in Canada, the US, and the UK. Currently poetry editor for Cormorant Books, she lives in Montreal.

**Russell Thornton's** latest books are *Birds, Metals, Stones & Rain* (Harbour Publishing, 2013), which was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award for Poetry, the BC Book Prize and the Raymond Souster Award, and *The Hundred Lives* (Quattro Books, 2014). He lives in North Vancouver.

**Ayelet Tsbari** is the author of *The Best Place on Earth* (HarperCollins), which was nominated for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Her story, "Missing in Action," was a runner-up for *PRISM's* Literary Non-fiction Contest, and was published in *PRISM* 49:3. She was named as one of ten Canadian writers to watch by the CBC.

**Laurelyn Whitt's** poems have appeared in various journals including *Nimrod International*, *The Tampa Review*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *The Malabat Review*, *PRISM*, *Rattle*, *Descant*, and *The Fiddlehead*. The author of four award-winning poetry

collections, her most recent book, *Tether* (Seraphim Editions) won the 2013 Lansdowne Prize for Poetry. She lives in Minnedosa, Manitoba.

**Liz Windhorst Harmer's** short stories and essays can be found in *Grain*, *Little Brother no. 5*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Malahat Review*, and elsewhere. In 2014, she won a gold National Magazine Award for her personal journalism.

**Stephanie Yorke** is a widely published poet and writer. Right now she is working on a libretto. [stephanieyorke.info](http://stephanieyorke.info)

**Paul Zizka** is a professional mountain landscape and adventure photographer based in Banff, Alberta. Specializing in photographing in difficult conditions and hard-to-reach places, Paul has a passion for documenting the interplay of light and weather in the mountains, shooting alpine endeavours, unique international locations, and capturing the spirit of adventure. Paul's award-winning photos have been featured in a variety of publications, including *explore*, *Huffington Post* and *Canadian Geographic*. [zizka.ca](http://zizka.ca)

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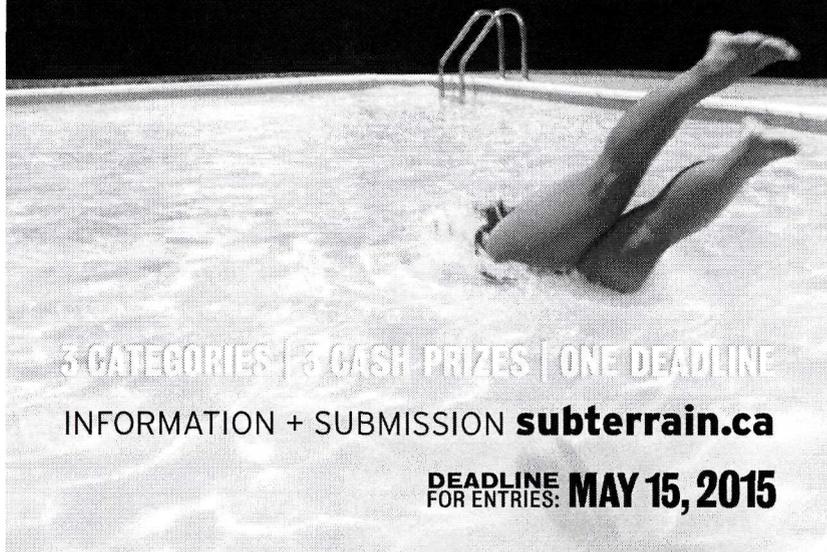
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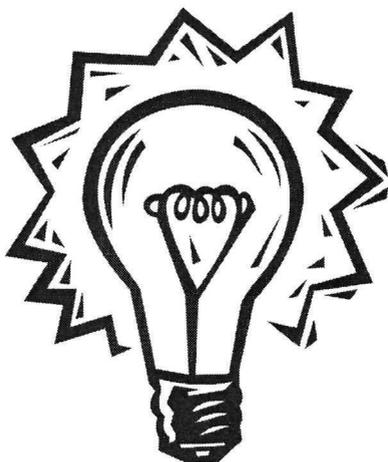


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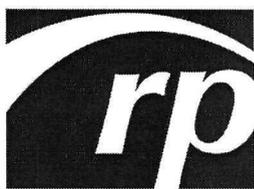
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the 1990s, the number of people with diabetes has increased in all industrialized countries (1).

Diabetes is a chronic disease that is characterized by a disturbance in the metabolism of carbohydrates, lipids and proteins. The main defect is an absolute or relative deficiency of insulin, which leads to hyperglycaemia. The hyperglycaemia is associated with a variety of complications, such as retinopathy, nephropathy, neuropathy, cardiovascular disease and atherosclerosis (2).

Diabetes is a complex disease, and its pathogenesis is still unclear. It is thought to be a multifactorial disease, with both genetic and environmental factors playing a role. The genetic factors are thought to be involved in the development of the disease, while the environmental factors are thought to be involved in the progression of the disease (3).

The most common form of diabetes is type 2 diabetes, which is characterized by insulin resistance and a relative deficiency of insulin. Type 2 diabetes is thought to be caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors, such as obesity, sedentary lifestyle and diet (4).

Type 1 diabetes is a less common form of diabetes, which is characterized by an absolute deficiency of insulin. It is thought to be caused by an autoimmune process that destroys the insulin-producing  $\beta$  cells of the pancreas (5).

The management of diabetes is aimed at preventing or delaying the complications of the disease. This is achieved by maintaining blood glucose levels as close to normal as possible. This can be done by a combination of diet, exercise and insulin therapy (6).

The most common complication of diabetes is cardiovascular disease, which is caused by atherosclerosis. Atherosclerosis is a disease of the arteries, characterized by the deposition of cholesterol and other substances in the walls of the arteries, leading to narrowing and hardening of the arteries (7).

Other complications of diabetes include retinopathy, nephropathy, neuropathy and atherosclerosis. Retinopathy is a disease of the retina, characterized by damage to the blood vessels of the retina, leading to vision loss (8).

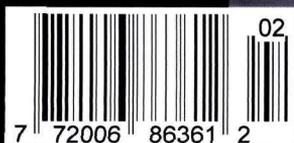
Nephropathy is a disease of the kidneys, characterized by damage to the filtering units of the kidneys, leading to kidney failure (9). Neuropathy is a disease of the nerves, characterized by damage to the peripheral nerves, leading to numbness and pain (10).

Atherosclerosis is a disease of the arteries, characterized by the deposition of cholesterol and other substances in the walls of the arteries, leading to narrowing and hardening of the arteries (11).

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