

PRISM international

Summer 2006

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Contemporary Writing from Canada and Around the World





PRISM international

2005 PRISM Short Fiction Contest

Grand Prize – \$2,000

“Vanishing”

Deborah Willis

Victoria, British Columbia

Runners-up – \$200 each

“Ingénues”

Ibi Kaslik

Toronto, Ontario

“The Steamer”

Nicholas Ruddock

Guelph, Ontario

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Madeleine Thien

Crystallization

In Deborah Willis' story, "Vanishing," Nathan, a writer soon to disappear, asks his daughter Tabitha, "Can you keep a secret?" Tabitha listens to the sound of her mother washing the dishes, feels time ticking down. "Sometimes," she answers. Her father leans back in his chair. He says, "There's a truthful answer."

Here is my own contribution to the store of truth: I thought that judging this year's PRISM Short Fiction Contest would be a straightforward affair, that the deserving story would announce itself like a hallelujah and the runners-up would fall gracefully into line. In fact, it wasn't that way at all. Of the seven stories shortlisted by PRISM's editorial board, three of them lodged themselves in my mind and would not vacate the premises. Over the course of a week, they performed their own pas de trois, gently upstaging each other, flourishing their wares, speaking their minds.

If you read the three stories, you'll see, I think, that they are distinct in ambition, style, and feeling. They tell a particular story in their own way, with their own omissions and discretions; they stretch the short story form, re-shaping it into something more fluid, more surprising. Ibi Kaslik's "Ingénues" haunted me with its sober voice, edged in heartache, as K grieves a lost love and a lost friendship. Kaslik has a way with the cinematic image. I loved the seaweed stuck to Mara's teeth like "torn construction paper"; how K and Leo, falling in love, "spend two days eating hot nuts and walking around the Met"; the description of the little boy in the park, his companions "dressed like middle-aged men," who wears a T-shirt that says "Passion is Free!"

Nobody can mistake the ingenuity of Nicholas Ruddock, whose story, "The Steamer," is a terrific read. Ruddock has talent to burn; he writes with verve and style. From the machinations of Walter Butts ("Some big steel rods fell off the barge, he said, seventy dollars an hour for me. What's twelve times seventy? See you in eight hundred and forty dollars"), to the smarts of Meta Maud, to the "fatal De-oxygenating Leukemia Disease" of Gerald Stoodley, I loved "The Steamer."

The pas de trois continued. I snuck up on the stories, read them at odd times of the day, waited for the penny to drop. And with each re-reading, the depth and nuances of Deborah Willis' writing impressed

me. “Vanishing” is a story that nearly escapes its confines. Events in the past and the present are briefly alluded to; characters appear and then mysteriously fade away. Reading this story, it’s hard to know where the ground is, how to see through to the heart of the matter. Willis has a very light touch. But when the story demands it, she is a writer up to the challenge of finding just the right word, the right image, to crystallize the moment. I’m thinking of the instant of Tabitha’s recognition, as she watches Marlene rock the weeping Lev in her arms. “You poor thing,” Marlene says. “You poor boy.” I’m thinking, too, of the description of Tabitha in her father’s attic office, the words exchanged, the clues that take a lifetime (and then some) to piece together. “Vanishing” is a moving portrait of how a life can be shaped by the disappeared, by love that never gets the chance to take hold.

I’d like to thank these three writers for their stories, for letting me, the reader, walk about in their imagined spaces, for the chance to be delighted and thrilled and moved. It’s been a real pleasure, and I look forward to seeing more of their words in print.

Deborah Willis

Vanishing

Weeks pass and the police give up their investigations. The newspaper men who wrote *Local Writer Vanishes* find other stories. Months go by, then a year.

Marlene and Bea drink afternoon coffee and their conversation slips back to the everyday: price of potatoes at Loblaws, who's a good doctor and who's not, what kind of pictures are showing these days. Marlene goes to shul more often, and she stands for the mourner's kaddish.

But Tabitha imagines that her father stepped onto a bus, then onto a boat, and soon they'll receive a postcard from India. She imagines him showing up in five years, his hair greyed or gone, with stories of living in Oregon, or Alaska, or the Alps. She imagines he simply moved into an apartment downtown. Sometimes—and this really puts ants in her stomach—she imagines he is hiding somewhere in the house, behind the couch or in the closets. She checks under her bed every night before she goes to sleep.

The day Nathan disappeared began like any other Saturday. Marlene put a long coat over her housedress and dragged Tabitha to Honest Ed's. They bought a pie plate on sale, six pairs of nylons, some patterned dishcloths, and—after Tabitha had pleaded—a life-sized, ceramic bust of Elvis Presley. “Where will we put that thing, Tabby?” Marlene said as they stood in line at the till. “What will your father say?”

But Tabitha knew her mother loved the Elvis too—the realistic folds in his collar, the glassy brown eyes, that smile. During the streetcar ride home, he sat on Tabitha's lap and she wrapped her arms around his smooth, painted shoulders. He made it all worthwhile—Marlene's housedress, the streetcar windows that steamed up from people's breath, and even Honest Ed's itself. The crowded aisles, high ceilings, and the blinking lights outside that announced: *Find an Honest Deal at Honest Ed's!*

When they arrived home, Tabitha went in ahead to find the perfect place for the Elvis, and that's when she saw that the attic's hatch was open. She stared at the ceiling's gape. Never in her ten years had she known Nathan to treat his office carelessly. She thought of calling to Marlene, but Tabitha knew how slowly her mother moved—how her

hips cracked when she bent to unbuckle her shoes, and how she hung each coat on its proper hanger. And Tabitha didn't want to speak her worst fear aloud, wasn't even sure if a nightmare feeling like this could be spoken.

"Dad?" she called up into the dark place where he did his writing. No answer, and before she could help it, she imagined her father hanging from the ceiling. She pictured it like the movies: his crumpled face and a sinister, creaking rope. In her mind, his swinging body looked long. Not tall—long. She climbed the ladder, feeling sick and dizzy as she put her foot on the final step. Then, weak-kneed with relief—initial, foolish relief—she found the attic empty.

He seemed to have left in a rush. They know he'd walked out the front door and locked it behind him, bringing only his thick wool coat, his scarf and hat, his umbrella. He'd left his typewriter, his books.

They might have assumed he'd gone to the office for a couple of hours, or out for a walk, if he hadn't taken the time to tidy the attic before he left. The scripts of his finished plays were held together with paper clips, last minute changes indicated in pencil in the margins. The more recent works were stacked on the floor. Marlene put these in a box and tied it closed with string, because he'd left a note that read: *Do not publish. Unfinished.*

Three years later, the plays Nathan completed are produced in Toronto and Halifax. Marlene gets a job as a bookkeeper and discovers that she's good at it. At Tabitha's bat mitzvah, the rabbi says he's rarely seen such a dramatic reading of the parshah.

Life is as uplifting as a musical, except that sometimes Tabitha wakes at night to find Marlene humming Paul Anka songs into her ear. "You had a bad dream," says her mother, and she touches Tabitha's forehead. "What was it? A monster? That falling feeling?"

No matter how hard she tries, Tabitha can't remember. All that lingers is sweat on her pyjamas and a bad feeling in her throat.

When Tabitha showed her mother the open hatch, the empty attic, Marlene stared at the floor and furniture, her hands hanging at her sides. She bent to look at some of the papers, then went to the window by Nathan's desk. "He's gone," she said, more to herself than to Tabitha. Then she descended to the kitchen, where afternoon light still brightened the room. She picked up the phone and Tabitha knew it was to call her sister, to ask Bea to come over, right away, please. But Marlene simply held the receiver in her hand as though it was heavy, as though she was too tired to dial. Tabitha touched Marlene's hip, where the housedress pleated.

"I'll do it," she said. "I'll call her."

Half an hour later, Bea brought mandel bread and said things like: "Maybe he was murdered. Or kidnapped."

Marlene shook her head. "Kidnapped people don't bring umbrellas with them. Besides, everybody liked him. He was a gentle man. And a good lawyer."

Marlene didn't mention Lev, but Tabitha imagined her father leaving the house to see him, putting on a suit and brushing the lint from his hat. Nothing out of the ordinary, though maybe that day Nathan hesitated when he got halfway there. Anything could have happened. Maybe he turned into a shop and fell in love with the beautiful clerk. Maybe he stepped off the Bloor viaduct. She imagined his body buried under snow. She imagined it would turn up in spring. But she didn't say any of this, because Bea was saying, "Maybe burglars broke in and attacked him," and Marlene was holding a cup of tea to her chest, shivering.

Six years after Nathan's disappearance, one of his plays is performed off-Broadway, and an academic from Montreal writes about the influence of Yiddish theatre on his sense of structure. Marlene gets some royalties and moves in with Bea. They don't need to worry about coupons anymore, but they do.

At sixteen, Tabitha drops out of school and gets a job as a secretary. She buys a record player and collects LPs. She takes swimming lessons because she wants to be Esther Williams.

Nearly everybody's heard of the playwright who disappeared, and when people learn Tabitha's last name, two times out of five, they ask if there's any relation. When she nods, they say things like: "He must have been such a fascinating man." Yes, she smiles. He was very clever. Vanishing, she thinks, was the smartest thing he ever did.

The first time Tabitha had gone into the attic, she was seven years old and forbidden.

"He's very busy," Marlene would say, never allowing Nathan's work to be disturbed. "He's writing."

But Tabitha needed to know what this word *writing* meant. Of course, she knew how to write. In Mrs. Hill's grade two class she was forced to spell out words in a notebook, and was learning how to form each letter: upper case, lower, cursive. But surely this wasn't connected to what her father did in the attic. *He's writing.* Marlene said it with such reverence that it was obvious she herself didn't know what, exactly, Nathan did up there.

So while Marlene weeded the small, patchy flowerbeds that lined the porch, Tabitha climbed the ladder. She knew her father was up there—

she could hear the floorboards creak as he took a few steps or adjusted himself in his chair. She pressed against the hatch—it felt heavy to her then—and she was almost relieved when she couldn't lift it. But then it squeaked open and she saw into the cramped room. Even in the middle of the day, it was dark. She could smell the dust and the damp.

“Yes?” Her father sounded far away.

Tabitha knew she should gently ease the hatch down and run to the yard; she still wore her sun-hat and she should be outside, helping Marlene water the marigolds.

“What is it?” Her father’s voice sounded closer now, and he opened the hatch all the way. “Yes?”

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark. Then she saw his ironed pants, tucked shirt, slim and serious face. “Does your mother want something?”

She shook her head. The sun-hat, which was too big because Marlene wanted it to last, slipped over her eyes. He bent to fix it and she felt his hand on top of her head.

“I wanted to see the attic,” she said. “I wanted to see what you do.”

“I rarely do much.” He nodded for her to climb into the dim room. The ceiling was so low it nearly grazed his thin hair. There were papers everywhere—organized, or perhaps not organized, on the floor, the desk, in boxes, and along the windowsill of the turret window. “Come on,” he said. “You can help me with something.”

She hated to hear these words from Marlene; they meant Tabitha would be asked to put away dishes, or help pick rocks from the flower-beds. But Nathan cleared some papers off an old wooden chair and nodded for her to take a seat. The chair had arms, a high back, and looked like his own. He handed her three sheets of paper that he had typewritten. “Well.” He sat across from her. “You can read, can’t you?”

The ink was smudged in some places, and there were pencil scratchings in the margins. It wasn’t like the picture books she was used to, and she didn’t know where to begin, so she said, “I’m an excellent reader.” Her teacher had said this after Tabitha had read a passage aloud in class. “If only I’d spend less time day-dreaming and more time concentrating on my studies.” She imitated Mrs. Hill’s stiff lips and intonation, her emphasis on *less* and *more*.

“Is that so?” Nathan smiled at her joke. For a second, he looked at her the way he would later look at Lev—as though she was a good show, one that captivated him. “What do they make you read in school?”

“Some poems. And the Lord’s prayer.”

“Ah. Of course.” He pointed to a sentence at the top of the page. “Start here and go to the bottom. It’s a monologue.”

So Tabitha sat across from her father and read what he told her to

read. He closed his eyes, and she thought at first that he wasn't listening. But every once in a while he took the sheet from her to slash out a word or add sentences in a hand she couldn't make out. He didn't explain the plot and she couldn't understand it on her own—the person on the page seemed injured, but she didn't know how or why. Still, she read—with an even intonation, the way Mrs. Hill had taught. Occasionally, her father said things like: "Can you repeat the last line?" or "Not so fast. Pay attention to rhythm."

After this, going into the attic didn't scare her. If Nathan didn't want her help, she would sit in the chair—her chair—and watch him type. She was almost sure that he liked having her there, and once he said, "You are a good reader. Damn good." Over three years, she got so she could read his handwriting.

Tabitha never told her mother of these visits, and she understood this was a betrayal. But she didn't want to share what she knew of his piles of paper and his slanted, chaotic notes. It was too precious, this secret.

By the 1970s, some critics claim him as a visionary of a socialist utopia, and there is no shortage of deconstruction going on. A standing production of his most popular work plays at the Eaton Auditorium.

Tabitha lives in New York, and she often sees her father. He'll be in brown polyester, or sometimes in cowboy boots. He'll be a man on a billboard, or a friendly, blurry face when she's smoked too much hash. The guy behind the counter at her local grocer's. Or a man in a dance bar, in a purple suit and fake eyelashes. She learns to ignore these visions so she can enjoy the city, her own success.

She is invited to every party worth attending and she is the life of them, sampling all New York offers her: the dancing, the threesomes, the various chemical highs. She has her mother's strong nose and dark eyes mixed with a haunting kind of ingenuity. This proves to be marketable. She gets cast in dark roles, ones that involve crying and shrieking. As a lark, she keeps a running tally of how many times she gets to kill herself on stage.

Like every other Friday, the night before he vanished, Nathan invited Lev for dinner. He liked to hear the law student's opinions, and Marlene liked to cook and fuss. Lev came over at six because he usually shared a scotch with Nathan before dinner. They would go to the attic to avoid the noise of the radio that Marlene and Tabitha played in the kitchen. The smell of their cigarettes would slip through the attic's floorboards and Tabitha imagined their hushed voices, the clink of ice-cube to glass, and Lev in her chair. But that night, he didn't arrive alone. That night, Lev brought a woman.

Her name was Sofia, and she had brown hair that curled around her ears. She wore a pencil skirt, a wide red belt, and a small leather hat. She hadn't dressed up her outfit the way Marlene would have, with makeup and pearls. She didn't have to. Her skin had a natural blush and her grey sweater brought out her eyes. Tabitha had never seen anyone like that—so graceful, so poised. She felt ashamed of her mother next to this woman, and ashamed of her own awkward body. She imitated Sofia's posture, stretched her neck and held her shoulders straight.

"This beautiful lady," said Lev, as he stood in the doorway, "has agreed to be my wife."

Nathan curved the corners of his mouth into something that resembled a smile, nodded to the woman.

Marlene held out her hand. "How lovely to meet you." She took Sofia's coat and gloves. "How lovely."

Over dinner, the men spoke of books. Lev had recently published a first collection, and though Nathan never wrote a single line of verse, poetry was the only topic seriously broached at the Sabbath table. From nearly two years of these dinners, Tabitha learned that Nathan was forever grateful for Klein, and Lev found him depressing. Lev deemed Pound "robust and brilliant"; Nathan thought him not only a fascist, but a victim of his own poetic rules. Nathan admired Elizabeth Bishop, but Lev didn't pay much attention to her. And they never agreed on Layton. "I love him," Lev stated that Friday night. He was extremely handsome, which was maybe what gave him so much confidence in his own opinions. "I love him the way a son loves a father."

Nathan leaned back in his chair and shook his head, his cheeks reddened from wine. Their conversations sounded like arguments, but Nathan rarely acted happier. He listened when Lev spoke and seemed to find everything about him—his youth, his ego—engaging. If Marlene noticed, she seemed to treat it as a necessary ill, like the arthritis in her fingers, the fluid that collected in her legs. "Now," she said. "Would anyone like more beans?"

"A violent, brutish father. That's the way I love the man."

"He's a drunk," said Sofia. She seemed older than Lev; maybe it was her rich voice, or the way she so confidently helped Marlene in the kitchen before the meal.

"So he's picked his poison." Lev turned to her. "That's his right."

"Certainly." Sofia placed her fork and knife on her plate with a click. "But I hardly find it charming."

"Sofia has little use for certain kinds of men." Lev smiled and showed his pleasantly crooked teeth. He picked up her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers. "Men who are wholeheartedly male."

"Then she's an astute young woman." Nathan looked Lev in the eye.

He smiled the kind of smile people use to cover up anger, or simple heartache. The kind of smile that never quite succeeds. "She's a prize."

In the 1980s, someone publishes a biography that gets it all wrong, Marlene and Bea spend half of every year in Florida, and Tabitha has become brash, too loud, a lush.

She is well-liked, though fat and poor, and she wakes one morning to find that her hair has become a brazen, phony blonde. There is nothing of Sofia in her now. She has lost her grace, her ingenuity, her youth. She treats it like a joke, a big joke, the way her old self has disappeared inside this other woman. But in private, she doesn't find it funny. She has nightmares—sweaty, waking nightmares—that her father will find her like this. In this body, in this hair, tipsy and hysterical.

Two days after Nathan vanished, Lev knocked on the door. He had come from the office and said he didn't have much time, was just dropping by. He sat on the couch in a dark, pressed suit. Marlene took Nathan's leather chair and sat on the edge of it. Tabitha curled up on the couch, as far from Lev as possible.

Without Nathan in the house, Lev seemed less warm, less assured. He was interested in the legalities: what the police had said, how the search was proceeding. He interrogated Marlene and she repeated what had happened, exactly as it had happened. The bus trip, the shopping, the empty house. She answered Lev's questions but seemed worn by them. When she finished, he pointed to the corner of the room and said, "Who's that? Is that Elvis Presley?"

Marlene refilled his coffee cup.

"There are only so many possibilities." He bit into a lemon cookie. "Either your husband's disappearance was planned or accidental. Either he's alive or dead." Lev seemed to find comfort in this kind of statement.

"He's probably just taking an extended day of rest," said Marlene. This was a joke, but even she didn't laugh.

"I'm sure this will all be cleared up," he said. "There's probably a simple explanation."

Marlene put her cup on the table; she hadn't touched her coffee.

"I can just see him waltzing in here tomorrow like nothing happened." Lev smiled at Marlene, smiled at Tabitha, then laughed—a short, coughing laugh. "Wouldn't that be so like him?"

"Anyway, he'll be glad to know you dropped by." Marlene stood. "He cares so much about you."

Then Lev made a noise that was quieter than his laugh, and sounded even more like coughing. When he wiped his face, Tabitha realized he

was crying—the kind of dry, stifled crying that produces few tears.

"I'm sure there's no need for that," Marlene said in the same voice she used to tell Tabitha to *stop dawdling*, or *quit picking at your food*.

But when Lev turned away and choked out the word "Sorry," Marlene settled herself beside him on the couch. She put her arm around him and despite the suit, he looked like a child, helpless and shaky. He rested his head on her shoulder. "It's okay," Marlene said, and rocked him back and forth.

Tabitha heard Lev's strange sobbing and understood what her mother must have always known. Marlene let him press his wet, closed eyes into her cotton shirt. "You poor thing," she said. "You poor boy."

In the early 90s, Tabitha checks into Betty Ford, where she meets Charlie Sheen, then meets her future husband. His name is Stanley and he is shy. He admits that he wasted his life, and Tabitha finds this very honest, very brave. There is nothing like Betty Ford sex, and the first time they make love, he cries.

When they check out, he proposes. Two months later, they are married. One year after that, he is rebuilding his law practice and she is making a comeback, playing disturbed mothers and over-sexed divorcees. They rent an apartment in Manhattan, and Tabitha learns him: his elaborate tea ritual, his fitful sleep, his splendid reading voice.

She eases away from friends and considers teaching theatre, rather than acting. She takes up cooking and she purchases things for their comfort—dishes and wineglasses and soft wool blankets. She feels a dedication, as simple and big-hearted as Marlene's.

The year before he left, Nathan had begun to say "Not now, Tabitha," or "I need to concentrate, please," when he heard her steps on the ladder. For a month before he disappeared, she hadn't ventured into the attic at all.

But that Friday evening, she silently climbed the steps after dinner. What drew her there was the look on his face when he'd stood and left the table in the middle of the meal. The defeated way he'd said, "I've got work to get to."

After Lev and Sofia went home, and while Marlene changed out of the blouse and green skirt she wore for company, Tabitha opened the hatch and pulled herself up, edging along the dusty floor until she slid into the office.

Nathan hadn't heard her come in—or if he had, he didn't find her presence important. He sat at his desk, facing away from her, and she stared at the back of his neck. This time, he didn't turn to her or clear the stack of books from the chair. There was a blank sheet of paper rolled

into the typewriter, so white it glowed under the lamp. He stared out the window, not even attempting to punch the keys.

Bea passes away suddenly, and Tabitha flies home to help Marlene with the details—the obituary, casket, stone. Maybe it comes from age, or from living with a sister for decades, but Marlene has lost any sense of propriety. She rinses dishes instead of washing them with soap, and forgets to close the door when she pees.

After sitting shiva, they give Bea's clothes and her cribbage board to the Goodwill. Then they pack Marlene's dishes and the canned goods she stockpiles—*might as well buy lots when they're on sale*—so Marlene can move to a smaller place. As Tabitha fills a box with her mother's old records, she finds the Elvis. He's at the back of Marlene's closet, looking out like a ghost. He smells of mothballs and his slim, ceramic nose has broken off. Still, there's something about him. Still, he's as strange and charming as ever.

Tabitha stretched up on the tips of her toes and her head nearly touched the attic's ceiling. She wanted, like her father, to see out the window. When she did this, the light must have changed, or the floorboards shifted, because he turned around. His wooden chair squeaked as it swivelled. "What are you doing here, Tabitha?" He was the only one, then, who called her by her full name.

"Nothing."

"Have they gone home?"

She nodded. "I'm supposed to be helping with the dishes."

"I shouldn't have left the table like that. Tell your mother I'm sorry."

When she wasn't reading the lines he gave her, she didn't know how to talk to him, so she said the only thing that came into her head. "Wasn't Lev's fiancée pretty? Like a movie actress?"

"Prettier," he said quietly. "Because it's real life."

Tabitha nodded and looked toward his desk. The typewriter. The blank sheet of paper.

"Did you know I haven't written anything in nearly a year?" He spoke as though it were a statistic, a fact that piqued his interest. She shook her head. She understood exactly what this meant: that he wouldn't need her anymore and there was no reason for her to be in the attic. That the chair was no longer hers. "But that's a secret." He raised one eyebrow, an exaggerated expression that reminded her of when he would read bedtime stories. When he terrified her, doing all the voices. "Can you keep a secret?"

She heard Marlene in the kitchen, running water for the dishes. Tabitha had a few minutes before her mother needed her to dry. "Some-

times.”

“There’s a truthful answer.” He leaned back in his chair. “Of course, I’ve written reviews and letters and things. But I haven’t really written.”

There was the sound of Marlene opening and closing a cupboard. “I should go down soon. She wouldn’t want me here.”

“Your mother is a very sweet person,” he said. “I think that’s why I married her. Because she seemed like the only honest person on earth.” He laughed then, and it sounded hollow in the low-ceilinged attic. “Isn’t that incredible? I married the only honest person on earth.”

Tabitha stared at his shoes. They were brown leather and polished. “If it’s just that you’re not really writing,” she said, imitating his emphasis on *really*, “then you should tell her the truth. It would probably make her happy because then you could come downstairs more.”

“The truth? It would break her heart,” he said. “I don’t suppose you’re old enough, yet. I don’t suppose you’ve had your heart broken.”

“Yes, I have.” This was a lie. But Tabitha had seen enough romances to know how to downcast her eyes and pause, breathlessly, before adding, “Once.”

“Then I’m sorry for you,” he said and turned back to the window. His voice had a harshness that told her she hadn’t fooled him. He was the only audience, she would later realize, that she hadn’t been able to fool.

Within a year of Bea, Marlene dies. And after her mother’s stroke, Tabitha can’t think of a single thing to say to Stanley. He holds her, tries to give comfort, but everything about him seems foreign: his smell, his pilled sweaters. He is a stranger, a man she never knew. So Tabitha walks out of her own life.

She leaves her marriage and New York and moves to a more manageable city. One with glass-fronted buildings and bridges that stretch over waterways. She doesn’t know anyone there, though once she runs into Lev as she’s buying groceries. “Tabby,” he says. “Is that really you?”

He looks tired, less handsome, and he wears an expensive suit that doesn’t fit his soft body. He says that Sofia left him long ago, after she became a successful lawyer in her own right. He says he visits the kids every Hanukkah.

She wants to ask him questions. “Have you heard anything about my father?” Or, “Do you still miss him?” But it seems ridiculous to say those things under fluorescent lights, beside shelves of microwaveable popcorn and freeze-dried soups. And Lev is talking about how he’d seen her picture in a magazine years ago and couldn’t believe it. “I said to myself, that can’t be the same girl!”

Neither of them suggests staying in touch, and they never see each other again. Tabitha gets a job in a bookstore, where the owner finds it

amusing that she was once well-known on the stage. Eventually, she too finds it amusing. So she settles, for a while, into this role behind the counter. And cultivates—perfectly—the sad, knowledgeable smile customers seem to like.

Tabitha stood in the attic surrounded by Nathan's boxes of books and the dim light, faced with her father's back. She wanted to say something—apologize for her lie, or ask why he had left the table, who had broken his heart. But he stared out the turret window as though there was something out there. So she slipped down the ladder, closed the hatch, and ran to the living room. She looked out the big window, the one Marlene washed with vinegar every week. She wanted to see whatever he'd seen. But there was nothing outside. Just the usual street lamps and lawns. Houses with drawn curtains. The everyday, falling snow.

Fiona Tinwei Lam

Waiting

I'll be back soon, my dad would say,
putting on his doctor's face
while he went on his rounds.
I'd sit in the back of the station wagon
in the hospital parking lot, draw a crowd
of circle-faces in breath-clouds on the window,
my fingertips greying like old bandages,
or sing choruses from Beatles songs—
let it be, all you need is love—
then surrender to a blankness
fractured by small explosions
of shoe-scrapes and key-jangles,
splattered coughs, stuttered ignition.
Slouched in my seat, I was impermeable
as the hospital's brick walls,
its blinded windows.

He never talked about his patients.
But I imagined him striding down the hall
in his white coat, half prince, half priest,
toward babies mewling in glass cages,
and children inert as dolls,
tubes worming into their arms.
Contained within surreal purpose,
he'd diagnose their charted bodies,
his elegant fingers assessing fevers, contusions.
Parents were nudged back
to the sidelines, reverent supplicants,
faces bruised with worry.

I would have fled home
if I'd known the direction,
rebelled against the numbness
worn into my body from sitting,
paced the seamed asphalt
and mounds of sickly grass,
even mounted the stairs to seek him inside.
Instead, I'd push the car door ajar
to dangle my feet out, measuring
the world against my shoes, then
seal myself in with a slam, and wait,
embraced within his car's sheltered borders
and my duty to stay, a prisoner
left with the key as a test.
I would be proving my love
until he came to drive us away
to someplace where I'd wait once again.

Julia Schroeder

At the Stone House, Easter 2004

Horses gnaw the bench outside the stable
wait for the paddock to unfreeze.
Inside the house is colder than paddock or forest
Er ist abgereist.

The Polish hunt scenes are cracking
woven riders shiver in the tapestry.
A crystal decanter of whisky sits untouched
a decade dusty and weak as sun tea.

She gives us a Greek Orthodox icon
—Gold sets off condemned and devil equally.
Tells us of her interest in Judaism.
(Last time it was *Foods that Heal* and Feng Shui.)

Then it's tea on pre-war Meissen
each dish with its hallmark: crossed swords.
We resurrect him in the worn leather of his chair
and wonder without these exact words:

How is it possible she's changed his dance on skates
to a grave marked with deer prints and shit?
And didn't notice the horse hair baked into the cake?
The pencil is bitten to the quick.

The Steamer

Shortly after that sweet girl, Meta Maud Grandy, left town for Halifax, Gerald Stoodley began to send her letters. He was in love with her but he didn't know it. He thought he just wanted to talk. As for her, she never gave Gerald Stoodley a thought even when the letters started to roll in. That was because she never got a single one. Each and every letter was steamed open, read and tucked away by the man she'd moved in with. His name was Walter Butts, and he made seventy dollars an hour as a deep-sea diver, and that was more dollars per hour than all the Grandys, put together, ever got. Maybe that turned Meta Maud's head a bit. He was a good-looking guy, Walter Butts, and when he pulled off his wetsuit, he had hair all over his chest. Not like Gerald, who was skinny as a rabbit. Gerald did not write long letters but there was something in them that bothered Walter Butts.

Dear Meta Maud, Gerald wrote the first time. *Things are good here for the most part. Every day I walk up and down Barter's Hill. Clyde's doing OK at the bakery so far, I think. Gerald.*

The deep-sea diver steamed open that letter with the kettle on low. Meta Maud was asleep upstairs. What could he have thought? That's no love letter, he must have said to himself. Who's this Gerald Stoodley anyway? After Walter Butts read it through five times, he sealed up the envelope again using a glue jar and a flat wooden stick that came from a popsicle. Then he went down to the basement, turned on the light, and he put Gerald Stoodley's first letter away in the dark, deep down inside the oldest diving bag he had. She'd never look there in a million years, she wasn't the curious type.

That night, over fish and chips down the street at Al's, he said to her, real casual, What's the names of all those friends of yours back home? He was so casual, he still had food in his mouth. And Meta Maud said to herself, Why that's nice, he's never asked much. She could overlook the food. She said, Well there's Eunice Cluett, who was her best friend, and Eunice had a friend, Henry, and then there was Gerald Stoodley. What's he like? said Walter Butts. Who, Gerald? said Meta Maud. He's just Gerald. He's nice, makes you laugh. That's all.

Dear Meta Maud, he wrote the second time. *Things are good here. There's lots of rain, which is no big surprise. Clyde's first paycheque, he's happy. There's*

a waterpipe broke on Barter's Hill, it made a real mess downtown. You'd have to wear your boots to keep dry. Gerald.

Now what did Gerald Stoodley mean by that? Gerald didn't know and neither did Walter Butts, who read it. But if you knew Gerald better than either of them did, that's a love letter for sure. Barter's Hill was the road he walked on with Meta Maud Grandy every day, down to where she worked. Nights he'd meet her again, walk her back up the hill no matter when. Just friends they were, and Gerald said he liked the work-out. They'd talk up and down the hill, mostly about her twin brother, Clyde. He sure had problems, Clyde did. Gerald never wrote one letter to Meta Maud without putting in it, somewhere at least, Barter's Hill, and Clyde.

Walter Butts steamed this second one open too and read it five times. Whoever this Gerald was, the letters didn't make much sense. Sure wasn't long-winded. He never said I love you lots, or Your passionate friend, or Miss you. There was nothing there like that, flat-out nothing at all. Walter knew who that Clyde was, he didn't worry a second about Clyde, her no good brother, the twin who couldn't do much. The deep-sea diver went down to the basement and put the second letter into the same bag. Those letters to Meta Maud, they cozied up in the dark against the picture magazines he had hidden in there. No harm to that, everybody had their magazines. Anyway, lucky for him, he had the kettle-trick down pat, kept it on low and real quiet. Got real slick at it. Meta Maud, why he liked her lots. She read books, she talked up a storm, she made friends easy.

Dear Meta Maud Grandy, this was Gerald's third letter. I hope you don't mind these, all the letters. Everything's still fine and dandy here. Eunice and Henry, they're fine, they don't know I've taken my pen in hand. They'd laugh. No letters from you but don't worry, one-way's fine. Clyde's OK, but they've moved him down near the coffee machine. That might be a mistake, I'll walk him down to work, remind him what we said about the job he blew, back at Tim's with the coffee. Hey Meta Maud, Barter's Hill looks the same, still up one way and down the other. Yours, Gerald.

Walter Butts put the kettle on low again. That way, the whistle never came on and wouldn't wake her up but what the heck, she slept deep anyway, you could shout and dance most of the time. Then he steamed open the envelope. First he laid the steam at one edge and moved along. The hard part was by the stamp. If there was too much steam put there, the stamp crinkled up and you could tell. Thirty seconds was all it took. He was fast. He wondered what the world record was, anyway, for steaming letters on the sly. Then he laughed at that and thought to himself, Never see that one in the Guinness Book.

Then, after he read through the whole thing, it didn't take long, he

said, That silly Clyde Grandy? Hopeless case, you ask me. Why bother writing about a loser like that? Worst thing about the letters, it was boring. Hey wait a minute, wait a minute, maybe they're after pulling a fast one here, maybe there's a secret message. Maybe there's a k-i-s-s-e-s or a s-e-x in there, only she could see. The first letter in each word maybe, check it out. Walter laid the letter from the Newfie retard flat-out and looked for the clues. Then, oh my, he heard the bed creak upstairs and there were footsteps. Hi there, honey, the kettle's on, you're up too early, go on back to bed, you needs your sleep, there's nothing here, I just got the bills.

Jeez, that was close I must say. Always have a spare tank Walter, when you go down so deep like that. There's no buddies down here. Now. There we go, take the first letter each line. He picked up his pen with the purple ink and he circled the first letter in every line and he did that to all the old letters too. Now at least they looked good, full of colour.

Twenty minutes later, Walter Butts gave up. There was no secret message. No darlings, no kisses that he could find, and the way that Gerald Stoodley wrote, he was like a simpleton with no brains. Like that twin brother of hers, that Clyde, they made a fine pair. Down he went to the basement and put the third letter in the dark bag. He was a fox all right, he was a deep-sea diver and there was no telling how far down he could go. That's what he thought to himself on the way back upstairs.

Dear Meta Maud (letter number four), I don't know about your brother now. Down the hill I went to the bakery, and there was Clyde making coffee. He had the sweat popped out all over him. Then he poured all the coffee out at once, all of it down the drain. Then right away, he made a new pot. It was like at Tim's all over again. He looked around, down the drain it went, surreptitious. I was the only one who seen it, I think. Then he made up a third pot right away. That's no good for Clyde. They find out, he's gone. Maybe answer me this time please, Meta Maud. Yours, Gerald.

Fat chance of that, thought Walter Butts.

Three weeks later, he and Meta Maud went out to the Keg. They had a special dinner for what they called their two-month anniversary. By then he had near twenty letters from Gerald Stoodley, all of them down in the diving bag. That night at the Keg, he had a lot more wine than he was used to, but what the heck, she had the keys to the car. Steak and baked potatoes and after that it was apple pie. What a time they had. Remember the dance we met, he said, you was so shy back then. And Meta Maud smiled and agreed and then the waitress came by and she said, You folks want coffee? and Walter laughed and said to Meta Maud, Hey, honey, why not? Maybe your crazy brother Clyde fixed it up. And Meta Maud said, Fixed what up? What did Clyde fix up? The coffee, the coffee, he said with a big laugh, Clyde fixed up the coffee! So Meta

Maud laughed sort of and they drove home and at 2 a.m. she woke up with a chill in the middle of her heart and she said, Whoa, wait a minute, I never said nothing at all to Walter about Clyde and coffee. Where'd he get that idea from? Walter, she said, wake up. Walter, where'd you get that about Clyde and coffee? He was half-asleep. You told me, you told me about the coffee. Meta Maud, go back to sleep. So she did go back to sleep and in the morning first thing she poured the orange juice for him and off he went down to the harbour. Some big steel rods fell off the barge, he said, seventy dollars an hour for me. What's twelve times seventy? See you in eight hundred and forty dollars. Off he went and Meta Maud Grandy sat there. What the hell, what the hell, what the hell, is what she said. Then she thought, let's figure it out. Phone home.

Back on Fitzpatrick Avenue, Eunice Cluett and Henry Fiander were already in a bit of a funk when they heard the phone go off. The problem Eunice and Henry had, and they'd had it for some time, was none other than Gerald Stoodley himself, and the problem with Gerald Stoodley was, he'd turned into a zombie on the couch. He lay there like he was a washed-up squid. Every time they walked by the squid, they had to say, Move them tentacles please, move them tentacles. Then he'd shift a bit but otherwise, when they said, What's wrong with you, Gerald Stoodley? he couldn't seem to muster up any strength at all. This was a big change for Gerald Stoodley, because up till then he was a house on fire all the time. More likely they had to say, Close the damper down some, Gerald, why not? You'll wear out like one of them supernovas. Now, with Meta Maud gone a couple months or more, there he was, a zombie on the couch. Paralyzed. They had no idea that he'd sent letters off to Meta Maud, and got none back at all.

—Get the phone, Gerald Stoodley, said Eunice.

—I can't. I'm de-oxygenated, he said.

That was the word he used for the disease he figured he had, the one that made him tired all the time. A big medical book lay on the floor by the couch, and when Henry picked it up one day, it fell open to the page that said Leukemia. This what you got? he asked Gerald, and Gerald said, That's it, I got it all, and Henry read a bit more and said, You got loss of appetite, weight loss, sweats in the night and chest pains? To that Gerald said, I don't have every single one of those but I got lots. I'm de-oxygenated, Henry. My oxygen bubbles are way too few. My muscles is starved of life-giving oxygen.

Then Eunice went right over to the couch and she snapped away the book from the dying man and she leafed through it a bit and gave it back to the dying man and she said, Gerald, read that. It says Depression. Depression? That's what you got, you numbskull, all right, said Eunice, that's all you got, you're pining away. I seen it lots, I wonder why.

Eunice ran for the phone herself, no one else moved. She said hello and then she laughed out loud, Why girl, you fell off the earth. Then Eunice was real quiet and then she said into the phone, Things aren't so good here right now. Clyde's gone and messed up and lost the job at the bakery. Gerald's dying on the couch. Otherwise, we're fine and dandy. Then she listened to Meta Maud a bit more and she said, Talk to Gerald, he's the only one who knows about Clyde. Kept an eye on him, for all the good it did.

She held the phone up in the air like it was a prize and waved it and said real loud, Gerald, it's Miss Meta Maud Grandy all the way from the big city of Halifax for you, and all of a sudden the man with the fatal De-oxygenating Leukemia Disease jumped up from the couch and came into the kitchen and took the phone from Eunice.

—Meta Maud, what's up?

He was so weak from Leukemia that his hand trembled.

—Gerald, what's up with Clyde?

—He didn't make it, Meta Maud, he didn't pull it off.

—The coffee again?

—That's it.

—Gerald, you should've told me.

—I wrote the letters, Meta Maud. There was nothing I could do.

—Letters?

—The first few days Clyde was fine. He made the coffee right, he walked away. He swept up the floor. He cut the bread. He tied on the little tags for the jam, like we showed him. Then he just started to sweat a lot, and he looked at the coffee all the time. His eyes got buggy like a frog, Meta Maud, I seen it, a bad omen, I thought right off. I'd warned him over and over. But you know Clyde, he got fixated on the drip-drip-drip of the damn coffee. That was it.

—That was it?

—That was it all right. One day he made twenty pots of coffee non-stop, then he poured it all surreptitious down the drain. Lickety-split, you'd pull your hair out. Between the pots, Meta Maud, all he did was bug his eyes and wipe away the sweat, like he was in a trance. It was all the same as Tim's, all over again, a second time. Break your heart, they fired him too. Bango.

—Bangoo. That's it for Clyde.

—That's it this time anyways. Nice to hear your voice, Meta Maud.

—I wish I'd known.

—You read all the letters.

—I got no letters.

—Maybe, Meta Maud, we keep Clyde away from coffee, find him a job like that?

—You sent me letters?

—You know I did. Every day non-stop.

—Never got a one.

—By the way, how's the diver?

Gerald knew she had a deep-sea diver now because, in the one postcard Meta Maud sent to Eunice, she said so.

—I'm not so sure about the diver, Gerald.

Then Meta Maud, before she hung up the phone, said something like, It's nice to talk. That's what he remembered after.

—You sent her letters, Gerald Stoodley, you fox? said Eunice.

Gerald seemed to have that shake in his hand a little less now.

—I did but she got none, said Gerald.

—My, who's in love with who, I wonder now, said Eunice. She said it real soft, no one could hear her, but later on that day when they were all alone, she said to Henry Fiander, Gerald's in love.

—Meta Maud?

—That's the one. He sends her letters, he can't breathe the oxygen when she's away.

—Too bad for him that he's got the fatal De-oxygenating Leukemia Disease, beyond the help of doctors. Bad timing.

—You seen him run out of here after that phone call, Henry?

—I did, he had the tentacles going in the right direction for the first time in weeks.

—Oxygenated. Cured by a miracle.

After she hung up the phone to St. John's, Meta Maud Grandy sat there at the kitchen table, there in Halifax. Nice condo they had, that's for sure. Walter Butts, he was gone for the full twelve-hour shift. He was pulling on the wetsuit and putting on the big helmet before he pushed off backwards, off the Zodiac. She'd watched him do it. Down he went with the big chains. He said you could hardly see down there in the murk of the harbour. That's what he called it, the murk of the harbour, like going down into a dark basement, honey, you can't see zip down there. Mostly you hear yourself breathe in and out, and you feel your way around a lot with the gloves, they're big and thick. They lowered fancy lights down there to penetrate the murk of the harbour. Hours, it took hours to wrap the chains on whatever they had to pull up, do it right. Today it was iron bars. You had to be a certain kind, to do that, and that's why they pay the big money.

Ha-ha-ha, that's what she remembered, the night before at the Keg. Ha-ha-ha. The way he laughed out loud, Maybe it was your twin brother, Meta Maud, maybe it was your Clyde made the coffee. Hey, I'll have some of that coffee, Sweetie. And that was the waitress he talked to when he said that, when he said Sweetie. Only one way he could have known

about Clyde and coffee, he must have read the letters that were meant for her. What did he do then, burn them up? What was he? Some kind of creep like on TV? What did she know, eighteen years old, the sister of Clyde the fool. Hair all over his chest, so what, screw him, she thought.

Well what the hell. Mister Walter Butts? Gone twelve hours now, that's for sure. Where are the letters? Gone for good? He kicked around a lot in the basement, that's for sure. She could do that, she could dive down, rattle some chains, and penetrate the murk of the harbour of the creep. Might find what he called zip, might find lots, you never knew. She got up and she flicked on the cellar light and down she went, clump-clump, she heard her own footsteps in the quiet, dead as night. That's what she said to herself. Those are my footsteps in the quiet, dead as night. There wasn't much down there. This won't take long, she said. Over there, there was a set of golf clubs, over there was the bags she brought from home. Then there was a set of filing cabinets, and in the far corner was a pile of bags. Sports bags and luggage bags and diving bags all in a big clump. The filing cabinet was empty. All it did was wobble and creak. Goldilocks, I'm like her. What next? The bags, the diving bags of Mr. Deep-sea Diver, that's what's next, and she went over and moved them with her foot and what do you know, one of them bags is full. Just this one here, buried at the bottom of the pile. She picked it up and loosened the thin rope that kept it closed at one end, and she put her hand inside. Well, she said, Goldilocks, let's go upstairs with the evidence now. Clump-clump, up into the morning light she went, and two miles away, Mister Walter Butts adjusted his mouthpiece. Time for the very first dive on what looked like the finest kind of day.

First thing she did, Meta Maud, was she poured herself out some orange juice in a glass, and then she emptied out the diving bag, all of it, onto the kitchen table. Then she sat down and looked. Naked magazines, he had plenty of those all right. They made up most of the weight of the bag. But then there was a pack of letters tied up with a big elastic, the type of elastic you get on the mail sometime.

Well well, let's see. Sure enough, the little packet, every envelope the same. It said, *From Mister Gerald Stoodley, 7 Fitzpatrick Avenue, St. John's, Newfoundland*. There you go, judge and jury, he's guilty as sin. The letters, why, they never been opened. That made no sense. She took a closer look, the edges of the envelopes were all smeared up with glue. Look at that. She put her hand down into the diving bag and felt around and out she came with a glue jar. Elmer's Glue, like he was a kindergarten baby. Whatever made Walter Butts do that? He'd gone and piled up the letters meant for her, smack up against the magazines. You want to stay with a man like that? She took the letters, they were all numbered in purple ink on the outside of the envelopes. That's his work, the diver way down in

the dark, he had a whole slew of those coloured pens. These never leak, he said. Even more weird, he'd gone and circled the first letter of every line with his purple ink pen. Then he'd made a list of all those single letters, tried to make up words like a puzzle. My God, he's after looking for secret messages, the fool, the idiot.

Meta Maud had all day, she had no classes till the afternoon. Down in the harbour, he'd be up by now, off the air-tanks. Never stay down too long, that's the secret, he said. Not the only secret he's got, I guess, said Meta Maud. Make your own secrets, Walter Butts, instead of stealing mine. So she read the letters one by one. The last one said, *Dear Meta Maud, Clyde's home three weeks now with nothing on the horizon. We're wracking our brains, and that's not easy. We need you, Meta Maud, give us a call. Yours from Barter's Hill half-way up, or more likely three-quarters of the way down, Gerald Stoodley.*

Next thing Meta Maud did, she picked up one of those purple pens of Walter Butts' and she wrote a letter. She started it off to herself. *Dear Meta Maud*, it said, and she wrote it pretty fast. She was good with words, she was smart that way. All the Grandys had brains, even Clyde had brains. For Clyde they didn't fire off right, yet, but she figured they would. Then she phoned up Eunice Cluett on the telephone, and after she said hello to her, How's Gerald? That's good he's not dying anymore, he's oxygenated again? That's good, let me speak to Gerald Stoodley.

—This is Gerald Stoodley.

—Hi, Gerald.

—Meta Maud. It's you.

—Gerald, I'm sending you a letter at last, but it's to me.

—To you?

—To me.

—That makes no sense.

—What you do is this. You get my letter, you copy it out in your own writing. Each line the same, Gerald, even the start of each line the same. Exact. Then you mail it back to me the same day. It ends up with *Your lover, Gerald Stoodley*. You got it?

—Your lover?

—That's what I wrote.

—Lover.

—Just copy it all it out, send it back.

Then Meta Maud Grandy went downstairs into the basement, and she put the letters and the magazines back into the diving bag. Then she lifted up her suitcase and took it upstairs and she packed up everything she had and she called a cab, and then she phoned up her old friend from school, Germaine Hamilton, and she said, Germaine, I'm staying with you a few days? and Germaine said, Sure. Then Meta Maud Gran-

dy walked out on Walter Butts and never left a note. Nothing.

Three days later, Walter Butts still couldn't figure it out. He'd come home after a real fine day and she was gone. Like she was never there, ever, and the condo was back just the way he had it before. The first thing he did, he went down into the basement and there was the letters and the magazines, still in the bag. She never found them, a million years it would take, he was right about that. Then the next day, he phoned in sick for first time in ten years. To hell with them, he had plenty sick-pay coming. Touch of the flu, he said. Try throwing up in your regulator, that's no fun. OK, Walter, see you when you're better. He was the best man they had there underwater, he knew that, he could do whatever he liked. Then he sat there for three days like a zombie and the mailman came by and dropped a letter in the box. Jesus, what's this? To hell with the kettle, he ripped the letter open with his hands, and he picked up the purple pen.

The letter said,

*Dear Meta Maud, how fine to hear
a voice that's
really you on the phone, the
lovely times we had
in English Harbour, the
night sky, the lightning bugs, the
ghosts in the shadows, the walks on*

*Gower Street and Barter's Hill
I'm the man for you
remember me the way it was. Your
lover, Gerald Stoodley.*

She knew Walter Butts'd figure it out. He'd get the bends from that, the sweetness of it all, sliding through him in the kitchen there. It was the last thing he'd ever steal from her, that's for sure. She felt strong, like she breathed on pure oxygen.

Peter Richardson

The Ballast Trunk

You haul it on a sledge. The tools inside it tinkle,
making the sound metal makes when it is jounced
hard over stream bottoms as you ford and reford
the same creek, a man adept at coffering loss,
at keeping it snug in numbered drawers. You halt,
turn and wade back across the cold wide brook.

You know you can't decide on a name for this
till you acknowledge the way of the trunk,
what the ropes for pulling it request of you, how
it feels to have pulled it without a breather,
straining into the draglines as a passing cloud
gives you a glimpse of your clenched jaw.

Scraping along in the slow current though,
you see how ballast can be helpful in grieving.
It joins you to the gravelled, sun-splotched
pools your trunk rudders over, not to mention
the ruckus of stirred brook stones, the hard
jangling ride your tools take under hemlocks.

Your last-second lurches to maintain balance
flog you forward, while the rocking motion
a horse might make here grinds at your back.
There's something to be said for not knowing
whether to set up camp, or continue hauling
till you've gouged a channel down to bedrock.

Bathroom Mirror

He keeps reaching forward to clear the glass of distortion
but already they are different from the way they were
in the shower. There's no groping-with-the-soap out here
under the fluorescent lights, only the two of them
correcting their postures as if this were a locket photo,
which, in a way, he supposes it is. She's asking him
to look at what little they know about the couple
whose habit of dazzling each other requires testing
in rooms of all dimensions and all manner of lighting.
He reaches forward to wipe again. Then his hand
drops to encircle her waist. He likes what she hopes
he will see when they look at themselves in composure.
And maybe they do make a couple who can acquire
a habit of appreciating this after water has sluiced
down their bodies and foamed into a steel drain.
Maybe she will always tug him forward by the towel
and his hand will go on alighting at her waist
till they are ragged with this continued hydrotherapy
through decades of soapy postcoital showers.
Right now, she holds him to a three-quarters hug.
Le beau couple, she says. Regarde le beau couple.

Ibi Kaslik

Ingénues

This ingénue thing is getting pretty old, Mara says, slicing the skin off a pineapple. I'm sitting on her sixteenth-floor balcony with a view of English Bay. I'm watching an ant pull a worm three times its size between the balcony rails.

I mean, do I ever do anything except dress up in period costumes, cry, and make out with strangers anymore? She tosses a pineapple chunk on my lap; the ant and worm struggle along.

Mara is almost thirty-five, like me, and sick of being cast as an innocent. She is playing Ophelia in an outdoor production of Hamlet in Kits. We met in a university drama class; I made a papier-mâché mould of her face and she invited me to her Chekhov club potluck, where we stood at the kitchen counter all night eating cheap cheese and discussing Russian angst. Mara is the kind of friend who returns your phone call within the same day, sometimes even the same hour. Thoughtful and oddly undramatic for an actor, you can tell her anything and she will respond with the same measured bearing of an unhyysterical coach intent only on your safety. In the four short hours since arriving at her place from Toronto, I've already confessed that I thought I was an elephant in a previous life, that in my recent recurring nightmare a male prostitute strangles me with a skipping rope, and that for three months running I've woken up to the swell of death in my ears.

I squash the ant and its cargo with the flat of my toe, feeling the balance of crunch and softness give. They wouldn't have made it anyway, wherever they were headed. Mara empties the yellow husks into the garbage. I chew the pineapple slowly, say: At least you get to drown yourself in front of an audience.

It had been a good day: the apartment was neat, I was in the middle of making coleslaw and answering email when Liz burst into my apartment with a key I'd given her years ago. She was wearing six-inch heels and a beaten leather jacket, which looked remarkably like the one I'd given Leo for our second anniversary. I was making coleslaw, my mother's recipe. Liz began babbling about brain chemistry.

Some people go down, K, but you go *really* down. Let me take you to my shrink.

My mother, a shrink herself, once told me that the first one to speak in an emotionally charged conversation was the one with the most anxiety. I thought about how this rule might not apply to Liz because she talked all the time. But now we were both quiet. I considered how I'd always been the one to make things easier for Liz in her transitions back from life on the road—asking her questions about the tour, offering her soup—but there was something between us now, in this unfocussed calm.

I wanted to tell Liz that I'd rather eat shit than go to her Finnish shrink. Instead, I lit a cigarette and let the silence between us grow into the haze of smoke I blew in her direction.

Instead of talking, Liz chewed a piece of cabbage. It made a rubbery sound beneath her small teeth. I knew why she was at my place.

There were circles under my eyes and I'd lost weight. I'd made the mistake of calling Leo the night before to tell him I missed his father's ham stew. Our break up had failed to arrange itself for me even after four months. I didn't understand it; I don't understand it, I said to him. I'd like to see you, he said. I'd like to buy you lunch. Lunch? I can't eat lunch with you. I just want to understand. When will I understand? I asked again. How can you ask someone to marry you and then watch them walk out the door with the food processor? It was late and he sounded tired and frustrated. He mumbled something I didn't catch.

There had once been an order to things. Leo was my fiancé. Liz was my best friend. They played in a band together. I went to clubs to watch them play. I'd pick them both up from the airport after a tour. I made Leo nice dinners he'd select from a *Bon Saveur* magazine. I massaged his small, bass-worn hands.

When Leo and I were together, he or Liz called me at least once a week from the road. Now, when Liz was back from tour, she spent all her time rehearsing, or sleeping off her hangover, or lunching with Leo. Liz and I used to spend at least twenty-four hours together on her days off, eating, drinking, and sleeping in each other's beds as we had since high school. Now she dropped in for these hysterical fifteen-minute sessions, looking like a New York Doll, offering me money and Ativans. Now this shrink business.

K, you called Leo last night and told him you wanted to *kill yourself*.

I looked at her face. She was smoking one of my cigarettes and her eyes were ringed with mascara. It seemed like she had last night's stage face on all the time now. I looked at the roll of fat caught between Liz's T-shirt and jeans; it somehow comforted me.

I feel like killing myself *every time I talk to him*, I clarified, pointing my smoking hand in the air for emphasis. Besides, why are we being so

dramatic? Why do you look so dramatic?

I examined Liz's dirty nails. She looked falsely lit in the glare of the kitchen. Something brittle took shape in my stomach as she reached out her hand and repeated my name. I smoked, stared, waited, and did not put out my hand.

Then I asked the question that had been hanging between us for four months, since Leo had gathered his things and walked out the door because he said he needed to be a musician, and thus free of me. I asked it loud, in someone else's voice, orating from my diaphragm as they'd taught us in that very same drama class where I coated Mara's face with Vaseline and stroked glue on her forehead.

Are you and Leo together?

Yes.

Are you in love with him, or what?

At the beach, Mara is trying to get a bee unstuck from her absurd hair extensions. A Japanese family plays baseball, races small battery cars, snacks. The women wear hats and gloves and the boys are dressed like middle-aged men, chinos hoisted up to their small bellies. One boy wears an orange T-shirt that reads: Passion is Free!

Mara's bee, the family, are exhausting to watch, to keep track of. So I walk to the ocean, feeling the spray melt away the braided resistance in my arms. I think of Mara onstage the night before, how one of her long hair extensions floated off her head when she jumped into her actor's grave. How I saw her arm twitch, reflexively, to try and catch the strands before her fall.

I swim out till I feel how big and impersonal the ocean is, till I feel the cold creep up my calves. Then I swim toward the shore, on my back, watch the sky.

When I get back to my towel, the bee is wrapped neatly in a paper napkin and Mara is asleep with a book about meditation folded over her face.

I was humiliated.

No, you weren't, Mara says, sucking a lychee out of its shell and pursing it between her teeth. She is wearing her torn Ophelia bridal gown and eating the brain-like fruits compulsively. Each night she rips her gown a little more when the actor named Chad playing Hamlet comes at her with his "Get thee to a nunnery" bit. She says this bit of stage busi-

ness helps her concentrate on divining all those mixed messages.

Mara eats seaweed, asparagus, and lychee non-stop, but only these things. In the washed-out light of her apartment, her freckles are tea-coloured. She holds her arms before her and stretches out her long body.

You weren't humiliated. You were humiliated *upon*.

Humiliated *upon* is not an expression, Mara, I say.

Oh yes, it is.

In the loud, mid-day July light, I try to un-remember all this:

Liz, at fifteen, blows Moroccan hash down my windpipe, our mouths locked in a smoky kiss behind a dumpster. Liz, drunk at our friend Ken's wedding reception, makes me hold her heels and purse while she pees out the church door. In university, sick with mono for two months, Liz sleeps on my couch, eats tuna melts, while I collect her Kleenex in wide plastic bags, move the TV onto the couch, and write her Women in Mythology term paper. Liz, at thirty-two, flies me to New York City twice in one year to watch her play the Knitting Factory, and I paste aluminium stars in my journal and drink nine Rolling Rocks in a row backstage. There I meet Leo for the first time and we spend two days eating hot nuts and walking around the Met. Liz mashes a camera into my face and Leo's after he proposes to me on his American grandmother's quilt. Liz, who likes to nap with all of her books and CDs and jewellery on her bed, who makes a pair of pink-feathered earrings for my twenty-ninth birthday, which break in the mail.

But secretly I memorize these fragments, tuck them behind the sound of cicadas, the sound of gulls tugging at beach garbage.

Of the many private and public horrors that are involved with having your fiancé run off with your best friend, the worst of it is the way people throw in the word humiliation, as if they've seen your bloated belly and dirty underwear and know exactly how human you are, no matter how thin and lacquered you look, no matter how kind or rich the guy on your arm is. I hadn't considered the fact that I was humiliated until my friends started bringing it up. I didn't feel particularly humiliated. I didn't cry myself to sleep; I preferred to cry during the day in my bed, with my phone on speed-dial, and a bevy of sympathetic ears on call.

I stayed relatively sober and subdued in most social situations and spoke only to close friends and lovers who would wrap me in their arms, buy me eggs, or a purse, and hide all of their meds. I had no nightmares;

all of my dreams had been peremptory. And, like the good Catholic girl that I was, I'd turned the other cheek, embraced denial. This was embarrassing. But humiliating?

It is a person's own birthright to humiliate herself in her own demented, personal way, Mara says, in her best bard diction. It is up to each of us to be present for our own dramas, she explains, sighing. She didn't humiliate you, K, you weren't even there.

Pouring it out of a saké decanter, Mara convinces me to try absinthe at 2:50 in the afternoon.

I will watch her eat seaweed for the next week. It will stick to her teeth like torn construction paper. We will sleep little in her bright apartment, perfect the tree pose on the beach, with all the seagulls and gay boys watching. A few actors might fall in love with us. But we'll leave the party before they remember our eyes. We'll tear over the Burrard Street Bridge doubling on Mara's granny-bike, fall and skin our knees at the red light before the uphill ride home.

And, one morning, I'll wake up on her living room floor so hungover I'll believe the bottom of her coffee table is the inside of a coffin. But then I'll notice the old gum on the underside and remember only someone truly alive can pretend to die every night.

Sandy Florian

Radio

Telegraphy without wire. German Telefunken. Or. Distant sparks. And. Transmission and reception of radio-frequency electromagnetic flutterings. Frequencies are stated in cycles of hertz. As. A frequency of seven kilohertz is 7000 flutters per second. A megahertz is one million. Or. Organized wireless broadcasting. As a medium of communication. Sending messages to ships at sea was one of its first uses. Now. Signals about conditions that influence the weather are received from high flying balloons. Or. As art. This is Radio Chaos. And. In the middle of the country, I have heard both the Atlantic and Pacific surfs. On the radio. But. If science has made it made it possible for me to blazon my disembodied broadcast, I drop my bottle into stiller waters. Watch it bob toward your infected ear. For. Signals are created by the oscillating electric currents. And. You need to be both strengthened and converted.

The action of these waves compare to the action of waves on water. But. Radio waves are not shaped like water waves. And. It's the radio that goes to war. As. Berlin radio relies on divisive propaganda. Moscow radio announces that Russia has launched an earth satellite. Cairo radio interprets the Soviet warning to Britain as a threat to bomb London. And. Soldiers carry his tiny talkies on their helmets. While. Miniature transmitters are swallowed to broadcast signals according to the body. In the evening, we listen to the radio and play billiards. See the set of expanding domes.

This is a test. This is only a test. And. Radio antenna. Apparatus. Beacon. And. Intercept again. For. While I fly contentedly checking my direction by the radio beacons, I ask Goose Bay if they have any other traffic. Pronunciation is not an opportunity for elegance but a problem of what to do with words. If this were an actual emergency, I think I said "I love you." As I cut off the radio link.

Ointment

A semisolid substance used as a salve. An emollient. A medicament. Or. A medicinal preparation in the form of paste. A concoction used for ceremonial anointment. As. Viscous oil from the ghost. And. An unction. An unguent. A cream or a balm. Or. A toiletry made of substances having a moisturizing effect. But. If the irritation is severe, you are the patron saint of pharmacy. With your spatula. Your urine flask. Your book and your brain. And. I am the patron saint of firefighting. With a stone roped around my neck in the river. For. A flint glass and a nickel cap. You have the ointment box. Or. You are the anointer. Mixing fragments of sun until the blend becomes unguent. Then. Adding rhodium.

See. Poetry is not pagan. Sweet anointment of the holy. Physicians are rolling pills. And. Making mud of. This is my body blank. Or. Life-drops. Is dropping. This is sovereign virtue that repels the inner heat.

As. Camphor. A gummy solid. Flammable and volatile. Of a formula. For use in ammunition and plastics. Insecticides and medicine. And. Derived from a Taiwanese tree. I ask you, How? You say, See here. Cook its wood and condense its vapour. Then. Cook its crystals with quicklime. Condensing again into gum. Or. Refine turpentine to make pinene. Pass it quickly through a prickly pipe. Then blend it all with hydrogen chloride. At settings and at pressures. For the making of flakes.

But. There's a fly in my ointment. Or. A trifling circumstance which spoils enjoyment. A thing that detracts from agreeableness. For. Canopus was a centre of the industry and a pleasure resort for Alexandrians. Osiris was worshipped as a human-headed vessel. And. The jar is used to hold the entrails of a mummy. But. I am off topic. Or. I am sidestepping the ointment. For. I've sent away Mercury with a fly in his ear. Or. A fly thus enclosed in amber.

Diane Tucker

Eve as rib

If time could be wound back before clock,
before sundial, almost before sun,
I'd spend a day, if I could, as your rib,
suspended awhile before God drew me out.

You stand after a strenuous morning of naming,
the unnamed still rubbing themselves
against your calves in the wordless new air.

You stretch and spread your fingers
across me while gazing into the distance
at that blueness we'll call mountains.

A big sheepish sort of creature rubs
against you then, and so against me,
both of us poked, both nudged for a name
or for its absence, not even this beast
wanting words right now, no word to slip
like a waxy leaf between it and its beginning.

Your hand still spread-eagled along my length,
they dawn on you, dawn in you: hunger and thirst.

So I help hold you in and up all the way
to the water and the fruit; I hang there,
stretched piece of your heart's bone-basket,
spine-sconced white hook, marrow-cored
blood coffer cuddling a lung in the dark.

When, that night, you lay down to sleep,
there's an insomniac hour. A sensation
we'll later, together, name *pain* licks your side.

Brand new, it keeps you awake but somehow
isn't unpleasant yet. You press your hand against
the place that seems to pulse the strange feeling.
Pain, unfallen, is your body making ready.
You become sure of this. You careen toward sleep
curled around the place, both hands clutching it.

*Something is going to happen, you think,
when the sun burns and I make words again
for the creatures. Perhaps (your last waking thought)
I'll hear the sound of my own name spoken
at last by one of these wandering beasts?*

No Suffah

Amelia uses up her whole trapeze turn hanging upside down in the catcher's hang. The copper skin of her face turns the colour of the leaves, then the colour of star apples. When her feet are pale as sun-bleached coral and her cheeks dark as the crags of cooled lava that tooth the shore, Lore interferes. "Amelia," she says. "Come down."

Before this, Lore has made subtler suggestions: "Would you like me to push you in a circle?" to which Amelia shook her head, and then, "You're getting red, let me show you a different trick," which Amelia summarily ignored.

Now Amelia says, "My time pau?"

"Not quite, but..." Lore's voice swallows itself like a collapsing wave. Her thirteen-year-old student already has the upper hand.

For three more minutes, Amelia hangs upside down in the trapeze. There is a distinct line around the base of her neck below which (being upside down), her skin pulses ashen, then crimson, like a coal.

Lore stands anxiously next to her, glancing at the clock. An echoing din surrounds them: the gym is full of kids on unicycles and stilts, kids juggling rings and practicing walking on their hands. It is the first day of the middle school's circus arts program.

One minute early, Lore says, "Time's up."

Amelia reaches slowly for the bar, unhinges her legs from the ropes, lowers herself carefully to the floor. She stands there, eyes closed, with the bar against one cheek, while the blood percolates out of her head. When she opens her eyes, she looks directly at Lore for the first time.

"I like hang upside down," she says, then pauses, still gripping the bar. "Ever'ting so different." She speaks slowly, as though testing each word for accuracy. "What I look for long time," she says.

"What are you looking for?" asks Lore.

Now Amelia loses the pidgin and speaks as though reciting: "Both the sensation and the reaction to the sensation." She says, "One pain, one pleasure."

"It doesn't have to be painful..."

"Is zactly right," says Amelia, schlepping a giant book-bag over one bony shoulder.

"What?" But Amelia is already heading for the door, and the next

student is waiting for her turn.

For two weeks, it's the same routine. The other kids dangle from various body parts; they sprint at the trapeze, which hangs from a single point on the ceiling, its bar just five feet off the ground. They let the trapeze lift them, then coast along the gym floor; they spin until they're nauseous and the ropes are tightly entwined; they fly till they can't hold on any longer, and then blow on their blisters and pilot back into the ropes. They're doing Christ hangs and comparing the track marks left on the insides of their arms; they're running and jumping directly into hip hangs. Some can already glide like stags with long launched soars for steps, pointing their toes as their leaps suspend in space.

Amelia sits on the lowest bench of the bleachers with her legs folded under her, waiting for her turn. She sits unmoving the whole hour, eyes shut, though occasionally they open a little, revealing only whites. Now and then, she gnaws at the black braid of hair she holds between her lips.

When it's her turn for the trapeze, Amelia hangs upside down and is unresponsive for the whole ten minutes, changing colours—Lore visualizes leaves, ripening fruit, fire, the chameleons that meditate on the rough koa walls of her sublet.

Lore stays after all the teachers and students have gone home. She looks at the clock, then slips easily into the catcher's hang. After three minutes, she is acutely uncomfortable. Though she has performed on trapeze for years, she's never tried just hanging torpid, upside down, with her legs pinioned in the ropes. She's used to flying, orbiting the bar on one plane, and the centre point of the circular swing on another, so she is liberated from gravity, unaware of her weight. This stillness is the opposite. It's torture.

She relaxes all her muscles, breathes into her belly, but can't ignore the throbbing in her temples, the numb creeping into her feet. At three minutes, waspish needles infuriate her legs, and her head feels as though it will explode. She comes down and lies on the floor, trying to recover. She doesn't move until she senses another presence in the room, and then she lurches up, preparing to make excuses. But it's only the janitor, steering his mop and listening to headphones.

She walks home with an umbrella that keeps her dry from about the navel up. She has to hold the canvas briefcase full of homework to be corrected just under her chin if it's to stay dry. They hired her as an artist-in-residence and then sprung it on her a week before she boarded the plane that she'd be a part-time English teacher as well. "Sounds like Hawaii," said Nathan, watching her pack.

At home, she hunches over a kitchen table stacked with magazines, turning the pages of this one or that one, reading or not reading. If she forgets to stop for take-out on the way home, there's always the mega-pack of black licorice the owners left in a cupboard, but nothing much else. She retires to the *lanai* and watches the light change shape on the palms. It's as if the sky, too, hangs impassively upside down until its face is puffed with blood before it blackens.

On Monday of the third week of circus, the seventh student on Lore's list doesn't show, making Amelia the last turn of the day.

Lore says, "Amelia, tell me what you're doing."

Amelia's lips shrink into her mouth. Her black eyes squint and quiver; she places her hands on the bar, but waits, looking at Lore through the edges of her eyes.

"Practice," she says finally, and lashes up into the air. Spindly arms snag her ascent: she has to scurry at the ropes with her toes to get her hips up and over the bar. But as soon as she drops down into the catcher's hang, everything about her appears serene.

Ten minutes pass. Fifteen. Her colour is frightening. In the pandemonium at the end of class, the acrobatics teacher is the only one who notices. "An island of calm amidst the chaos!" he bellows, approaching, but then he sees her hue. "Ms. Dubin! What is going on here?"

"Amelia," Lore says carefully, suddenly sweating, "is testing herself. To see how long she can stay upside down."

"She could do permanent damage!" He takes two steps toward the trapeze.

"Stuart," Lore grabs his arm. "She's okay. Go on home, all right? I'll clean up." She says it firmly. Though she is a full head shorter than him, her broad shoulders, grey-blue eyes, her old farm-kid stance juxtaposed by ash-blonde hair cut stylishly short to her head, something about her intimidates him. He stands a moment, pushing his hands deeper into the pockets of his sweatpants, frowning in Amelia's direction, then nods at Lore, blows exasperated air out of his cheeks, and retreats.

Lore sits cross-legged on the floor a little distance from the trapeze. Amelia's colour seems to have levelled off. Her breaths are visible in her shoulders, slow and full. The last few inches of her braid lie flat against the waxed hardwood floor. Her face is engorged with blood, her eyes shut and her lips slightly puckered.

After some time: "Amelia, I have to go home."

"My time up?"

"Yes, your time is up."

Obediently, Amelia slips off the bar. Lore looks at the clock. Twenty-five minutes, she thinks, almost proudly, as if Amelia were training for a

race. But she knows Amelia won't care about the time. She asks, "Practice for what, Amelia?"

Something troubled pours over Amelia's swollen features. She stands looking at the floor so long that Lore thinks she won't answer. "Practice fo' pain," she says finally, but then, "No, das no right." She sighs, frustrated.

"Just tell me one thing," says Lore. "Is someone hurting you?"

Amelia looks startled, blinks, looks straight into Lore's eyes. "No," she says, and after weeks of apparent obliviousness to Lore's bewilderment, she now looks genuinely sorry she has caused concern. "Not dat," she says. "Kay?"

"Okay."

Amelia walks toward home. She straggles across the baseball diamond, along the palings; two billy goats strain at their tethers, cry and buck toward her, get jolted back. Her fingers lapse along each paint-peeled board, dry mango leaves in drifts at her feet.

She approaches the edge of the papaya field, day drowning into its sea of leaves, light splintering through stooping corridors of blonde and porous trunks, trunks which at their bases cling tenuously to lava rocks. Amelia has at other times loosened these rocks methodically, rolled them away in rows, revealed bottomless crevices and peered down into them: old lava tubes cooled into caves.

Today she crouches on the border of the field, not yet entering it. She intends to pull young cane grass for the goats, but gets distracted instead by a snail.

Its shell is tawny and opalish; its body a tongue lugging a skull; its eyes four antennae that ebb and flow, ooze forward and then astringe. Amelia takes the snail into her hand. Immediately, it scrunches into the thin space of its shell, leaving two brownish wrinkled lips and a surf of foam around the edges of the opening. It is the size and weight of an egg, secret and fragile. Tiny clear bubbles appear on the pursed lips as they attempt to sink deeper into themselves, to disappear.

Amelia places the snail back in the cinders. She waits; the day's light wavers, thins, becomes threads. After a long while, the snail gyres forward again. Cautiously, it extends itself, skin expanding and contracting, sienna, then ivory. When its antennae have spired forward a full inch and it's lapping along the cinders once again, Amelia digs into her schoolbag and produces a pair of scissors from a zippered pouch. She does not hesitate. She snips one soft probe from the snail's head.

A hearty trajectory of clear viscous juice spurts out, and the snail sucks itself up in a second, stays suctioned to its spot but hiding, though not as clenched as before. Amelia lays her hand gently over the snail, blan-

keting it. Inside is perfect stillness. She fathoms into it with her hand, wondering if it will move again, and it does. Quicker this time, she thinks with glee. She thought so: that the fear of pain would be greater than the pain itself. Resiliently, the snail pulses forward; asymmetrical yet seemingly unperturbed, it slides onto the edge of a withered leaf, which collapses under its weight and sends the snail rolling, retreating, emerging again.

Amelia blinks at the faded light and darts into the slouching columns of papaya trees.

It is the fourth week of circus, halfway through the program. The middle of February. The seventh student on the trapeze list officially dropped out, and Stuart, the acrobatics man, hurries out the door with the rest of the class at five o'clock.

Today, once everyone is gone, Amelia says, "Swing me den."

Lore lets out a breath. Finally, she thinks, some progress. She places a hand in the small of Amelia's back and walks her into a wide circle, her arm extended and taut, so when she lets go, Amelia is flying.

There is no change in Amelia's posture, except perhaps a slight broadening of her mouth, a deeper glow from the coal of her face. "Keep me swinging," Amelia says, when the circle begins to die down. "Again," she commands. "Again."

There is a green tinge to her, and a rhythmic rearranging of her lips, as if she's suckling an invisible nipple. Lore says, "I have to go now, Amelia." It is her checkmate. Just before Amelia makes it to the door, she adds, "I want you to tell me what this is about."

Amelia ducks her head and rushes out.

As she unlocks the door, Lore hears Nathan's voice on the answering machine, describing the snow in Ohio. She stands in the apartment, which has screens for windows, and listens to him trying not to sound gloomy. "Dazzling," he says of the snow, without sounding dazzled. He found a hibernating insect, he says, beneath some old corn stalks, with its wings folded over its head. He draws a breath, and falls silent. Lore sets the Filipino take-out box on the counter and wedges her hands between the faucet and the stacks of dirty cereal bowls she's been ignoring for days. As she is rinsing her hands and face, he speaks again, warning her about the divorce papers—somewhere over the Pacific and heading her way. Before he hangs up, he says, "You can still change your mind, Lore." And then, with the bewilderment that set in when he finally accepted her departure, "I'll let you."

That night, Lore dreams Amelia unlaces her legs in mid-air, and at the same moment, the floor drops out and Amelia falls for a long time, her

black braid scrawling in space. When she lands, the braid is all that's left of her, and it drains away down a hole.

In another dream, Lore is standing at the ocean, wading ankle-deep in the surf. But then she realizes she cannot feel her feet. She lifts them out of the foam and finds them missing—swollen stumps where they should be. Her mouth goes sour, and then she sees Amelia stretched out long and taut above the choppy water, black and severe, like a cormorant.

On Thursday, once everyone has gone, Amelia opens her eyes, and unhitches herself from the trapeze. She weaves over to her bag and carries back a thick book.

Lore sits cross-legged in her now-customary spot. Amelia opens the book and places it in Lore's lap, then pulls herself into an ankle hang. This week her repertoire has quadrupled. In addition to the classic catcher's hang, she can hang upside down with just her ankles wedged between the ropes and bar, balance on her hips so her body is bifurcated fore and aft, and hang right side up with all her weight on the inside of one elbow. In this last position, she is unique among Lore's students. All the others flinch when they try it, starching their eyes at her, as though she'd intentionally tricked them into injury.

Lore turns the book over. It is a human physiology textbook, checked out from the school library. She turns back to the page Amelia indicated and notices a passage that has been underlined lightly in pencil: "Both the sensation and the reaction to the sensation must be present for tissue-damaging stimuli to cause suffering."

The braided marine rope imprints itself on Amelia's inner ankle. With her hands on the floor, she walks herself into a broad circle, lets go, and flies. Her face is a mask, a tumid Buddha. Before she leaves, she says, "Dat wot dis about," nodding at the book now clasped to her chest. "Dis fo' practice no fo' suffah."

Lore sighs. This is going nowhere.

Amelia's father stands upright on the tractor in a yellow rain-slicker, T-shirts rolled and tied around his head and a scarf sheathing his face, leaving only his eyes, which squint into the late afternoon sun he's driving directly into. Wands protrude on either side of the tractor, and thin fountains douse the rows of papayas. Amelia waves and her father nods at her, signals her to stay back. She yanks a bouquet of tender cane grass for the goats and then loiters around the edge of the field, looking for but not finding the disfigured snail.

Amelia lets herself into the house soundlessly. She drops her bag by the door, and goes directly to her mother's room. It is dim and smells of orangey incense. From the bed, there is a slight groaning with every

exhalation. Amelia feels through the covers for a hand. What she finds is dry and tight. She covers it with her own as she had covered the snail after she cut it.

Amelia sits with her mother until her father comes home. She listens to the chafing of the waves in the distance, to the almost identical moaning of her mother, seeming just as distant. She hums softly. She smells the syrup she used to love to inhale off her father's neck, before she hears the bathroom door click shut, the water running, sweet fungicide racing down the drain.

Amelia lets go of her mother's hand. Where their palms met, hers is warm and wet. "Ma," she says, almost singing, "Ma, no worry, Ma, no worry."

She gathers up her father's laundry in old army bags, empties a tub of leftovers into a skillet, wipes throngs of earwigs off the counter and flushes them down the sink drain while she waits for the food to warm. Whenever her eyes lose their focus, she sees the soft tongue of the snail grazing the barbed lava rocks. And how it stayed battered inside her grasp, but then recovered so quickly when she amputated its eye.

"Show me," says Lore. "Teach me how."

Amelia's skin is the translucent green that water turns when a jug of it gets left in the sun. For almost thirty minutes, Lore has kept her flying in wide circles, while she hangs upside down, alternating occasionally between catcher's hang and hip hang.

Lore steps away now, waits for the trapeze to wind down, for the weight that is Amelia to sink to its centre.

Amelia lowers herself and grips the bar a moment, eyes more closed than open. "Kay," she says, stumbling back a few steps to make way for Lore on the trapeze. "Remembah wot I showed you in dat book. Only no react, den no suffah, li' dat. Kay?"

Lore drops into the catcher's hang, and without warning, Amelia grabs her by the shoulders and runs into a circle, lets go. When the trapeze slows down, she intercepts it and runs it up again. After several minutes of this, Lore opens her eyes. She is verging on panic.

Amelia bites down on her lower lip, then says, "You like come down? You pau awready?"

"What colour am I?" asks Lore, urging humour into her voice.

Amelia brightens. "You one blueberry!"

"What am I doing wrong?"

Amelia stills the trapeze. "I swing you cuz mo' bettah wid pleasure, wid da wind. I tink easy when swinging. Hod when still, na?"

Lore's breath is pinching up as tight as the backs of her knees. "It's hard both ways. I'm used to dancing. How did you teach yourself, Ame-

lia? Not to react, not to suffer?"

Amelia comes close, places the tips of her fingers gingerly on the back of Lore's neck. "You hafta be li' da ocean on da rocks kine," she says. "You tink da ocean hurts when fo' hit da rocks?"

Lore comes down, lies flat on her back. "I'll try again tomorrow," she says.

The divorce papers arrive, along with flyers for a show she'd have been in if she'd stayed. Her stomach pitches when she sees the flyer, as if she still had a secret to sustain, but the divorce papers have no such effect; she signs without reading them.

Tonight, she devotes herself to a stack of articles she photocopied at the university library about the effects of morphine on the body. She picks at *ahi poke* and potato chips, and reads that morphine is effective on the emotions only, that the pain stimulus still occurs but the drug alters one's response to it, so it no longer feels disagreeable, which is exactly what Amelia has been saying.

Another article describes lab rabbits that can be taught to dilate and constrict their own blood vessels. She reads, "The human subject as well can learn to consciously eliminate the mental and physical factors involved in an anxiety response."

She writes on the back of the envelope from the lawyer, "Relaxation," and then she draws an arrow and writes, "Control." She sits until the light is gone, staring at these words until they blur, feeling that she's onto something.

Amelia waits, tranquil, in the ankle hang. When everyone has gone and the chaos putters down into quiet, she walks herself toward Lore with her hands. Lore holds out her hand and Amelia takes it, and then the other, so she is slung between the trapeze and Lore. Then she gazes rashly, urgently, into Lore's eyes.

Lore swallows, and swallows again. Is this the intimacy she's been missing? She feels far more naked, far more known, than when Nathan showed up where he shouldn't have been.

Amelia runs home through the slanting columns of papayas. *Today* she doesn't get distracted. She drops her book-bag just inside the door. The ocean is inaudible. She listens for her mother's breathing, hears nothing but the notching of palm fronds in a breeze. Inside the bedroom, a tiny orange glow wavers feebly from the vicinity of the pillow. As her eyes adjust, Amelia sees her mother smudge out the joint in the ashtray with a jerking hand.

Amelia catches the hand as it drops back to the bed. She finds the

other one wedged under a hipbone in the covers. She sits on the edge of the bed, searching for her mother's eyes in the shadows, but they are gone behind their lids. Still, she imagines her way through the skin, and they stay that way, mother and daughter, hands and imagined eyes locked, until the crescent moon moors and sinks into the open palms of the papayas, and her father comes home and coaxes her away.

As soon as they are alone, Amelia nods at Lore, then gestures toward the trapeze. Lore sucks up a mouthful of air, as if it might be her last, and inverts herself.

Amelia's lips chew at a grin that seems to want to settle there. She lowers herself into Lore's spot, crosses her legs, and holds out both hands. Lore walks herself toward them, takes them in hers. It is disconcerting, to be voluntarily baring herself to a student. Her eyes blur, the blood crowding into them. Her face is uncomfortably conscious of itself, feels enormous, preposterous, not hers. How does one consciously eliminate one's anxiety?

Amelia has her features back under control, has filled them with care and vigilance, locked them to Lore. "You no hea," she says. "Where you at?"

Lore fights gravity to keep the ocean out of her eyes, a sudden storm of sobs that is living at the bottom of her throat. "I don't know," she whispers, and rips her eyes away. Isn't Amelia supposed to be the troubled one? How did this get so turned around?

"You hafta stay, Miz Dubin, dat is da kine secret. Where you go?"

Lore unlaces her legs and drops down onto the floor. Head spinning, through a tight throat, she says, "I'm only here on this island to be away from somewhere else." She knows this isn't what Amelia was meaning, but as soon as she says it, it seems to precisely describe her affliction.

Amelia nods as if she already knew this, and her smile returns. "You show me, den. You show me wot you like do on da kine trapeze."

Lore has been waiting for this. She takes off running, and with the fingers of one hand attached to the bar, flies in wide swinging crescents across the room, uses her feet to touch down and spin mid-flight. She does not rest in any hang, but threads herself through space, at first ethereal, then reckless and charging, appearing to fall from high in the ropes, then catching herself abruptly. Her body is a bird with a ruined wing, escaping from a glass house: flying then faltering, flung out over an endlessly swallowing sea. She seizes the ropes, and they trap her one moment, buoy her the next. She drops down, catching her arms crucifixion-style over the bar, and with a few searching glissades, sends herself skyward again.

Finally, she melts back to the floor, fixes her feet at centre, and with

her hands still on the bar, allows her body to pour around itself, like salt water taffy around an invisible axis; she spirals slowly to stillness, opens her eyes. Amelia's expression is vague again, unreadable. She says nothing, which comforts Lore, who is used to silence after a show. Silence is what she had wanted to preserve.

Maybe I don't want to be "hea," Lore thinks, maybe the whole point is to let the trapeze take me away.

That *had* been the point. The whole point upon which her life had tottered. It began with such a small omission. A tiny privacy she had absolutely no reason nor right to hoard, but which found its way to the fulcrum of her passionless, sturdy marriage, until it was too late to tell it, and once divulged, everything under it avalanched.

She had grown up in South Dakota, where her husky stature and her demurring and scornful eyes were traits both laudable and pervasive. That she would perform was absurd. That she would put herself on any stage, unthinkable. But she had taken to the trapeze as though starving. Walking by a warehouse on her way home from work, she had glimpsed human bodies flying, had edged into the room and stood like an eye in the dark half of a face half-lit by a lantern. The first time, no one saw her. The second time, they beguiled her onto a bar. A month later, she was gazing out into an audience, an emptiness she imagined instead as a South Dakota night.

She could perform as long as no one she knew was out there. If she told Nathan, she would lose it; if she didn't tell him, her life was severed down the centre. She chose the latter. She came to rely on the twin exhilarations of secrecy and flight. They became the furrows she kept her periphery upon, as she steered the groove from a classroom full of fourth graders, to a household brimming with half-finished projects, to a marriage of familiar easements and deliverance.

Her ailing uncle in Cincinnati was an effective excuse for weekends away, but eventually someone told Nathan. It was bound to happen. Dayton was too small a place. The company's shows were all out of town, but still. That proscenium audience in Minneapolis looked as the night always looked to her: flat and black and full of solace. But afterwards, there he was, hundreds of miles from anywhere she expected to see him, leaning against her hatchback, saying, "Why didn't you tell me you were a star?" His voice, as if it was craning out from under stacks of stones. And the point she had balanced on, like the tip of a flame, quickening and kindling her for nearly two years, was snuffed in a second, and she knew she couldn't go back to any of it.

They have a new ritual. Amelia suspends herself until everyone is gone, still or flying, in one of her four hangs. Expanding her vocabu-

lary beyond this doesn't seem to interest her. Once they are alone, she gestures Lore onto the trapeze and then plops down to the floor, holds Lore's hands, inhabits her upside-down eyes. Periodically, she demands, "Where you at?" or "You hea?"

Lore scrambles for an answer, averts her eyes, tries to get a glimpse of herself to hold up as proof of her existence to Amelia. She scans the complaints of her body, searching blindly, sheepishly, for an inkling of choice—an option to do something other than react. She stays upside down and relaxed a little longer, and then a little longer again, but another part of her is panicking, feels pinned, helpless.

I am out of line, Lore thinks, and begins to fear getting caught. Getting caught at what? she asks herself. But she knows how the posture of hiding itself can incriminate you.

Amelia slips out of the gym into a golden twilight. Okay, she thinks, I'm ready.

Lore keeps finding a borrowed constellation in the muscles of her face. She is mimicking Amelia—not on purpose, but emulating nonetheless that extraordinary expression which seems to ask of everything it encounters, "What are you?", as if it weren't plainly itself; seems to stare at the rafters as though she can see their former lives as trees, seems to question every instance, every drone of a far-off motor: "Are you a message meant expressly for me?" Seems always to be asking, "Who am I?", and asking it as though she's the only one wondering, as if the answer were urgent and possible and deserved.

And even as Lore admonishes herself for copying a child, she feels that these questions have been hers forever, lying dormant within her, but now bursting forward, like the whale she saw at the bay last evening, breaching its impossible bulk through the rough drape of the sea.

She stays up most of the night, correcting homework, puzzling over the context sentences her students come up with, like she's deciphering a code. "What do you mean by this?" she writes next to one. And at the top of a page full of particularly vacuous sentences, she writes, "Where are you?"

At a lunchtime staff meeting, where the discussion of a boy who brought a bowie knife to class has digressed into an abstract debate on school policy, Lore blurts out, "What if we gave them more power instead of less? I think these kids feel out of control of their lives."

Stupid, she tells herself in the silence that follows.

After the meeting Stuart catches her by the arm and says, "Do you know that Amelia—"

"I don't want to know," says Lore.

"Her mother—"

"I don't want to know."

Amelia ought to have the rights to her own stories, Lore thinks, just like I should have had the rights to mine. But then she's up half the night wondering what it is about Amelia's mother.

It is almost equinox. One more week of circus, then one more term in Hawaii. Then what? It feels overdue to have something to show for her years, Lore thinks, to harbour something more than a secret, to move toward something rather than away. But what will compass her? A child of her own? A career in the circus? Her family's farm? Another city? Where to from here? As yet, there are no answers.

Nathan's weather reports soften. He sounds genuinely astonished that the flowers are emerging again. He received the divorce papers, but it hasn't stopped him from talking on and on into the vacuum of the answering machine. Though he no longer reminds her that he'll have her back, he still says, "You could be a twilight pickpocket for all I care, Lore. You could be a closet evangelist." The invented humiliations change from time to time, but the message stays the same, stays irrelevant. She smiles, remembering him; there are pangs of guilt, but she cannot find in her heart a hook that would lead her back to him. Some unseen hand keeps guiding her back to her own thick, lonely body, to the sheltering, scrutinizing stare of a South Dakota night. To this child who seems to have something to teach her.

She has been spending her weekends on a rocky coastline, where she occasionally sees footprints in the small depressions of black sand between the stones, but never another person. There is a tiny pocket beach set low between two cragged headlands where she lies often for hours in the sand. She brings no magazine, no articles, nothing to occupy her. The cove is escape enough, a small haven, where the swash teases her feet now and then, and the surf strums endlessly in Amelia's pidgin, calling every other beat. "You hea?" it whispers; "You hea?" it roars.

Though the seasons hardly change here, the light is now surviving an extra hour into evening. Lore wades through the oily puddles that divide Main Street from the tangles of competing vines that pass for lawns. She sits out on the *lanai*, anaesthetized by the din of the coqui frogs, persisting with her illegible scrawlings on the backs of envelopes and junk mail.

She writes, "What would it mean to be 'hea'?"

She writes, "Sensation." She writes, "Reaction."

She writes, "Control, Pleasure, Pain, Control."

She feels adolescent, ridiculous, unknown to herself; she folds the paper into an airplane and launches it into the chirping night.

On Monday of the last week of circus: no Amelia. Lore organizes her students into a simple sequence of tricks for the performance on Friday. There are no moments of true grace, no nuanced pauses, no subtleties of emotion. Her choreography is completely one-dimensional, she thinks, physical feats only, audience pleasers. It's only a kids' circus class, she reminds herself. Still, she is embarrassed by her own agility at putting the heart of a thing aside, and craves Amelia's unwillingness to do this. She is worried by Amelia's absence but also relieved by it, wanting to avoid Amelia's eyes, in which she believes she would read reproach.

On Tuesday, still no Amelia.

Lore checks in at the office Wednesday morning, asking after her.

"They say her mother won't last the week," says the counsellor.

"She's dying?"

"Cancer. All through her body. I'm surprised you didn't know."

"We don't talk much," says Lore. "Amelia just...she wanted extra time on the trapeze, and I didn't mind staying. Was—is her mom in a lot of pain?"

"I imagine so. Why?"

"I just—where do they live?" She fails to sound off-handed.

The counsellor leans forward in her chair; a long strand of hair falls across one cheek. She's a *haole*, but she has the languid eyes of one who hasn't left the island for decades. "Just right here on the other side of the papayas," she says. "Family's had it forever. Since before the eruption. Papaya's the only thing to grow on those cinders, but I knew that was a bad idea from the get-go. Used to grow them myself on the dry side, years ago. I can tell you, that's the climate for melons. But here they have to spray like mad. And Amelia's mom dies of cancer."

As Lore enters the papayas, it is quiet and still, save for the needful whine of mosquitoes, save for the mynah birds flashing the white bands of their wings through shafts of failing light, save for the far-off whisper of the sea. There is an acerbity to the air. Lore finds herself moving the way she would in a public restroom, careful not to touch anything or to breathe too deeply. This is where Amelia lives?

There is an explosion underfoot. An empty snail shell, shattered.

She hurries, clutching her briefcase to her chest. There is another explosion, and then another, as if she is in a minefield; the sound wetter now, and when she looks down, something like albumen smeared between broken shards of shell. She has heard about these giant snails, from Africa, overrunning the island, transplants like her, so thick she can't avoid stepping on them. Tightness returns to her throat; she is practically running, her ankles turning on loose rocks, scratching her sandalled feet. She is upon the house before she's even quite seen it.

She hears humming, in harmony with the ocean, which is suddenly much louder. The house is a shamble of corrugated metal, old sash windows, and scraps of screen wedged together and nailed or wired in place. She crouches down beneath the screen from which the humming comes. It is twilight, but there are no lights on in the house, nothing to illuminate its contents. What is she doing here? She is nervous again with the thought that she will be discovered and apprehended. Yet she stays. She knows the humming is Amelia. Amelia sounding like the surf.

Lore's crouch buckles lower, into a hypnotized curl, her head resting on something hard and hollow that might be a gas can. The humming turns inside out, speaking to her, "You hea...you hea?" and Lore recognizes the words from way back; they are words that have followed her a long time, and now, across an ocean: a whisper she has pretended not to hear, insisting she step into the spotlight, and find herself waiting there.

At first, she doesn't see the headlights that track across the yard, or hear the engine cutting out, for the hum of Amelia and the hum of the sea, the hum of mosquitoes feasting, do not diminish. But then she startles. Her heart beats wildly; she hunches and runs, turns back only when she's two-trees-deep in the papayas. A gaunt man with a cigarette and a limp descends slowly from the jacked-up cab of a pick-up truck and falters toward the house.

Lore turns away. She has to feel her way back. It's slow going. She can't not touch. Overhead, the papaya leaves are negatives of paper snowflakes, arranged in wreaths, against the weak fevers of the stars. She returns to the school feeling toxic, humiliated, futile. Why had she gone there? What did she think she'd find?

When she bangs on the gym door, the janitor opens it almost immediately, but stands in the way, blocking her entrance. Tiny beads of sweat glint on his upper lip, his head bobbing to music of which Lore can make out only static.

Neither of them speaks, nor retreats. The janitor waits, bobbing, running bland eyes over her. Finally, Lore says, "I want you to watch me," and he steps aside just in time to avoid the full weight of her, coming through.

She lowers the trapeze and collapses into it, lacing her arms in the ropes until they're locked. Then she runs across the floor until the trapeze lifts her, launching her so high she's grazing the trusses on her up-swing. She pushes off the floor again and again, losing herself in flight. When she's out of breath, she finds the catcher's hang, and stays there, effortlessly, far beyond the momentum of her last swing.

The janitor sits at the end of the bleacher, chewing something in his mouth, eyes aloof but on her. She has her audience then, her witness. She is Amelia. Fully Amelia. Fully herself.

It is Friday, after the show. Amelia steps into the gym, later than she's ever entered there before, and finds Lore flying.

"You one angel, one *pueo*, na?" But she whispers it, and it isn't heard.

Amelia has held her mother's hands until they slackened and went on without her. She has poured fungicide into a backpack sprayer, hefted it onto her back, and marched into the files of papayas, unleashed storms on a pale sky, inhaled the candy scent of her childhood, and by moonlight poured the last of it down a storm sewer. At dawn, she has returned with armloads of collards, gathered up dozens of snails and fed them, petting the glassy spirals of their shells. In an early morning drizzle, with shadowy rainbows disappearing into the canopy, a *pueo*, Hawaiian owl, landed so close she could almost have reached out and touched it, with its milky wings half-closed, its gigantic eyes fixed forward.

Lore does not see Amelia enter, nor hear her whispered words. She is elsewhere, a spider weaving space. Her legs have become extensions of the ropes, spinnerettes, dreams of themselves.

So when she is at the trough of a wave that will take her toward the ceiling, when she pauses a moment in the hip hang, and Amelia comes running, hits her and holds on, when Lore drops reflexively into the catcher's hang and whisks Amelia's body off the ground, for a moment she's not surprised. She could be anywhere, on any stage. This could be choreographed; it could be she was expecting it.

It is Amelia's gauzy weightlessness, like a handful of bird bones, that shocks Lore into present time.

At first, Amelia grapples for a hold, and Lore impulsively urges her horizontal, until they are belly to belly, flying, Lore upside down, Amelia curled around Lore's torso. Once Amelia finds this spot, she seems instantly to belong there, and goes completely limp. Lore moves to cover her, her arms creating a hollow, which Amelia sinks deeper into, her head curled down and over Amelia's middle. Lore is trussed; Amelia, cradled. They pendulum in space, Amelia wrapped, Lore locked down.

Even when the trapeze stills, Lore does not wish to move. "Where you at?" she imagines Amelia asking. And she says aloud, "I'm here."

Lorna Crozier

What Comes Next

Here comes my father home from fishing;
he never owned a crewel. In a tin bucket
he carries three Lac Pelletier perch
for my mother to gut and scale.

Here comes my mother with a scraping
knife. She didn't how to fillet then.
At supper, the fish fried in butter,
she fingers through my portion for the thin
white slivers she fears will stop my breath.
No one loved me better.

Here comes the silence, Sunday's
cutlery and the formal courtesy
of passing salt and butter, the only question
that gets asked, *Do you want some tea?*
my father's hand shaking as it guides
the spoon from the sugar bowl to his cup,
a sweet trail sparkling across the cloth.

Here comes the cold unwanted.
In the prairie dark I'm walking home
from school where my third-grade teacher
has put me in the back and told me
not to sing. I don't tell anyone;
I have no music in me.

Here comes the snow, me singing loudly
as I can. Crystals bloom on my scarf
where my voice is coming out,
my brows and lashes feathered, my lungs
machines for making frost from breath and cold.

Here come the dead. They've had enough of
mouthing words above the clouds,
enough of never asking. Straight from the heart
where there's little left of them
they've been singing while we sleep.
All the windows in our house gleam white as bone.

Trying to Find Four Ways to Appreciate the Huge Moths that Keep Me Awake Banging Between the Blind and Window and Falling on My Pillow

1.

The trap springs shut. From the mouse's mouth,
its soul flaps out, brown and bigger than you would've guessed.
It drags its wings up the wall to the small eternities
of twitch and quickness, heavenly half-moons of cheese.

2.

Though inelegant, fat with grit and gravity,
sooty-winged and always falling, they're more
spirit than flesh; each night wearing thin
as they beat the air, trying to fuck the household
god-who-is-all-light.

3.

The dull-named Townsend
with long floppy ears and knobs
like tree burls above its nose,
having learned to soften its sonic clicks
so the moths won't hear, is now called
Whispering Bat.

4.

Years before madness, the young Van Gogh,
after a morning of studying charcoal,
smudged his flat thumbs on the willing
white breasts of the flour merchant's wife.

Giving Up

The last of the moon is fed up.
It's given them enough light below
to do something good, enough light
to read by, enough for the man to find
what he left behind the day
he walked from the woman and the house,
from what was bright within him.
How it gleams now like an old spoon
unearthed from a kitchen midden.

The moon will turn itself off tonight.
Let them do their work in darkness, the bad
and good of it; let the cereus cease its shining.
Let the man turn away from the boy in him,
the one who made tracks ahead of the girl
to ease her way through drifts,
and never once for fear or love looked back.

That was the moon's way too. It faced
what lay in front of it, lighting its lamps
one by one in the night's deep avenues of snow.

Michael Lista

Novenas

For Zachary Billote, 1983-2006

I.

How does livin' feel to ya, momma? (always meant to ask you
that) I often wonder 'bout you when I'm ass-deep
in a bottle of cheap wine, or swimming in the lakey blues
of a mushroom comedown. Wonder what you wonder
'bout. Went

to the movies today with
dad. Half price at AMC on Tuesdays. Up in Woodbridge.
Fourtwentyshow. Told you
all this yet? The dozen marionettes floating round the
popcorn lobby like extras in a Beckett one act? Like
sheets? Told you all

this yet? After flick, pissing side by side, he cracks the silence
—“and what do you think that last look meant?”—didn’t say a thing, just
kept staring at my dick, kept sneaking peaks of his, tiles, no one. *I*
came from there, pre-thought, pre-questioning, pre-piss,
euphoria,

urethra. What moaned he the moment I was made in you,
momma? Some question 'bout expression? What was his look?
Inflection? What did his inquisition look
like? How 'bout his face? Did he stare you in the eye as he
manufactured me? Did
his mouth reek of weak champagne, 01/01/1983? Did
you love him

then? A week ago I made my New Year’s calls, slumped over
in a cab, head to window, smoking, talking business with Habib. I left
messages in the west-bound midnight lane then fell asleep. No
one’s called me back since then. My slurring must
have worried

or repulsed them, made them think I've changed. Saw █ at the bar the other night. Have I told you all this yet? Asked me what I'm doing lately—

told him writing, even though I know he's always thought
poetry's for fags and crazies, dropouts, adolescent girls
douche-deep

in diaries—*dear Kitty*—He puffed his chest, talked markets, hand in pocket, tympani vibrato in his chest and beer in other hand. Felt like reminding my dear

cousin of us sucking dicks on parents' bed ten odd years ago/ sweet summer evening

(—ahh...) some dirty twitching drawing us towards purgatory, hell, our

families downstairs, Catholic high school still ahead of us. *Does he recall the way those drapes quivered too, like a rogue bit of skin over bone of window frame,*
huge night outside, tiny faces in each others' tiny laps? His hairless legs

my first gnawing of desire/ two ten-year-olds sixty-nineing in the nineties, on a comforter of down, near dawn, TV blues on us then and now...(?)...

(the neo-con new world, millennium, this bar, and now [...]...]...I didn't have the

balls to bring it up, just counted freckles and the frown lines

etchesketching 'cross his brow, momma, while he warned me 'bout the Liberal advance. *Goddamn faggot-lovers.* He sipped. I smiled, (~~said nothing~~) left the past behind his rightist head and stared at it and wondered 'bout the gap. Sweet Amy called me crying today,

Ma. Said her sister had just called her crying too—broken telephone of tragedy snaking coast to ghostly coast. *Shitty news from Philly, momma.*

How would your head have tilted if I had ever told you this, me looking out a

window, you at your own

feet? A holy flame was snuffed a week ago, at 22. Flashed out first night of '06—took a perk or 6 too many, momma, had some drinks, stared face-up in some bathroom at the dawn. What say that to you, momma? How whisper you to that and how whispers creeping night, closing in with no time left? What

promises
make you
to the tile
in the end? (What wonder 'bout you?)

II.

Hail Mary, momma, full of grace, I'm fifteen and underground, squealing to a stop at St. Pat's station. You're in some cathedral topside, on your knees murmuring novenas for Grandma Mary, making deals with the holy family to rid her of what Tamoxifen may fail

to find. The Lord is with thee. I just came from him, all yellow bricks and dying maple trees, St. Michael's, St. Clair and Bathurst, 1998. Now all my organs

are lurching forward as the whales keen inertia
somewhere deep below your down-turned

feet. What's the back thought in your brain as you train your way round and round the holy beaded circle? Blessed art thou among women when later tonight you slam bedroom doors, jingle keys and

fall out screaming into sycophantic autumn. Where

go you on your drives? What looks suburbia like to you at night with all its bedroom lights shut off? How's CBC that late? Must miss Gzowski, eh? God still up

to chat with midnight drivers? He's pro'ly spoonin' with the Virgin Mary
—no touchy though. *No go under blue moo-moo, Poppa.*
That pair's

got a long eternity of prayers to listen to and rest up for. Sad Joseph's out driving again too. He's backing his red brake light eyes ass-first towards the dawn. Can't

even miss his Holy Mary momma, can't even hail her in his high beam head, 'cause

they read minds in bed, dream bent-kneed pleas,
sweat-out nightmares of

being mortal and in love, insomniacs running the odometer.
Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, momma, up late waiting for ya, and
later shaving

chest and trimming pubes (just in case...[tomorrow maybe...]) by
the sleepy bathroom light—fine, really starin' out the

window, watchin' for your headlights to turn, blinking round
the front yard pine. And now what think you, a decade later, you home
most nights,

garage door shut, Grandma still alive, me hairy-chested and a
heathen? What

conclusions drew you with your headlamps round the

cul-de-sac? Holy Grandma Mary, mother of God is saved
by your petitions. I shall save you too, one smudged scribble at a
time. Each revision is a hack-kneed iamb of perfection. Pray for us
sinners, we

Dylan-listeners, we million Ginsbergers, now (with

Dad upstairs asleep, and you somewhere in the southern
hemisphere and me staring straight ahead, half-drunk and thinking
about Zachary) and at the hour of

our death. When will it come, momma? And how gently? How will
you know?

Will we taper like an evening

or a noise? (let it
be full of grace, well-tiled.) I know that you'll reach for your rosary
for me, if I fade first. I'll reach for a pen
(...for you, and you for Mary too...) Amen.

— Kingston, 2006.

Craig Boyko

OZY

| | | |
|-----|---------|-----|
| 1: | 1500000 | WWJ |
| 2: | 1200000 | NEF |
| 3: | 1000000 | RTP |
| 4: | 750000 | BQD |
| 5: | 500000 | TYO |
| 6: | 250000 | GMV |
| 7: | 150000 | DSA |
| 8: | 100000 | HIV |
| 9: | 75000 | THG |
| 10: | 50000 | MKE |

The scores were fake. They were too even, too rounded. Tenth place, bottom rung, was exactly 50,000 points. Ninth was exactly 75,000. Eighth exactly 100,000. Fifth was not a point more nor less than half a million. First place would cost you exactly one and a half million.

“It’s goddamn impossible,” said my brother after his first game. He’d scored 17,455.

If the highest scores seemed too big, the lowest were too small. The top ten were spaced out in neat exponential increments, like currency or prizes.

I was old enough to know that progress was made not in great, smooth leaps but in clumsy, painful steps. I’d played piano for six months, taken swimming lessons for three, and been a scout for about two weekends—and if I’d ever found myself stranded on an island twelve metres from the mainland with nothing but a Swiss Army knife and a Casio tone keyboard, I’d have died of hunger or poison ivy in about twelve hours flat and wouldn’t even have been able to perform my own funeral dirge.

Genius was not a gift. Talent was not innate. Practice, and only practice, made perfect—which was just to say that the long road to perfection was paved with bumpy, potholed imperfection. If some kid calling himself “WWJ” had really scored 1,500,000 points, there should have been countless others who’d only done 1,450,000, 1,464,000, 1,485,975. For every Edmund Hillary who reached the peak, there should have been

dozens of frozen carcasses littering the mountainside below. The lack of evidence of any such carnage in the hygienic high score list was proof of its artificiality.

And that offended something in me. I was insulted. And I'd learned from my brother a useful self-defense manoeuvre: Take every insult as a challenge.

I told him to give me a goddamn quarter.

"Suck a turd, midget."

I could tell by the mildness with which he said it that he was out of money. So were the others. We lingered around the machine like smitten suitors, jiggling its joysticks and tapping its buttons, already reminiscing over past exploits and sketching out the fiery mayhem we would unleash in the near future, until Mr. Kacvac, invoking his dead wife's long-suffering soul, told us to get out of the store. Our loitering was scaring away paying customers.

Everyone but me had great handles. Some—Donnie Werscezsky (DON), James Lorenson (JIM), and my brother (LEO), to name but a few—had been blessed from birth with names exactly three letters long. Others—Gob McCaffrey and Pud Milligan, for instance—had had such names bestowed upon them by inadvertently generous peers. Even those whose names seemed at first glance to be as unabbreviatable as my own had little difficulty re-christening themselves. Hank Lowenthal, who occasionally claimed British heritage and could quote entire scenes from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as proof, embraced his pedigree with ANK. Sanjeet Kastanzi, who everyone called Sanj, had a number of options: SAN was safe if rather dull, ANJ was bold if a little risky, and KAS had a nice rough-and-tumble ring to it. (SNJ was tacitly off-limits; we all wanted our names to be sayable.) In the end he went—a little overweeningly, I thought—with JET.

And Theodore Mandel, a friend of my brother's, tried on labels like they were shoes. Indeed, you sometimes suspected that the challenge of textual condensation was the only reason he played—just as you sometimes suspected that the only reason he hung around with my brother was so he could refer to the pair of them in rhyming third person.

Theo tried on TEO first, then DOR. But you could see the dissatisfaction of the artist in his eyes. When he discovered that numerals were permissible, he came up with 3OH ("Three-oh"), 3A4 ("Three-a-four"), and finally, his *chef d'oeuvre*, 0EO. The zero, he explained to everyone in the grocery store, stood for the Greek letter theta which, in the International Phonetic Alphabet, was the symbol for the "th" sound. We responded to

this little lesson with a different sound. Marcel Kacvac (MUT), who we all looked up to in fear and awe because he had a tattoo, a car, and acne, started calling Theo “Oreo,” and then, because “Oreo” was not offensive enough to ever catch on, “Cookie.” But Theo defused the danger by pretending to be delighted. For a week, he insisted that everyone call him Cookie and for a week, everyone refused. “Piss off, *Theo*” even became a schoolyard catchphrase. I used it to greet my brother’s friend one night at the door to our walk-up and was swatted for it later by my mom, who, seated upstairs in the kitchen, had neither heard him call me “Oozy” first, nor seen him playfully ruffle my hair afterwards.

I was supposed to have been OLD. O.L.D. really were my initials. Fortunately, they spelled a recognizable word. And old was something I wanted to be anyway. OLD was perfect.

I crept onto the high-score screen with my very first quarter. Naturally, I took this to be an omen, a sign that I’d been earmarked for greatness. But my triumph was short-lived.

LEO—whose hard-won 76,450 points had been propelled into the abyss by my seemingly effortless 78,495—immediately pantsed me. This was to be expected, and wouldn’t even have been humiliating if Mrs. Schrever, my brother’s History teacher, hadn’t been in the store at the time. Because she was, Mr. Kacvac felt obliged to loudly reprimand my brother and me for our deplorable behaviour. Normally, he didn’t give a damn how we comported ourselves so long as merchandise got paid for. He believed Mutt’s generation to be so far beyond redemption that it didn’t even trouble him anymore. On the contrary, he seemed to relish each fresh confirmation of our wickedness. When there were no adult customers in the store, he encouraged us to deride volunteerism, team sport, and homework. Once, home from school with a feigned illness, I wandered into his store in the middle of a weekday afternoon and Kacvac rewarded my waywardness with a free handful of gummie fruits. But that day, with Mrs. Schrever in the store, he had to condemn my brother’s wanton cruelty and my obscene immodesty until the grown-up finally paid and left.

The charge of willful obscenity was, I thought, a little unfair. It’s not that I wouldn’t, but *couldn’t* pull up my pants right away. There was a high score that needed claiming; I had to enter my initials first.

Whether in my excitement or because everyone was laughing at the threadbare state of my skivvies, I overshot the D and put an E in its place. The mistake proved irrevocable. So I pretended I hadn’t made a mistake at all. When Saul Lasburgh demanded to know what the heck

"Olé" was supposed to mean, I just shrugged enigmatically but with tight-lipped significance, as though we were really talking about some girl I'd banged, and whom I was too much of a gentleman, or depraved pervert, to slander by disclosing the garish details.

In the end, it didn't matter. My low high score was wiped out, to my secret relief, a mere twenty minutes later by DON. OLE was dust.

But so was OLD. That name was now forever tainted. It was just as well, I realized. OLD was a stupid, terrible name. Mrs. Schrever was old. Mr. Kacvac was old. And did I really want it getting out that my middle name was Leslie?

OSS seemed the obvious choice but I didn't like it. It looked amputated. Standing on their own like that, the first three letters of my name gave no clue to their origin, their context, their pronunciation. Future generations would suppose that OSS rhymed with "floss" or "gloss"—words not known to strike fear into the human heart.

I could fix this problem by substituting Zs for the double-S but I didn't like OZZ any better. It looked ugly and asymmetrical, the second Z was technically superfluous. Besides, I hated "Oz," with all its childish connotations: witches, wizards, and flying monkeys, munchkins and a yellow brick road, a girl named Dorothy and a dog named Toto, for crying out loud. Yes, I had made a habit of kicking the shins of anyone who called me Oz and who was not my brother.

So what did that leave?

OSI? OZI? OZE?

Ossie's needs had been modest. He'd spent his meager allowance on little more than junk food, model airplanes, elastic bands and paper clips—which he and Philip O'Toole (POT) stopped firing at human targets after Jill Alistair's mom complained to their moms.

OZY, on the other hand, was always on the lookout for money.

I dismantled our sofas. I stuck my fingers inside payphones and pop machines. I trawled the gutters in our neighborhood with my eyes. At night, I stole quarters from my mother's purse and, in the morning, obfuscated my crime by demanding an advance on my allowance. (After all, no thief in his right mind would return to his victim the very next day as a supplicant.) I upturned my peanut butter jar and converted its contents, my life savings, into a roll of pennies, two rolls of nickels, and a roll of dimes—nine dollars and fifty cents in all. At the bank, I watched,

red-faced, as the teller removed, with a long red fingernail, two quarters from a roll before cheerfully handing it over to me. It felt like a slap on the hand. But my mood improved as soon as I stepped back out on the street with thirty-eight quarters in my pocket, weighing the left side of my cords down almost past my hip.

Unfortunately, there was no one in Kacvac's but Kacvac. I felt the need to flourish my fortune at someone, so I squandered one play, three whole lives, on a dozen gummie fruits. Fussily, but with good-humoured resignation, like someone who has grown weary of the bank's empty promises to make their coins easier to get at, I peeled a coin from the top of my roll and slid it across the counter like a checkers pro.

"Mazel Tov," said Mr. Kacvac gloomily, and in his perpetually damp eyes I saw not the dysfunction of lachrymal glands (a medical condition that my mother had warned me not to mention) but a keen, unadulterated—and unadult—envy.

In no hurry to shatter my adversaries' records in their absence, I sauntered up to the machine, performed a few limbering calisthenics, looked around the store, smiled companionably back at Mr. Kacvac, peeled off another quarter, and inserted it into the slot. The machine chimed happily, like a baby robot gurgling at the sight of its mother. I exchanged a grim nod with my reflection in the store window, like two rugged highwaymen crossing paths out on some lonely mesa after midnight. Then I reached up over my head, gripped the joystick with one hand, and slapped the START button with the other.

It was not respect that we sought. Those who were better than you could not respect you, and those who were worse could not even like you. Those who did not play—my mother, our teachers, the President of the United States of America—did not really exist.

It was not respect that we were after but immortality. I dreamed of taking all ten high scores. I dreamed of an army of OZYs slaughtering anyone who would deny them their rightful place in eternity.

It never occurred to us that our high scores might not be immortal. They were as indelible as a Guinness World Record or the Permanent File that Principal Ballsack kept locked in the cabinet in his office—and which he promised to show no one but such colleges, potential employers, and juries as might someday need to be disabused of any notion of our goodness or worth. Our high scores were the high scores of all time and space. We assumed they would last forever.

For disabusing us of this notion, Roger Pembroke (ROG) was systematically ostracized. We put dead gophers in his locker, we squashed his

lunches with our textbooks, we tied his gym shoes together and wrapped them around the football goalpost like a bola, and then—worst of all—we left him alone.

ROG had been one of the real contenders, one of the Obliterati. He'd been with us from the beginning. He'd been the first to "get HIV," with 104,895 points. He'd also been the first to kill the underwater level boss—a giant robotic octopus that sprayed clouds of ink that would freeze you to your spot for five seconds while it—rather implausibly, I thought—lobbed fireballs at you.

Leo smacked me in the side of the head and said that obviously *grease* fires could burn underwater. Phil, who was supposed to be my friend, backed him up, saying that everybody knew that the army had flamethrowers on their attack subs. I asked if he meant the navy, and Leo smacked me again.

"*Ow*—what was that for?"

"For being a smartass."

"I wasn't," I said truthfully. (*Wasn't* it the navy who had subs?) I felt the first prickle of tears gathering somewhere beneath the skin of my cheeks. It was not hardship or cruelty but injustice that made me emotional.

"Oh shit. I was just teasing. Don't pull a Kacvac on us."

One afternoon, Roger was in striking distance of usurping Jack Thomas (TOM) for sixth place. We were all cheering him on. Jack Thomas was almost eighteen and, like MUT, far too old, in our opinion, to be competing. Shouldn't he have girls to bang? we asked ourselves.

This was approximately one month after the machine had first appeared in Kacvac's, dumped indifferently, as though by some giant stork, at the front of the store between the rotating display of birthday cards and the three shopping carts that no one ever used because they were too wide for all but the frozen foods aisle. None of us ever really paused to wonder where the game had come from. Though battered and scuffed with age and rough use, it seemed to us to have simply materialized out of thin air, like some sort of divine challenge—like Arthur's sword in the stone. Some of us must have realized that Mr. Kacvac owned Kacvac's, but he never seemed like anything but a worn-out and mistreated employee in his own store. It was inconceivable that we had him to thank for *Ballistic Obliteration*.

A month after it appeared, the bottom five scores were history. MKE was long forgotten. THG's thing had fallen off. DSA had, of course, caught AIDS from HIV. We were unable to do much with GMV or

TYO—which was suspicious. Indeed, with the exception of HIV, none of the default high scorers' names spelled anything even remotely dirty. They even seemed to have been chosen to rule out offensive acronyms. Not a single DIK or TIT or AZZ among them—another sure sign that they were fakes.

Then again, none of us ever resorted to such vulgarity either. We took the game, and our fame, too seriously. To pass up the chance to take personal credit for your score would be more than a tragic waste; it would be a gesture of disrespect, more obscene than any three-letter word could be. Lennie Gruman (LEN)—who later became my principal rival, next to Fran Tate (FT)—did once enter POO after losing three lives in quick succession to the dragon on the lava level (who at least did not breathe water at you). But no one so much as smiled at POO. It had been a gesture of peevishness, we all knew, not rebelliousness. LEN had two better scores on the list already, so maybe it didn't matter. But there were kids—my brother, for one—who'd have killed for what Lennie tossed so dismissively aside—namely, 589,140 points.

At the time of ROG's last game, the bottom five scores were 545,770, 532,225, 528,445, 500,000, and 476,610. They belonged to TOM, FT, OZY, the imaginary TYO, and ROG himself. Watching him play were FT, OZY, POT, and Wally Hersch, who never had a moniker because he never made it onto the high scores list. The kid was hopeless. His hand and his eye were apparently operated by different brains altogether. And he never got any better despite all the quarters he plugged into the machine. We serious players respected neither his ineptitude nor his conspicuous wealth, so we never let him play unless we were all broke or he promised to lend us money, which he did gladly for anyone who would play doubles with him. But this we refused to do.

Two-person play was, at least among the Obliterati, tacitly prohibited. It was easier to get further when playing doubles, and while the points that piled up had to be split two ways, the extent of player one's contribution to player two's success and vice versa could never be teased apart. Doubles scores were an inaccurate and therefore invalid measure of one's skill. A high score that came out of a doubles game was deemed not just worthless but in fact immoral, because every illegitimate score displaced a legitimate one. It didn't matter if your partner *was* Wally—that is, if he contributed nothing, if he died off before you even got as far as the wild boar boss at the end of the forest level. It was a question of precision. Of honour.

I once walked into Kacvac's to find Lennie Gruman playing alone. I

watched him mutely for ten minutes. Suddenly, he let out a shriek and swiftly committed hari kari.

"Why the hell'd you do that?" I wanted to know. "You were creeping up on bottom rung with two damn lives left."

"No shit. Why d'you think I killed myself?"

Evidently Mutt Kacvac had been labouring over the machine when Lennie came into the store. MUT never played if anyone was around. He didn't like being watched. He was not a real contender, and he concealed his lack of skill behind a mask of derisive indifference. When Lennie came in, he suddenly remembered he had to be somewhere and asked LEN if he wanted to take over. Lennie hesitated, so Mutt casually crashed his ship into a toxic chemical vortex, turned and strode out of the store without another word. Lennie couldn't bear to let most of a quarter go to waste. But nor could he claim a high score that was not completely, one hundred percent his own. When he backed away from the machine after his *felo de se*, he kept shaking his hands as though they were dripping wet and muttering to himself, "That was close, that was a real close call."

When Jack Thomas came into the store, Roger had 521,915 points. He'd secured ninth place and was sneaking up on me in eighth. He'd made it to the electricity level—a nightmare landscape of sparkling capacitors and fizzling dynamos swept with gleaming acid showers and arc lightning that only a few of us had ever seen with our own two eyes—and he'd done it without losing a single life. He had 521,915 points, his Faradization upgrade, ten nukes, a triple forcefield, and three ships left. He was on fire.

Fran, Phil, Wally and I fell silent. Even the buzzing coolers in the produce section seemed to hold their breath. TOM, defending champion, pretended not to notice what was happening. He made a lazy circuit of the store like an old lady searching for discounts. He stood in front of Mr. Kacvac and deliberated out loud over which brand of cigarettes he should try today. In the end, he bought nothing but a newspaper, which he folded neatly and tucked under his arm before finally strolling, lackadaisically and as though quite by chance, in our direction.

"What's this?" he asked primly.

"It's a video game," Fran said quietly. "Never seen one?"

Casually, and with the inattentive air of someone lighting a pipe, Jack asked, "And how's old Rog doing?"

"Fine," Phil said.

"Pretty good, actually," Wally said. "He's got ninth place."

Roger muttered something under his breath.

Jack stooped forward slightly, turned his head to one side, and blinked rapidly out the window. "Hmm? What's that he said?"

"Eighth place," Fran said. "He just got eighth."

"There goes Ossie," said Wally.

I exhaled. Something tight in my chest loosened up.

"Nice one," I said.

"Holy, what kind of power-up is *that*?" asked Wally breathlessly.

"He's right on your ass, Jack," said Phil gloatingly, "and he's got three lives."

At precisely that moment, Roger's ship exploded. He swore loudly. Mr. Kacvac, perched on his stool behind the counter, looked up from his crossword puzzle and cleared his throat threateningly. (Mrs. Howard, a friend of my mother's, was palpating lettuce heads in the produce section.) Out of respect for the dead, and not because we were cowed by Kacvac, we fell silent for a minute. Jack, who'd been about to say something, let his mouth hang open, like someone anticipating a delicacy. He brought his lips together at last:

"Two," he said. You could tell the word tasted good. "Two lives left."

Phil sent Fran a quick comisserative glance. "He's on you. He's right on you. Oh man, he's—that's it. You're toast."

"Nice one," said Fran.

"He's got seventh place now," Wally explained. "He just passed Fran."

"Seventh place," said Phil, "and he's got two lives left."

Roger's ship erupted into flames. He swore. This time Kacvac cleared his throat inquisitively, as though politely inquiring which of us would most like to be kicked out first.

"You guys are goddamn jinxing me," Roger said under his breath. "Stop saying how many lives I have goddamn left."

"Why?" said Jack brightly. "What's the matter? Are we *jinxing* you?"

He was chuckling but there was an uneasiness in his voice. His eyes, like the rest of ours, were locked on the screen, where Roger's score continued to rise, bit by excruciating bit.

"How many lives do you have left anyway? One? Just one?"

As though on cue, Roger's ship hurtled into a giant electrified razor-wire barrier and blew into pieces.

He did not swear. He slammed his palms down on the buttons and spun around to glower at Jack.

Jack grinned. Fran, Phil, Wally and I gasped in horror. Roger's game wasn't over yet. He needed less than four thousand points to beat Jack and *he had turned his back on the game*.

He was back at the controls before we could scream at him, but the

one or two-second interruption proved fatal. Before he knew what was happening, his right wing had been grazed by a deadly blue will-o-the-wisp, sending a geyser of black smoke up into the poisonous atmosphere. Roger pulled away too late and too hard, overcompensating in space for what he'd failed to do in time. He rocketed from one side of the screen to the other and came too close to a giant electromagnet, a device which looked as harmless as a giant bedspring but was as deadly as a coiled cobra. The magnet pulled him in slowly, almost gently. Then it injected him with a billion volts. The screen went white.

GAME OVER.

545,385 points. Seventh place.

Roger spun around. Jack was bent double, clutching his newspaper to his chest. It looked to me like he was only pretending to laugh. "You goddamn jinxed me."

Jack straightened, took a deep breath, and fanned himself with his paper. At length, he brought his eyes to focus uncertainly, as though without recognition, on Roger.

"Twice," said Roger through his teeth.

"Hey Roger," said Wally. "Your name..."

The game gave you thirty seconds to enter your initials. Roger had twenty left.

He made no move. Jack stopped smiling. This was serious.

Roger was going to throw his score away. He *was* throwing it away. We were watching him do it. He was hurtling towards the edge of a cliff and defying anyone to intervene. He just stood there, glaring at Jack. Jack glared back. He was angry now too.

But he was nervous as well. His eyes kept darting to the screen. Fifteen seconds.

I couldn't breathe. Wally looked ready to pee himself. Phil had to put an arm out to prevent him from rushing forward to enter the R, O, and G on Roger's behalf.

Ten seconds.

Jack flinched first. The spell was broken. A goofy, panic-stricken grin spread across his face. He lunged past Roger, dropping his newspaper, grabbed the joystick and began jiggling it madly. He managed to tap out the last letter—an M—with less than a second to spare. Then he stepped back to admire, and invite the rest of us to admire, his work.

Phil, Fran and I were too upset to speak. Wally appeared to be working himself up to a Kacvac. Roger just peered wordlessly at the screen.

Jack sensed he'd committed a faux pas. He became defensive. "Hey, it's just a joke. He was going to waste it. Jeez, it's just a *game*."

Mr. Kacvac had time to say "Hey, you kids—" before Roger reached around behind the machine and pulled the plug out of the wall. Wally

shrieked. Fran closed his eyes. Jack Thomas's face went white. Then he stepped forward and punched Roger neatly and expertly in the stomach, like a paramedic administering the Heimlich manoeuvre. Roger reeled back, then tipped forward, using his momentum to head-butt Jack in the chest. They collapsed together into the display of birthday cards. Mr. Kacvac sprang over the counter and, perhaps by invoking his dead wife's name, or perhaps by brandishing a baseball bat, convinced all of us to come back another time.

I couldn't stay away long. The next day, under the pretense of having been delegated by my mother to purchase some goat's milk, I was able on my way out—empty-handed as planned—to confirm my fears.

MKE, THG, HIV, and DSA had made miraculous recoveries.

ROG, TOM, FT, and OZY were no more.

Gone. Just like that. Without a trace. In the blink of an eye. Forever. So what was the point?

I must have stumbled out of the store. I found myself wandering aimlessly down a street only my feet recognized.

That night, I lay in bed, struggling to fill my mind with the idea of forever. I took a single summer day spent rambling through our neighbourhood with Phil, taking apart bugs, collecting pop cans, melting popsicles on our tongues, browsing through his dad's old CB radio catalogues, practicing our ventriloquism, throwing rocks at stray cats, chalking our names on sidewalks exposed to the naked sky—I took one day like that and tried to hold it in my head all at once. Then I shrunk it down to a dot, a mere speck, and populated the vacated space with a hundred dots, a thousand specks. A sandstorm of days—as many as I'd ever see in all my life. I compressed the dust cloud too, squeezed it down into a tiny cube and pushed it to the very edge of my imagination. I began lining cubes up next to it, slowly at first, only one or two at a time, to give me a chance to grasp the enormity of the addition. Then I began adding half a dozen blocks at once, then half a dozen half-dozen, then a long undifferentiated row of blocks spanning the entire width of the space behind my eyes, then half a dozen rows, then half a dozen half-dozen.

I sensed that I was cheating; for each time I moved to a higher level, the detail of the lower levels went out of focus, so that I was no longer really multiplying the multiplied multiples of multiplied multiples but just pushing around individual blocks again, solid pieces that could only re-

gain their plurality at the cost of their unity, parts of a whole that I could not simultaneously see as wholes of yet smaller parts. But I continued until I realized that everything I'd imagined so far, every multiplication I'd performed, could itself be condensed to a single infinitesimal cube and put through the very same process, from start to finish. And *that* entire process could be taken as a unit and run through itself, and so on, and so on, forever and ever. There it was: no matter how long you imagined forever to be, your idea of it was to the real forever as a split second was to your idea of it. This truism remained true even if you took it into account when formulating your idea of forever. Even if you took *that* into account. And that. And so on, forever and ever.

Forever, then. Forever was how long dead people stayed dead. It was how long my dad and my mom's dad and my aunt Sherona and Leo's hamster Delorna and Theo Mandel's mother and Jill Alistair's brother Geoff and Mr. Kacvac's wife Eleanora would stay dead. Forever was how long gone things stayed gone. It was how long my switchblade would stay at the bottom of Konomoke Lake, how long my magnifying glass would stay smashed (thanks, Leo), how long the key I'd lost to our old apartment building would stay lost, how long our cool old car would stay sold to a fat salesman from Wisconsin. It was how long the Alistairs' house would stay burned down, it was how long World War II would stay finished, and it was how long TOM and ROG and OZY would stay gone from the *Ballistic Obliteration* high scores list. It wouldn't matter when the power went out or when the plug was pulled. It didn't matter if it happened tomorrow or a hundred years from tomorrow. Forever would wait.

Every message is a message to the future. The feverish, grandiloquent *billet doux* stashed with trembling hand in the coat pocket of the girl you're in love with; the casual note to your wife jotted in haste and posted to the fridge before you leave in the morning; the drunken, desultory jeremiad left on your ex's answering machine—they will be read or listened to, if they are read or listened to at all, by people of the future. Even the thought scribbled carelessly in the margin of whatever novel you're reading is a variety of time travel. Every mark we make, every trace we leave is a broadcast sent out into forever. We think of our footsteps as receding behind us, but really they are beacons sent out before us.

So listen:

I was good at something once. Great, even. It was a long time ago. I was ten. Now I'm forty-three and not good at much of anything.

I'm not complaining. You're only forty-three and not good at anything

for a short time. But you will have once been ten and good at something forever.

I can't prove it, of course. I have no evidence, no documentation. A month after I obliterated Fran Tate's top score by a margin that should have established my supremacy for—well, for a very long time, our neighbourhood experienced a brief power failure at about 4:30 in the morning. My mother's alarm did not go off; the three of us slept late—a real treat for Leo and me but a catastrophe for Mom, who crashed into our room bellowing and clutching her head as if bombs were being dropped on the neighborhood.

We had to pass Kacvac's on our unhurried way to school.

Power failure. Blackout. 12:00, 12:00, 12:00.

I had to go inside. Leo swore at me and continued on to school, not because he minded being late but because the decision to be late, or to do anything else, always had to be made by him.

They were gone, of course. All of them, gone forever.

Or were they? Who knows. Might there not persist, etched upon the air we breathe, though we haven't the sensitivity to detect it or the wit to decode it, the mark of some mark, the trace of some trace?

The universe is thought to be without memory, existing only for an eternally renewed split second. Like a sprung trap, the immediate past is supposed to inexorably propel the present into the immediate future. But I think what the past really does is stand nearby, at the present's elbow, and whisper in its ear, give it counsel, suggest how a future might be made. We listen but we don't always hear everything. Not the first time. Not right away. But there might be echoes.

I put a quarter on the counter. Mr. Kacvac held out the pail of gummie fruits. I counted five, showed him. He glanced at his wristwatch. It must have been well past nine. "Oh, go on," he said. "Take a handful." And he slid my quarter back across the counter.

I stood before the machine, the coin resting in my loosely cupped palm.

Forever would wait. So, let it wait.

I dropped the quarter into my left front pocket. "Later," I promised, and hurried to school.

TOM and ROG, LEO and OEO, FT and OZY—they're gone now. Only briefly did they stir from the dust. For a short time, a time that seemed long while it lasted, they made marks that were read and left traces that

were followed by others who made marks and left traces of their own.
Among the marks they left were the following:

BALLISTIC OBLITERATION
** HALL OF FAME **
TOP TEN HIGH SCORES

| | | |
|-----|---------|-----|
| 10: | 98505 | MUT |
| 9: | 212005 | DON |
| 8: | 299385 | OEO |
| 7: | 398510 | LEO |
| 6: | 545385 | ROG |
| 5: | 545770 | TOM |
| 4: | 784605 | POT |
| 3: | 1246325 | LEN |
| 2: | 1597425 | FT |
| 1: | 2069100 | OZY |

D.C. Reid

the slow tongue of night in the treetops giving way

ah is that the memory makes grass a living thing in its breathing across a field and the chest at night that rises and falls and the grass moves the land when night is looking for itself it is then the eyes are green and wakening the eyes that can only be seen when night is a friend in the treetops what is left of wind gives way and in its passing the sound of old women in the fallen together alder so your hair moves of its own volition

and it makes you turn and find green eyes that eyelids close within the trees whose flesh has gone south the fallen together limbs that reveal themselves only when the green eyes and lashes shift among stalks leaving the flame of their hunting you never turn around quickly enough but you keep that in your mind face turning skull turning and ribs within which breath is stuttered the grass in its ceaselessness and nothing plus nothing is vertigo your mind turning to where it is you think you should not go

how can they endure it

no blame the fence posts strung with sagging arms that have held
their ground against gravity faith is what is worthwhile in the face
of odds that cannot be explosions of lichen on the silvered posts
and there in the non-blaming field that allows the blades of the
father to slice in spring and fall allows itself to be made into heads
that are reaped as though another outcome say to turn the land on
edge would make him fall

past the tractor with the holes in its seat
past the wheels mired in mud the worn blue salt blocks with cow
tongues sculpting icebergs and how can the simple fields endure
the concentric aims of the father his furrows all columns mountains
he must cross coming back now with sun on his shoulder with his
shadow he cannot reach

if it were to free his feet and they were to
fly like a child with the abandon of never being harnessed the
small puffs are his feet and the smaller ones his sweat this is a life i
thinks and to withhold it is to be small

The dumbleness of male embrace

The metronome irritation of the clock and its penguin sense of time

Eyes swim from eyelids to ask the question, what?, and, o?, and, yes, I am here, familiar

The ceiling then seen in double sight
so the veins of its making
jump, and moving the eye so it sees
one way valleys other way hills

The press of Cleo into Avie's head and he thinking: You must go for I am trapped by my head too full of your hair, the small of your back. My hand so close and... (pointless, for you belong to yourself and me, too, though I don't want me too).

Landscape her shoulder, heave of mountain ranges of blanket across the bent up legs, the valley, the flat beyond

Only the black iron keeping watch at the end of the bed, the curlicue lion-head on the post around which night conspires

Do clothes lose their lives when thrown off? Do they gag on hooks?

Sharon McCartney

St. John River in Flood

Lift the bank's calico skirt of debris—
baubles, bric-a-brac, bottles, bags, last
winter's Christmas trees—and shake it,
a sheet snapping. Humble the bridges,
not towering now, my hands up their thighs,
ooze over oily highways, itchy rows
of potatoes, shoo the lowlifes, ungulate
and vermin, out of their quaggy homes.
Rain-drunk, aimless rage, trespassing
illicit lawns, swelling through sewers
to pool, lolling, in that imperceptible dip
on Landsdowne, lipping the languid
sandbags staggered like bricks around
the Beaverbrook, sinking into basements,
periphrastic, unkinking from north to south—
so good to forget the seasons of abeyance,
muddy knuckles cracked and shrunken,
the older brother smugness of the sun.
Snort at the gawkers, lordly amblers
on what's left of the street, as if they're
out strolling for any purpose other than
to shake their heads, *tsk tsk*. Don't give
me that. I trashed you first, betrayed
you first—you can't hurt me.

Contributors

Craig Boyko lives in Calgary. He is not working on a novel.

Lorna Crozier's 1992 collection, *Inventing the Hawk*, won the Governor General's, the Canadian Authors' Association, and the Pat Lowther Awards for poetry. She has published twelve books of poetry, the most recent *Whetstone* (McClelland and Stewart, 1995). The University of Regina awarded her an honourary doctorate in 2004 for her contribution to Canadian literature. Presently, she is a Distinguished Professor at the University of Victoria.

Sandy Florian was born in New York and raised in Latin America. She is a current candidate for a PhD in English and Creative Writing at the University of Denver. Her first book, *Telescope*, is forthcoming in the fall with Action Books. Her work has appeared in many journals including *Indiana Review* (Latino Edition), *14 Hills*, *New Orleans Review*, and *The Encyclopedia Project*. She keeps a rudimentary blog at boxingthecompass.blogspot.com

Allyson Haller is a print and web designer based in southern California (www.allysonhaller.com).

Ibi Kaslik is a novelist and freelance writer. Her debut novel, *Skinny*, was shortlisted for the Best First Novel Award (Amazon.ca/Books in Canada, 2004) as well as the Best Young Adult novel by the CLA (Canadian Library Association, 2005). Currently, Ibi is at work on her second novel.

Fiona Tinwei Lam is a Scottish-born, Vancouver-based poet and former lawyer. Her work has been published in literary magazines across Canada, including *Descant*, *Event*, *Grain*, *The Malahat Review*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The New Quarterly*, *Contemporary Verse II*, *Canadian Literature*, *The Literary Review of Canada*, and *Room of One's Own*. Her book of poetry, *Intimate Distances* (Nightwood Editions, Harbour Publishing, 2002), was a finalist for the City of Vancouver Book Award.

Michael Lista was born and raised in Mississauga, Ontario. He currently lives and writes in Montreal. This is his first publication.

Sharon McCartney is the author of *Karenin Sings the Blues* (Goose Lane, 2003) and *Under the Abdominal Wall* (Anvil, 1999). A chapbook, *Switchgrass Stills*, is forthcoming from littlefishcartpress, and a full-length collection is forthcoming from Nightwood Editions.

D.C. Reid is the winner of the Bliss Carmen Award, the People's Poetry Prize, and his last two books of poetry, *Love and Other Things That Hurt* and *The Hunger*, were nominated for the Dorothy Livesay Award. He is currently working on a trilogy of historical novels set in Bamfield and the Broken Islands, BC, and has just finished his fifth book of poems, *What It Means To Be Human*.

Peter Richardson has published two poetry collections with Montreal's Véhicule Press: *A Tinker's Picnic* (1999) and *An ABC of Belly Work* (2003). A former ramp worker at Mirabel and Trudeau airports, he now lives in Gatineau, Quebec.

Nicholas Ruddock practices medicine in Guelph, Ontario. He has been a prizewinner in both *The Antigonish Review* and *The Fiddlehead* for poetry, and his short fiction has appeared in *The Dalhousie Review* and is forthcoming in *The Fiddlehead*. He was awarded First Prize in the 2005 Sheldon Currie Fiction Contest, from *The Antigonish Review*.

Julia Schroeder has a BA(Hons) English from the University of Calgary, and an MA in English from the University of Toronto. She has had poetry published in *The Fiddlehead*, *Wascana Review*, *Descant*, *Room of One's Own*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Fireweed*, *Matrix*, *Event*, *Tessera*, and an essay in *Mademoiselle*. She lives with her husband and sons (four and six) in Hudson, Quebec.

Madeleine Thien's first book of fiction, *Simple Recipes*, won four awards in Canada, was a finalist for a regional Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, and was named a notable book by the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize. Her debut novel, *Certainty*, will be published this spring. Originally from Vancouver, Madeleine currently lives in Quebec City.

Diane Tucker, a graduate of UBC's Creative Writing program, is a poet and editor living in Burnaby with her husband and two children. Her poems are published regularly in literary journals in the US and Canada. Recent appearances include the *Harvard Review*, *Event*, and *The Vancouver Review*.

Kyla Wetherell works part-time as a crisis counsellor, grows vegetables, and dances, in addition to her primary devotion—writing and reading fiction. Her first published story appeared last fall in *Ballyhoo Stories* and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She lives in Eugene, Oregon.

Deborah Willis recently completed a degree in English and Writing at the University of Victoria. Her fiction has appeared in *Event*, and she was a winner of *Grain's* 2005 postcard fiction contest. She is from Calgary, but currently lives, writes, and works in Victoria.



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Fiction/Poetry/Drama/Translation/Creative Nonfiction

44:4

She wanted to see whatever he'd seen. But there was nothing outside. Just the usual street lamps and lawns. Houses with drawn curtains. The everyday, falling snow.

—“Vanishing” by Deborah Willis (Fiction Contest Winner), Page 19

2005 Fiction Contest Issue

Judge's Essay:
Madeleine Thien

Craig Boyko
Lorna Crozier
Sandy Florian
Ibi Kaslik
Fiona Tinwei Lam
Michael Lista
Sharon McCartney
D.C. Reid
Peter Richardson
Nicholas Ruddock
Julia Schroeder
Diane Tucker
Kyla Wetherell
Deborah Willis



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