

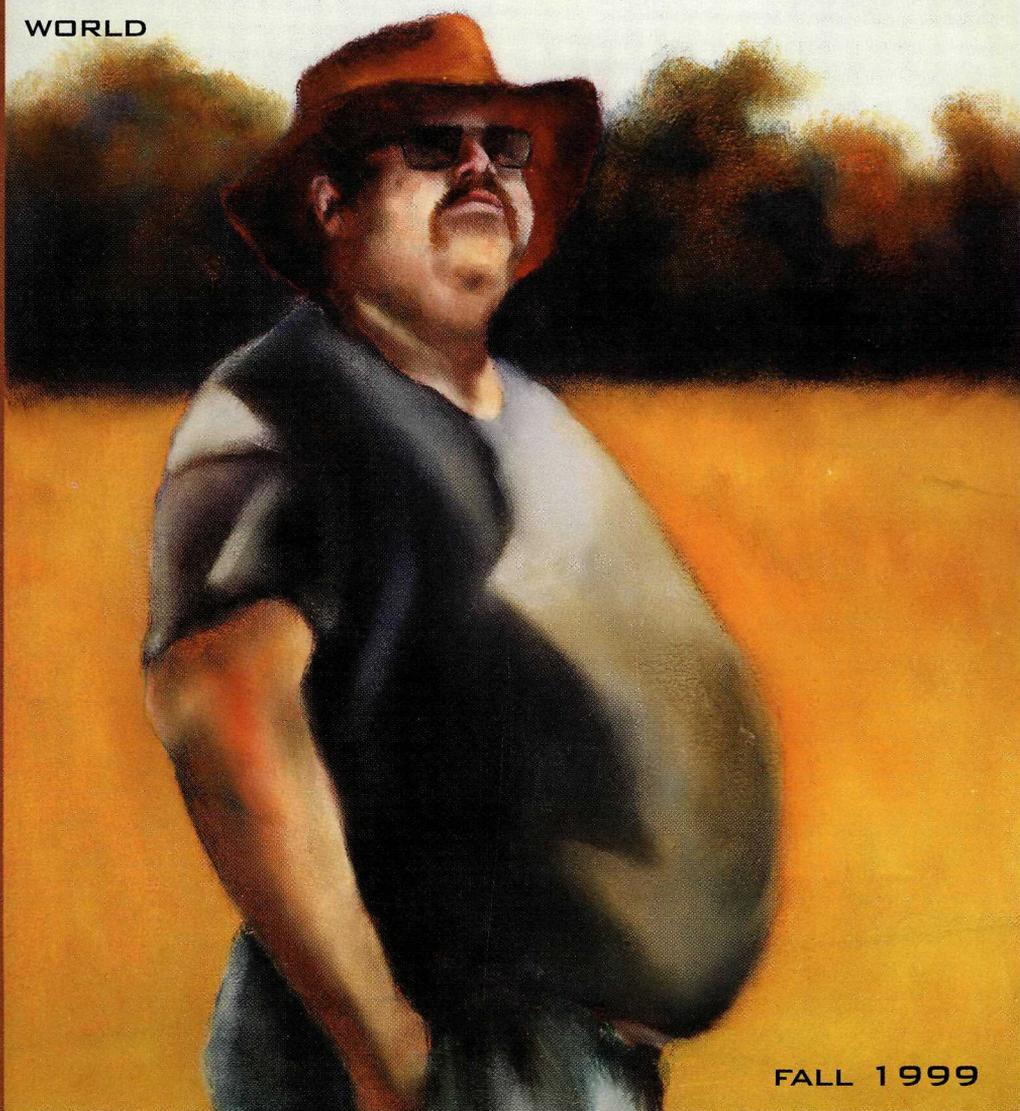
# PRISM

INTERNATIONAL

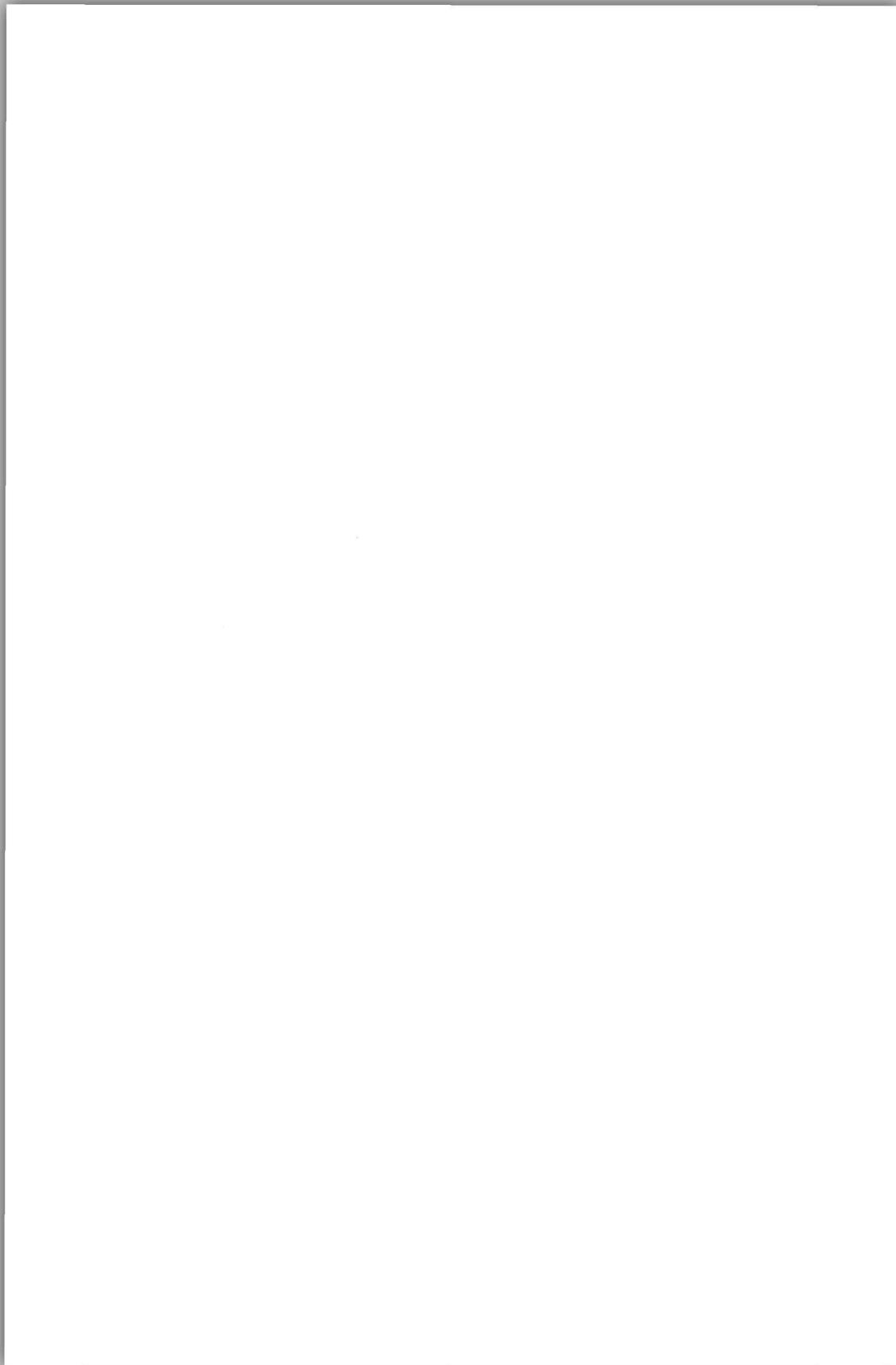
40TH ANNIVERSARY

CONTEMPORARY  
WRITING  
FROM  
CANADA  
AND  
AROUND  
THE  
WORLD

38:1



FALL 1999



# **PRISM**

**INTERNATIONAL**



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INTERNATIONAL

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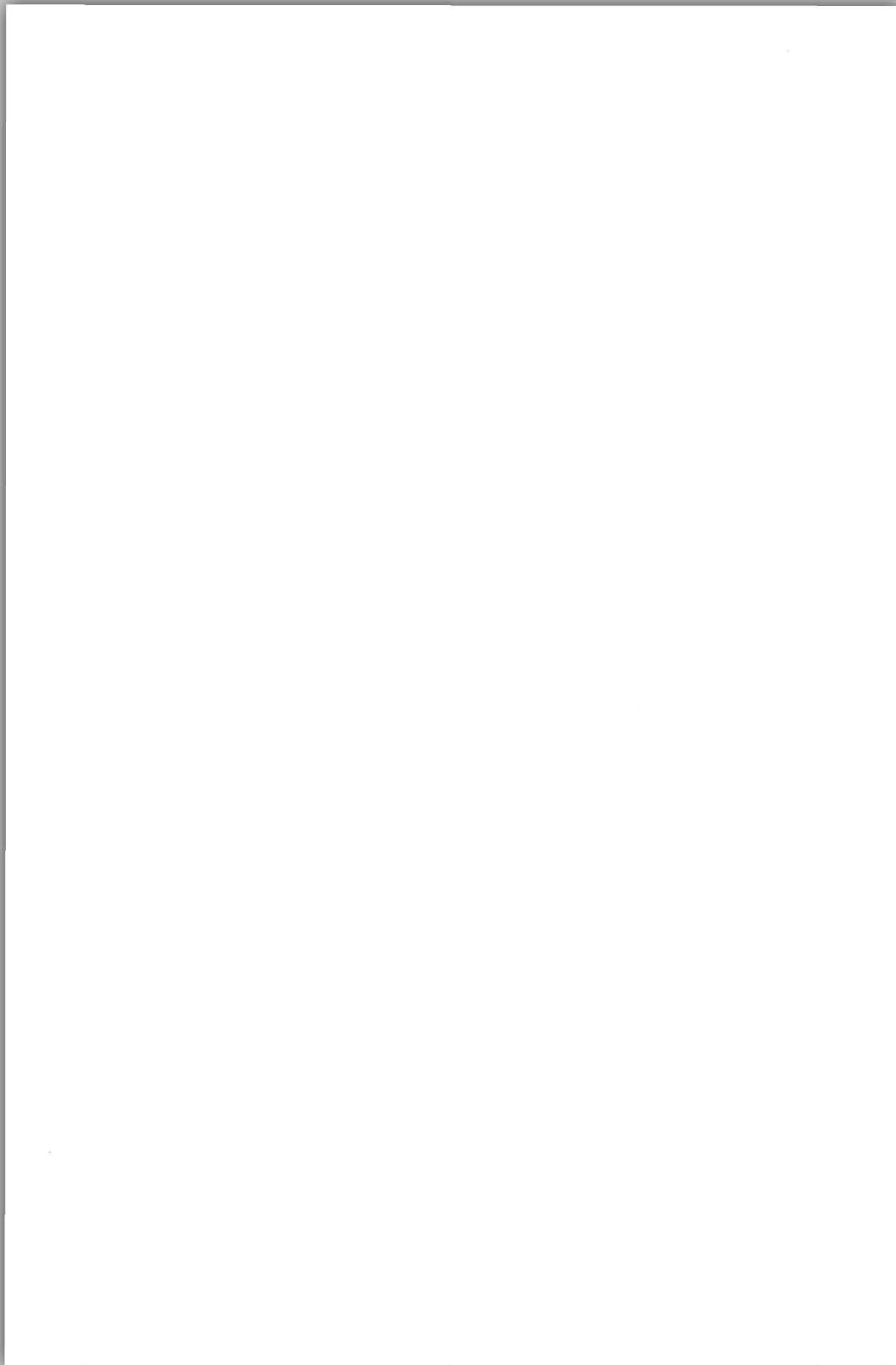
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Maureen Hynes

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## Speechless

How to frighten yourself speechless:  
hasten to plant the snow peas  
in a morning blur before  
a spring trip: open the packet and spill  
the seeds: a bounce and clatter  
of big beanseeds all over the counter,  
the floor: oh, shit: like your words,  
in motion, every direction, no control  
when you're rushed, not paying attention:  
which is nearly all the time: just plant them.

On your return, the squirrels have dug  
every beanseed out of the ground, swallowed them.

Then several mornings later,  
gasp: something evil, your first  
thought: something green and evil  
growing out of the kitchen drain's throat:  
a slender stalk, five straight inches  
up to the light and atop, two wrinkled  
leaves unfurling like a tiny  
silk bow tie that's been crammed  
into a pocket for weeks: forgotten,  
insistent: you must remove this:  
your own throat tightens: a gentle tug  
on the needle-straight stalk: wrong  
to keep its pale green here, wrong to pull it out:  
fear grows like this, wordless.

*Jynne Dilling*

---

## Mornings in the Kitchen

Our chairs are stuck together like two horses, entangled.  
I pull them apart. Dirt on the linoleum  
floor produces an Iowa farm effect:

another pig dead, haunches stripped, turned  
into pork chops overheating on some electric stove.  
All day, we do not mention marriage.

Our silences drip down the walls like syrup.  
These days you say nothing of my former girlfriend,  
the travel agent. The hum of the refrigerator is upsetting,

a soft rattling in the corner. We fall asleep to the rush  
of cars on the freeway. Against my chest, you say the hissing  
frightens you. I think of her colourful brochures.

We keep the curtains shut all the time.  
Neighbours see nothing but a hint of shifting shadows.  
In the draft of the fan, brown fabric trembles.

*Maureen Lennon*

---

## Cow Skin

I know how your skin feels,  
Though not as you.

Not as the accidental canvas  
Poured over your slow bones  
Spread like creamy artist's paint  
Edges creeping to meet edges  
Colours locking into one another  
Like the teeth of gears  
Black into white, white into black.

Not as the smooth black-and-white mottle  
Hot to the touch in the all-day sun  
The short hairs a surprise to a novice hand.

Nor as the dreamy soft of pink muzzle  
Sprouting with trout-bone-soft white whiskers  
The velvetness of a mouth.

No. I know the feel of you differently.

You know your skin only as  
The twitching  
Beneath clouds of flies on your rump  
The spot you rub against bark and post  
Such contented pleasure.

Passing your tongue over roughness  
When your great head turns back  
For a moment's exploration  
You learn the contours of your own surface  
Accepting skin as skeleton.

You learn the skins of your calves  
Even better than your own,  
Your tongue wicking away the slick surface  
Of their birth,  
Washing them to consciousness.  
Slipping past the tender shoot of an ear  
You believe 'Child of mine'.

But I know you differently.

Harnessed, stunned and slit  
Eyes widened in terror, rolling in disbelief  
Their light suddenly extinguished  
One instant to the next,  
So useless in death, your brown eyes—  
No market, no culinary traditions.

Splashing red on the cement below your stilled hooves,  
The exodus of you from yourself begins.  
Through clean slits  
Dark organs fall to belts  
You shed everything once contained.

Steel blades split bones  
You multiply in your diminishment.  
Muscles, shaved from bone props  
Fall away,  
Cat food.

Bones wrestled from clinging flesh,  
Rib racks hang in the blood-moist air.

Scraped out from beneath your skin  
You disappear  
Your cloak—shipped  
To be pinned to the giant butterfly boards of tanners.

Now even fine hairs are burnt off,  
Delicate ducts evolved for blood are  
Forced with fluids,  
Drowned in acrid baths—  
Subdued.

Soft at last  
Another blade draws through  
Slashing an inch-wide strap.  
Layered with another, stitched, pierced, carved, enclasped  
This last bit becomes  
A cinch looping through trousers  
The belt that hangs in my father's closet.

I have met your skin  
Flesh to flesh  
Yours flying through an arc in the air,  
Biting into mine with  
A blistering kiss.

Where it whipped and stung  
My small child's feet learned to dance  
My arms welted in striped tattoos,  
My back arched against fiery little tongues,  
My bottom glowed, two red hot pots.

Hunting me, your skin crackled and smacked  
Speaking loudly  
Against table legs and door jambs.  
Too concerned with flight  
Mine swelled in silence,  
Burned for hours afterwards.

And the lesson driver  
Making such a soulless tool of your flesh,  
Robbing time to speak so caustically  
Of nothing,  
Missed everything once contained  
Falling at his feet,  
The exodus of his child from herself.

You though,  
Would never think,  
Driving the  
Tempered hide  
Of a man,  
To rid the world  
Of another's will,  
Only your own to  
Put in place.

I am sure of this,  
Seeing you raise  
Your great curious head towards me,  
Come walking slowly  
To see,  
Your soft sweet nose  
Reaching through the fence  
To gently search my  
Outstretched palm.

Barbara Nickel

---

## Puttanesca

There is a mole growing under my pubic hair. I can see it through the soapy lens of my bathwater—it's like a spot on a piece of overripe fruit. My fiancé, Rick, has told me in no uncertain terms that I must have it removed. He is an accountant but has a keen interest in medicine—the operation channel, *Reader's Digest*, those books with titles like *Osteoporosis: The Long Road Back (One Woman's Story)*, and *Lyme Disease: The Great Imitator*, which he reads on the plane traveling to and from his jobs in the States.

"It could be harmless," Rick said last Friday night, his fingertip on the spot. I'd just picked him up from the airport. We were at his place, on his single bed. "On the other hand, it could be a malignant melanoma and would need excision." This said with slight, authoritative emphasis on excision. I tuned out the rest of his diagnosis and focussed on the pressure of his finger on my spot. I willed silently, "Go farther down, farther." He didn't.

My bath's getting cold and I'm shaving my legs badly, leaving patches at the back of one calf, my knee scar faintly moustached. When I dip my pink plastic razor in the water, hairs make from the blade like a school of tiny fish, set free like my grandfather and his siblings running into the Baltic Sea after a day of hoeing sugar beets. In that water, a rope divided the Men's Side from the Ladies' Side. In his bathing costume—a sleeveless, striped affair with buttons up the front—Grandfather floated on the waves and dreamed of Greta, the girl he couldn't marry because she wasn't Mennonite. He was about to kiss her hair when he felt a coarse length of rope instead, heard screaming from the other side.

"Pass auf, Jakob!" Some girls he knew from church fell giggling into the water. He pulled back his leg from where he'd trespassed, watched their bathing skirts undulate like the exotic flowers he imagined floating in other, warmer seas.

"Entschuldigung—" He dove under the water, back to the Men's Side. His face was hot.

In this lukewarm water, with an August breeze through the open window bringing with it a faint stench of garbage, (the collectors are on strike), I have my own dreams. There's a man with dark, hairy hands who drives me to his condominium in Burnaby, sets me down and strips off my clothes until I'm a white root on his beige carpet. His fingertips smell like garlic.

I pull the plug. Bathwater sucks its way down the drain, my little hairs turning to hieroglyphics, stuck to the sides of the tub. I rinse them all away.

\*\*\*

Tuesday, almost through the show, I think about the puttanesca I will eat later. Celine, back in the cellos, must be thinking about it, too; her solo in "Any Dream Will Do" seems tangier—vibrato that promises tomatoes and crushed red peppers, black olives.

"Don and I make this every Tuesday night," she said last year, handing over a photocopy of the recipe. We were two months into a one-year run of *Phantom of the Opera* and already some of the syrupy melodies were becoming prescriptive: *Play nightly except Mondays for an entire year. Will pay off student loans and buy apartment, etc.*

Don, the horn-player, came from behind and kissed the back of Celine's neck. She laughed, took his hand. "Puttanesca's very therapeutic after the show," she said. "Helps to drive these tunes from my head, anyway." She kissed his earlobe and I pictured them feeding each other olives, falling onto the couch in a tangle of limbs and hastily removed clothes.

"I'll have to give it a try," I said. I watched them walk away—out of the pit, out the stage door, out of sight. Celine is perfect—she has a cello case on wheels, a recipe for every occasion, a cute horn player husband. Also, at 30, she's younger than me.

Tonight when I get back to my apartment, I stand for awhile before the still life of ingredients I set out earlier. A little tin of anchovies balances over a can of olives and a jar of capers. On the bright yellow can of Italian plum tomatoes (Celine cans her own from a garden tended to perfection by herself, Don, and her Italian mother and grandmother) is a portrait of a woman with enormous breasts only half covered by some red, flimsy material. She holds up Statue-of-Liberty-style a bunch of tomatoes that glow along with her fresh cheeks and breasts and blown-back hair. Behind her is the blue Mediterranean, a smouldering volcano, a white sailboat. I chop the olives.

The phone rings just as the pasta water's on to boil, the garlic's turning golden in olive oil and I'm ready to add the crushed red peppers and minced anchovies. I know it's Rick, calling from Washington, D.C. My phone cord doesn't reach the stove so I have to turn the whole thing off.

I march to the living room. "Hello?" I say, flopping on to the couch, trying to keep the irritation out of my voice.

"Hey, it's me."

"I was just making puttanesca—"

"Sorry, I can call back later—"

"No, no, it's OK," I grab a cushion and flip it in the air. "How's it going over there?"

"Intensely boring meetings today. Tomorrow I might take some time

off, go to the Smithsonian. Have you done anything about the mole yet?"

I slip my hand down my pants and find where I think it must be under a twist of wiry hair. It feels raised up a little from the rest of my skin. Didn't Rick say that was a bad sign?

"Listen, all you have to do is phone up Dr.—"

"I know, I know. Make an appointment and get it *excised*."

"Then why don't you just do it? It's so simple—"

"I don't know..." I twirl around some pubic hair, lightly stroke the spot. "I don't know..."

"It could be extremely serious. Promise me you'll have it removed?"

I hesitate for a long time. "Yes."

"Do you miss me?"

"Yes."

I do. Once at 3:30 a.m. when I was writhing in menstrual pain, barely managing a moan over the phone, my nightie soaked in sweat, he grabbed an early flight back from Seattle and climbed right into my bed with his suit and tie still on. He smelled so clean, not at all the plastic and smoke of airports, but like laundry left on a prairie washline for a summer afternoon. And his hands on my abdomen, rubbing over and over some kind of magic. "Shh, shh," he whispered into my ear, into the blue morning light.

I've lit a candle to eat my puttanesca by. Also, I have some red wine (*not* the dependable Chianti suggested in Celine's recipe), a freshly stocked pepper mill, and the recipe to read as I eat: "Legend has it that this lusty sauce was created by Neapolitan ladies of the night. Translated, puttanesca means 'of a harlot.' There are two stories: the ladies either cooked this quick and tasty sauce between clients or they prepared it to entice passersby with the tantalizing aroma."

I smell the sauce I've prepared, my face so near it that steam fogs up my glasses; I could be in the kitchen of a Neapolitan brothel or in the mist of my grandmother's wedding veil in one of the two stories I have of her life:

*Version #1: Farmhouse near the Church, Saskatchewan, 1918*

"Have you thought about what will happen tonight, Elfriede?" my great-grandmother asks through the pins in her mouth. She helps adjust the veil.

"Yes," answers my grandmother, a woman of few words.

"I mean in the bed. What Jakob will do to you."

"Yes."

"Your father and I have been thinking. You're only 18—you aren't ready for this. It will look bad to the community, as if you are too eager for bed. Your father and I have decided you must stay home with us for a week. Then you can go to him. It will be too painful for you tonight, your wedding night."

"But Mother—" She had been kissed only the other night, behind the shed. Jakob had been as smooth as cream and hard against her abdomen. She had wondered what things would be like without clothes.

"Enough, Elfriede. It is almost time to leave for the church. Your father will tell Jakob."

After the cold meat, buns, potato salad and wedding cake in the church basement, after the German circle games and singing ("Miller Boy" and "Röslein Heiden"), Jakob, my grandfather, guides his horses and buggy down the dirt road. The gate and front porch of his house have been decorated with wild roses and ribbons by the neighbours. He walks slowly up the front steps, into the empty kitchen. If he were in Bohnsackerweide near the Baltic Sea, he would ask Greta to dance. Anyone happening by the farm of Jakob Bartel on his wedding night would look into the kitchen window and see him with outstretched arms, leading an invisible partner in the most intricate of waltzes.

*Version #2: Brothel of Ethel Baxter, 20th St., Saskatoon, 1917*

"I want Annabelle."

"And what makes you think she's available tonight?" Ethel leans back in her chair, sizes up the travelling salesman just off the 10:15 from Edmonton. He's got a dollar or two, by the look of things. She wraps a cushion's tassel around her little finger. Life is too good these days. No R.C.M.P. hassles. Lots of men on a line straight from the C.P.R. to her house. And Annabelle.

"I've heard her name from Lethbridge to Calgary to Edmonton. Name's Peter Wilson. I don't know if that means anything to you, but listen here—I get Annabelle or I find another house with another doxy."

"You just happen to be in luck." She's heard his name—something to do with Alberta oil. She can't afford to lose him. Life isn't that good. "Room 6 upstairs. And I oughta tell you—there ain't no curtains up there." Ethel smiles. "Annabelle don't mind."

Anyone watching from the next door boarding house into Room 6 (and they did—often—the single gentlemen, hands down their pants) would see Annabelle, stark naked, removing each of Peter Wilson's garments, gentle as if he were her first love or the last man on earth. He is overweight, with pinkish flesh covered in little tufts of hair. She doesn't seem to notice. When she takes his cock in her mouth she could be licking a scallop straight from the Atlantic—succulent, soft, white.

What he notices are her hands—one minute they're gently cupping his balls and in a flash they're in his hair (what's left of it), then gripping his back, his buttocks. All this foreplay—no wonder he keeps hearing about her. Forget Diamond Dolly's women in Calgary—hardened women with

their painted nails and bodies used up as old newspapers. Give him Annabelle—this little goddess sprawled under him without a trace of paint or cheap satin. Great Scott, she's hungry for him, hungry. When he finally does get inside he comes roaring like the trains he spends most of his life on.

"Annabelle, will you marry me?" he says, pulling up his trousers.

The usual question. She just shakes her head, pulls on a flannel nightie. Great Scott, a flannel nightie! She hasn't said a word.

\*\*\*

I play around with the last of the puttanesca in my mouth for awhile. It's the smooth textures of these ingredients—capers, an olive, smooth strands of spaghetti—that I love as much as the taste.

As far as I know, I'm the only one who knows about Version #2. I made it up in the bath one night after finding an old photo at the bottom of Grandma's shoebox. She's standing in front of what looks like a city house with her arms around two girls. Or women. It's hard to tell; the photo seems blurred by rain. On the back, in Grandma's careful hand, is written simply, "Annabelle".

"Where's this from?" I asked my mother. We were at Grandma's house sorting through stuff after she died.

Mom turned it over, put on bifocals that she wears on a chain around her neck. "I don't know...could those girls be Agathe and Elsbeth, those cousins from Saskatoon that she stayed with one summer before she was married? They were the daughters of Ernest and Agnes Friesen, originally from Altona—"

Unlike Grandma, my mom's a woman of many words. She is basically the author of Version #1, although I've added a few embellishments of my own.

"But who's Annabelle?" I asked, taking the photo again, studying the handwriting on the back. "It's Grandma's writing, isn't it?"

Mom nodded, shrugged. "It's her writing, but who knows about Annabelle? Check out the family book, the Friesen one. There must be a relative somewhere with that name, although it doesn't sound like the usual Mennonite variety. Annabelle...hmmm..." She turned back to sorting a teaspoon collection.

I searched through every family book. No Annabelle. Then one time in the pit, during *Phantom*, I was flipping through one of Celine's *Maclean's* (she keeps a stash for light reading during long brass sections) and I came across an article about brothels on the prairies. Grandma, the harlot. President of the Zoar Mennonite Church Senior Ladies' Aid and former whore. I even studied old copies of the Saskatoon *Star Phoenix* on microfilm at the library when I was home for the holidays. I found an Annabelle Woods listed as "one of the women of ill repute arrested overnight during a

skirmish at the Ethel Baxter brothel on 20th street.”

That was all I needed.

In her spotless blue and white kitchen, I used to suck lemon drops and watch her scrub the floor. “Wasn’t it clean before you started?” I asked once.

She scrubbed through two more lemon drops. I was reaching for a third when she finally spoke, the most words at one time I ever heard my Grandma say. “Clean, Katherine, clean,” she pointed to a gleaming white square of tile, “is not always what it seems. Who knows what’s underneath this polish? Your Grandfather came here from Bohnsackerweide leaving a girl he wanted and couldn’t have. He took me instead, the clumsy one, couldn’t dance a step. I was Mennonite, met the requirement, a clean decision, the elders approved. But when he refused to dance with me? Who knew about that? And who knew about me by my window alone on the wedding night, how hungry I was, how alone? Eh? Who knew about that?” She poked her rag into a corner, her whole body moving to erase a seemingly invisible spot.

“But what about all of us, this kitchen, your good food, the songs—”

“Yes. A clean house, a clean—” She went into the dining room and took down an old photo of the entire family on her and Grandpa’s 40th anniversary. “A happy family, a churchgoing family. Together. Above all, that’s what you want, Katherine. And spotless floors. Always.” She got back down on her hands and knees and I remember her white knuckles as she gripped the rag.

I construct Version #2 remembering her hands—playing hymns while we stood around the piano singing on Sunday afternoons, kneading dough for the buns we ate at faspas with Saskatoon jelly, sorting the berries she picked in secret ravines at the river. Her hands folded tight during prayer as she sat on the Ladies’ Side in church.

\*\*\*

“That was nice,” says Rick as we drive back to the city after a day with his cousin and her husband in the suburbs.

“Yes,” I answer without turning from the window. Another sultry day. I’m watching the late summer dusk turn The Bargain Castle and surrounding fast food joints to a magnificent shade of red. We ate iceberg lettuce salad and casserole made with canned soup while his cousin talked non-stop about Tupperware, even showing us her little booklet. “Eventually, I want my cupboards to look like that,” she said and pointed to a photo of a cupboard filled with fantastically organized plastic; each container had its own little label. We sipped lime punch made from a sort of mix while she went on about Tupperware’s everlasting qualities and the benefits of hosting a party where everyone participating gets a little something such as an egg separator or a colander magnet. In the morning we attended their huge church, sang choruses led by a worship team, a drum set and an overhead

projector, the tunes and harmonies reminding me of *Phantom* and *Joseph* but worse.

I lie back for a nap (I feel guilty about this since Rick leaves for Boston tomorrow and we should be making the most of every moment). When I close my eyes I see rows of Tupperware and neatly organized years in the pit, Rick by my side calling it all "nice" and urging me to remove the mole.

"Katherine?" He turns down some jazz on the radio.

"Yes?" I sit bolt upright. I don't know why I'm so tense. His voice sounds serious.

"It's OK." He reaches over and massages my neck with his free hand. "I'm not going to ask about the mole. I was just wondering how you're feeling."

"You mean feeling in general, or feeling about us?"

"Just feeling. Whatever."

"I don't know. Did you actually have a nice day? The heat, all that Tupperware..."

"It wasn't so bad. How can you be so critical?"

I don't say anything for awhile and he starts humming "Ride the Rollercoaster of You", this song we made up once in the car. He has a gorgeous bass voice. That's how I first fell in love with him. I stood next to him in church and heard him singing hymns, gently, as if he were singing "I Need Thee Every Hour" to me alone. By the time we get into the city we're belting out "Ride the Rollercoaster" at the top of our lungs and my hand is between his legs, under his shirt, anywhere I can get it without disrupting his driving. On his bed he takes off my clothes, piece by piece. At first I want to devour him but after a few minutes, all I want is sleep. He's still all over me and it's irritating, but I can't let it show. I know he wants to have an orgasm and since intercourse is out of the question (we have decided not to have sex until we're married), I take his penis in my hand and move it up and down.

"Please let him have one soon, please," I will. He doesn't. I'm on my side and my arm aches and he's *groaning somewhere above me* and we have to take breaks every so often. He finally comes over my stomach and immediately goes to the bathroom to get toilet paper and wipe it off. He finds my panties on the floor and instructs me to put them on right away. He read somewhere (*Reader's Digest? The Bible?*) that pregnancy can happen in odd ways.

"I chose this," I think, after I've taken his sleeping bag down from its hook, bedded down by the space heater at the foot of his bed. Since he has to get up early to go to Boston, he'll have a better sleep if I sleep on the floor and he on the bed. I chose this, to stay a virgin until marriage as expected by church and family and the watchful eyes of Grandma Elfriede.

A 34-year-old technical virgin. Did she see me up there working Rick's penis? Does she see me now, down here in the smells of old cat pee, the space heater casting a glow over my face? At least we've avoided the hassles and expense of birth control pills. What were our reasons? Commitment, church, upbringing, family.

Rick is snoring. I stand up suddenly with the urge to get out of this house, catch a cab down to Hastings Street where I've seen the women on the corners. I could be the one by Scott's Market with hair to her waist, fourteen years old, olive eyes and complexion moving in and out of the fog. I get as far as the phone for the cab (if not to Hastings Street then at least my own apartment) and something pulls me back to the sleeping bag. Once under again, I reach down and feel the mole. I can tell without seeing that it's grown. I think about the man with the dark, hairy hands from Burnaby, his fingertips smelling like garlic. It's like in the bath, only now he discovers the mole and can't stop kissing it; each touch of his lips makes it grow larger until it begins to take over my whole body.

Rick's bass voice rumbles beautifully even through his snores, filling the room with a kind of peace I can't ignore. Tomorrow I'll phone the doctor.

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There is a new man in the pit, a substitute trumpet player. He has curly dark hair to his shoulders and a long nose. He doesn't smile much.

"Sort of creepily intense, don't you think?" whispers Celine during the string break.

"Sort of." I dare to look over at him. He's playing "Coat of Many Colours" as if this opportunity will never come to him again. I want to dip my toes in his sound or hear it hovering up with ceiling frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Even my mole (I didn't get around to making an appointment yet) feels electric. When I put my violin up to my chin and work my fingertips over the strings, I know he's watching.

His name is Michael, I find out later at the pub across the street, where a bunch of us have gathered for drinks. It's Tuesday; I'm surprised Celine and Don are here. I'm surprised I'm here—I need to pick up some anchovies at Safeway before it closes. I'm sitting next to Michael and each time he exhales, his breath lands on the top of my right hand, cooling on the journey from his mouth to my skin as if he's placing pennies there, sending peppermints again and again while the others talk.

"Katherine is getting married next spring," Celine says, emphasis on married. I could kick her.

Michael raises his eyebrows. "What does your fiancé do?"

"Uh...he's an accountant with a big firm. Travels a lot." Suddenly everything about Rick is put on hold, sort of like having to turn off the element when I'm in the middle of puttanesca.

"Have you been gigging around town very long? I don't remember

you—” says Don.

Michael laughs. “No, I just sailed in. Literally. I live on my boat. If I can get a permanent position until next year, I’ll make enough to pay the next leg of my trip.”

“Where?” I ask. His tangled hair almost touches my ear.

“I’m not sure—maybe India.”

“Oh really? I’ve always wanted to travel there.” I tuck my hair behind my ears, trying to look like Celine.

The others drift off. I know where this is heading. I also know that when the appropriate time comes, I’ll pull the appropriate plug. “Please help me,” I pray to Grandma Elfriede. Also to the woman on the Italian plum tomato can. And Grandma Annabelle.

Michael asks for a ride to his boat in Deep Cove. “I can always catch the bus if it’s a problem,” he adds, grinning. It’s the first time I’ve seen him really smile.

“All the way out there? Are you kidding? Of course I’ll give you a ride.”

His boat is called *Windy II*. We sail out into the cove and find a place to anchor. I sit on the deck and watch him pull up the sail, tie off various mysterious knots.

“Tell me the nautical terms for right and left,” I say. I pull my hair into a tight ponytail, prop my feet up on the other side of the boat. I’m trying to be perky but the initial excitement is waning a bit. I think of making puttanesca at home in my own apartment.

“Port, port, what colour is port?”

“Red.”

“What colour is the heart?”

“Red.”

“Where is the heart?”

“Left.”

“God you’re quick. You’re a natural. Port, red, heart, left. Port is left.”

“And starboard right.”

“Right.” He’s frying steaks. I pull my knees up to my chest. Cliffs rise up treed and steep around us. There are stars and an almost transparent crescent moon. There is a beautiful man giving me steak and potatoes on a paper plate.

“I feel so bad, no other vegetables, but there are breadsticks, butter, salt, pepper, wine.”

“Perfect,” I say, raising my glass. “A toast—to *Windy II*.”

“To *Windy II*.” He sits beside me. “I have an idea,” he says, covering our legs with a blanket.

“What?”

“After dinner, you can earn this meal by giving me a violin lesson.”

“Perfect. Have you ever played?”

"I've tried a few times. Nothing serious."

I bet. Other orchestras. Other nights on this boat. Other violinists. But I go through the motions. Tuck the violin under his chin. Curl his fingers over the fingerboard. Touch his arm to help him bow "Twinkle Little Star".

"Will you play for me?" I ask.

"Of course. What do you want me to play?"

"Anything."

He plays a jazz piece that sounds like purple fizz and velvet. Maybe this is what I've wanted all along. This man playing trumpet on the edge of a boat with the moon like an ivory brooch pinned to the sky behind him. I lean my head back and see the stars I could be swallowing in the Mediterranean over that bay where the goddess of Italian plum tomatoes resides, in Saskatoon above the room where Annabelle lies with Peter Wilson, above the Baltic Sea where Opa and Greta waltz, his fingers in her hair, above the room where virgin Elfriede spends her wedding night alone, above that place where Celine and Don go after making puttanesca. If I could only get there. Now his music tips, sways; soon it'll fall apart.

"You know," he says, taking the trumpet from his lips. "When I was growing up my father ruled the house. Don't do this, don't do that, I began to suffocate. So I shut myself in my room and played the trumpet all the time." He holds it up to the moon. "Freedom. This piece of metal stuck to my mouth."

"Play again?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"Freedom," I say, reaching up to touch the wet mouthpiece, then tracing my finger along his lips. He touches each of my fingers with his tongue.

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Sitting cross-legged on the floor of my apartment, I'm not thinking of the narrow bunk space and the tightness of it all, the swaying of the boat and the sound of the waves, although the walls of my room are still shifting around me. Not of his surprise when I told him it was my first time, not of the hurting or his light "See you around sometime" (emphasis on some-time) when I finally said goodbye and drove away this morning. Not even of Rick sitting behind a desk somewhere in Boston or of the loss or gain of any one person or thing.

I'm thinking about Version #2 and Annabelle, how she came to live at Ethel Baxter's brothel in the first place. She spent the whole summer before she was married with her Saskatoon cousins, Agnes and Elsbeth. They convinced her to earn a little extra cash by working for a home-cleaning business run by a man from their church ("It's perfectly respectable. Mr. Klassen pays well, most of the homes are rich Mennonites, and just think of all the new clothes. Of course, you don't have to tell

your parents.”) One day there was an address mix-up and she found herself on Ethel’s doorstep explaining that she had come to work. Ethel took one look at her stockings and floral-print dress with tight-fitting sleeves and collar, guffawed hugely and said the kitchen floor could use a scrubbing anyway.

In a brothel such as Ethel Baxter’s, to move from being on one’s hands and knees on the kitchen floor to that identical position in one of the preferred bedrooms is not a great leap. I’m thinking about the night of her first customer, how when she lay down before him she wanted to whisper all the dirty words she was never allowed to speak into his ear but kept quiet (she became renowned for her silence) and said them all with her hands instead. All summer she sent messages over men’s bodies until finally on one very hot day in late August, she looked at her hands and realized they could never scrub invisible spots as Elfriede again.

Was it when I rubbed my finger over the saliva on Michael’s trumpet? Or later, that moment before he entered me when I whispered, “Fuck me, hard” into his ear? Somewhere on that boat last night, Grandma Elfriede’s ever watchful image, her veil and her blue and white kitchen, even the 40th anniversary portrait, vanished.

I smell the sex on my hands. My stomach’s growling; the swaying of the boat has been replaced by empty dread. I know, however, exactly what I’ll do.

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The garbage collectors are still on strike. Even in the nice neighbourhood where Rick and I are walking, there’s a stench wafting around with the freshly cut lawns and hydrangea blooms.

“How was Boston?” I ask.

“Cool. I went into the greatest music stores and libraries. I want to take you there sometime. You’d love it.”

In three blocks, when we reach the Starbucks, I’ll tell him every single detail. I will not exclude one word or kiss. I think I know how he’ll react; I’m prepared for the worst. If he demands that we seek counseling for months or if he leaves me on the spot, I’ve planned what to do.

I’ll drive home to my apartment. I’ll make puttanesca with lots of garlic. I’ll run a hot bath, shave away a patch of hair like a shrine for the man with hairy hands, for Rick, for Michael, for a whole succession of men who will come to my blemish and kiss it, work their way down until I’m satisfied.

## December, 6 a.m.

Full-grey, first light floats  
inside this airy hour like smoke inside  
a bottle. One bird  
addresses the mountains, though  
the mountains refuse to answer,  
brooding from the broken parapet of themselves.  
Each day, like newspaper, the sky prints  
the same blurry snapshot of the sea,  
which the wind then delivers.  
And the sun—?

    The sun  
can't be found, though they  
talk of it constantly, the bird, the wind  
and sky,  
while I let the kettle  
burn dry,

and hustle for dreams under eiderdown.

# Chinese Quince

Too heavy to rustle, the waxy  
leaves of this Chinese quince  
are a wardrobe of stagy green, dressing  
the terrace-end of my year-long residence.

A juice blooms through the fruit, uncertainly  
bitter. Taste tangled in its cells  
strangles the stem with weight. Late,  
late November, these reluctant perennials

*cling and delay the seasonal guillotine,*  
swaying like lanterns that gutter and flare.  
I watch them silently ripen, strain under  
seams of pulp, simmer with a sun-yellow glare

and shake in the frost-edged glances  
of wind. My landlady will come soon,  
with a stick to strike them down.  
Autumn will end in one afternoon.

Milda M. De Voe

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## Family

*Raynor*      1937–1994  
*Erica*        1944–  
*Nissa*        1965–  
*Lamont*      1967–  
*Olaf (Ollie)* 1969–?  
*Sven*         1971–1992

**N**issa 9 lies under a piano. She stares up at the gold bones of the Steinway. The shag carpet that cradles her head sends up smells of Bartok, Mrs. Smythe's cat. Nissa thinks the cat's name is very clever. The chocolate-brown book of finger exercises by the Hungarian composer has been Nissa's nemesis since she was six, and Bartok the cat is an untouchable Siamese. It seems appropriate. At every lesson, Mrs. Smythe makes Nissa sight-read Bela Bartok's rhythmically unpredictable pieces until Nissa cries. Nissa cannot come near the cat without it hissing and trying to scratch her. Nissa keeps trying to sight-read and keeps trying to pet the cat. She stares up at the gleaming underbelly of the Steinway and wonders if her long white hair will smell like cat later, if her little brothers will call her stinky.

(May 18, 1974)

Ollie 17 mows the lawn.

He whistles a tune of his own creation as he pushes the mower through the thick Texas humidity, *pretending not to sweat*. Five more rows and he will reward himself by going swimming. He is earning two dollars per acre mowing a field which was once a horse field. The ground is long and flat which makes his chore effortless. Today he will take the five-dollar bill from Dr. Parnell's palsied hand and fold it carefully into his fat cowskin wallet. He smiles, thinking of the distorted wallet with its frayed seams. It cannot hold all the dollar bills of his life. He reaches the end of Dr. Parnell's land, where a barbed-wire fence divides Dr. Parnell's property from theirs. The grass is long on the other side of the fence. Ollie swings the mower up on its two back wheels and the blade chops at the air. He swings the machine one hundred eighty degrees to the left and returns on a path adjacent to this previous path, a continuous arc of projectile grass soaring off to

his right. What does a rainbow look like in a black-and-white film, he wonders. He will continue to wonder until he turns the mower around again and hears a cowbell from across the field. The low metallic sound will lead him to wonder whether music couldn't be some sort of alien language, with sentences and phrases and jokes. His steps behind the mower are *andante* and as even as the tick of a metronome. He breathes deeply of the fresh cut grass. It is his favourite smell: the smell that makes him think.

(May 18, 1986)

Lamont 13 sets a field on fire.

He doesn't intend the arson, but the power of an aerosol can spurting flames is too beautiful and he forgets his judgment. He is not allowed to look at pornography, or at soap operas. His mother and father never kiss. His sister's room is off-limits, so he shares a room with his two little brothers while she has her own room. She is a teenager, older than him. Her room is full of the treasure of strange sweet smells, love letters, and romance novels. She screams at him if he asks her questions like what are you reading. A book, she screams. Her voice is as shrill as his mother's was that time she walked in on his evening ritual. Once, too, he had fished a pair of slippery pink underwear out of the hallway hamper at four in the morning by candlelight when the house was all silent and tried it on over his head, but his sister had opened the door of her room and switched on her bedroom light. The click of the light was sharp, and Lamont froze in the shadow of his sister's backlit silhouette, hoping the flickering candle at his feet would fail to illuminate his pink mask. At 4:02, the door had closed. He thinks of her face as he sprays the singing flames into the thick air.

(May 18, 1980)

Sven 21 smokes a joint.

Swirls of sweet smoke cloud his brain, and he forgets what homework was due. He remembers only what it felt like to be the youngest and the last one in the house. There was no one left who could learn to listen.

(May 18, 1992)

Erica 27 goes to church.

She stares at the suffering of Jesus and thanks the Lord that suffering is a gift. She feels close to Christ, closer than she has ever felt to another human being. Father Pat looks over at her and says *Hello Erica*, disturbing her early morning prayer, but at the same time spiking her to the pew with a thrill of happiness. If Father Pat has noticed her daily prayers, Erica thinks, surely God had too. Surely God will reward her. She leans back against the smooth wood, and spreads her palms on the missalette, while

her mouth repeats the dotted rhythms of the Hail Mary for the seventh time. Her last baby has just been born, the third boy. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, she murmurs, and she begins the familiar rhythms *da capo*.

(May 18, 1971)

Raynor 55 plays the piano.

Chopin's Polonaise in A-major has booming chords in the bass, and Raynor pounds them with his meaty hands, hands that are accurate when he aims them. His hands pound away the memories of Protestant Sweden. It is eleven-thirty on Friday night. It could be six-thirty in the morning. It could be ten, twenty years ago. The solid octave clusters shake the plasterboard walls with waves of sound. The children are not in bed as they used to be, but this changes nothing. His wife is in bed: unchanged and unchanging since the last child was born. The Lord watches over her, Raynor thinks. He will not sleep until these fourteen chords are mastered. He repeats them. He repeats his mistake. The G in the right hand should be an F-sharp. In their beds, the four children would be burying their heads in the sheets now, although the night is muggy.

(May 18, 1992)

The piano forms a heavy gold canopy far above Nissa's closed eyes. The carpet scratches her back and she presses into the itch to relieve it. Mrs. Smythe has given up asking her to please please come out from under the piano, it isn't seemly for a young lady. Nissa is wearing the maroon velvet dress her mother likes, with its bright white bow now crushed beneath her, although this is only a group class, not a recital, and her mother isn't even there. Nissa ignores the boys who giggle and look up her dress. She is wearing white tights so she knows that there is nothing for them to see. She is still too young to know that it is the act of looking which excites them, not what they find. When she is fifteen, she will begin to understand. By the time she is nineteen, it will be a power she controls. Now, she opens her eyes and stares at the thick gold sky above her and wonders what it would feel like if the piano crushed her.

Grass shoots out to the right and Ollie turns to the left. He wonders if snakes feel the ground beneath them as they slither, and whether they prefer sand or grass, whether sticker-bushes hurt them, whether they feel the scrape and rasp of crossing rough cement, or if snakes ignore these feelings, the way people ignore the feeling of the earth beneath their shoes. Ollie walks behind his mower trying to feel the newly cropped grass through the soles of his green-stained tennis shoes. As he walks, he imagines that he is walking in place and turning the green globe beneath him.

Saw-grass ushers fire into the horse field, and Lamont sees the danger. He forgets his sister's face, he drops his flamethrower, and he runs, he runs for the garden hose. The hose is coiled in green loops in the middle of the dying vegetable garden. Lamont lugs it to the back of the well-house, where he is shielded from the sight of the empty house, and he screws the metal ring to the water spigot. When he turns the water on, it spurts cold needles all over him, and he curses. It is the first sound he has made since he set the field on fire.

The piano showers music onto Nissa in her velvet dress. She feels pummeled by the forte section, feeling the crescendo press her into the carpet. She will feel this again at twenty when her brother throws her onto a futon. She gives in to the notes, to Beethoven, and when Jeremy's fingers pull the *pianissimo* notes away, her rib cage rises as if to capture the *largo*. She thinks that this might be what it feels like to be in love. Jeremy is a high school boy. He is Mrs. Smythe's son. Nissa inhales the notes he plays. They smell like Bartok the cat.

No one hears Lamont's yelp. His grimy T-shirt is wet on the *Star Wars* decal, but the water is cool. He tightens the metal ring and tries the water again. The water flows smoothly through the rubber hose, spurting in a controlled stream from the nozzle. Lamont trains the white jet towards the flaming weeds and focuses the spray to its tightest and sharpest stream. He twists the spigot to its full pressure. If only I was taller, Lamont thinks, and he vows to grow. The water does not reach the expanding orange ring. He points the hose towards the sky, and the water falls to the cracked dry soil in fat raindrops. The ground is so sere that the falling water makes smacking sounds as if it were landing on cement. It is the same smacking sound that his face made when his mother's hand landed quickly on his cheek that time she caught him. Lamont thinks of the sting as the ring of flame expands, eating saw-grass, twigs, purple thistles, dried-up dewberry bushes, pink Texas stars, and wine cups.

Erica climbs into her car to drive home, Father Pat's sermon still echoing in her thoughts. The car is hot from the sun, its brown vinyl seats sticky on the back of her upper arms. There is a nickel on the dashboard, touching the windshield. A hot nickel. A week after her husband brought her to Texas, Erica left an Almond Joy on the dashboard of her car for only a moment while running back to the house for her chequebook. When she returned, the chocolate had glued the white wrapper to the dash, and the almonds were like small bugs creeping away from the coconut mess towards the indentation where the nickel now sat. She does not start the car, but sits in the unbearable heat, staring at the nickel and remembering

the sermon and the melted chocolate bar.

The neighbours who own the horses call the volunteer fire department; Lamont soaks a picnic blanket in water and is battering the earth when they arrive. He is drenched with sweat and well-water and streaks of dirt cover his face and arms. Outta the way, boy, a deep bass voice growls behind Lamont. He doesn't hear the voice the first time and he keeps pounding the flaming grass with the heavy wet blanket until a strong grip catches him by the wrist, and yanks him to the edge of the small crowd which is gathered at the edge of the barbed wire fence. He is abandoned there. Young man, do you realize what damage you might have done, one of the men says and Lamont nods. Is your mother home, another man asks and Lamont shakes his head. His mother is never home. The firemen are called back to the truck, a pickup with a tank of water in the bed instead of the usual hay. The fire is extinguished and Lamont is left staring at a patch of ground as black as a glossy scab, with burnt sticks poking up out of it like awkward hairs. He doesn't notice the crowd disperse. He stands with his face towards the burnt ground and breathes the dead air. Around the patch of blackness, the sky is blue and cloudless, and the grey is a dry green. Wine cups peek purple through that grass, as if taking attendance. A roan pony walks around the patch of steaming ground, a strange look in his large brown eyes, and Lamont looks away and pulls with his hands at the blanket he finds himself holding. He sees that the picnic blanket is ruined, but Lamont folds it neatly and squeezes it to his chest, as if to still the movement there.

Ollie turns to the left and walks on his planet, following his mower. He is the lord of this world. He is the king. The fire ants and walking-stick bugs and praying mantises, the rattlesnakes and hairy magalormors, the bullfrogs and chameleons, the scorpions, the mockingbirds, the black widows, all creatures of the world of grass are under his control. He shatters them. He splits them. He cleaves them in half. He destroys their world. He walks on their demesnes. He walks across their bisected carcasses across their homes across their lives their dreams. A stick pops in the mower blade and explodes into wooden shrapnel. Ollie jumps back, releasing the mower for a second. When he recovers from his fright, Ollie cuts the power and the world of grass feels silent until his ears adjust and he hears the music once again. He nurses his hand, which is bleeding at the knuckle. A frog creaks like a distant door. Ollie sucks the blood and it tingles on his tongue like the positive end of a small battery. He thinks, I am drinking myself. His nostrils curl away from the gasoline smell of the lawnmower, and he wishes he could smell only the grass.

If God has really predetermined my fate, Erica thinks, then perhaps I should allow chance to determine my actions. She reaches for the nickel, bracing herself for the burn of the dashboard. She is able to pry it loose with her pink fingernails, and she scoots it along the hot vinyl into the palm of her left hand. She tosses it from hand to hand like doll-sized pizza dough until she can hold the hot metal comfortably. She looks at the modern church building through the passenger window, and she sees no disapproval in its brick façade. She closes her eyes, holding the warm nickel in her right hand, and asks God whether she should go straight home or stop at the mall on the way. She opens her eyes and looks at the church again. Heads—home, tails—the mall, she thinks, and she flips the nickel briefly into the air, before catching it and slapping it onto the back of her left arm. She can feel its strange warmth, and this makes her smile. She savours the moment of giving her life wholly over to God.

In a haze, Sven picks up the phone to call his sister in Anchorage. No one answers, but a machine uses her voice to cheerfully state that she is not there. If you are a new student please leave your name, your level of ability, your last piano teacher's name. Sven hangs up. The voice was all he had really expected, even if she had been home. The telephone is a giant black clam, menacing.

Sven tries to call Lamont. He has to look up the procedure to call the prison. He decides it isn't worth the trouble in the end. Roasted peanuts in a jar beckon and distract him. He goes to the bedside table of the efficiency apartment and eats them all. The walk to the table seemed very long, he thinks as he sucks the peanuts into his mouth. They taste like the ocean, like eating oceanic rocks. He feels the peanuts crumble in his teeth, and imagines they are the sea-washed bones of whales.

Sven wonders about Ollie, but no one know where he lives, only that he has moved from Germany to Morocco to Paris to Moscow to St. Petersburg to Madagascar to Rome. Any day now, Sven thinks, Ollie will send a postcard with no return address from another M place. There is that much order in his life. Sven takes the empty peanut jar and throws it across the room. It falls to the linoleum floor with a hearty clatter and Sven smiles. His smile is not communication. No human has ever seen it.

Lamont waits in his room which is also Ollie's room and Sven's room and which, a long time later, would become the music room, housing only the piano and its sheet music. Lamont is waiting for God's verdict. When

his mother came home from ministering to victims of poverty, Lamont was standing in the dry green grass, holding the blanket, staring at the black hole in the middle of the horse field. She did not yell at her son when she saw the black hole. She did not ask about the roan pony, or the dappled mare, or the bay. She did not say a word. She went into the master bedroom and closed the door behind herself with a click. On his side of the room, Lamont lies on his bed, facing the wall and listening for the sound of his mother rolling the punishment dice. God will determine his punishment. His mother will only relay it to him. Lamont stares at the wall and wonders if God had been paying as much attention to him when he set the field on fire, and if so, why did He not make it rain.

Raynor 57 plays the piano.

Chopin's Polonaise in A-major has booming chords in the bass, and Raynor pounds them so the sound shakes the walls. His hands pound away the memories of Sweden, but cannot pound away more recent memories. Memories that make his fingertips numb. Memories that clench his heart. He pounds with his numb fingers and ignores the squeezing in his heart. He has forgotten all the love he ever had. He has banished it to live in the home of his youth along the fjords. He protects himself by playing louder. It is eleven-thirty on Saturday night. It could be six-thirty in the morning. It could be ten, twenty years ago. The solid octave clusters shake the plaster-board walls that isolate each room. The children are ghosts who haunt his home. One is missing, one banished, two have fled. His wife is in bed; unchanged and unchanging since her last child took death into his mouth. He had wished to devour the sea. At rest in the satin of his casket, he wore a small smile as grotesque as happiness. The Lord watch over them all, Raynor thinks. He will not sleep until these five chords are mastered. He repeats them. He repeats his mistake. The G in the right hand should be an F-sharp. He dismisses the pain. In their beds, the four children would be burying their heads in their sheets, cringing.

## Fixing

A sudden squall scoops up the snow dusting the stone window ledge, whirls it past the glass in dizzy spirals. As if this were the secret sign she was waiting for, the signal for release, Alex abruptly gathers books, papers, bag, and leaves the class where she has not heard a word for two hours, walks. Past dozing students, down echoing corridors and marble steps, bursting finally into the damp air. Her coat flaps open, leaving throat and chest bare to the bitter wind that tears pearly clouds of condensation from her mouth. She does not mind the cold. It's a relief, in fact, after a soporific afternoon in the fluorescent, airless lecture hall. "Flayed by another day," she murmurs to no one in particular, then smiles, liking the sound of it. In her mind's eye a wan diva collapsing, slow-motion, on a red velvet chaise lounge.

It's a bright grey afternoon, air vivid with that peculiar light just before a snowstorm. The sidewalk's salt-stained concrete glows beneath her scuffed boots.

The rush hour city sounds fade as she heads north, cutting across the huge park that bisects the city. The din of traffic becomes a dwindling murmur as she climbs an embankment and makes her way through a stand of trees to a long field. Frigid silence clings to her; she imagines it dripping from the bare trees and coating her in an icy balm. The hypnotic flash flash flash of her black boots across dead grass and drifting snow. There are occasional puckered clumps of white, like healing scabs, where the snow had settled, then melted in a warm spell after the last storm.

The wind brings tears to her eyes, makes her nose run. When she sniffs deeply, the hairs in her nose prickle in the stabbing cold. Something unfolds in her chest, like a hand unclenching, something soothed by her rapid progress across the field. Eyes fixed on the horizon, a watery band of lime beneath smoky blue, Alex sinks into the familiar, formless stream of images: the frozen wind's gnawing translates into wolfish teeth at her cool neck, a grim fairy tale scene, white black red. Girl in a jet coat on ivory snow, something silent at her working throat and the scarlet surprise of a kiss. Ex, ex, ex, and—Oh. How it presses, presses so the hot love gushes up, she imagines the relief of that dark release.

She knows it's silly, comical even, but Alex always imagines it the same way, the profound, polar silence that would follow this draining

kiss: crawling into a giant freezer and stretching out among the hoary vegetables and mysterious plastic packages of meat, just another shining form blind and dumb in her winter-white fur coat.

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She arrives at the lobby of his apartment building and pauses to let the mist on her glasses dissolve. When he buzzes her through, she takes the tiny mirrored elevator up to his floor. Cramped silver box and she is surrounded on all sides, three short women, shapeless in long black coats. A pinched, foxy face in triplicate. Stray snowflakes glitter, melting in the tangled hair, escaping from three identical braids. The elevator creaks and shudders to the top floor and she avoids her own eyes in the spotted glass, relieved when the door slides open. He lives at the end of the narrow, rust-carpeted hallway. A wave of heat and the surprisingly oppressive scent of clementines wafts out from the half-open door. He hovers near the entrance and, like every time, protests that Alex shouldn't have come, that she must have nicer things to do, all the while waiting anxiously for her to come in so that he can close the door behind her.

He waves a trembling, puffy hand towards the coat-stand, indicating that she should hang her things up. "I'm sorry dear," he begins, breathless, tugging at the frazzled edges of his burnt straw hair, "I'm just such a wreck today. I know I must look a sight...and this place," he gestures hopelessly at the dusty carpet covered in crumpled tissues and dried gold trails of clementine peelings, "I just can't seem to *keep up* with anything." He begins this way every time.

They proceed with this familiar ritual of his apologies and her reassurances, until he is satisfied and they can settle on the cluttered couch. He pushes ineffectually at some of the mess before dissolving into tears. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he sobs, "I can't help it, I feel so weak, I'm sorry." She has stopped telling him there is no need to apologize, simply holds the spongy hand that is not covering his eyes.

Her gaze drifts around the room, not really taking in anything, until it alights on the television. He seems to sense what she's looking at, because he sniffs and pats around for the Kleenex box, asking "Is it time, dear? Are they on?" She squeezes his hand before going over to turn the volume up. He pats the lumpy corduroy couch, releasing small puffs of dust, so that she'll settle next to him to watch his girls. Stifling a sneeze, Alex sits, drawing her legs up under her.

The four golden girls snipe and quarrel, and he cackles when the oldest one makes a particularly rude remark. She somehow reminds Alex of a malicious trained squirrel, with her little features bunched up under the tight lavender wig. "Oooh, she's such a b-i-t-c-h! Oh, excuse me dear," he adds coyly. Aims a cloudy glance in the direction of Alex's face. She reaches

into her bag and pulls out the net sack of clementines she has brought for him, waiting for the next commercial to ask if he'd like some now. He immediately begins to weep again, as he reaches out for the bag of fruit. "Thank you dear, I just love these things. They're the only thing I can keep down."

When she'd first started coming, Alex had brought food from the Caribbean take-out near her apartment: akee and saltfish, roti, sweet fried plantain, cow foot soup. Even then, he barely ate anything. Picked contentedly, talking all the while, often describing the beach behind the house where he grew up. Sucking delicately on the fish bones, he'd repeat how he'd never learned to swim, afraid of the greedy foam fingers that came skittering up the beach to nip at his tiny ankles, drag him under the glinting waves.

The show comes back on and he asks her what the tarty character is wearing, because the b-i-t-c-h-y old lady has just said she looks like a hooker. He giggles appreciatively when Alex describes the tight leather dress for him, and reaches for one of the little oranges. The peelings fall, gather around his bare, ashy feet in bright drifts. He sighs when the commercials start again, popping a section of fruit into his mouth. Sucks avidly, extracting every drop of sweet juice, then spits the remains into a ragged Kleenex he pulls from the sleeve of his blue cardigan. The damp bundle dropped on the floor with it is full. He sucks so hard, Alex imagines the juice being drawn straight into his veins, mingling with the infected ebb and flow.

When the snow is finished and the tears inevitably well up again, she puts a hand on his arm and gently strokes the skin that has bloomed with the tell-tale dark stains. His body has become a topographical map of illness. The skin is warm and dry, with the rough texture of handmade paper. When she first heard the words Kaposi's Sarcoma, the words for the splotches on his skin, she imagined something beautiful, like a stained glass city in the middle of the desert. Hot, silent.

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"Does it look really bad, dear? Do you think anyone could tell?" He asks this every time, and Alex always lies and says no, because it doesn't really matter anyway. He never leaves the house, except to go to his medical appointments with her, by taxi. "I'm afraid," he moans, whenever she has to help him get dressed to go outside, and he clings to her as they shuffle through the drifting snow, with more strength than she would have imagined in those sick limbs. He calls her his ray of sunshine, his only light. She is uncomfortable with these effusions, about the halo he sees above her head, and rubs his back silently outside the doctor's office. *Don't*, she wants to say, *just don't*. It's the same feeling she gets in his elevator, shifty-eyed and fidgeting, trapped in the triplicate embrace of her reflection. *Mirror, mirror*—What would she ask, anyway?

"You want to know how I got it, don't you, dear?" he said once, during one

of their first sessions in the plastic bucket chairs of a waiting room. Turning to look at him, Alex just shook her head silently, forgetting that all he would see was a vague bucking of dark and light. He seemed to understand anyway and smiled; as he grew thinner, this expression had become painfully minimalist, skin sliding over jutting bone with the disturbing ease of an expensive, well-oiled mechanism.

"Well, *I* wouldn't mind knowing!" He laughed softly for a moment, then lapsed into silence again, hands clasped neatly in his lap.

Not knowing what to say to this, Alex began to describe her toothy fantasies, waking and sleeping. He rarely asked her about her life, but he was fascinated by dreams and they often whiled away their waiting room hours, quietly describing their dreams to each other with the married intimacy of an old couple lying awake in their twin beds.

She was, Alex explained, sometimes just an observer, but most often *The Girl* herself, in a dim hallway or rank forest, the hot star of red blooming at her neck under the sharp pressure that often sent a thrilling arrow of pleasure to the corresponding dampness between her legs. She left out the last part, about the arousal, just describing as best she could the variable surroundings, how she would wait. Paralyzed and anxiously expectant, waiting for the indistinct form to materialize—from behind a tree, from around the corner, features melting and sliding, unimportant, only this tug, this ache, always the same, so it was if she spoke: come.

When she finished speaking, they sat quietly for a while, both staring at the corkboard, covered in a bright dog-eared patchwork of pamphlets, posters, factsheets.

"I had this beautiful Filipino boyfriend, you know, who used to wake up screaming every night. Scared me to death every time, I was sooo relieved when we broke up after a couple of months." After a moment, he reached over and took her hand, squeezing gently as if *she* were the one in need of comfort. "What a pair," he murmured and Alex didn't know who he was talking about—the two of them, or himself and the ex-lover, or even the ex-lover and herself. Not really wanting to know, Alex squeezed the swollen fingers in return.

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She has been coming to visit him for five months now. The two women she used to have coffee with most days after class have given up teasing her, trying to find out who this mystery lover is anyway, this man to whom Alex now devotes all her free time. At the first volunteer meeting, the coordinator asked each of them why they were there. When it was her turn, Alex felt the expectant silence swell as she hesitated, waiting for something convincing to come to her. The coordinator smiled encouragingly. Faintly dizzy under the fluorescent lights, Alex picked a small piece of fluff from the sleeve of her grey sweater, rolled it between damp fingers. Somebody

coughed. Staring at the wrinkled fabric of her skirt, Alex finally murmured something vague about having the time as a university student, and so few people willing to visit AIDS patients...

It started with a peer tutoring program years ago in high school and she just hasn't been able to stop since—burned children, rebellious teen mothers, glue-sniffing kids, mentally, physically disabled adults. Cuddling stroking advising listening reading explaining holding. Giving. Teachers, advisors and friends' parents marvelled oh what a wonderful girl so kind so unselfish, asked her if she wasn't getting *burnt out*. Burnt out? It was a soothing image: a crumbling charred husk, sooty fragments scooped up by a gust of wind and whirled into a colourless sky.

Alex often remembers the jolt she felt the first time she went to volunteer at the children's hospital, and someone placed a crying infant in her arms. The tiny, straining bundle of wires and tubes slowly relaxed, and as it stopped crying Alex felt a sympathetic calm wash over her as well. Her eyelids drooped, as if someone had injected her with a powerful tranquilizer. After an hour in the small, over-heated room, everything had fallen away, even the sounds and images of her parents' latest fight—the slurred insults and screaming, the final crescendo of breaking glass and toppling furniture. The silence afterwards which was worse. The nurse was surprised to find her still there hours later. "I wish we had time for this," she sighed, taking the sleeping baby from Alex. Pausing to study the girl's curiously peaceful face, the nurse added "You're certainly welcome to visit as often as you like." Alex spent every afternoon of her final year in high school there, pursuing that fix with a focussed hunger. To give. To give *more*. And it was somehow never enough.

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They spend long mornings and afternoons together, Alex and her mystery man, either in the twilight must of his apartment, or, more frequently now, under the antiseptic glare of the waiting room lights. He told her once that he liked how she just sat quietly, rubbing his back. The last buddy chattered nervously all the time and it got on his nerves. He hates being at the hospital as it is, always afraid someone will recognize him from when he used to nurse there. Alex just nods, strokes the sharply etched wingblades of his shoulders.

She doesn't think compassionate, volunteer companion thoughts. Alex imagines white rooms furnished only with light and shadow. Being there alone, and watching the snow thick-feathered and profuse, whirling past the windows. For some reason she can never get to a place like this, only finds herself in clinics and the shabby, cluttered homes of people who need things from her. Mostly people just want her to listen. She listens.

Shortly before he dies, he tells her about a dream he used to have as a child in Jamaica. The hospital room is quiet, high above the lights and noise

of the darkening winter afternoon city. His story rambles like careless knitting, with dropped stitches and uneven rows. He occasionally raises a black-tipped claw for punctuation, weaving in and out of focus. "You know dear, they can tell...children can always tell if you're different. They were so nasty...so I spent a lot of time by myself...once I fell out and broke my arm and he beat me for being stupid." He laughs, a ghostly, merry cackle. He tells her about the horrible old woman who lived next door, whispers *black magic*, dear. Everyone in the village was afraid of her; she drank chicken's blood, and could heal any illness just by fixing her rheumy blind eyes on the spot. On a dare he once ran through her dusty yard shouting curses, little mouse heart threatening to explode with fear. He places a trembling hand on his chest, as if to show Alex where.

He explains how these people can control your dreams. "One night I...dreamt that...as I ran across her yard, she suddenly appeared in front of me...stretchin' out her ol' dry-up hands to catch me...I sort of...*jumped*...into the air, and then I was just flyin' over her head, too high for her short arms to catch me...the sky...really stormy and I flew into the clouds," he gestures towards the ceiling, eyes closed, "and I just felt *sooo* relieved...but when I looked back there was this huge...dark bird right behin' me. No matter how fast I flew, I couldn't...escape...it was like my shadow and I couldn't shake it. I woke up just as it was...diggin' it's nasty claws in me...had...a terrible pain in my side for days...kept havin' this dream for years. Now I can't sleep anymore...so that's not a problem."

Smiling, Alex tugs the hospital sheet to cover the cracked, bony feet. They remind her of sea-horses, somehow, their antique, spiny articulation against the white cotton. She remains standing by the bed, watching the faint rise and fall of his ribcage, trapped beneath the blankets. His shallow, tattered breathing fills the room.

The red glow of the digital clock on his bedside table catches her eye and Alex automatically checks the time, though there is nowhere else she'd rather be. 4:32. Her afternoon lecture would be finishing right about now. She'd been skipping more and more classes, as he grew increasingly feeble, and now that he was hospitalized, it seemed impossible to go back to the meaningless drone of the lecture hall. The restless buzz that has been eating at her the past few days had simply stopped, as soon as she walked into the room. An incredible calm wells up, envelops her like a fog, a magic spell. His hand twitches briefly on the pale blue blanket and she reaches over to hold it. This is what it would be like, she thinks, to be at the centre of an egg, or the eye of a storm: perfectly balanced, needing nothing. The hospital should gradually gain volume with the approach of dinner hour.

A nurse bustles in shortly, does something with the tangle of wires and

tubing that connects him to food, air. She wears a mask and gloves. Her peach cotton uniform peeks out from beneath the drab green protective smock. She turns to Alex, and the freckled skin around her eyes wrinkles suddenly. Alex realizes that the nurse is smiling at her, curves her lips in return. "It's nice to see someone in here," the nurse whispers. Apparently he hasn't had any visitors in the week since he was admitted. There isn't anyone. "My mother always told me not to be chat-chattin' your business at work," he explained to Alex, when she asked why none of his former colleagues came to visit when he stopped nursing. The family was all still in Jamaica and he was adamant that they never find out. "Trust me, darlin'—they would rather think I was married to a *white* woman, than dying of this." This was one of his favourite jokes. Alex was sure his family would be thrilled if he were married to any woman at all. She said nothing, curled up in the chair by the bed. If would have been awful, she knew, if there had been anyone else—the crying, the shouting, the messy grief. This way it was perfect, just the two of them, in the quiet, gull-coloured room.

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Evening begins to stain the corners of the room with shadow and outside the snow whirls thick-feathered and profuse. The storm's billowing silence wraps them in a mantle of peace: this thin, dark form in the hospital bed and the woman touching his foot. A metal food trolley rattles to a halt outside the room and the strangely swampy smells of institutional food waft in from the slightly open door. Alex settles back into the dun, plastic chair, watches the icy window dim as the day wanes. There is a dull ache in her throat, a slowly mounting pressure. She does not notice when the narrow chest ceases to rise and fall in the nest of wool and cotton.

She imagines: teeth, delicately piercing the skin.

She imagines: the frail boy airborne in a warm tropical sky, technicolour and punctuated with bruised-looking clouds. The air is thick with the smell of waxy flowers larger than her head, a drunken perfume faintly sexual, menacing. He beats at the heavy air, struggling, smooth brown skin covered in a damp sheen of fear, struggling to elude the dusky bird following his movement like a rapt lover.

## Calm

The night your sister calls I walk the beach below  
Beacon Hill, trace ships gliding like slow whales  
through the darkening strait. It is February, low tide.  
The land shifts beneath me, grain by grain, holds  
the strange weight of my body sinking. I have watched  
ocean cover this spot, will watch it again as the last red  
streaks of sky draw down. Not even the lights of a passing  
car can split the night at my back, the air thick with waiting  
and the dull hum of an answering machine rewinding itself  
in the dark, blink of a red light eyeing my return, a message  
in its measured signal: it's over. Still, I want to believe  
it won't come like this, the graceful end of a slow drowning,  
cell by cell. No hard white beam of lighthouse flares over  
the water to mark a passage so quiet. Across town, your body  
warm in the orange pools of lampshade slips deeper, simply,  
into that darker stillness: the sound a foundering ship makes  
miles down.

# Cure

I run the route we walked our dogs in windstorms,  
think of your yellow rain jacket slapping my shoulder,  
the sound seals make on calm water. Those wet mornings,  
the flap of your skin so battered grey, I knew,  
I knew and still wouldn't admit it was even possible,  
not with the wind knuckling up off the water, drumming  
itself in dark fingers against our bodies. Running today  
I need rain, the hard movement of fists punching holes  
in this sky, charred skin of a coastal October. I need  
the symmetry of falling, the clumsy puffing of runners,  
*names carried like ghosts on their chests, In Memory of...*  
Those small white banners of loss a link between grieving  
and grieved—like the woman waiting alone at the finish,  
her handmade sign: a crayoned loop of pink ribbon over  
*Thank You* in block letters. She is the last thing I see  
before crossing the line, face wet with eight months of hard  
running and the nudge of you bumping against me; the rhythm  
in these rows of survivors, their hands clapping and clapping.

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## Escaping Laughter

The first time I was unsure  
of a woman's laugh  
was when I was twelve –  
trying out on the schoolyard  
soccer pitch, mud & bruises  
worn like a uniform,  
the boys crashing into  
each other like blind birds.  
I had trotted to the sideline  
where the coach paced  
near the ranking board –  
my name third from the top,  
a small white chit  
pinned to the plywood  
like a broken tooth  
barely left in a bully's victim.  
I looked to where some girls  
sat braiding & said to  
my favourite Jennifer,  
First Team, Inside Left –  
that's good in soccer.  
Behind her hand her teeth  
were sparking,  
above it her eyes held mine  
then squinted out at the field.  
Her laughter came short  
& hard, like it was escaping  
from somewhere under her chin.  
I backed out into the safety  
of the rough scrimmage  
with the shaky legs of a survivor.

# Dreaming Up Birds

I have a history of dreaming  
up new birds –  
sleep coming over me  
each night like strange wings  
against the sill of my head,  
(something like a magpie  
& a cardinal crossed –  
a blue blackbird or swallow-hawk,  
anything fascinated by shiny stones  
or eyes)  
& I watch them land on my brow  
with the interest  
of anyone that near the edge –  
how they move  
in twitches & ruffles,  
nails digging into my skull,  
smooth, thick maws  
sitting open & crooked,  
the spilled ink of their eyes  
around fading points of white –  
& sometimes I think  
to get bread crumbs  
to keep them occupied,  
or to change my clothes  
in case I resemble a farmer  
in the field –  
but usually I wait (amazed  
that I cannot move, or lift a hand  
to shoo, or even catch  
the blurring edge  
of a falling purple feather  
as it drifts to rest in my sheets) –

& the bread crumbs  
become diamonds & the soft  
down turns to spiny knives,  
& when I look back, everything starts  
changing from the forms  
of new birds to scarecrows,  
or something else entirely.

Alix Ohlin

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## A Theory of Entropy

What could reach them here was the mail. Claire took the boat across the lake to Bob's store to pick it up. The first of the summer people were in, browsing through the aisles, stocking up on canned goods and batteries. From behind the counter Bob nodded and passed her a rubberbanded stack, her bills, Carson's heavy magazines—*Science*, *Journal of Organic Chemistry*—saying, as he did each time, "A little light reading for you, Claire?"

"Puts me to sleep," she said. Around her in the store children tugged their parents' sleeves, begged for candy and to be taken fishing.

"Hold on a minute. Something for you in the back," Bob said. Claire waited. When he came back he carried a bundle in his arms, a padded envelope square as a box. She didn't have to look at the return address to know that it was Carson's book.

She piled the bills and magazines on top of it, then slid it off the counter, pressed to her chest for balance. Bob was frowning at a boy handling a box of fishing lures, larceny in his fingers; when she left, he raised his hand briefly, holding up the palm in silence, without looking away from the boy. The dock was not ten yards from the entrance of the store. She threw a tarp over the mail and gunned the engine. She could feel the heft of the envelope in the boat. She didn't look at it. She never opened his mail, although he had sometimes asked her to, and anyway he opened it in front of her, showed or told her everything—he had no secrets, he always said. But these were her scruples. The boat skittered a little as she manoeuvred around driftwood. On the other side of the lake a motorboat roared and circled. Underneath it and closer in, a smaller sound almost evaporated as it reached her: the hoot of a loon.

Carson came into the kitchen where she was snapping beans. He dipped his hand into the bowl and sat down at the table with the handful.

"She wants to come here," he said.

"Here, why?"

"Because she knows I won't go to the city."

She turned. His legs under the table stretched the length of it: he was over six feet tall, strong-shouldered, rangy. Long fingers with thick knuckles, like knots on wood. To relax, he made furniture, and had built the table

where he sat.

"To work on the book," he said.

"I thought she already did," Claire said. She set the bowl in the sink and ran water over the beans. "Isn't that what came today, the edits?"

"She says we have a lot more to do. That the book isn't quite coming across. She thinks a few days of hammering it out in person could do it. So, can she come?"

"You're asking me?"

"It's your place," he said.

She looked at him. She loosed a clove of garlic from its paper and set it, along with an onion, on the table for him to chop.

Carson studied entropy. Claire didn't understand his work, and she had given up trying. It was entirely theoretical, divorced from the data sets and experimental designs on which he had built his early career in chemistry. He produced it, as far as she could tell, whole and unprecedented, a rabbit from the black hat of his mind. Sitting in his office at the back of the cottage he wrote pages of thought with a blue marker on lined yellow pads. What she knew of entropy came from a college textbook that she had bought, in a vain effort to educate herself, when she first knew him. Entropy is a thermodynamic function measuring the disorder of a system. The greater the disorder of a system, the higher its entropy. Disorder equals randomness.

Or it used to, until Carson came along. He had developed a new way of looking at entropy, of evaluating the whole idea of order. Of equilibrium. He had charted the paths of molecules through systems and begun to wonder if entropy veered towards simplicity, whether there was order within disorder, whether disorder had a quality of inevitability to it. The lawful tendency of a non-equilibrium universe. When Claire thought about this she thought that possibly entropy was a scientific term for fate. But she never said so to Carson, who would tell her gently that science was science, not metaphor.

When they first met, in the city, he tried to explain the model to her, defining its basic elements, then moving on and almost immediately losing her, his logic twisting along a corridor where she could not follow. He drew outlines for her, equations, the universe in boxes and arrows. The blunter she looked the faster he talked, reaching into his brain for examples to teach her by, striving to share his clarity. He stretched his hands wide, carving air: his words a map to show her where he was. Claire was no scientist at all: she was a freelance designer, and she had failed math in high school. Instead of listening to his words she became distracted by the passion in his voice, the shaking timbre of it, the way he seemed to be peering under the surface of things to some elusive knowledge of the world. She forgot to pay attention; attraction overruled. Eventually, they

both gave up the explanations.

She had known Carson for a year when he published the first diagram of his model. It appeared in *Science*, was acclaimed, publicized in the non-scientific press. Scientists pilgrimaged to his office at the university, besieged him with letters. His phone never stopped ringing. Some of the letters and calls came from a woman named Jocelyn Gates who acquired manuscripts for a popular publisher. She wanted him to write an account of his work for the general reader; she said that it could be the best scientific seller since *The Origin of Species*.

The other members of his department assumed that he accepted for the usual reasons, the temptations of money and self-inflation. But this wasn't it. He had been seduced, Claire thought, by the promise of particular riches, the only treasure he really craved—time away from the university, from the task of grant writing, the company of difficult colleagues, the obligations to students and administrators. Time to think. He could take leave from the university, write the manuscript, and meanwhile chase the magnets of his own ideas. In interviews, he always said, "There is so much left to be done."

When he decided to write the book, Claire offered him her cottage on the lake, and her presence with it. They had been here two years.

Even in May, the nights were cold. Under the blankets she moved closer to Carson, whose body gave off heat constantly, no matter the season, as if it were electric. She turned her back to him and brought his arm around her. From where she was lying she could see out the window to a clutch of birches on a hillrise behind the house. The bark turned silver in the light from stars.

"How old is this woman?" she asked him.

"Claire," he said. His tone a warning. He hated signs of insecurity in her. Carson was generally even-tempered but frustration sparked from him sometimes in fits like anger. What he liked best about her, she knew, was the idea he had of her strength: he liked being in the position of borrowing from her, of having accepted the favour of this house. It was important to him to think that she did not need him.

"Old?" she said. "Or young."

"She's not much younger than you are. Twenty-nine."

"How do you know? I mean so specifically."

"She told me. She took one of my classes at one point, apparently. She told me what year she graduated."

His hand twining hers began to sweat and he unclasped and moved it to her shoulder. His cheek scratched her face.

"Don't be jealous," he said in her ear. "I hate it."

She flipped to her back. When she looked at him his eyes were open,

reflecting colourlessly in the dark, like glass.

"All right," she said.

Jocelyn Gates arrived by the noon bus. She was not what Claire was expecting, although she hadn't realized that she was expecting anything at all. She had long, wavy hair which had been dyed an unnatural brown-red, like dried blood. Behind thick brown frames her eyes were blue. When she stepped off the bus she flung her backpack over her shoulder, like a student, and her eyes searched out Claire's immediately.

"Are you Claire Tremble?" she said. "I'm Jocelyn."

Claire stepped forward and shook her hand.

"Is that all you have?" she said, glancing at the backpack.

"Dear God, no," Jocelyn said. The driver struggled over from the side of the bus and heaved a large suitcase in their direction. Claire looked at it.

"It's mostly manuscripts, I swear. Carson said there would be a boat," Jocelyn said. "There is a boat, isn't there?"

"That's the boat," Claire said, and pointed.

"Oh. Should I—"

"It's fine. But you might have to sit on it, that's all."

"I can do that," Jocelyn said. Claire made a move to pick up the suitcase but Jocelyn shook her head firmly, lifted the suitcase, and gestured for Claire to walk ahead. When they reached the boat Jocelyn lowered the suitcase onto its side and straddled it. With the extra weight the boat sat heavily in the water, but Claire judged that it would hold. Jocelyn sat precariously, her white hands clutching the gunwale, spray from the lake misting her glasses. After a minute or so, the boat seemed to adjust itself and moved slow but smoothly through the clear branches of spruce trees reflected in the water. Jocelyn leaned over to trail her fingers through their rippling needles.

"It's beautiful here," she said.

"I know."

"What a wonderful place to write a book," she said, and inhaled deeply, with satisfaction, as if catching the scent of unborn books in the wind. She caught Claire's eye. "Thank you for letting me come."

Carson was waiting for them on the dock, a surprise, since he regularly worked every day until five and would brook no interruption, a habit which had led Claire to offer to pick up the girl in the first place. Yet there he was, reaching out a long arm to catch the prow and rope it to the dock. He grabbed Jocelyn Gates' hand and pulled her up. The two of them laughed and moved from handclasp to shake. Jocelyn would not permit her suitcase to be carried for her, and she trudged after Carson up the hill to the house. Halfway there she paused to readjust her grip and said again to Claire, who was behind her, "It's so beautiful here."

"Yes."

"A refuge," she said. Her eyes were glowing, blue coals. "I hope I won't disturb your peace."

"Don't mention it," Claire said.

Because the desk in Carson's office was small, the two of them set to work at the kitchen table, where they could spread the manuscript out in stacks. Claire shut the door to her office and tried to work, but on her trips to the washroom and the living room she could hear that they had already begun to argue. She could not make out the specific words of it, only the general tone of grievance in Carson's voice, and from this tone she suddenly heard her own name rising, and realized that he was calling her.

She stood in the doorway.

"This woman," Carson sputtered. His face was flushed but Jocelyn's was not. "She wants me to tell my story. She wants me to sell the material. Would you please tell her, please, that science is not a *story*? Will you please agree with me on this so I'll know that I'm not insane?"

Claire looked at Jocelyn, who smiled politely.

"I think I'm the wrong person to ask," Claire said. Carson groaned. "I mean, I'm no scientist, you know that."

"So? You still know that a scientific theory is a model, not some fairy tale."

"Well, yes, and I'm not saying that it's fiction. But I do kind of think—sorry, Carson—that science is a story we tell ourselves about the world. In a way."

Carson said, tight-lipped, "It's not just any story."

Jocelyn said, "The important thing here, Carson, is that we tell it well."

Over the next three days Carson and Jocelyn worked on the book. They fought often and loudly while Claire, in her office, let go the pretense of work and listened. For some time it seemed that they could not even agree on terms, could not share meanings of words. She heard Carson's voice, strained and hoarse through the walls. ("Order and disorder are only categories. They don't hold up, statistically.") Jocelyn's voice flowed quietly under his. She was trying to simplify Carson's theories, to put his arguments into the plainest terms. They could be expanded later, she told him. The book was a pyramid requiring a foundation, a wide and basic layer.

Claire thought of the phrase Carson, quoting Jocelyn, had used to describe this process: hammering it out. This was just what it sounded like, voices striking hard as metal, Carson's strident, the woman's relentless, pounding his science into flatness, like nails into wood. Claire was afraid for him to see his work—so famously abstract—popularized and, inevitably, reduced in this way. To cooperate in the reduction, even. And she was surprised by Jocelyn's persistence, her conviction that his ideas could be

explained to the world. She kept on hammering.

"So all things tend naturally towards a simpler state," Claire heard her say.

"Where do you get this naturally?" Carson cried in an anguished tone. Any lack of precision pained him. "Where do you get this? You're creating some kind of animism that isn't inherent in the work." Claire pictured him spreading his palms, trying to explain. "There is no naturally. Things can only happen according to the physical laws of the universe."

"So explain those laws to me."

"Look, miss, I didn't realize that you came up here for a scientific education. I thought you came here to work on my book."

"I am your reader," Jocelyn said without a pause. "Explain it to me."

"Maybe you're not my reader," he said. "Maybe I have no readers. The kind of people you're talking about don't want to know about my work. Couldn't understand it even if they did want to."

"They want to."

Other times, as Claire passed through the kitchen, she saw them working smoothly, heads together, one nodding, the other speaking, low and constant and rhythmic, like two birds on a branch. In the evenings she and Carson cooked dinner for their guest. By tacit agreement, they all three avoided the subject of science, instead discussing politics or weather, the natural beauty of the region, the improvements that Claire and Carson had made to the cottage in order to live in it year-round. Conversation stayed polite and almost distant, with none of the contention or excitement which echoed through the rooms during the day.

Claire took the boat across to Bob's and Jocelyn asked to go with her. She needed to use the phone to check in at the office.

"Although I'd rather not," she said at the dock, hands on her hips, looking out at the water. "The office seems a bit unreal at this point."

"It'll seem real enough once you get back," Claire said. The other woman raised an eyebrow.

"I guess," she said.

"Whenever I go back to the city, I feel like I could take up my old life again in a minute, and this is the place that seems unreal," Claire said. Jocelyn nodded.

"Do you ever miss it there?" she asked. Her tone was neither curious nor conversational, just inquiring, as if she simply wanted to know. Claire wasn't sure if this was sincere or practiced. Possibly it was an editor's technique, a means of seduction for writers, giving them the sense that she wanted them, or the knowledge only they could provide. In this way she could pry them open and get the books out. Claire took a breath and looked out over the lake. A string of starlings lassoed themselves into a circle,

twisted, formed into a symbol that looked, for a second, like infinity.

"Sometimes," she said.

"You grew up here?"

"In the city. This was our summer place."

Jocelyn reached over and touched the water.

"Can you get across the lake in the winter?"

"Usually," Claire said. "If not, well, we have a lot of food stored."

"Must be a long winter."

When Claire didn't answer, Jocelyn went on, "But beautiful." Inwardly Claire rolled her eyes. Of course it was beautiful, but beauty had little to do with it. She had come here not just to be with Carson, but to prove that she could live here. Putting up food, trying to get Bob and the rest of the village not to look at her as "summer people," insulating the cottage, chopping wood, all the other chores—the chores had everything to do with it.

"My parents built the house," she said finally. "We were always working on it. They didn't intend it to be lived in year round. But Carson needed a quiet place to work. And I could work from anywhere."

"Lucky for him," Jocelyn said.

"Not lucky. Just something I was able to do," Claire said. She felt Jocelyn's eyes strong on her. "I was glad to be able to offer it." She was speaking unwillingly but couldn't stop, she felt the words being reeled from her as if the other woman held a line. She felt she had to explain—that Jocelyn had to have the correct impression of her life. She wanted to make something clear, the necessity of it bearing down on her with a pressure like physical weight.

"This isn't a sacrifice for me," she said. "I like living here. I don't just see to Carson's needs. It's not like he's the, you know, reclusive man of genius and I'm the handmaiden."

"The handmaiden?" Jocelyn said. She started to laugh, shaking her head. She clamped her hand over her mouth but giggles issued from between her fingers anyway. "I'm sorry. I'm not making fun of you. I've just—never heard somebody use that word in conversation before."

"Oh, God," Claire said, "you're right." Her tension cracked and she could feel laughter breaking the surface of her skin, bubbling up through it, as if it were water. "I don't know where that came from."

At the store Bob handed her the mail.

"Got a visitor with you, eh?" he said, looking at Jocelyn, who stood at the pay phone frowning at an open engagement book and making notes in it.

"That's summer for you," Claire said, and shrugged. She bought a chicken and some bread, then crossed the street to the vegetable stand. When she came back Jocelyn was still standing next to the phone, no longer talking on it, just standing, her face tilted to the sky. She had removed her glasses and her pale skin seemed doubly naked, exposed to the sun. As if she

recognized Claire's steps, she opened her eyes with a smile already present in them.

"Ready to go, handmaiden?" she said.

"You stop," said Claire.

They took the boat back in silence. It was late afternoon, the sky changing to grey, and the water they passed through was planed in shadow, alternately clear and opaque, plants rising up from the deep into occasional visibility. As she docked the boat, Claire looked up and saw Carson moving past the window of the house, his outline passing dark in the light, the line of his neck, the curve of his shoulders. For one moment she didn't recognize him, didn't feel the familiar jolt of his presence. A blankness swept inside her. When she first met him she memorized those outlines, enraptured by the shape of him, a desire that she could not ignore. Now she stood on the dock and looked at him, and some emotion drained from her in a trickle like grains of sand marking the passage of time. Jocelyn walked in front of her, up the hill, her bare arms the most visible part of her. Claire thought of all the woman's questions and all her own answers. Whatever she said to Jocelyn, she had changed her life because of him, her desire for him, that drastic feeling. It wasn't possible—or was it?—that after making such a change, the feeling could dissipate, could disappear.

It made her wonder if she knew just what that feeling was. From the moment she met Carson she knew that there was a part of him she could never reach, the part devoted to an abstraction she would never touch. And then the move to the cottage, the distance and isolation and cold. She had not been coerced into anything. But what she had chosen was difficult, was chosen for its very difficulty. If she had made a mistake, it was to believe that things struggled for (the cottage, Carson, their life here) had to contain more value than things fallen into with the simple force of the inevitable. A belief engineered by pride.

That night she lay awake, Carson breathing heavily beside her, Jocelyn inaudible in the guest room. She tried to remember as much as she could about his work, her thoughts circulating in a slight, dull frenzy, like the night before an exam. As if she were about to be tested. All she could think of were the examples from the textbook. Dye dissolving into a glass of water; from a dense red drop, a cloud of pink. Picture a truck crashing into a wall, she remembered. This is the world in spontaneous action, growing in disorder. Picture a mirror shattering on the floor.

They were almost finished, Jocelyn and Carson; they were working their way through the final chapter, framing the conclusion. Claire could feel their exhilaration. She made a pot of coffee and joined them at the table with a cup.

"I think that we have an opportunity to extrapolate here," Jocelyn said. "From the level of chemical processes, the ones you've established, to larger ones."

Carson shuffled the papers of the manuscript on the table, then ran his hands over his face up to his forehead. From repetition of this gesture, his eyebrows had risen into unruly tufts, adding to his look of worry.

"I'd like to resist leaping to unwarranted conclusions."

Jocelyn exchanged a smile with Claire.

"I appreciate your caution," she said, "but this isn't a scientific paper. You don't have to worry about peer review. This is the time for you to make wild claims about the potential of your model to explain biology, economic and social phenomena, the very nature of human existence. Say that the second law of thermodynamics has been forever broken. You can be speculative. Be sexy."

"Listen," he said. "You must know by now that physical laws can't be broken. I only uncovered them a little further. They were always there."

"Come on, Carson," Claire urged. "Have a little fun with it."

"Claire."

"What?"

"I'm a scientist, not a comedian," he said in a stricken way. This made the women laugh so hard that Jocelyn wiped a tear from her eye. Carson shook his head.

"Both of you," he said. "Ganging up on me."

She thought how once, in a bar, near the university, one of Carson's colleagues (an older, wheezy, red-faced man), drunk, started to talk about great discoveries in science, the leaps and bounds of thought. This was a popular subject among scientists, Claire had noticed, as if by discussing the personality of genius they could associate themselves more closely with it. This man said that there were two kinds of thinkers, those who led—who thought the new, the fully original—and those who followed in the existing tracks. The searchers and the followers, he called them.

Carson snapped, "It's true that there are two types of thinkers in the world. People stupid enough to believe there are two types of anything. Then everybody else."

"Sore subject, Carson?" said the colleague.

They finished the very last and final edit at seven o'clock. Claire fixed a late dinner. She lit candles and set a bouquet of wildflowers in a jelly jar on the table. Carson lifted his glass of wine and declared a toast.

"As Claire and many undergraduates can attest, I've never been successful in spreading my ideas outside of a narrow group of scientists," he said to Jocelyn. "I know it's been like pulling teeth to get this book out of me, and I

thank you for it. And I'm very glad it's over." Though he smiled, Claire sensed how strongly his relief tugged him: that tomorrow Jocelyn would leave, silence return, and he would retire to his office with three months left of his leave from school. Three months completely devoted to real work. He lapsed into quiet, and a general exhaustion seemed to spread from him across the table. By nine, the candles on the table had burned low and the talk dribbled to nothing.

At midnight, rising to go to the washroom, Claire passed the guest room and saw light through the door; without thinking, she knocked. Jocelyn sat up in bed surrounded by sheets of paper, one pencil stuck in her hair, another in her hand.

"Don't you ever stop working?"

"I couldn't sleep." She waved for Claire to come in. Claire sat down at the foot of the bed, on a folded quilt her mother had made. She traced the line of a square with her thumb. The pieces came from blankets, rags, old clothes that her mother had hauled here to work on, during rainy summer days. She used to collect the scraps through the year, kept them in a box in the kitchen. She called it something to pass the time.

"What are you working on?"

"Paleontology," Jocelyn said. She put down her pencil and stretched, her neck's tendons visible and strong. When she reached up, the sleeves of her T-shirt fell back, showing the very smooth skin at the underside of her arms. "It's a new theory of dinosaur life," she went on. "Dinosaurs are very big sellers."

"I don't know how you do it," Claire said. "Understand all these things."

Jocelyn rubbed her eye.

"Well," she said, and smiled. "They're still dinosaurs, right? They still disappeared."

"I guess that's true."

"And anyway, I don't have to completely understand it."

"Don't you?"

"Not at all. I just get it as clear as I can, and then I move on to the next book."

Claire looked at the manuscript on Jocelyn's lap. Neat pencilled notations lined the margins. Suddenly she was horribly conscious of having interrupted Jocelyn's work. She felt herself flush.

"I'm sorry for intruding on you," she said, getting up and walking to the door. Jocelyn gathered up the sheets of paper and moved them aside.

"No," she said. "You didn't."

She practically missed the bus. In the morning she came out of her room with her bags packed, but at the last moment Claire could not find where she had gone. Claire went out the back door and there she saw her, crouched in a clearing behind the house. She balanced on her ankles,

staring at a trillium, its single white flower nodding in the grass like some reminder of snow.

"Jocelyn, we should leave." Jocelyn stood and turned around. The slope of her shoulders was outlined in gold by the sun as it arched through pine branches. Her blue eyes looked jeweled. In the sharpness of the light Claire could see the fine down of hair on her cheek. A swoon of silence between them.

"I'm sorry to go," she said.

Carson's book appeared the following spring. There was no preface, no page of acknowledgments. The book launched itself into being from the first page, Carson's voice transposed into type: *I begin by stating that we live in a non-equilibrial universe, and that the state of disorder we know as entropy is itself an order of the universe that we have not, up to now, been able to recognize.* Claire could hear him saying it, picture his palms spread wide. In the bookstore she flipped through the pages, ran the tips of her fingers over the glossy jacket. *This new model of entropy could change the way we look at the organization of the universe, the way we think about its future and ours.* She turned to the back flap, touched the black and white picture of his face, leaving prints behind.

Then she put the book back on the shelf and tapped it into place. She walked quickly to the end of the aisle, where, because, Jocelyn was waiting.

Matthew Pitt

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## Venus and Vulcan

The deceased of Pompeii mooned Phil in the kitchen. They made ugly faces and picked their noses with their tongues. They hated the way Phil watched them, like a greasy teenager auditing art classes just to hawk the nudes. Still, they knew Phil's girlfriend Ursula couldn't see them like Phil could, and they used this fact to have their way and have their fun with him. When one woman caught Phil staring, she buttoned her lips and shovelled her breasts skyward. A parched old man flipped Phil the bird while Phil drank down ice water.

It was not easy being the dead. Always stuck striking their final poses (many of them embarrassing and undignified), the assortment of minor tragedies from that dark day in A.D. 79. The old man knelt on the linoleum, cocooned against the fridge, his wrists slung inside a stock. He had died an ugly death. Ursula had described it to Phil five months ago, on their first date. The nude woman's death was grim too: she'd undressed hoping to run more freely through the narrow streets. Her dog fetched the clothes, subservient to the last, and got tangled beneath her feet.

Ursula was putting on earrings and adjusting her volcano. She wondered, why was Phil looking so intently and oddly at the fridge? He probably didn't want to be standing near the scale model, something he associated with Charles Thackeroy. Ursula liked how Phil overvalued her time with Thackeroy; the truth was that her ex-lover had proven to be a flat tire of a man. In bed, on the phone, everywhere but the lab. Their arguments over chaos theory were more exciting than the sex.

"Dry, damn you." She dabbed wood glue with Q-tips to the base of a balsa Forum. Was she late leaving the house, or was Phil just up early for once? When he first moved in, she'd marveled at how early he rose. "I have to make phone calls," he'd tell her, promising breakfast "in ten minutes, on a plate, waiting for you to fork it." He'd just lost his business in some swindle, and was nearly bankrupt. But here he was, treating those disasters as though they were random drug tests, indignities to be endured. It was all massively sexual to Ursula; she liked to ambush him in the morning, whip her legs around his waist, and scribble her tongue through his pubic hair. "How about forking me for ten minutes first? Or are you all business before any pleasure?" It was a great game to play—would she win, pull him into her, or would he push his way out of bed? From morning to morning she

never knew the answer. After a few weeks, she did. Phil began surrendering to her every advance. That lapse in mystery somehow dulled the thrust of the sex, disappointed Ursula.

And worse, after it was over, instead of making coffee or faxing a resumé, Phil would just roll away and fall back asleep. Now months had passed since Phil's business had gone belly-up.

"Baby, get my keys! I'm fucking late!" Ursula fidgeted through the kitchen. Paced a tight circle, slapped at a fly he couldn't see.

"Okay, one sec. I'm looking for a stamp." The drawer was stuffed. What a mess. Thanks to last month's trip to Naples. Like a road trip where the vacationers accumulate wrappers to food they can't remember having eaten, Ursula and Phil had amassed postcards of fountains—dozens of them—from tourist traps. Ursula bought them because they were more personal than hotel stationery. Phil bought them too, though they all looked the same. He was simply thrilled by the devalued lira—every object seemed suddenly obtainable. No scene was safe from Italy's fountain postcard series. Babies christened in fountains. Old men lowering their grandchildren into the fountains. Falcons fucking in fountains, fountains reflecting the Mediterranean sun, its massive sediment of heat.

"Baby, *now?*"

"Sorry. Keys. Where do you think they might be?"

Ursula shook her head and Phil heard a ting. She stooped down; her key ring had constricted itself around her hair. "Does that answer your question?" she asked. Her face was round and smooth like a bean, and had a quality of demonstrative sadness, which most people mistook for a bad mood. He sniffed tobacco on her scalp: today her group would get the lab results back. They were waiting to hear whether a certain kind of skull—one more elliptical than ours—could bear a certain kind of nasal passage. A millimetre error and she was happy hour joke fodder. If she were right, though, she'd be vindicated. Ursula's goal was to locate superior elements of our ancestors' cerebrums—Neanderthal was braver; Homo erectus, a far better diplomat; Cro-Magnon, almost unthinkable visual acuity (compared to them we are iguanas, discerning the world only in patterns of indifferent outline)—and eventually graft that lost genetic fabric back to us, self-improvement from the literal source.

Phil examined the key ring. "How did you get this...never mind."

"That's right, never mind," Ursula laughed. "You don't want to ask."

Pulling the key ring out would be easy. Still, Phil feigned hesitance. He wanted to hold her, face in his hands, hair along his wrists, for one moment more. When he yanked, she yelped. "Gentle, gentle." Soon she was calm again and breathing smooth. Ursula had that ability, like a cat, to spring from Earth at the slightest threat, and then settle back into glazed repose the moment the threat was over. She lifted his chin, put two

fingers to it, and made a kiss noise. "You'll come to the celebration?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Ulterior. I need your scent; someone near me who doesn't smell like a petri dish."

He thrust a postcard into her hands, then sat on the sofa. Time had faded it, and all her furniture—the care she invested in the objects she'd found stood in exact contrast to her negligence toward the objects she'd bought.

The hotel in Naples had been this way too, worn and wormy and falling apart, while the hotel guests spent their days next door, polishing the frozen ruination of Pompeii. Ursula left in the mornings, to lecture or listen to lectures. Phil stayed behind. The sun spoiled in the bedroom without her. The walls ached silence. The air, with no open windows to circulate through, tasted like mold. There was little to explore, or maybe exploring without her held no interest. There was a library in the hotel, but nothing was in English except for very sloppy versions of *Hello* magazine: "Michael Jackson sings 'Bad' on his the last record! Phenomenal hips! Phenomenal waste! Phenomenal dance! Yes, Michael, yes!"

So at some point, Phil took the creaky elevator down to the lobby. A few minor artifacts were on display there. Phil looked at a rectangular box, quite unremarkable, except that it was lit like a celebrity. The concierge approached, in his starched shirt and wrinkled English. "You know what's that?"

"It's a strongbox, isn't it?"

"Indeed you're right. Fiorelli's find." Phil mentioned that he'd read Fiorelli, and asked if they loaned out any of his diaries to hotel guests. "The books are yours, but the price is time. You must wait. Our librarian, she has taken lunch."

Phil asked when she'd return. "This is good a questioning as any. You will wait. Then I will ask, and you will wait. Then I will come, and you will know." What generic symmetry between his life and his vacation. Straying from Ursula's house or the hotel in Naples, but more for sport than purpose; and either way, never straying very far. He still didn't know Ursula's neighbourhood; it took thirty minutes and a touch of panic to get back to her house from the convenience store that was four blocks away.

Ursula would need to leave for work in a moment. He really should let her. Of course he should. But he couldn't—her presence for him was like a dream one tries, upon waking, not to remember, but extend and proceed into the waking hour. She angled the postcard as if calculating density. "What am I looking at?"

"It's for Dagger." Phil's nephew had just returned from camp; Phil wanted to send a hero's welcome. Dagger had called Phil every Friday this summer, leaving gleefully rambling phone messages when Phil was in Naples.

The calls were nourishing, to hear his nephew describe conquering the immutable fears of youth: getting a flu shot without flinching, swimming in the deep end, and *oh yeah, also I learned how to avoid the girl with ugly teeth who tried to kiss me*. Why were they ugly teeth? *Because they always pointed my way*.

All Phil had learned at *his* summer camp was how to ignore backaches. He'd sprouted half a foot the winter before. Sleeping, what a bitch it was. The short sheets. The spiny mattress, lumps as resistant as the dining hall mashed potatoes.

Ursula waved the postcard. "He should take Vitamin E next summer. It'll ward off the bugs." With her, Phil slept with his ankles hung over the end, like a corpse in a movie. She slept in an arc, subtly bent at the knees, elbows square to hands, forming a second pillow. Her face favoured the window. "He'll love this. I have to run."

"No, that's not it. I wrote too much; I've got no room left to put the stamp."

"Sure you do; just cover some of the picture with some of the stamp. Fold the stamp in half. See, problem solved." She reached into her wallet. "Now what can I solve for *you*?"

"Nothing."

"Make me feel useful." She handed him a fifty, which he refused. The chorus giggled behind Ursula, light and wavy laughter, like soap bubbles. Phil turned and bumped into the old man. Phil wanted some water, but a younger man, adorned with a scowl and a crisp Caesar cut, blocked his path to the sink.

"I don't need fifty." She pulled out another bill. "I don't need twenty."

"You need something." Ursula thrust the twenty into Phil's palm. "Take this."

Phil heard the chorus behind him. "Take it take it take it," they urged. As their voices bled into one overarching hiss, the "Take it, take it" started sounding like "Ticket, ticket," and then simply, "Tick tick tick tick tick tick." Phil slid the bill across the counter as though positioning an area rug.

"Maybe you could pick up some dinner? In case there's no celebration tonight?"

"Of course there's going to be a celebration, Urs."

"*If* there's not, I'm saying. If not." Tape-recorded bells chimed from outside. "When will that fucking guy learn? No one buys ice cream at eight a.m."

"Business is brisk, actually." Fine, Phil thought, I'll take your twenty. He could spend it on good resumé paper and cook something for her instead. That was probably what Ursula would expect, anyway. No. He'd taken too much from her as it was. "Is pizza okay?"

"Okay, pizza." Ursula kissed goodbye. Waved at the neighbour mothers

buying fruit-pops for their kids. "No one will ever make me one of those," she'd once said. "One of those what?" Phil hoped she hadn't ruled out motherhood. "A woman with a life bordered by walls. Doors. And windows, windows everywhere. Looks out the window while her kids get on the bus. Out the car window while she carools other kids to soccer practices. Then the house window again, waiting for her husband to come home. A window watcher."

"So say something. I thought you were close."

"Sure. But who am I to tell her how fucked up her life is?"

Phil walked to the kitchen; the dead stared back at him, finally letting him pass through their gauntlet of airy flesh and resistance. They appeared off-white to Phil, with yellowish tint, sickly rather than ghostly, taut (even the chubby ones), and their heels hovered two inches above the ground. To Ursula's eyes, of course, they didn't appear at all. They were his field of vision, and his alone.

For a while they kept silent. But once Phil poured himself some juice, they started in. *You won't actually go to this celebration? Without being able to speak intelligently about her job? Without a job of your own? This is my lover Phil, the man with the Caesar cut mocked, batting his eyes and affect-ing phony pride, he's unemployed and an imbecile. Isn't he just dreamy?*

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Phil sat on the arm of a chesterfield; the cushions were covered with books. He skimmed through the intro to one. Hmmm. This he could follow. Maybe. With the others, even the acknowledgement pages left him guessing. Ursula was a genius. It was a fact, both grim and grand, for him to sift through. Phil was no genius and knew it. Admitting it didn't hurt, it had ceased hurting years ago. He knew what he wasn't—smart or lucky—and what he was: a crook. A one-time crook. His criminal career had consisted of one great heist, Ursula; and how he'd stolen her he couldn't say.

That first dinner should have clued him in to what she was. The feast to his famine. They ate at Rosy's, famous for mixes of Arabic and Tex-Mex. She was working on two projects. He cringed through her summary of "the real one," nodding and kneading a roll in his hand as she flew over his head with talk of craniums and carbon dating. The project he understood was "just a favour" she was doing for her old lover Thackeroy (a cultural anthropologist). She'd built a scale model of Pompeii, based on newly found archives, plans and blueprints for ten buildings which would never be built.

She showed Phil her toys on the third date. "What can I say? My brothers stole my action figures when we were kids. It's payback time." She was erecting what would have been the town commons. Her talents were manifold: the clumsy fiberglass did look like pumice now. The distressed wood, like bronze. He'd never seen someone work like her. She was not a shadow

to her job. When Phil worked he felt dislocated from himself, as though he were only some corporate charter made flesh. But Ursula had control. She took science and bent it, as Phil bent the window-blind each morning, to reveal an apartment of sunlight.

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Ursula didn't always make sense, but her words seemed to matter, more than the garrulous babble of most scientists. The worst was Thackeroy. His stories were zoos of esoterica. He was a turkey at parties, but adored in other contexts; by Ursula too, still, Phil suspected. Thackeroy had long ago developed blindness to any setbacks to his confidence. In their first encounter, Phil had seen that in Thackeroy, and this: his was an arrogance powerful and willful enough to substitute for charm.

This was when Phil started hiding in the basement.

In a utility closet stocked with allergens and paper. Paper in high stacks, like majestic columns of bone, the femurs of gods. Phil couldn't say when he would go to the basement. *He* didn't know. Something just stung beneath skin. Sometimes after a fight he'd provoked about money. When he was unhappy he wanted to make her unhappy too. But she couldn't brush him off. Ursula wasn't used to criticism; the little that came her way always triggered some wreckage. Her emotions were too kinetic—like a heart-beat through a stethoscope, they pounded with melodrama. At some point in these arguments, he realized that, somehow, he was hurting, was breaking her. The retreats came at times like these.

"Are you going to drink that?" The sweaty older man was eyeing Phil's cranberry vodka. For how long? Time had few fences these days, only two: Ursula's morning departure, and night arrival. He knew she'd called it a day when she entered the bedroom and untethered her belt. One long motion, sexy, deliberate, like lips brushing across a neck. Then he knew it was safe to gather her.

"Hey, I'm dying over here. Can I get a drink or what?" As his answer, Phil sipped down a last dash of alcohol, draining the rest slowly down the sink.

"Cocksucker." Phil turned away and opened a door. "Oh sure," the old man said, "can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen!" This was true. In the basement, Phil had learned, he could get away from the dead. Ursula kept a stereo in the basement and, when he turned the music up loud enough, Phil could make the dead soft, feint, he could drown all they had to say.

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"Good morning, Medi-cINC. How may I direct your call?"

"I'd like to participate in a study." Phil cleared his throat. He'd found a stash of ambition in the juice and vodka, TV and dopamine, something to spur him from the fog he could not shake on afternoons like these, when he'd slept two or three hours too long. Some days he found it hard to emerge from dreams of Pompeii. He dreamt about the crush of flesh, the

automatic society of panic ensuing. In his dreams the dogs died first, trampled to the limestone. Then the lapilli and pelting ash. There they were, these unsettling things, a thick butter of chaotic violence.

"Certainly. Are you a healthy, non-smoking male?"

"Say again? My respirator cut you off." Phil got a laugh. This could be gold. Anyone clocking under nine an hour didn't laugh at jokes. Phil bet this guy made fifteen.

"Great. And you've had Strep? And were treated with penicillin?"

"Well, here's where it's tricky. It was an antibiotic. Basically penicillin."

"Basically penicillin." The voice flattened. Phil heard a candy wrapper rip; he reset the receptionist's wage at twelve dollars. "Then we can 'basically' pay you. This isn't an amoxicillin study. Please read the fine print *before* calling next time."

Ten dollars.

Damn. Why was this so hard? Phil had been calling this place for weeks, impatiently trying to make himself a patient. Medi-cINC was just down the road. Semi-skilled technicians doping their guinea pigs with drugs not quite ingratiated to FDA constraints. Participants were held for up to two weeks, pro rated per hour for any study they fit.

The problem was Phil didn't fit, exactly, any study. This was a surreal failure: trying to match his maladies to their cures, hoping to run across something wrong with him they would need.

*Got Acne?*  
*Experiencing Balding In Places Other Than The Head?*  
*YOU MAY QUALIFY FOR \$\$\$!*  
*Do You Suffer From Wooden Bladder?*

"What's wooden bladder?"

"If you don't know you don't have it. Please call back if—"

"Wait. Please, what else is there?"

The receptionist ruffled through pages, about to repeat a list for the fiftieth time today; he was doing this to make money for medical school, probably. At night he waited tables. His whole life was about memorizing the specials. "We currently have a wide range of studies. Tell us about yourself. What do you think is wrong with you?"

"I have a lazy eye."

The receptionist sighed. "You're too healthy. You can't help us."

"But I need this," Phil said. How hard the buried in Pompeii had clutched their children, their gold, their prized possessions! Had they even been running away at all? Was it possible they only wanted the gods to know what they wanted with them in the afterlife? Wanted their gravediggers of the future to see what they had loved?

*Why didn't you hold onto what you had? Those were your things! You earned them!* It was true; he felt weaker for pawning his watch for quick cash. *And you weakened in her eyes, too.* Maybe. No. Yes. Maybe. Pawned all his things except his suits. *And where's that money now? Under the mattress? In a savings account? It's dried up, gone.* Their voices coiled and sprang. He wanted Ursula to see him digging out of the hole, but when he'd pawned everything, he felt only a sensation he was adding more weight to the spade.

*Pull yourself together, jackass!* Phil pulled himself together. "I'm sorry," he said to the receptionist. "It's only I was—in a recent accident. And I lost much of what I owned."

"Look. I know. It's tough. I'm trying to finance a deep-sea dive myself."

"Yeah," said Phil, "I kind of sensed that about you."

"Listen, how old are you?"

"Now? Thirty."

"Okay, okay. Please hold." Hold! Hold had to be a good thing. Maybe this wandering science was exact after all. Maybe a conversion chart existed that would spit out income options. Then Phil could afford an incline to his life. He could move out—not that he wanted to, but it would signal to Ursula, I'm on my feet again. He'd ruin his asshole business partner. Ruin him back. Take him to court. Tit for tat, eye for eye. Unclean images danced for Phil; his bastard partner shaking before a jury of peers. Punitive damages. Him not being able to get it up for his wife. Him staring at a gun in a glass case. Or hung, neck frozen inside a loop of leather. Vivid and malicious and relaxing images.

Only in the basement did Phil feel on the mend. Just a barrage of must and mildew at first, it had come to mean something else, a stage to view his dreams and despair with acuity. Its coarse furnishings, the confidential congress of dark sounds, spits of heat from the colicky furnace—all a comfort. Archipelagos of dust on the shelves that changed colour when he stirred them. Phil was even used to the smell of cat piss. He didn't mind it now, found it almost aromatic. Did formaldehyde smell this way to Ursula? In revolt, do we create romance from the suffering we cannot rid ourselves of? Would he someday learn to appreciate, or at least dismiss, last year's bankruptcy? Right now his anger and anxiety seemed fraught with an endlessness that left his breath shallow.

The receptionist clicked back over. "Call back in five years."

"Five what?"

"Prostate." Phil heard a book shut. This chase was over. "It may be on the blink by then. Best advice I can give you. Check regularly." What do I look for? "You'll know when you feel it. Lumps, for instance, are good. Call us first thing if you feel lumps."

He hung up, needing to move, remaining in his seat. His bladder wasn't

wooden. His eye not lazy enough. Everything about him was really quite fine, and he told himself this as he stared through the bedroom window.

This couldn't be a call he'd make in five years. He couldn't imagine his decline lasting this long. Vesuvius had taken mere minutes to erupt. He would call again later today, after a nap. Try, try. Try again.

"Why so glum, champ? Another stamp crisis?" The dead smirked as Phil crossed into the kitchen. He was, he knew, more susceptible to attack than most. Phil recalled the second date. The meal he'd cooked for Ursula had burned badly. Thinking quickly, he ordered Chinese from a restaurant that made food lame and limp enough to pass as Phil-iginals. With nothing to do but wait for the deliverer, he boned up on Pompeii. He meant to study carbon dating, but got caught up in the myths. Vulcan, despite his ability to create destruction, was a minor God. Scorned and rebuked by the others. Vulcan was comic relief for the deities, the 98-lb weakling of the cosmos.

And yet he was sated. In love with, and loved by, Venus. Who was many things, none of them minor. Venus was protection. On her back rode Pompeii's prosperity. Her divinity edified the people, allayed their paranoia over the corporal fragility of their home. There were plans to rename the town *Pompeii Veneris*. And who do you love, Venus? Somehow, she doted on Vulcan. Devoted herself, despite the imbalance of power, for him.

"Maybe your girl can help...it is tough remembering which side to lick, and which to leave alone." The old man crumpled a soda can with surprising force. Was that a real can? How had he done that? "I meant to ask, by the way," he continued, "did she *choose* you for her community-service, or were you court-appointed?"

Bottle the pressure; blot it. She was enough to sate him. She had to be. Just as Vulcan endured the browbeating, endured even his own ugliness and belittlement until a moment of explosive reckoning, so would he.

Phil closed the bedroom door and removed his clothes. Her belt from yesterday hung from the headboard, the strips of leather entwined like a caduceus. This belt, he had removed. This has been them. Hearts folded over one another. Skin steamed close, kisses and moans. The rage and chatter muted, for a moment, into even harmony. Like in those moments in Italy, when she would escape from the conference and the plenary sessions, to be with him—with him!—on the hotel mezzanine. They split Pellegrino, scanned the town over. The heat was like a tide finally cresting; they imagined the fountains below worked, and that their waterworks had risen up, to wash and cool both their bodies, from the soured skies, the quarrelling earth. And not a trace of dissonance. Venus and Vulcan.

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More bad dreams. In these Phil saw the arrogant faith that precipitated Pompeii's collapse. After an earthquake in 63 A.D., the city was left to lick its wounds. They had done wrong by the gods. Efforts were installed to

rebuild the weak union. To plead for the dormancy of Vesuvius, to please Venus. Years followed without incident, though, and a proud strut resumed in the city. The town stood rebuilt. Christ had fallen, his shadow yet to complicate Mesopotamia.

One man, Ursula said, had been uncovered in the stocks beneath the Basilica. An older man, punished for releasing horses under his charge. The man claimed his crime had been pursued "with solemnity and forethought. The beasts possess more sense than we. Of late they seem to beg to leave Pompeii, and cannot. We might do so, but refuse."

Positing such a dread future in the midst of tranquil times was tantamount to treason. Still, judges planned to commute his sentence. They waited too long.

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Ursula's call woke him early in the evening: "You sitting or standing?" She spoke in blurts he strained to hear. Too many others talking. Was the talking coming from her end, or his? Background rustling, was the line about to go dead? And then a gunshot? Only more hollow, like the tube that travelled through the underground lungs of a drive-through bank.

"What's that sound?" Phil asked.

"I don't know what...oh. That! Cork. Popping cork."

"Where are you? Are you okay?" His concern was out of control, unsightly. She believed in him beyond what he afforded himself. How stupid and lofty to believe devotion for another could ultimately balance the self.

"No, I'm not. You're not okay, I'm not okay. But what we are is rich. I'm rich, you're rich, everybody's rich, rich!" The results had come back. Her project had been funded. Phil suddenly felt sick with hunger. A queasiness not entirely separate from last year, when he'd stood on the subway platform, toes over the yellow line, to feel the train sounds bang through his stomach. His partnership had just dissolved. One hand held a summons, the other, a framed degree.

"So this is the big one!" Ursula shouted tentatively. "This changes our lives! You, me, everyone." He'd have believed this once, but not now: there'd be no ornamental car, no trophy condo, no shameless tourist's cruise between decrepit port cities.

The money wouldn't alter Ursula, it never had. This was a woman who still fused bright-coloured balls out of the apple slices of soap from showers past. We all carry peculiar perceptions of how to maintain our economies. With Phil it was a tipping scam. If he ate at a coffee shop where gratuity was just another covert tax, when the cashier turned, Phil would slam pennies into the tip jar so they'd sound like quarters. Though he wondered if the nickel-and-dimed employees weren't attuned to such subtle tricks with noise and echo. *He* was, since the disaster; the sound of money had grown louder.

"Buona fortuna! Adesso si dà al bel tempo. Vale a dire, beve fino a essa

fonderà.”

“Who is that?” Phil asked.

“Excuse me, baby.” Ursula cupped the phone’s low end. “È un vero vulcano di cattveria! Ciao bella!” Beautiful; Thackeroy. Trying to steal her back in Italian now. His ambition wasn’t only overt, it was *bilingual*.

Phil cut in to tell her ‘congratulations’, and that he thought something might be burning. “I’ll let you go,” Ursula said. “I think your line’s going dead, anyway.”

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Phil made for the basement. He flipped a switch; brightness beat into his eyes, forcing them shut a moment. How could light, so crucial to survival, overload us so easily sometimes, tear the eyes when we’ve been deprived of it for too long? Perhaps Ursula could study *those* evolutions, but they’d have to wait. She’d become a movement. She would go tonight to a party to be introduced to and mugged by anyone of importance in the science community, and she would do it all with her date in a clinic. Medi-cINC had phoned back, late that afternoon, five till five: they needed him. Phil was to be a key participant in a no-doubt vital study on cold sores.

*But it’s work, it’s money, it’s good fortune. If you respect good fortune, you take it. When you expect it, you give it away.*

You should never have gone to Naples. Given away all that time. What did you accomplish there, or learn about yourself? Other than that you can play the dormant sidekick?

Music. Drown-out music. Phil lowered his finger down the rack of CDs like a priest beginning to trace a cross. He wanted it bright and loud. Wanted music hard to keep from dancing to, music so loud it would blow the chorus out of his head. He chose mambo, and lay on the concrete, back on cool floor, feet in air. He’d slept this way many nights in summer camp, after losing battles with the bed.

He heard the fist of brass, the high-pitched drum land on the second beat, like a miner’s hammer ticking at a mountain range, greedy but patient for treasure, or the instruments Ursula used to break dirt from skulls without doing damage.

Ursula! How in Hell had the grant come through? Even she’d admitted her funding proposal was porous. She’d been working on this for years—“my enchilada,” she called it—a study to create a mock-up of the perfect simian cranium. But secretly she thought it was a dead end, that its mystery would outrun her perseverance.

“What I’m after is selective, human-sponsored, manipulated atavism. Nothing less.” Her fork stroked over couscous. “Pass the salt.”

“Salt for what?”

“The coleslaw.” She looked at the food as though it were another table’s order. “Anyway. It’s work I’m proud of. Of course, it spits in the face of the

organic evolution cadre..." Um, Ursula. "But that's fine, I'm a good spitter." Ursula..."Yeah, Phil?"

"My 'D' in Biology was practically bought. My parents had to get a mortgage."

"Sorry." Her bottom lip bent, sorrowful and pouty in the wisdom and passion she couldn't share. "I'll stop."

"Don't stop, just break it down. Way down. Not chunks. Not bits. Splinters."

"I'm not a doomsday woman, like some of them." She'd explained Thackeroy. A tranquilizer with a pulse, she'd called him; but Phil could tell her heart was much more forgiving than she let on. She was getting over him still. Who could claim otherwise? It's as though the lovers we leave and friends we lose do not drift and drift until gone from sight, but rather lie down beneath us, waiting to trip our path.

He watched her eat and it pleased him: she ate her salted coleslaw with a spoon, couscous with a fork. A woman intimate with the most sophisticated tools still lacked a handle on basic dinnerware.

"I believe the human form is moving toward perfection. But you know how some medicines cause problems as debilitating as what they cure? Our enlightenment climbs at that same jagged pace."

"We de-evolve?"

Ursula nodded, spoon in mouth. She stirred sugar into her teacup with a middle finger. Phil watched a melted candle coagulate, its journey from solid to liquid back to solid complete. "Sounds right," he said, "My ex-business partner fits that. He's scheduled to revert into protoplasm next week."

"Ex, huh? So you've moved on?"

"I've, yes. That."

"Bad mix?"

"Oh, I'll tell you stories..." But he never did. The fact of Phil's poverty became clear to Ursula in the weeks ahead. But not the how. When pressed, Phil revealed only generic samples of the fallout.

Phil removed from the shelves a box, six inches deep and a foot wide and long. It had been hand-painted with acrylics by an old lover; there were scrapes in the paint, unliving scars where he'd sliced her artwork in the nights following the break-up.

Phil stammered through the old love letters as the furnace rumbled; these were other partnerships he'd never imagined would end. But here was evidence they had, from first insults to flared endings. He wished he didn't have to keep these letters. But he did. He needed them for now. There were so many stubs to look through. The refrain that kept surfacing as the mambo played and Phil read through it was surrender. "Giving up for you is a form of exercise," one lover wrote. "Once you knew you had me, you started looking for ways to fritter me away."

In Pompeii, the effect of the earthquake that startled the town into subservience had in time faded. The priests stopped imploring the gods for providence, and began to expect it. A few years later, Vesuvius. The priests were left to their failed meteorology, their inaccurate forecasting of the mood of the gods. Some scrambled for a quick sacrifice, stalling for time. Others chose suicide, a vote of flesh. What if that were the root of all tragedy? When we decide to stop begging for grace?

Ursula was good at being jivey with her work. One night, they viewed an odd sociology video about a group of cannibals in Holland who were trying to break off into an organized sect. They wanted to go legit. They would design currency, draft a charter, apply to credit unions. "How would you write them if you wanted their business?" Ursula wondered. They wrote a fake letter from such a potential company: the salutation read, "To 'Eats His Own'". Something about her made a mess of his stoic depression. It was heroism, somehow, to admit vulnerability in her presence. To believe it belonged in the world.

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Much later that night, hours after the celebration had ended without him, Phil walked into the bedroom. He pressed his pants to his skin so the jangling keys wouldn't wake Ursula. She kicked at the sheets; a glow of drool rested near her, a kidney-shaped pool below the chin. Her face twitched and winced. It would be a difficult hangover.

He clung to the dress she'd worn. One of his favourites: steeple-backed straps, a thick hem, coloured a moody shade of plum. He could still smell the perfume, the perspiration, the cigarettes she'd smoked nonchalantly. The sex of her indented the air. She'd danced in this dress, obliged boys she'd schooled with as a doctoral candidate, who'd been chasing her for years and who she didn't mind throwing bones to. Hugged countless times through this fabric. Phil imagined Thackeroy draping her in shameless conceit. Begging kisses after toasts.

And she drank in this dress. When did it start? When she realized Phil wasn't coming, when the highway fell quiet; that's when she began seeking the waiters out, begging doubles. She'd hit herself hard in the last hour. Phil guessed who took her home, and whether she'd considered keeping her seat belt on. There was not much spite in her. But there was a trace, a tremor.

"I'm so proud of you." As though she were a child sleeping through church service, unimpressed with the testimonials from former lost souls, she did not stir. "I'm done downstairs. I need to be by you."

Ursula scooted to one side. Dragged the sheet for Phil to slip under. In sleep, forgiveness comes with an ease and grace not matched in the working light of life. In daytime there is pride to contend with, crevices of doubt, wariness. At night there seems to be only gesture. Lock the door or give up

half the bed. Request a conditional pardon, or wait out your time in the basement.

Which had he done tonight? He'd gotten through the cold sore study none the worse for wear, no biopsies, no sluggish aftershock from drugs, no damage. The desk clerk had handed Phil his remittance slip for three hundred dollars with a smile. She liked Phil; they'd been comrades-in-unattractive-jobs. She'd told him how to fake an anxiety attack so the attendants would be forced to roll a TV into his room. But she had gazed at Phil so oddly afterwards, when he explained Ursula, and the celebration he'd skipped to come to Medi-cINC.

He didn't need the map to return. Every post and beam other than those to Ursula's house seemed to sink back into the earth. With each step, though, he found himself weakening. What had the desk clerk said to him? *Are you sure here is where you should have been tonight?* He asked her what she meant, did she think he'd made a bad decision? But her face only tightened calmly, like a mannequin's, as the dot matrix printer whirred behind her, printing up the proof that he had earned his check.

Phil walked on, drained by silence. He wanted the chorus to show. If they would only speak, even to lampoon him...Phil had never been out this late, alone: never before known a sky so free of stars and nature's crowded restlessness. The palms didn't sway; weeping willows hung still. Eyelashes of terra cotta grass never batted. The ghostly calm hiss of the streetcleaner's brushes was absent. Had he been wrong to stand her up? *Who said recovery wasn't grim? Who said that in the hard process of relocating what you've lost, you won't lose even more in the wake?* No voices were around to mock him or approve, to galvanize him one way or another. As the streets continued, Phil continued with them, towards Ursula's home.

This too was alien terra. He pulled the sheets up over his chest, ankles dangling over the end: this bed which was his to lose. He had never known such an invitation, an invitation for nearness like this. He'd had to tap dance into women's lives, and labour to remain. But Ursula hadn't needed a prompt; it was and continued to be her offering. He kissed her open mouth; it was filled with the chalky mosh of nicotine and gin.

"Why tailor's chalk?" Phil had asked her once. She was working another long Sunday in the lab, making her marks, her scrawl's wide swoon like unwound paper clips. He was there to pull her away to a picnic.

"What else would I use?"

"There must be something. Black pencil? Electric tape?" After all, these were measurements that mustn't be misread, crucial millimetres. Science begged perfection of its practitioners; yet she used chalk that barely showed up against the white bone.

"I imagine where the marks should be on my drive over. And they're where I imagine." He walked over to Ursula's desk and felt the skulls of her

paradise men, their hybrid intellects etched together, their meagre gifts assembled on one head. To think, he thought, we might yet prove perfectible. Nimble enough to outrun our mediocrity. But she could see this? Faint etchings against the enamel and jaw hinges? Chicken scratch examining an occipital bone from a long-obsolete ancestor, which might protect us in a way ours now failed to?

He wished Ursula could measure him with such ease. Wished it for himself. This mirror of love—reciprocity—frightened him. He guided his hands along the curve of her skull. He wanted her eyes. Her faith. What she owned was difficult to sleep beside. It was rattling thunder on a window. A presence so intense it must be near. But no; gaze through the window long enough and you knew. That heat, that sound, that strength, was all so faraway.

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## Assorted Spaces Between

Simple movements,

    yet some days  
even gesture turns unreliable.

Lifting cigarette to mouth  
or the unnoticed habit of eyelid.

Elbow a loon stretching to find air.

Dentists who pull out their own teeth  
with their hands.

    Tonight  
there is a division  
between the epistemology of sight  
and the acts of my hands

a silence between the muscles of my back  
that like roots find their way  
to the movement of  
even this writing  
    A wire bridge over water

Constantly aware of this distance

Someone has taken the knife you gave me  
and sawed through this cable.

# "About the spiders"

1

That summer you stopped for a swim  
and stayed for a few days  
in the green boathouse,

bringing a box of food  
bottle of bourbon soft curl  
of hip towards stomach an open hand  
over my mouth.

Waking me that afternoon to swim  
out into cool Okanagan  
past bobbing plastic bottles and down  
breathless to touch the red tongue of radiator  
anchoring the neighbour's boat,

not knowing I'd given up bourbon for vodka.

Coffee at night  
steaming on the green Coleman.

2

Calf tensed stretching  
holding your purple Bic lighter  
and burning white cotton egg-sacks  
from the corners of this room,

burst out of shadow like new stars.

3

Red canoe tied to the rotten pier,  
arms sore after paddling from Ellison park.  
Numb with rhythm

like breathing.

Touching your back now,

you are on the plastic lawn chair.  
I am spreading oil onto skin

glinting like trout warm

spreading this mirror into you.

4

Soon you would break apart  
and fall thread like  
into grey sand.

Water streaming into loose grass  
like karst, hidden passages  
beneath my scratched feet.

Turning back to look at me  
skin of your breasts embroidered  
woven designs from the chair.

Twist into this  
hook

Pushing into your mouth a kicking insect,  
tongue taking your palimpsest body and  
finding new tastes.

5

Throwing a brick into the fire pit.  
Shoulder lit from sparks  
crawling out into night  
towards the lake,

sweat along the base of spine and  
a tongue tasting this or

webbing you with fingers.

You won't sleep *in there*  
all those tiny blacknesses  
out for revenge  
yet

you trust these hands  
finding clarity and pushing into you devouring.

6

Waking to waves  
twitching like fish on the beach,

bits of us sticky as blood,

your spit in my beard sand on my  
lips *weak broken sick* blue above us  
a new ceiling to be charted.

Moving in hangover,  
intricately.

*Kim Ki-Rim*

*translated from the Korean by Shannon Hudgens*

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## The Butterfly and the Sea

Since no one has let her in on the water's depth  
the white butterfly feels no fear at all for the sea.

Believing it a blue radish patch she dips low,  
salting the young wings in the break  
and like a princess, exhausted, returns.

Flowers on a March sea don't blossom;  
in the butterfly's back, a blue shiver of moon.

*Hafez*

*translated from the 14th Century Persian by Russell Thornton*

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## The Dark Night of the Lover

Wine-bearer, circulate and offer the cup,  
for love seemed easy at first, but now it is difficult.

Because of the smell of the musk-pod the wind will release at last  
from that lock,  
and because of each musk-fragrant wave of her hair, what blood  
has spilt in men's hearts.

In the halting-place of the Beloved, what security of pleasure can I have,  
when every instant  
the caravan bells' anguished cry informs me: Lift up your burden; Depart.

Colour your prayer-mat with wine if the magian tells you to,  
for that traveller is not without knowledge of the way and manner  
of the stages of love.

The dark night! The fear of the wave! The terror of the whirlpool!  
What can the light-burdened on the shore know of our state?

Because of my self-interest, all my actions have, in the end, drawn me  
into infamy.  
How long will the secret they speak of in the gatherings remain secret?

\*

If you long for the Beloved's presence, do not be absent from the Beloved,  
Hafez;  
when you meet the one you desire, say farewell to the world, abandon  
everything.

که عشق آسان نمود اول ولی افتاد مشکلها	ایا ایته الساقی آورگانشا و ناو لها
ز تاب جعد شکنیش چه چون افتاد در لها	بوی نافه گاتر صبا زان طره بچشاید
جرس فریاد میدارد که بر بندید محلهها	مراد منزل جانان چه امن عیش چون هر دم
که ساکت نجبر نبود ز راه و رسم منزلها	بی تجاوه رنگین کن گرت پیر معان گوید
کجا داند حال ما سببکاران ساحلهها	شب تاریکت بیم موج و گردابی چنین بلبل
نمان کی ماند آن رازی کز سازند محلهها	بمه کارم ز خود کامی بید نامی کشید آخر

حضور می گریه می خواهی از و خایب مشو حافظ

متی مطلق من تهوی فرح الدنیا و آهلهها

Lee Ann Mortensen

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## On Stage

I, Teresa, woman of muscle, am here on stage in a Phoenix auditorium, seeing only lights and knowing there are people down there watching me, my body tan in this spiritually white bikini. Or at least that is what Linda, my trainer, says about white, that it is powerful and can help me win. I flare my lats like Linda has shown me, make my veins large for the audience, and they moan, wanting to touch me, to see if I am real. I pull my arms above my head to give everyone a good look. I let them see my indented triceps full of lines and sinew. The soundman plays Cuban music that goes off on its own, and I stand still and sweat, flexing my quads until they shake and the people I can't see below me are clapping and whistling. Pastified judges are in front pointing at my muscular flaws, my asymmetrical pectorals and unaligned left gastrocs. I dance my body around for them, twisting in the ways Linda taught me to twist. I try to look for her out there, sitting, perhaps, with my staring, flirting boss and his blonde, staring children.

I know they all want to be like me, a woman made of muscle.

When the song ends, I run off stage to see if there are notes in my bag, notes from Linda saying she still wants to train me, still wants to live with me even though I am less holy, less celibate, less Navajo than she is. But when I open my bag, there are only messages from Judge # 4, the one whose back is bent, the one who is always trying to take me out for drinks and ice cream and kissing after I win things with my body.

"Your abdominals. They are so ooooooh," he says when he inspects my bikini before every show. This is the kind of winking man who makes me want to throw things as he touches me, as he looks for evidence of cheating or excess. His pinches and remarks remind me of the barrio boy who came at me once, angry and touching, thinking I owed him something. Judge #4 sometimes puts his hand on my gluteals that same way, as if I were the kind of girl who likes to put out. He does not think I could break his arm with a breath. I like to think I could do this, just look at someone and do violence. I like to think I could scare.

Sometimes, after all the judges have gone away, after they have felt and pinched at me and I have stood there taking it, I like to sit backstage and throw things. I pick up another body builder's cold cream jar and throw it against the wall to watch it explode. All that mess gives me a power I never feel at home with Linda. Five years ago, she wanted me to be like one big

muscle because that was what she was, sinew and body and years of starvation. Now she has hit her cultural mid-life crisis. When she stopped kissing me her body became a withered stick. Not long after she stopped looking at me. She said she knew what I was thinking, that I was too in love with the physical. She told me this was the beginning of death.

"Celibacy is the only way toward perfection," she told me a few months ago. She had already started to lose her muscles, but the idea of celibacy was, at the time, a surprise, and all I could do was look at her, my hand on her blonde thigh, my trainer, my lover, gone mad.

"Sex is only for the here and now," she said. "I have seen what is important. I have a vision."

Linda likes to think she is prophetic. Perhaps she is. Her lips are not what they once were. Her hip bones protrude. Her eyes go big at slight noises. It's all for her own good, she tells me, looking sad and celestial, looking much too small for a big woman. This is why I think of sex all day and dream of it at night.

Linda once got the comments I get now. "You could be a barbell model," Judge #4 told me backstage one night after checking for illegal bodily extras. He looked at my shoulders and my neck and breasts for too long, like he owned them. Then he gave me his card, a small barbell engraved in the centre.

"I run an agency," he said. "Famous all over the valley."

"Lovely," I said, and kissed the card, leaving my lip stains there, knowing he was the kind of man who would want to kiss these stains of mine late at night when his wife was snoring beside him.

I have collected and kissed many cards by now, mostly from lawyers and retired police officers who want to stare without being slapped, who think that I am here for them. Sometimes though, when I am lucky, I find notes in my bag from other kinds of men, visitors, replacements, and uninitiated fans like sheep ranchers and prickly pear farmers who think they like big women.

"I enjoy it most when you flex your calves," said a new judge once after a difficult competition. The large sign with a #3 on it still hung around his neck as he talked to me, as he stared. He was a Latino in a straw cowboy hat, looking anything but judge-like, looking so young, so smiley. I scraped oil off my body and watched him closely to see if his eyes or his mouth were anything like the barrio boy's. But this one did not look like the type who would follow a woman, or shove her, or yell at her in an old city gym about fucking and gringa bitches. The heat would not get to this man that way. He was more of a *ranchero* type, like the ones who live by South Phoenix *mercados* and grow grapefruit. He was soft. His eyes were not angry at the world. He spoke to me in an accent I have always wanted to speak in.

"Are you a Latina?" he asked. My hair is dark, and I could tell it made

him want to discuss the old neighbourhood.

"No," I told him. "My father stopped being Mexican a long time ago. He's a Mormon now."

A small mustache covered the smooth youth of this judge's skin, and I almost touched his face right there, but I had oil on my hand. Linda would have looked at him and laughed at his tiny, slim body.

"I know what good muscles look like," he said. I could tell he was only guessing at what symmetry and cuts meant, only hoping to give the right scores. "I'm filling in for the judge from Peoria," he said, biting his mustache. The other competitors in the room were watching him as he pulled on the dark hair under his hat, blushing and shy.

"You're so smooth," I told him. "You shouldn't have a mustache."

"I look like a baby without it," he said.

He asked me to flex my biceps for him, and I did.

"You're so cheap," said one of the other women as we walked out of the changing room. They have always been jealous of me. They only wish the judges would fall in love with them.

That night the ranchero let me shave the mustache off him, me behind his back putting on the cream, washing off the razor after every pass, trying not to make cuts or burns. The cream came off in neat rectangles as he told me about Margarita, and Xotchil, and Jimena, his tall sisters who grew cattle in Nuevo Leon. I watched his talking mouth in the mirror and nodded and laughed at his stories about cows and wind storms. While he talked, I noticed that the smooth, hairless skin on his back could be anyone's skin, Linda's after a day in the sun, or the barrio boy's. I kissed his skin there, and it was sweet at first, but then I began to feel my throat collapsing dry, filling with the bile of these people who think they can own me.

For a moment, I held the razor, a plastic disposable, in front of his soft neck. I imagined I could control him from back here like the barrio boy controlled me, like Linda controls me, and that if I wanted to make a change and see blood and death, if I wanted some kind of cleansing, some sense of real power, it would have to happen now. I pressed the razor in, but he was smiling. He was rubbing my razor-holding hand. His lips were like children's lips, with cream around the edges.

When I was done with the shaving, I could see he was right. He did look like a baby, so I put my mouth all over his baby lips and body, and for an evening I had fun. I almost didn't think of Linda at all, and how she would look at me, unholy and impure. I almost stopped imagining she could see the two of us through some cosmic telescope. As the ranchero shaved my already smooth legs, I even smiled. He laughed as I bit his toenails, unaware that his life had been, for a moment, a thinness ready to disappear in front of me.

"Terry, you are so reckless," Linda told me after I got home, laughing and full of cervezas. "He could be anyone. He could have guns. He could have a disease. Then where would your muscles be?" She stood in front of me looking calm, but would not move or let me walk past her. Then she touched my arm. "Don't you want to be better than this?"

"He was very young," I said. "Very quiet and smooth." Linda had been training my muscles and fucking my body for the last five years, but her face was foreign to me now.

"You don't really want my help. You need to be on your own. I can sense these things." She walked into the kitchen, her small back moving away from me.

Linda has always thought of herself as more knowing than other women.

"I won tonight," I told her, holding up my new trophy. "They were all clapping and stomping. I hit my extensions perfectly." I looked at her back. "I was really it."

"You want only what distracts," Linda said. From the front door, I could see her drinking something with leaves in it.

"I don't care, I don't want to know about your higher purposes," I told her, my voice cracking and dry. Linda does that to me, makes me just a little afraid, unsure of where to stand, even though I am twice her body size. I looked to see if she would react, but her face was like gritty rocks. I touched the striated veins on the back of my hand and said, "A big girl like me has to have an outlet. You of all people should understand."

"Your mind is too out of control," she said, ignoring me. "Your body could go at any minute. You like food too much. Your hair is too thick. I have to think of higher things now."

"You are so omniscient," I said. But I knew she was right. I was on the verge of something uncontrollable. My celibate, mystical Linda is right too often, and lately I find myself wanting to hate her for it all.

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It has been three days since I've seen Linda and her blonde, Navajo ways, even though I have been living in her house and running through her backyard desert and past her newly constructed sweat lodge, looking for her or her body, but hoping for something more. She hasn't been around to make me lettuce sandwiches or watch my caloric intake. She hasn't been in the weight room to spot me, or make me do sit-ups until I want to bleed, or touch me with her once sharp and colourful nails. She left no messages, no notes to say she was angry at my muscles, that they were not getting big enough or lean enough, that they weren't celibate enough for her. There were no notes saying my unruly thoughts were giving her headaches, or that my old sex partners were calling too much. As I stepped through the house, flexing naked and tight in front of Linda's mirrors, laying face down on her scratchy carpet to stretch my gluteals and look under the bed for

any signs of her, I could see that all of Linda's astrological magazines were stacked neatly in their spiritual places under the mattress, dusty from lack of use. The one she had been reading the night I came home from my last competition was still open on the edge of the bathroom sink.

I walked by each corner of the house to see if she had hidden anything from me, a burned incense stick or a piece of wine-soaked sage. A Navajo horoscope. An etching on the wall. A sand painting in the tub. She started doing things like that a few months ago after she saw Frederick, my bank boss and our neighbour, try to kiss me in his back yard.

"He likes my quads," I told her.

As we lay in bed later that night, she said, "You would sleep with anything."

"At least I am still living," I said.

"You know how I feel about it," she said.

And now Linda wasn't here. I felt bad for hating her. I sat on the couch for hours, holding onto the cushions. Around 2 a.m., ten hours after not seeing her, I took a flashlight and walked outside to look at her newly constructed sweat lodge. I wanted to see if she had etched anything into the mud walls, but all I felt when I touched it was smoothness and radiating heat. Linda made it one week when I was on the Arizona Body Builders Tour for Leukemia. As I sweated for cancer, as I pumped in the dark, old rooms, as people who had never seen women with muscles asked if they could touch and if I had implants, Linda was praying in other languages and stirring mud into puddles in her back yard. As I was pointing my toes painfully to maintain maximum gastroc definition, Linda was chanting and braiding twigs. I came home on a Saturday night, and looked out the kitchen window to see a brown dome where an ocotillo bush had been.

"I had to have something. This is a safe, natural space," Linda said. There was mud all over the carpet and in Linda's thinning hair.

"I am the same as I was. This is the real me. Pretense is dead."

And now my nirvana woman was gone and I was partially dressed and outside, looking at the opening of her manic creation. It was a hole, really, small and close to the ground, made to humble. I turned on the flashlight, and pointed it around the unfenced yard, then inside the sweat lodge.

As I sat inside it, dust got on my hamstrings while I smelled the remainder of incense sticks and Linda's sweaty, spiritual perfumes. Near the mud-packed opening of the lodge was a collection of dead lizards, neatly lined up side by side, drying there for some spiritual potion she would no doubt make herself later, if she came back.

Then something moved at the far side of one wall, and dust went swirling. I thought for a second that I saw a face. I squinted, then closed my eyes. Not even Linda can make me see what isn't there.

"It's not unusual," Darryl tells me four days later when I call him. My old, fat boyfriend who once fucked Linda is the man who's house has dead tumbleweeds and grocery sacks pushed up against window screens from afternoon winds. His dead yard is filled with dog shit. He is the neighbour everyone wants to kiss, but once I thought I loved him. I lay on the bed, listening to him sounding peeved because I'm not still living with him, helping him binge on chocolates and pies, helping him feel better about being fat and afraid of the heat and the people outside. "She used to always go off to lunar conventions before her husband and kids moved away. It's nothing new. If you don't want my cheesecakes you can just get used to it."

"She hasn't done it before," I say. As I lay there, I felt weightless at not knowing she was still somewhere in Arizona, sleeping at the same time as me, sweating when I was sweating. I couldn't know if she was dreaming at the same time I was of saunas and muscles, of violence and sand and sex. Now she could be anywhere, in Mexico or Europe, or even with my brown father and white mother in Peru, with their rain forests and baptisms and terrorists who only look into your eyes when pulling the trigger.

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During the wet monsoon nights before the fourth body building competition of the Arizona season, I sit and stare at the gun I finally bought after Darryl showed me what it felt like to hold one correctly, even though the gun he had was small and stolen from a grocery delivery boy. After calling my mother to hear another of her terrorist stories, of bombs going off, of dead chauffeurs, after dreaming about the barrio boy and waking up alone with no Linda in the house, and after being whistled at by those Latin grapefruit pickers, I went to the gun store. The pickers' words were still in my head as I looked through the sight of the salesman's largest short barrel magnum. Those men had called me a maricón and a transvestite because they were not sure. I could be anything with calves like this, I know. But I still walk like a woman, and after they stopped me on my way to lunch and tried to touch my breasts, after the one looked so much like that barrio boy I could hardly move. I sat in my office and flexed and flexed, feeling like explosive air at high altitudes. As I left work early, I passed by Frederick's office and tried not to look at the new 8x10 glossy he had of me holding a trophy in my white bikini. I tried not to show him that this big-bodied woman was afraid.

And now I'm sitting here in Linda's house, looking at my gun and hoping it will give me what I need. The gun is blue black and polished, a colour like something Linda would put on her nails to prepare for a bad day. If she were here today instead of lost in a sand storm, no doubt taking these last few weeks off from work and from me to try and find her aura in the dust, I would tell her to paint those once long, cool nails this colour of black. I would

hold my .44 on the bathroom sink and say, "Paint your nails like this." I would even try to sound angry, to make sure she knew what effect she had.

There was a time when she would let me rub my lips over her nails to feel their smoothness that is like fur. I would lay there with her, my lips on her fingers, my muscles aching from squats as I smelled her Noxema and the perfume of her woolly suits. I would listen to her Tuba City stories of drunken dogs and pow-wow encounters until all we could do was laugh. She would rub light swirls on my naked back and tell me about the husband and children she hadn't seen for many years. And as I fell asleep I would think her lips were saying the word "love."

But things have changed. If Linda were here and sleeping right now, I would have insomnia, for her nails, her celibacy, her regimen of starvation do that to me, make me sleepless and constricted. I would be next to her cool body, thinking nothing could intrude on my last pleasure, the absolute silence of touching skin, but then I would remember Linda was changing, and in my weakness I would remember the barrio boy. I think of him now. I let him touch me, I let him make me too afraid to punch or move. I let him show me who I thought I used to be. When I think of this I want to go down to South Phoenix with my gun, driving fast, looking for him, seeing something, shooting, and later putting a dead boy in a park or a ditch. The news would say the gangs had started to go wild again. Even with these muscles and bulk, even though I could have bench pressed him or flattened him with an arm twitch, I did nothing. His eyes were so angry they were almost yellow.

Now that I am armed I decide to go to South Phoenix to show myself there is nothing to be afraid of. I get out of my car by the lime orchards and walk in my overstuffed jacket in the heat. My black shorts show off the heavy power of my shaved legs. My .44 in its shoulder holster pulls tight against the obliques and breastless breasts. When I bought the gun the man said, "That's not a woman's gun, but I guess a woman like you doesn't care." I shook my head to reassure him.

When I walk through the barrio, I can feel the weight of the bullets and metal close to my skin, and I almost laugh. I'm in public. I have a gun. But there is something to it, its weight, its liveliness, and I start feeling like I can look anyone in the eyes, maybe even Linda, and tell them all to fuck off. This makes me smile for the first time since I shaved and kissed the smooth ranchero.

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Three days later, after my visit to the south side made me feel confident enough to hit one of the grapefruit pickers and yell at them all until they ran, I even tell my boss I can't come see him for a while. I was able to hang up on him. He called back and I didn't answer. This is me, feisty and pumped and ready.

Darryl calls and I tell him to fuck off.

"How rude," he says. To hear him sound bewildered makes me smile for several hours. I sit on the couch all toothy, looking at my legs and liking them. For a moment, as the sun moves down Linda's picture window, I think of leaving this house, of throwing my tailored work suits in a bag and driving off, never to see the sweat lodge or my weaknesses ever again.

Then Linda appears, walking in without knocking or waving, and the air leaves my body. She says, "I always find exotic things."

"I don't care what you think you've found," I tell her. I'm mad she's here to interrupt me. I hold my leg up to flex the quad, trying to act like the body builder she has made me into, a woman who cares only for her own flesh and no one else's. The only time she leaves me alone is when she thinks I am a mindless muscle.

Linda walks in front of me. She must not be in the mood to be ignored. She's in baggier-than-before shorts, looking dusty and a little greasy, a little dehydrated with her peeling, burnt skin that has been in the sun for more than a month. I can see scratches and cuts on her shoulders.

"You look thinner," I tell her. "You've been whipping yourself again." Her mystical atonements, her self-induced starvation, and the Sonoran sun are making her transparent, like old, beaten glass.

"I'm becoming holy," she says, sitting far away from me. She does not want me to kiss her or be close or touch her ragged nails, but I don't want to do any of these things now. We sit there for a while, and she looks at me. I know I am a blank. Later as she showers and rubs the dirt and mud off her body, I sit on the couch and watch a high cloud dust storm come in from the southeast. I want to think that her holy presence, cleansed by the heat and dirt of the desert, will not infect me again.

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The pose down is a strange event in body building. All of us slide around each other trying to get the judges to notice, to see our bodies first and the careful deprivation we have put them through, to see that our legs have done the most squats, that our triceps have been the most perfectly tortured. Still, this exhibitionism always takes an extra effort for a shy girl like me.

"Just imagine you are alone," Linda told me after my first competition. I didn't want to touch anyone because they were sweaty, and so I flexed behind them, unseen until it was over and the others were going back to the dressing room.

"You need to think, 'front of the stage.' Push them all out of the way if you have to," Linda said. "You're bigger than they are."

Now, during this seventh competition of the season, during my 6th year of pumping and squeezing, I pose down better than anyone as I try to

imagine I am alone while pushing at the other bodies that are so much like mine, so inhuman. I now imagine there are no women surrounding me, or touching me with their oiled hands, or slipping their shiny biceps in front of my face. I imagine their sweat doesn't really drop on my eyelashes. Still, as we show ourselves off in every competition, one woman always leans against me to lift her leg for a hamstring flex, and I try to imagine I don't see her, or feel her hand on my arm. When I turn toward her to show my back off, she licks her lips at me. She touches my abdominals, and the scar I have there from one sleepless night when I once drove to South Phoenix for drinks and got cut in a knife fight at a fake cantina.

This woman who is trying to distract me now, who has always licked her lips at me, touches my scar very lightly while we flex. The crowd claps politely. They are tired and it is hot outside.

"She always was a cheat," Linda will say when I get home. "She thinks she can break people with her eyes." Linda will be dehydrated and quiet, sitting at her kitchen window to stare outside for hours. She no longer comes to see me and my body win things, and I am almost relieved.

In the dressing room the lip licking woman comes over to me as I take off my make-up. She walks over in only a pair of shorts and starts to rub my shoulders a bit, her breasts never moving, never looking like something a woman would have. Our bodies are the same, sexless, flat, but so very human under fingertips.

"I hope I didn't ruin your concentration," she says. "I just had to see that scar of yours up close. I like a woman with scars." Her face is much older than mine, more like Linda's face after years of smoking, or a long time in the desert.

"How nice," I say, trying not to look at her hand on my scar, or at her lack of breasts. I know her kisses would be only physical, and that is what I will tell Linda, that physical is not what I want right now. I want to fool the all-seeing Navajo and make her believe that I, too, want to be holy. This may be the only thing that saves me from her.

"I haven't even thought of sex, or food much," I tell my trainer later. I can still feel the breastless woman's bite on my shoulder, sharp and small and humid.

"Sometimes the physical is nice," says Linda, always trying to catch me off guard and make me think twice, but I know she is not becoming the woman I want. She has been spending long hours in the sweat lodge, sweating and hitting her arms and her back. When she showers I can see the marks. She turns toward the living room window and watches a station wagon drive by. "I was once a very different person," she says. I sit up slightly. This is not like her, to almost speak like other people. I wait, wishing I didn't care, but wanting to hear the words, any words that show me she

is still alive. She says nothing more, and that night sleeps far over on her edge of the bed. It's hard, she tells me, to be as holy as she is.

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"You were a marvel," Frederick, my bank boss says backstage after a late season competition. "I almost drooled." His children stand next to him and look at my greasy legs, at the lack of tan line I have there, at Darryl's old muscle shirt, and the lack of bra underneath it.

Frederick smiles like a man who has tried to kiss me, like a man I have hung up on. He comes to these events a lot now, but this is his first time back here with all the women.

"I can't imagine being able to do that," he says, looking around to see if any other competitors are looking at him. He flexes a little bit as if to try it out and see what body building is all about.

Frederick is a little red. He knows I see how he wants to touch me sometimes, especially my deltoids. He looks at them now, trying not to let his very blonde children notice his eyes. And because I want to be the slut they all think I am, I say, "I'm coming over tonight, Frederick," as one of the competitors brings around the Häagen-Dazs for our immediate pleasure.

"Maybe you were a worrier in a past life," my boss tells me later. We're out at midnight, running through the yucca fields. As we sit on the warm ground, his breathing pushes into the still hot air. He smiles, and then I see him going in, his lips pushed out as he thinks of kissing my dusty kneecap, but then he changes his mind, rubs his lip.

"I worked hard for these legs," I say to distract him, and he nods. This is something he wants to understand, and it keeps him at a comfortable distance. It isn't so easy with Linda. I wish for indifference, but still want her to enjoy the darkness of my almost Latina hair, gotten from my almost Latino father. I want her to leave or kiss my mouth and really mean it.

Instead I touch, then kiss Frederick, and we take each other's shirts off.

The next morning Linda seems disrupted for the first time since I've known her. I imagine her prophetic eyes seeing us out there under the moon. I walk by her sweat lodge with my mouth still dry from Frederick's wet lips. I see her looking at her lizards. I see how her face wants to be hit by their leathery carcasses. I almost stop. I almost want to go inside with her and smell the incense as she walks through the house, holding onto her matches and mumbling "Viceroy's" under her breath. But there is no smoking now, no hidden cigarettes, no tobacco tins. She has been too good for too long.

"I wanted to look at his whiteness," I tell her.

"I can't believe you," she says. "It's just disappointing to see you go bad. He's a man. A white man."

"You're a blonde, Linda," I say.

She sits on her couch lighting matches and breathing in the phos-

phorous.

"You made me into a body." I rub my lips over the veins in my hand. "A body doesn't always care where it finds pleasure."

"Kissing will make your muscles fade," Linda says. "And I won't be able to help. You are almost gone as it is." She is trying to talk like a trainer, trying to keep my muscles in mind, but her eyes are, for once, angry.

Later in that week, and for the first time in six months, Linda decides to give in to her earthy side, decides that for an evening she will come down from her spirit world and kiss me, but she pulls me onto the couch with her, which she does awkwardly, being so out of practice. When she almost has her dusty lips on mine that are so muscular, I tell her my mouth is very dry, dehydrated, painful from too many sprint intervals.

"My quads hurt too much for lips," I tell her, surprised at myself.

Linda's face begins to flatten. Her smile goes straight. I close my eyes, feeling just a little petty. She touches my mouth with her fingers like a nurse, acting again like she is only here to make my perfect. For the rest of the evening she gives me electrolyte replacement drinks and rubs oils on every part of my body, trying to make me smooth again, make me see that she really wants what's best.

Her fingers burn every part of me.

"Sometimes I wish I didn't have a calling," she says. I stop breathing, and for some reason hope for a change. I wait paralyzed for the words I need to hear, but then she says the unforgivable.

"I loved you more than Darryl or my husband."

Her past tense words make me want to faint, and I hate that she can see this.

That night, when this Navajo woman is sleeping, when her self-inflicted bruises seem to glow in the dark, I am awake. There are electrolytes buzzing in my arms and thighs, making my heart beat too fast. I sit there in bed with my gun on the carpet, watching her breathe, watching the glow of lizard welts on her back. I start to feel angry that she is so violent with herself. I feel angry that this emaciated woman, this caved in thing, this alien who had lips can still make me crave her. I feel guilty for not kissing her and for wanting to kiss her. I feel stupid for still being in love.

Sometimes I would like to be as violent with her as that barrio boy was with me, call her a *gringa* bitch and just be done with it.

There are billions of us on this planet, so I pick up the gun. My index finger twitches, and for a moment, for just a small point of time, I aim it at her back, knowing it is loaded with shiny, clean, silvery bullets waiting to explode into something. I lie on the bed and feel my pulse as I move the gun slowly toward her, until I touch the barrel to her naked backbone. If she were awake she would say the cold feel of it was the perfect sensation for focusing on other worlds. I think of pulling a bit at the trigger to watch the

firing arm move just slightly. But then, behind me, it's as if someone's eyes are big and staring, and I think I hear Linda say, "Wait."

I run outside to the backyard desert, Linda's electrolytes burning my esophagus. The air is hot and thin even when everyone is sleeping and the downtown lights are going off. The moon is rising over the bouldery mountains to the east as insects fly by my ear. Everything that moves is highlighted. Scorpions. Dogs. Coyotes. Snakes. Rocks. At this hour, the desert is alive, and my feet bare. Something makes a noise in a bush nearby, then moves quickly into Linda's sweat lodge. I think I hear breathing. Linda's eyes seem to still be behind me, staring, and then a voice says, "*Gringa puta*." I pull the trigger, and a shot goes toward the Cave Creek mountains and the yellow moon.

"Wait," I hear from the sweat lodge. I shoot at the voice until the gun is clicking and there are large holes in the dried mud. I hear dogs barking. I stand there, listening for something wounded, but I can't move toward it to look. Nothing makes a sound for many minutes as I stand there, my muscles stiffening, and then I hear a coyote from far away. A police siren goes off, but it doesn't come down our street.

The next morning I wake up with swollen eyes from a lack of sleep, my former lover standing at the foot of the bed, staring at me. I watch as she goes into work without nail polish, in a dull, grey suit she hasn't worn for years, one that is now too big for her unmuscled body. She wears this suit every time she wants me to feel guilt. When she's gone, I watch the sweat lodge from inside the kitchen. Its holes are obvious and violent. Later I put on sandals and go outside to stare at the opening of the lodge. There are a few drops of blood in the dirt. I bend down to touch one of the drops, and it is still wet. It should be dry. It should be old. It should be some of Linda's from a particularly violent self-cleansing. I squint inside it, but there is nothing there. No animals. No barrio boys. My night of violence has produced nothing but holes. I bring a bucket of water outside and pour it into the dirty sand to make a mud pit, and then pat heavy, slick patches onto each hole I've made. I know Linda expects this, and so, maybe for the last time, I comply.

That night Linda isn't talking. I look at her face as she sits on the couch, staring, then closing her eyes, opening them to look at the desert wrens hitting themselves against the windows. I walk into the bedroom to dress for an evening at the barrio where it's easy to feel powerful. As I put on my black shorts, I notice Linda's apricot suit hanging in the closet. I touch it, put it against my skin. It looks so orange next to the stretched tan of my arm. Linda's soap smell is still in the fabric of the large sleeves.

I breathe her old cells in.

As she gets into bed that night, I know she is a dead thing.

"A woman like you shouldn't need sleep," I say. She doesn't respond. I

watch her until her breathing is thick. As I leave, I look at myself in the mirror and for once, I don't think about which muscles need work. I see how dark my eyes are, almost ethnic, almost watery and red, but not quite.

Outside the air is as hot as Linda once was, and I suddenly don't feel like toting a gun or anything else. The moon is rising. I drive with the windows down, breathing in dust until I am high up in the Cave Creek hills. When I stop, there are finally no homes, no development sites, no gas stations anywhere. There is only the bright moon highlighting the boulders and the cacti, making sharp, dark shadows. My car looks almost white up here. The Phoenix lights below are washed-out and quiet.

I begin to walk, then run and shed things as I pass blue sand, scorpions, and ocotillo. First, the gun goes, thrown toward the city lights. I don't hear it land. Then my tank top, floating white onto a saguaro. Then my shorts, my watch, my shoes, my earring hoops dissolving into the sand. I step on painful things, running naked but not looking naked, my arms so bright, the air so warm flowing over my fluid body.

I swim through it and nothing in the desert moves.

# Contributors

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**Angel Beyde** lives in Montreal where she is currently in the throes of a Masters thesis. When she is not chained to her computer, she teaches and is a contributing editor of *Matrix*. This is her first published story.

**Jacqueline Bitz** was raised in rural Saskatchewan and currently lives in Edmonton, where she is pursuing a graduate degree in English at the University of Alberta.

**Milda M. De Voe** won second place in the 1997 Raymond Carver Short Fiction Contest. Two of her translations and one original short story have been published in *Lithuania: In Her Own Words*, a collection of émigré and local Lithuanian writers (Tyto Alba Press, 1998). She is an MFA student at Columbia University in New York, where she lives with her husband and a parakeet. Yes, there is a novel in progress.

**Jason Dewinetz** is an Okanagan writer whose poetry and fiction have appeared in journals across Western Canada including *The Inner Harbour Review*, *The Lyre*, and *Prairie Fire*. He is the author of a long poem chapbook, *Gericault's Severed Limbs Paintings* (Greenboathouse Books), and the editor of *The Greenboathouse Reader: An Anthology of Okanagan Writing*. He is currently working with Outlaw Editions on a book entitled *The Gift of a Good Knife*. Jason lives on Vancouver Island, where he is pursuing graduate work at the University of Victoria.

**Jynne Dilling** studied Creative Writing at the University of Virginia. She currently lives, works, and writes in New York City.

**Hafez of Shiraz** (1320-1389 A.D.) is considered the undisputed master of the "ghazal" form and one of the supreme lyric poets of Persia. His poems are widely read (and sung) even in contemporary Iran. In Hafez's lines, which are unmatched in their beauty, music, and symbolic resonance, human and mystical love are woven together so subtly as to be indistinguishable. Many readers see Hafez as a kind of oracle; they open his "divan" (collected poems) for spiritual guidance, inspiration, and messages about the future.

**Shannon Hudgens** has published work in *Ellipsis Magazine* in the US, as well as an anthology titled *Shi'in Sa* in Korea. She has begun working on a novel, based loosely on her experiences in Korea.

**Maureen Hynes'** first book of poetry, *Rough Skin*, won the League of Canadian Poets' 1995 Gerald Lampert Prize. She is now working on her second collection, *Harm's Way*.

**Kim Ki-Rim** was one of the first poets to introduce modern poetry to Korea. He was primarily an imagist and in favour of discarding musical rhythms and the romantic tone of earlier poets. Unfortunately, Kim Ki-Rim was banned in South Korea until 1988; he had been "kidnapped" and taken to North Korea around the time of the Korean War.

**Maureen Lennon** has been a closet poet since childhood. Lately, the closet has become a tad too confining, so here she is, all busted out into the world. So far, so good.

**Lee Ann Mortensen** has been published in *Ploughshares*, the *Mississippi Review*, and *Inscape*. She won a Poets & Writers Exchange Fellowship, and two Utah Arts Council Awards. Her work has been anthologized in *Tasting Life Twice* (Avon). She received her MFA from the University of Utah.

**George Murray's** poetry and fiction have been accepted for publication in journals such as: *Prairie Fire*, *Exile*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Fiddlehead*, *The Antigonish Review*, and *Event*. His new volume of poetry, *Making Sense of Bones*, will be published in the spring of 2000. He last appeared in PRISM 36:3.

**Alix Ohlin** grew up in Pointe Clair, Quebec, and currently lives in Austin, Texas, where she receives a fellowship from the James A. Michener Center for Writers. Her stories have been published in *The Bellingham Review* and *Five Points*.

**David O'Meara** was living in Kwang-ju, South Korea, when he wrote "December, 6 a.m." and "Chinese Quince"; they will appear in his first poetry collection, *Storm Still*, due out in the fall of 1999. He currently lives in Ottawa.

**Barbara Nickel's** first book of poetry, *The Gladys Elegies*, won the 1998 Pat Lowther Award. She has written two children's books and lives in Saint John.

**Matthew Pitt** completed writing "Venus and Vulcan" in Brooklyn, New York, where he holds a membership to Venus Video. He began the story in Austin, Texas, where he held a membership to Vulcan Video. He is currently a New York Times Fellow in Fiction at New York University, and a great believer in coincidence.

**Lisa Rigstad** has been freelancing for about four years, since receiving an MFA from the University of Michigan. Her work has been seen in publications such as *L.A. Weekly*, *Montana Magazine*, *Sunshine Magazine*, *Christianity Today*, *Virtue*, and *Technical Analysis of Stocks & Commodities*. Currently, Lisa is teaching figure painting and drawing at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, Michigan.

**Russell Thornton's** poems have appeared in a number of literary journals and anthologies, including *The Canadian Forum*, *Descant*, *Event*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Grain*, *The Malahat Review*, and *Vintage '95, '96, and '97-98*. Several of his poems are included in an anthology of Canadian poetry due out in the fall of 1999 titled *The Edges of Time* (Seraphim Editions). He has a collection coming out in 2000 titled *The Fifth Window* (Thistledown Press). Russell lives in North Vancouver.

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the 1990s, the number of people with diabetes has increased in all industrialized countries. In the Netherlands, the prevalence of diabetes is estimated to be 6.5% in 2000, which is equivalent to 1.5 million people (1).

Diabetes is a chronic disease with a high prevalence of complications. The most common complications are cardiovascular disease, retinopathy, nephropathy, and neuropathy. The prevalence of these complications is high, and the mortality is high. In the Netherlands, the mortality of diabetes is estimated to be 10% per year (2).

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*Full-grey, first light floats  
inside this airy hour like smoke inside  
a bottle.*

— David O'Meara, Page 24

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