

PRISM international

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PRISM international

NON-FICTION CONTEST

GRAND PRIZE

“Reunion” by Re'Lynn Hansen

FIRST RUNNER-UP

“Almost-Home” by Julia Zarankin

SECOND RUNNER-UP

“Notes on Breath” by Jenny Boychuk

JUDGE Timothy Taylor

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ANOTHER CHALLENGE

In last year's note from non-fiction judge Andreas Schroeder, a challenge was laid down to writers who might submit this year. In essence, Andreas was pushing creative non-fiction writers to get out of the comfort zone of personal memoir. It's a form that occurs so spontaneously in our era of compulsive self-disclosure (yes hello Facebook and your lunch menu status updates, I'm talking to you) that it would be easy for a newcomer to creative non-fiction to think that this was the only genre at all.

Of course it isn't. And I won't pretend. Part of me is biased against the memoir. I came to UBC after twenty-three years in the freelance trenches during which time I wrote many hundreds of articles—food and travel and business features, opinion pieces, cultural criticism, profiles, etc.—and never once did I write a piece of memoir because I wouldn't have been able to sell it. Editors aren't particularly interested in the form unless you're already famous or have had something truly extraordinary happen to you. And freed of any disciplining marketplace, memoirs can become documents written by the authors for themselves.

You might have thought, then, that I would have been uncomfortable choosing finalists from a short list of six creative non-fiction pieces *every one of which* was memoir. But if there's one thing that I've learned about writing creatively over the years, it's that no matter what form you're working in, there is endless capacity for surprise. And so I'm delighted to report my surprises, memoir pieces that are not inward looking, but branch outwards from themselves and offer many surfaces on which the reader can alight. In "Notes on Breath," a difficult set of family relationships is unwoven and revealed in the process of an episodic meditation on breathing. "Almost-Home" surprises in its own way, weaving the memories of an only half-remembered place of birth into the emigration story of the author's parents. And in "Reunion," the annual gatherings of a group of school friends is unpacked in all its human complexity, showing those present to be involved in both a celebration of life as it has been lived and as it is sometimes only sketchily remembered, at the same time as being a kind of mourning vigil for those who've passed on. Here the memoir form is elevated, and the story speaks importantly outward and into the world.

I would like to reiterate Andreas's challenge to writers to explore the possibilities of other creative non-fiction forms, to stretch themselves, to encounter the world, to reveal characters other than themselves. But I'd also like to commend the authors of these three pieces for doing all those things in their pieces and showing just how penetrating and observant and relevant memoir can be.

REUNION

I went to a Catholic all-girl high school and I'm not sure what this has meant—what it offered then in terms of a foundation for who I am now. The exigencies of religion and its doctrine were lost on me. I look to the skies at night and to the renewal of the trees in spring as my religious philosophy, and maybe the closest I've come to feeling connected to some larger gestalt is when I'm out walking the dog in the nearby state park, and a bend in the river that I know is coming up, comes up again—the oxbow emerging from the wetlands—and amazes me all over again, crystal waters sluicing quietly past reedy banks.

Perhaps I am different from them, my classmates, who have volunteered for Catholic Charities, prayed for me, especially since I've had cancer, and who make their monthly visits to the elderly nuns who once lectured us.

As a class we have stuck together more than most. It happens that we don't have a reunion every ten years, but *every* year. I'm not sure what spurs this on. Perhaps there is only the circumstance of convenience, but it could be purposeful, as many classmates seek out the ritual of gathering together more than I do. Most of us still live in the city, and the president of our class had a reunion one year after high school, and then one year after that, and one year after that, and we all kept going until we were this group whose pledge it was to get together next time.

The president's house is a large bungalow done in a Frank Lloyd Wright prairie style appropriate for Chicago. She still lives within the boundaries of the city because her husband is a fireman. There's a sense of home when we get there because she's had these reunions for twenty years, and we know the routine by now. There is a grand piano and an addition in the back with a kitchen island and family room. The forty of us who gather can settle in the family room, but sometimes we migrate to the living room where the piano is, and we gather round it to sing the school song.

I don't ever remember what they remember, my friends from high school. If they are talking about a car, and they say that I was in it, I believe them. They say, *remember, you were in the car*. And I say I do. One friend remembers an evening when she deeply gashed her hand as she tried to retrieve a joint that fell beneath the bucket seats of her car. I was with her, and we were racing away that night, apparently, to evade her father. She had stolen his car, which I barely remember was an Impala, and he was following us, driving *hers*, Nancy exclaims to the classmates gathered around the kitchen island listening, meaning her mother's car, *and he was going to beat the living shit out of me when I got home, remember?* she asks looking at me. I never challenge the story. There were numerous dark nights and circlings of empty city streets and meeting up with other classmates

who had also borrowed or stolen their parents' cars. I never ask if she was scolded or punished that evening by the father whom I vaguely remember as stern. The story always ends in triumph. We pulled over, we dimmed the lights, we lost him. I don't remember the evening's end any more than the beginning. *We met up with McMurphy who always had the best weed*, is how Nancy ends the story, and I am content to listen and to make a toast with her at the president's house. And of course I wonder how long I can keep up, keep going back with them before nothing is the same anymore—nothing is as I remember it, but I have not reached that threshold.

We have ghosted our past, sketched in the places where we lived, what buses we took to school, whose houses we stopped at on the way home. I have stood at the kitchen island, and late in the evening, sat on folding chairs with the few stragglers who are left sitting in the yard of the president's house. I have remembered or said I remembered the motels we stayed at as part of the Christian mentoring weekends hosted for us by the women alumnae of Notre Dame. The story ends when we all get drunk at the motel, and there's an epilogue—we're hung-over in chapel at Notre Dame with our "big sisters" at our sides. Someone mentions how Susan wasn't there that morning at chapel—and I assume here that I was at chapel—how the nuns forgot the head count, how Susan's absence wasn't noticed.

I remember Susan.

I remember she had thick, curly blond hair that she used to comb and fix by pulling her hands through it. She wore dark eyeliner, part of an early goth look. She was thin and wiry and smoked with hands flicking ash to the air. Her uniform, the brown plaid pleated skirt and matching vest we all wore, was a drape on her, and when she moved, it was mysterious, like something captured, a stuttering. I am not sure, but I think I remember her running through the school hallways, limbs waving and avoiding capture, running away from the voices, the nuns who called after her demanding that she come back to class.

By the time we were sophomores she was no longer living at home, the large condo on Lake Shore Drive. It had four bedrooms, one for each child and a master suite for the parents. There was a wall of glass that faced the lake. I remember picking up Susan and standing in the centre of clouds while waiting in a room of white carpet and couches. Her parents never spoke to me or to any of us. The details have been brought up at reunions now and then, how her parents were very religious, very strict. She kept running away from home, stayed with other classmates and their parents, in other condos. Technically, she was homeless. She sat at the corner café down the street from school and waited for us. It was called Irving's; it was on Irving Park and had a bubblegum pink sign with blinking Hollywood lights that spelled out I*R*V*I*N*G*'S. She chain smoked there and poured brandy from a flask into her coffee cup and waited for us to come by after school.

We'd meet her there after class. The rest of us, we who waited for the bell, waited for dismissal, and went to lockers, and made phone calls, and walked up the street to Irving's where we could see her waiting in the booth, her face

obscured in the shadow and shine of the glazed windows. We'd tell her of our day, our history lesson, the talk in theology, the poems we recited in creative arts, led by Sister Claire who we heard had long ago published a book of poems. We'd sit down, the four or six or eight of us, and shove each other into the booth, and Susan would push back, *fuck you, no fuck you*. She would confirm how *insane* it was that we were stuck in high school this last year, taking electives, learning nothing. She wasn't going back, she pronounced. And we would confirm how she was better off sitting at the café.

It went like that. And then coffee and more cigarettes, and Susan talking about how no one had learned *any* Spanish that year, and fuck it, she was going to France after high school anyway. And she had done acid last week—again with Terence, the man who seemed to supply drugs as a favour, a genuine favour to us, with no sex due as payment, just a sort of camaraderie. We all had some form of low-toned conversation—how nice Terence was. He was Schaffer's cousin. He just gave drugs away. That was amazing, Terence was amazing, his drugs were amazing.

And the restaurant becoming whiter as darkness came on, the pedestrians who passed all wore dark wool coats that spring, and the table wet with prints of water glasses, and everything unhinged, every pause in conversation led to laughter, then nothing, then everything again, every word or reprimand from some teacher repeatable. *Did she really say hustler? A hustler? As in whore, or as in pimp? Did you ask her to explain that? She said hustler, just hustler!* Everything caught, shifting, imitable in variations. We all thought we would unleash ourselves upon the world with a scream and an indelible smear that would prove we were somewhere. Someone at the reunion always remembers the booth at Irving's—how we managed to pen our names on the Formica table despite how difficult it was, and we reasoned that management overlooked it because every table was like that.

I remember the coolness of the evening when we walked out the door. I think I remember running out the door sometimes to catch the bus at the stop across the street, and the fluorescence of the bus, and the quiet of thinking I was soon to arrive home.

I knew about appliances, that there was a dishwasher at home, that I was expected to empty it, that dinner was in the fridge, that my brother was home watching reruns of M*A*S*H, waiting for me, that my parents were out at a restaurant similar to the one I had just sat in with Susan, except it had a bar with spigots and cocktail shakers, and a waitress who knew them, and who served them martinis and the evening's strip steak—they had worked hard that day, and then they too slinked themselves into booths.

At one reunion in an informal speech our president remarked how she was thankful our school was run by the order of BVM's—how modern they were. The president made a toast to the Blessed Virgin Mary nuns, saying it didn't matter if we were pregnant or addicted to whatever; we graduated, we got to college.

I don't recall who was pregnant or addicted. I know that Susan graduated

and went to New York to study acting at NYU, and then travelled to France, then lived in London where she studied a particular acting technique—not really a technique, she would explain at later reunions, but a method of learning, not learning, but of knowing yourself, so that your body placement, your words, become mindful. *The technique helps to centre you in acting, and in life*, she added to her webpage.

At later reunions it was clear that Susan had become known for the mastery of this acting technique, but this was before she was killed, but not really killed—before she was disabled, but not that either—perhaps I am trying too hard to give this memory its proper placement—before she died, simply died from breast cancer.

Every year there was wine, the president liked reds, the Barolos from Italy, and cucumber sandwiches, and a mystery guest—someone who was last seen in high school or shortly after that. And there was a strangeness, not with others but with me, as I tried to remember the classmates who had moved from the city. Maybe the ones who had moved away were more like me: living in a more isolated manner on a country acre outside the city. Maybe they also didn't have a clue as to who they were in high school.

In high school I led a life of austerity, which I thought lent me style—my long hair, my books, my T-shirts, my jeans. I was always with one or two people in the corner of a room and never with a crowd. I played guitar. I wrote poems and stories.

At various times they, my classmates at the reunion, have asked me how I'm doing. *What are you doing now?* I tell them that I am a writer, a professor of creative writing. I live with a partner, outside the city. They were settling down while I was coming out, I tell them, to make my story succinct. I travelled, I went to graduate school, I met my partner who taught at the same college as I did. We had a foster child who is older now, we've raised dogs, first one golden retriever, then another, I say again for brevity, a cat, a chicken. A chicken? Someone always asks. I tell them about the chicken. I tell them the raccoon and chicken story. How I ran down in the night to the hen house. The cries had awakened me; there was the raccoon with my hen in its mouth. I end the story by telling of the vet who rehabbed the chicken, and the thousand dollars I spent on this, and everyone thinks it's a good story—and I guess it is. It's a story of vulnerability and of the quiet of 2 a.m., it is the story of a near vanishing, of what could easily be overlooked had it not been saved.

There are so many women around the kitchen island and I can peer through elbows to see marbled cheese there, and a pastry, a baked brie, and a tall silver chafing dish with meatballs and a smear of sauce hugging the corners. We've gathered here, this high school class, this wave of us around the kitchen island, this time we're here for Susan. Billy Joel is on the stereo, and some are dancing in the house, including the women who have brought their pep squad uniforms—to cheer her on, Susan, now with cancer.

Maybe they, like me, have run the numbers. We went to an all-girl Catholic high school. The chances of a woman having breast cancer in her lifetime is one in eight. If there are about forty of us at each reunion, five of us will have breast cancer. Two of us will die from it.

She is slight and bald from chemotherapy, and I find myself sitting alone with her there on the velvet couch. It is only a moment that she is there alone, while everyone else is packed into the kitchen, but I spot her, and I sit down, and she takes my hand, and thanks me for coming. *I wasn't sure you'd remember me*, she says. *Of course I remember you*, I say. Maybe because everyone knows she has studied the acting technique, or maybe because everyone knows she has cancer, they move into the room and circle around us. They, like me, might be mesmerized by her, the way she sits, composed with her back upright, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes attentive to everyone she is thanking. She sits, and they come and take her hand. For some reason she keeps one hand on my knee. The other hand she presses to each who comes by. I remember her arms and hands flying about the café, knocking over water glasses, vibrating like winter branches. She is effortless and graceful now.

We all listened then, we listen now. She thanks us all again and again. She thanks us for our little fundraiser. She thanks those who have come to walk with her, thanks those who have cooked for her, who have read to her, who have taken her to doctors' appointments. And now, at the president's house, we all want to help her more, and so a book is passed around where we can sign up, and a webpage is mentioned called *Caring Bridges*. We all sign up to help. She thanks us. She says she needs us. We make simple pledges.

It is late in the evening, and I'm still sitting on the couch with Susan. A woman approaches—whose hair is cut in a pageboy just below the ears, who we used to call Poppalowski, who used to wear large, round glasses that slipped down to the bottom of her nose, which I know only because it has been brought up at reunions, who is now a doctor of oncology specializing in breast cancer—and pulls up the ottoman and sits there and takes each of our hands. She tells Susan to hang in there, to call her, and to not allow them to take all her lymph nodes. *There is no study that shows that taking all the lymph nodes will make any difference in your overall survival rate. If they test negative, leave them in. It's a quality of life issue. You'll get through this*, the class doctor says, and now makes eye contact with me. Then she adds that she is a breast cancer survivor herself.

The class doctor leaves and Susan tells me about her studies in London. It's about living consciously, mindfulness. *All could be gathered*, she tells me, *every thought, every gesture, along with every breath, all could be gathered by simply letting it happen and becoming aware*. She explains how she worked with a chair for years, a simple wooden kitchen chair. She practiced sitting and then standing. For years, sitting, then standing, until she had it, effortless sitting and standing. This is what she says, Lydia who is Susan who now calls herself Lydia. I heard about this name change at the last reunion, which I went to but Lydia missed. I thought *Lydia* curious. I deeply wanted Susan, the one I remembered. Sitting across from her now, it makes sense. She seems softer, different.

Sitting there, I think Lydia knows me, knows that half the time I have second thoughts about my thoughts, that I am paralyzed with a thousand things I could say as I try to formulate that one statement that might mean something. Suddenly she turns to me and says, *You know what you have been in my life? So important,*

just everything. Thank you for coming.

She gets up from the couch, leaves me with my hand in my lap. She is stunningly simple—a bald woman in T-shirt and jeans. She lifts her head up so that her body seems to face me, and then she faces the room, her spine follows, then her legs; she seems gazelle-like, standing there in an animal pause, as if on the wavy ledge of the sierra range. She turns to the women gathered in a half-circle around her. She thanks everyone again.

Later, she came to visit me where I lived in the country with my partner. The weekend she sat in my bathroom it was two weeks after her mastectomy. Her stitches needed to come off. Actually, her wound was taped shut, they had used topical adhesives, half-inch strips of tape to keep the wound closed. So I did that. We both sat in the bathroom, and I un-taped her breast. I took a washcloth and wet her breasts. I kept dipping it in warm water so that her stitches would come unglued. And she stared ahead, I think at the mirror. She was quiet as I peeled off her stitches. Then she thanked me.

Later my partner and Lydia and I went to the farmer's market. We bought an eggplant and Lydia cooked it for us as she had learned to at some restaurant in London. We went to a wine store and she picked the wine. We ended up at a stable because we had told Lydia about my niece's horse that was having a problem with some lameness. Recently, she had begun to use her centering technique on lame and wounded animals. Lydia had become an interpreter of horses. She told us this about horses: You wait for the horse to give eye contact, you hold a hand out before pressing it to the muzzle, then stroke the horse at the flat between the eyes. She seemed to know about putting a shoulder to the chest of the horse. *It makes them quiet*, she said.

I stood and watched her lean into our horse. I watched her roll her arm into that crevice between the horse's shoulder and barreled stomach. She softly announced that the horse's back pain was compensation for tendonitis in the left leg. It was November by then, the air was chilled, the steam poured from the horse's nostrils; you could smell the hay and the manure and it seemed right, or at least I could sense that the horse was at ease with Lydia's touch. I Googled her later and found pictures of Lydia with all kinds of equines. She had stable owners, and race tracks, and polo teams for clients.

It was probably about that time—that I was standing next to her in the stables—that a cancer was growing in my body, though I wouldn't have known it then. I think, ah, Lydia, you missed that one, the obvious one, but then again, maybe she had not. Maybe along the way, as she drafted herself from a wild being to being contained, maybe she had known those things—whatever it is that we gather but do not express.

I last saw her in the city, in her garden apartment. I brought her a cantaloupe that I put in the small fridge under the counter. She patted the bed and I sat down next to her and she put her head on my arm and was quiet for a while. I asked her how illness had changed her. I don't know where I found the tenacity to ask that, but I wanted to know. She said now she noticed smaller things like the difference in taste between yesterday's cantaloupe and today's, and noticed

smaller kindnesses like people trying to make eye contact and nod to her on the street. *You thank people for visiting. You thank them for bringing soup. There is no stammering, no awkwardness. People ask how you how you're doing; you answer. You rarely lose your way anymore,* she said, directing it all to me and, for whatever reason, I remember this.

A memorial service for Susan is held at the president's house, in the yard. There's a tiki hut bar along the fence and the president is pouring champagne. There are white folding chairs and flowers on the tables, and women get up now and then to remember Lydia. *Do you remember the pool party?* someone says and everyone seems to join in: *We were all naked, the clothes were floating in the pool, everyone was tripping. Everyone was tossing their empties into the pool, watching them sink without breaking. Remember? And then the parents walked in, their flight had been cancelled. They were supposed to be going to Venezuela, remember?*

And then someone else gets up and remembers taking the bus out to the stables the next day: *We were all hung-over. Probably twenty of us with headaches, trotting our horses down that path that edged the city and hitting the highway that bordered the woods. And breaking into a gallop on the highway, remember? The stable hand yelling goddamnit girls, slow down! Remember? The one stable hand? Can you believe they sent us out with one stable hand? Wasn't his name Rocco?* someone asks. *But he took us out again!* someone else remembers. *The riding club went there all the time with this guy. The Angry Stable Hand, isn't that what we called him?* someone shouts amid laughter, and I ask myself if I could have been a member of a riding club.

One of our classmates has a home on the river and the reunions have become twice yearly events—one in the city, one in the country, where inevitably there is a bonfire and someone remembers the pool party. The pool party has become more ritualized, to the point where it must be remembered. And I am beginning to think that I never attended. It is a couple years after Lydia passed away and a year since my own cancer diagnosis. I go to sit on a bluff overlooking the Illinois River and I bring wine and listen. We all feel somewhat celebratory because I have survived my cancer, or at least a PET scan shows I am clear. I called our class oncologist, Poppalowski, a few times for guidance, and classmates turned up at my door with pillows and soups, and I thanked them. We try to agree on the particulars of the pool party. *There was a pool party. Lydia hosted it, and someone else.* The next person adds that *Susan never hosted the pool party, she wasn't living at home then. It wasn't in Susan's building. It was the one across from hers.* We're never sure if she should be remembered as Susan or as Lydia. At this new reunion, the one on the bluff, we continue into the night and stare into the bonfire and try to remember the particulars. Whose party was it then? And I feel it again, the futility of the reunion. Others around the bonfire scramble to pin down whose party it was, whose parents were they, with faces frozen, standing at the edge of the pool tarmac. My mind wanders and I remember sitting on Susan's bed the last time I went to see her. Again, I felt I could ask her anything... *and why are you crying?* I asked. *The loss,* she said. *I wanted to keep it all. And I am crying for the loss.*

WHITE LILIES

It is hard for the dying to leave us.
We make it hard for them. So they wait
for us to step outside before they cut
the cord. So the baby
in the cabin, lungs full of staph,
who had been fighting the infection
for long nights and days
waited until his mother went out
to chop firewood before he sighed
and stilled. How can I forget her
running across the wet pasture
with his body in her arms
as though my mother were a witch
who could bring back the dead?
I picked the thick white lilies from our garden
for his grave, but was not permitted to the place
where the mourners gathered. Instead I waited
in the silent house, unfolded
the image of his mother
with her hair wild as the wind
and the weight of him in her arms
a stone, a feather, a sunflower
as my mother rose to meet her
or what I have imagined, the map of memory
creased and softened
like a star repeating its trajectory into the sea,
the father who did not yet know
coming up the gravel driveway
with a shovel over his shoulder
whistling, kicking the mud off his boots
before he opened the door.

VIRTUOSO

If you are good at soccer, the whole world will know
your name. Your perfect foot
will find the ball and send it to the goal. You will
endorse sports drinks, watches.
Beautiful women will vie to have your illegitimate children,
will fish your condoms out of the garbage and insert them.

If you are good at poetry, half a dozen
poets will know your name. Nobody will ask you
to endorse anything, though your need is acute,
and your husband will compete with your boyfriend
not to be the father of your illegitimate children.

If you are good at sex, though,
who will know your name?
What a shame, to have such a private
skill, such talent as can peel back the covers.
You are the one who puts the name of God
into the mouths of your lovers.

Even the chess players, even the speed eaters,
even the spelling bee winners are better known than you.
Only a few lovers remember you in those early hours
when they can't sleep, and that, for you, will have
to be enough. No sexual spectator sports, no audience
to appreciate your cavorts. And if you can't play this fucking
game, your shame will be private, you will not
be picked last for the team, you will not come
in last for not coming
at all; no one will ever know.

Miranda Pearson

A WALK IN THE PARK

We take the sloping wheelchair paths,
past rhubarb leaves so giant you could
curl up and live in one. It's only
three months since his death,
two months off drink, and we
have to live gently. We're at the age

when you join gardens, when you
require colour, assertive flowers,
with their arched out sentences,
that say again and again it's possible
to remake a landscape,
to let it topple and change.

We are animals that live to endure;
walk these paths to the glass house
with its fragrant air, glimpse
of petrol-blue parrots between
Matisse's cut-out fronds, shining
and graphic. The rose-pink cockatiel
that would return later,
perched on a mail box in a dream.

We are learning about leaving;
about holding on. How the body
is a new sort of friend, flawed,
unreliable. Of all things
clouds are the most beautiful.
You say no, trees. These
are the kind of disputes we can
handle. The slamming of a car door,
a ringing phone—are too much.

ALMOST-HOME

I have an almost-home that I don't quite know what to do with. The word *Petrozavodsk* haunts my childhood memories, and yet I never bothered to inquire where the city was, or why my would-be geographical origins were so difficult to pronounce and impossible to explain. Growing up in 1980s Vancouver, when people still thought espresso was spelled *expresso*, the only Russian émigré in my school, I didn't have much reason to talk with anybody save my parents about Petrozavodsk, the city I knew but didn't know, this home I might have had, but which I'd never seen. A convoluted consonant cluster of a word that I couldn't even pronounce in English. A place so far removed from my familiar I began to wonder whether it was another one of those things from *that* world that my parents had made up. And it followed me everywhere.

At home, Petrozavodsk was part of our vernacular. It stood as a placeholder for my father's last job in Soviet Russia, for life in a communal apartment, for our ultimate stop before applying for exit visas to Israel, for a life upended.

A family story: As a child, I couldn't pronounce Petrozavodsk and called it *petrocaca*. My parents must have been visibly charmed by my neologism since that is the word they now use. For a while, I wasn't sure whether the city was an actual place or referred to a state of mind. The here before here.

In those days, I couldn't tell you where home was. From our living room window, through a pair of binoculars, I watched life unfold in a house across the street. I studied the layout of Mary and Bill's living room and memorized the sequence of TV shows they watched until I could retrace the interior in my mind and play through their evenings like a movie-reel: *The Brady Bunch* followed by *Wheel of Fortune* with a break for tea in between and, after supper on Thursdays, *Jeopardy* and *Knight Rider*. I scrutinized their routine until my mother grew suspicious.

"What are you doing with those binoculars?"

"Watching Mary and Bill."

"Well, don't be too noseey."

"I think I'd like to live with them," I told her, which made her pause. "I like how they do the same thing every night and even eat the same food." What I didn't tell my mother was that I thought they had a home and I didn't.

"Your grandmother sent those binoculars. They're for going to the theatre and looking at actors or opera singers up close."

"That's what I'm doing."

A few days later, the binoculars were gone.

I had been peering into Mary and Bill's life through Soviet theatre glasses, sent by my grandmother from a country that used to be home to a place that was now somewhere in between. The same theatre glasses I might have used had

we lived in Petrozavodsk, where my parents likely would have taken me to the children's theatre or the circus.

Petrozavodsk became a subtext, a world beneath the one I lived in. Sometimes it would hover at the surface of my world, and then disappear underground again. In university, a friend in one of my advanced Russian classes told me that she had learned Russian at the University of Petrozavodsk. I hadn't heard the word spoken in a few years and looked the place up on a map in the library. It was the first time I'd heard the city name uttered by someone who wasn't part of my family. The city existed. Right there, as a yellow spot on a map, on the shore of Lake Onega, north of St. Petersburg, not far from the White Sea. The capital of Karelia. Near the churches at Kizhi, which I'd heard about because my parents had a replica of a small wooden church built without a single nail on one of their armoires. As I child, I wondered why our house was filled with churches and not synagogues. Not even a *mezuzah* on the door. But wooden churches—some on wood panels, some lying around as extra gifts, some little statuettes—everywhere.

And then Petrozavodsk plunged into oblivion again.

In an essay called "Journey to Armenia," Osip Mandelstam writes about the verb tense he would choose to inhabit, if he could. "I want to live in the imperative of the future passive participle—in the 'what ought to be.'" I'm invested in a much more tentative space; I would give anything to walk about in the "what might have been" tense, the one that didn't happen but potentially might have. An exercise in fiction making. I don't necessarily want to travel back or forward in time, but I'd welcome a collection of many different slices of the present.

It was my father's idea to revisit Petrozavodsk the summer we met up in St. Petersburg. Before I joined my parents, I spent most of my days in the *publichka*—the St. Petersburg Public Library and archives—reading newspapers from the late 1920s, trying to figure out whether these homeless émigrés in Paris I wrote about were ever missed back home. I read, searched for clues, and in the end found nothing, which confirmed my initial hypothesis. Vladislav Khodasevich and Marina Tsvetaeva, two Russian poets-turned-memoirists in 1920s and 1930s Paris, had been abandoned by their homeland. Their names erased from literary memory back home, they responded with an urgency to document a world that no longer existed.

I wasn't sure what else to do in those archives. I went looking for something more uplifting and saw the Baedekers—old travel guides—and read Alexander Blok's copy of the guide he had used during his travels around Italy in the late 1890s in preparation for his Italian cycle of poems. I wasn't sure what I was doing—all this vicarious travelling, dreaming of elsewhere. Somehow if I knew where Blok had travelled in Italy, if I held his guidebook in my hand and read his marginalia, I hoped I might learn something about myself. I might understand what I was doing living and working in the middle of the middle of the United States. I might, somehow, know what it meant to be at home.

Petrozavodsk-bound, my parents and I boarded a ten-hour night train north from St. Petersburg. I was about to see the city I would have grown up in had we not emigrated in 1978.

Petrozavodsk was founded in 1703, the same year as St. Petersburg, by Peter the Great's chief governor, Prince Menshikov. More prosaic than I expected, the city's name literally means "Peter's factory," in reference to the factories that produced the bulk of Russia's armaments during the Emperor's frequent wars with Sweden in the early part of the 18th century.

By the time of our visit, not much remained of the city's original Petrine identity as an industrial, iron foundry capital. Instead, I noticed a monument to Marx and Engels in the town square. The two were seated on a bench next to one another, engrossed in conversation, likely postulating the principles of socialism. A block from them stood a new, controversial monument to a youthful-looking Yuri Andropov, former head of the KGB in Petrozavodsk and, later, the Soviet state. Instinctively, we crossed the street to distance ourselves from the memory of this man whose three-syllable name I remember hearing—either whispered with contempt or barked out with rage by my mother—almost daily over the course of his eighteen-month reign from 1982-84. My grandparents' repeated petitions for exit visas to Canada were refused by Andropov's regime, allegedly because they had privileged access to essential "state secrets." I remember looking at Andropov's photo in *Time Magazine*—an unsmiling, white-haired man with a precarious heart condition and a stony expression and wondering why this man refused to let me see my grandparents.

Here, not far from Marx, Engels, and now Andropov, my father held a visiting position on the piano faculty at the Petrozavodsk Conservatory from 1975-77 and, given his positive reviews, my parents hoped the job would grow into a permanent one. There was also the promise of a position opening up for my mother, once she graduated from the Leningrad State Conservatory, in spite of the infamous word branded in the fifth line of her passport. In Soviet parlance, which didn't allow for religion, Judaism was considered a nationality and the word *yevrei*—Jew—appeared in uppercase letters in every Soviet passport. I can think of no less desirable nationality for a Soviet citizen, and my parents' Jewishness clung to them mercilessly.

My father lived on the faculty floor of the conservatory dormitory, which functioned as a large-scale communal apartment. He had his own room, but shared the bathroom and kitchen with twenty others. My mother visited on weekends or whenever she could get away from her studies in Leningrad. As a three-year-old, I shuttled between sets of grandparents in Odessa and Kharkov and my parents in Leningrad and Petrozavodsk, depending on the availability of childcare. I was growing into a nostalgic nomad.

Is this almost-home of mine responsible for my addiction to northern climates? I might have grown up here, ferried between school, the conservatory, and our makeshift dormitory-apartment. I would likely have spent summers in Odessa with my grandparents, just like my mother had done before me. Summers on the Black Sea, dark winters near the Arctic Circle, not far from Old Russian

settlements and churches built of wood without a single nail. By my mid-thirties, I would likely already have children of my own, though I'd probably still share an apartment with my parents, and nobody would have to struggle to place my foreign-sounding accent.

This dormitory was the site of my parents' first business venture, which entailed buying and selling large quantities of underwear through a trusted source in the Ukraine. A friend of theirs from Kharkov, Marina, assured them there was a killing to be made by importing and selling packs of *Nedel'ka*—cotton, hip-hugging women's underwear with the days of the week inscribed on them, logically called "little week" and made in East Germany. Though available in Petrozavodsk, *Nedel'ka* hadn't yet penetrated the Ukrainian underwear market. The scheme involved my mother lining up for hours in Petrozavodsk, buying fifty packages of underwear, running to the post office, and shipping them to Kharkov, where Marina would pick up the parcel, sell the heavily marked-up goods to her network of consumers, keep a modest percentage for herself, and send the profits back to the Karelian capital. In the end, it turned out that the *Nedel'ka* craze never managed to reach Kharkov; women there seemed content with Soviet or Bulgarian underwear and weren't craving a higher priced, East German model. Months later, Marina bought one package for herself, sent the rest back to Petrozavodsk, and my parents lived with the forty-nine remaining packs of underwear until they applied for emigration visas to Israel. At that point, they began offering packs of *Nedel'ka* to friends, colleagues, students, and neighbours, lest the underwear follow us into the West.

I stood in the courtyard of the dormitory, flanked by three other apartment buildings with a rusty playground in the center, complete with a metal slide and a swing set with only one of the four seats remaining, grass growing haphazardly wherever it hadn't yet been stomped out. Is this where I would have grown up, thinking of ingenious ways to cover up my "nationality" like my father's colleague Lara Matveyenko, who had pasted a photo of her son as a pudgy toddler over the fifth line in her passport? Sometimes her scheme worked, but her husband couldn't obscure his roots no matter how hard he tried. Even though he finally paid enough to have his last name, Lerner, erased from his passport and replaced with Matveyenko, his communist party membership card still said Lerner, and everybody knew that the word "Ukrainian" in his passport was a sham.

"What floor did you live on?" I asked my father.

"I don't remember."

"But you lived here for almost two years."

"Why would I want to remember this?"

I hadn't realized that for all of the two years my father lived here he thought of nothing but emigrating. He was here at a time when absenteeism from work was considered a crime and was publicly chastised for missing a day's work when his train from Leningrad was delayed twelve hours. He had called in "sick" from a pay phone in Leningrad, but the secretary tracked down the source of his phone call and quickly informed her superior. The next day, my father was met with a stern cross-examination from the dean, who determined that "our dear

comrade has lied.”

I imagined my parents and the Lerner sitting around the small table in their room with an Uzbek rug hanging behind their bed, composing letters—offering each other editorial suggestions—to the Office of Visas and Registration, begging for family reunification with their fictitious Israeli relatives, the first step in the bureaucratic process of receiving exit visas to Israel. The Dutch embassy in Moscow representing Israeli interests in Russia had issued letters of invitation from Israeli citizens inviting their “family members” to join them in their “historical motherland.” My parents claimed an uncle Schmuel who lived on a kibbutz not far from Tel Aviv and the Lerner declared an aunt Sarah in a neighbouring kibbutz. The letters were fictitious works of art: Though Schmuel and Sarah existed, they had no idea who we were and were certainly not our relatives.

Once the OVIR accepted the query, my parents began the exhaustive process of collecting documents from every person they had come in contact with—including my father’s ex-wife, the dean of the conservatory, the head librarian in his hometown, the superintendent of the apartment where he grew up and where he was still registered—stating that they held no economic debt to the Soviet Union.

Had the dean’s initial refusal to attest to my father’s rectitude prevailed and had a friend of my mother’s who had experienced similar difficulties not advised my parents to march over to the KGB headquarters located directly behind the Marx and Engels monument, demand an appointment, and explain to an official with hair pulled back into a bun that their attempt to emigrate to their “historical motherland” and seek “reunification with relatives” was being thwarted, I would likely never have made it to Canada. Instead, the official listened patiently, gave a cursory glance at my photo, which my mother always carried inside her own passport, and told them she’d take care of the matter. A week later, the dean cleared my father of any economic debt to the Soviet state.

My parents were lucky. Difficult though their process was, they got away. Five years later, my grandfather met with a KGB official in Odessa, begging for similar “reunification with relatives” in Canada, and his request was met with the official’s icy message, which my grandmother still quotes, intoning the syllables in a spiteful drone that reeks of certainty: “You will not live to see your relatives.”

I had come to Petrozavodsk to recover strands of nostalgia from the home I never had. I thought my father would recognize every pothole on his way to the conservatory, would show me where he bought groceries and books and the post office where he mailed letters to my mother. Instead, just about everything had escaped his memory, apart from the train station and the embankment along the lake, which, thirty years ago, had been decrepit, dirty, and barely walkable.

My mother took a photograph of me standing with my father on the shores of Lake Onega, smiling. Thirty years ago the photo might have been a picture of us at home. Here we are now, on a pilgrimage to a place I’ve heard of my entire life, a city that I might have known intimately. I might have known where to

buy good coffee, good pastries, good bread, and I wouldn't have had to ask for directions.

“What did you do when you lived here? Where did you hang out?”

“Hang out? I practiced, I worked, I missed your mother, and I dreamed of getting out of here.”

Carla Drysdale

INHERITANCE

One of my two sons devours books
as I did, bespectacled, silent.

There are childhood facts I'd like to check,
but the past is unpopular

with my mother. Her husband wasn't a reader.
His eye was on me during the day

and at night, when the door opened
and carved a wedge of hall light

into my dark room. I would wait for it.
Her pain was mine when

I heard the hush through the wall
after one of their bedroom fights

and her fall into Valium numbness.
My other son peers into

the legacy behind my eyes,
at what I'm trying to hide.

His pleasure and pain
are always mine

as when he kisses his cat or bends
his pen in half and yells at me,

enraged by the words
on the page

in front of him.

RAFAEL'S QUESTION

My son carries the name
of the healing archangel. He

sits in my lap, at the computer's
luminous screen. We look at photos

of my parents, divorced
when I was two. Their faces

sagging, eyes hopeful.
Still alive, but their visits to us

number less than a handful
in his five-year-old life.

Sometimes, after brushing our teeth
he'll say, "Mom, make it like a river."

And I'll cup my palms together
under running water, and he'll drink.

Tonight as we sit together
I'm silent, because it's hard to explain.

He asks me, "Do you still love them?"
So gently, so gently. Like a lullaby.

NOTES ON BREATH

I was born blue. Early and blue like a 5 a.m. summer morning. My mother yelled at the nurses, forgetting her own medical training and reasoning, as they tried to rub and gently smack my six-pound body into taking an inhale.

Later, she would tell me it was such a hard labour, and all she could think was, *All of that for a dead baby. I did not go through all that pain for more pain.*

But then, I breathed. I cried.

And I would spend the following years searching for those first few, missed breaths.

I was five and my mother was bathing me. She knew about the fragility of small bodies, but also how much they could take. Though she was a nurse, there were never Band-Aids in the house; if my brother or I skinned a knee, she'd clean it and leave it to the open air to heal. We rarely got to stay home sick. A couple of grape-flavoured children's Tylenol could fix most ailments.

I was paranoid about getting soap in my eyes, so she never poured water over my head after she had shampooed my hair. Instead, I would lie back, my spine curved, the top of my head dipped beneath the water as she ran her fingers through my hair. Once, she pushed me down so my entire head was submerged—held me there so long I began to struggle, my eyes opening to her smiling face through the warm water. Of course, I must have known she would let me up. Let me breathe. But she held a bit longer, her free hand still in my hair, until I began thrashing. Until she let go. I don't remember gasping for air—just crying as she said, *You're fine. You're fine. What's the matter? Did you get soap in your eyes?*

Maybe it was a lesson. Maybe she was preparing me without knowing it. What do you do when the person you trust most holds you under? Please don't misunderstand.

When I was older, my mother came home from her night shifts around 7 a.m., and we would sit on the back porch in wicker chairs while she smoked cigarettes and told me about her night. I listened, sleepy and still warm in my half-sleep. Every so often she'd tell me about some kid from my school who'd been admitted with appendicitis or a broken arm, and when I went to school later that morning, I got to be the one who told my class. She often told me things I was probably too young to hear, but my childish curiosity craved to know. One morning, she told me it had been quiet in the emergency room all night and

she'd needed to go down to the morgue. She was working with a nurse, Cathy, who was terrified of it. My mother has a good sense of humour: She convinced Cathy to go down to the basement with her, convinced her that she needed help with something. As she told me the story, my mother explained that if you press on a dead person's chest, they will let out a final breath, one last exhale—even if they've been cold for days.

My mother pressed on some old man's chest and Cathy nearly fainted, my mother laughed as she told me—then fell very quiet. *It's different, though, when you know the people being kept there. I won't go in when there are people I know*, she said. We lived in a small town and everyone knew each other. Her job was rarely easy.

The August before I turned twelve, we went camping in Nelson, BC for a few weeks. One day, my father drove us into town to buy new school clothes (my mother had said the sleeves on my coat were too short). As my father was about to park, we saw an elderly woman get hit by a car in the crosswalk across the street. I cannot begin to explain how far it knocked her. Maybe a bus-length. Neither of my parents said anything. My father parked the truck and my mother got out so quickly she nearly fell—but all I could do was focus on the woman's shoes, so far from her body, lying there on the crosswalk. Small, white, faux-leather heels. I didn't want to breathe; sitting there reminded me of driving by a cemetery or over a bridge or through a tunnel—it felt like I should hold my breath.

When my mother came back she had blood on her hands and it scared me because I'd only ever seen small stains on her scrubs. She whispered to my father about someone bringing oxygen from the nearby pool and *rough shape but maybe, maybe she'll make it*. But I knew she'd saved her.

The next morning we sat next to the radio in the camper, waiting for some news about the accident or whether the woman had survived. I went outside and smeared ketchup on my new white sneakers.

The next morning I found them clean, and no one ever said anything about it.

I travelled to South America the summer before my last year of university. In Peru, my friend and I had planned to hike from Cusco to Machu Picchu. We would trek through the Sacred Valley on the first day: a twenty-six-mile hike through the Andes.

Rather than flying, we took an overnight bus from Lima because it was supposed to lessen the chance of altitude sickness (the only cure is to descend back to a lower elevation). But when we pulled into the bus station I knew something was wrong even before my eyes fully opened. My breaths were short and laboured as though the air I inhaled bypassed my lungs to go elsewhere. I

reached into my backpack for a prescription bottle holding white, chalky pills—the pills my doctor had told me he wasn't sure would even help.

I stepped off the bus in a haze.

I was careful over the next few days. I didn't drink the pisco sours, and I slept a lot. I took stock of every breath as we browsed shops and markets in the Plaza de Armas. I could breathe, however shallow the inhales, and so I tried not to panic. Stairs were difficult and I began to feel like someone who'd smoked for twenty-five years. It didn't matter how much air I sucked in—the mountains had my lungs in their fists.

On the third night, a woman from the tour company visited us at our hostel. We were to start our trek to Machu Picchu the next day. The woman asked how we were doing, if we had any concerns. I lied.

The first half-hour was fairly flat, and I managed well enough. It was early in the morning. Sunny and cold. Every time I stopped, I pretended it was so I could take a photo of the ancient stone baths or the sage hills against the blue sky. It was only me, my friend, and our tour guide (whose name we had not heard correctly and so we called him "Buddy" behind his back); there was supposed to be a horse and its handler accompanying us, but they hadn't shown up and Buddy said they would catch up eventually. The horse would be our emergency transportation if one of us became ill or injured.

I lost track of time and place as we moved further from civilization. My chest smouldered and I had to stop after every ten steps to try to catch my breath. We were too far in to turn back, and I didn't want that anyway. I thought of the many times in my life when I'd wanted to feel real isolation, when I'd wanted to be somewhere no one could find or reach me. The path through the Sacred Valley was that place, and I knew it.

If I passed out, what could be done? I would die up there, I was sure. The only person we saw was a woman who seemed to appear out of nowhere along one of the ridges. She was selling hand-woven belts. She didn't speak Spanish, only Quechua: a native South American language spoken primarily in the Andes. I chose one with a frog pattern, and when I placed the Peruvian *Soles* in her hand, she looked confused. Buddy explained that she'd never seen the currency before, and I realized then that we had crossed a threshold, somewhere behind us.

As we continued to climb, I began to feel like I didn't have a body. I felt like a machine that was slowing down. With each inhale, my chest heaved like it was pulling a pail of water from the well of my belly. My legs continued to step forward and I grew tired of expecting them to just stop. I began to feel oddly weightless. There were no trees, only the dry, grassy slopes, the clear sky, and then: a cobalt blue lake below. I'd never seen blue like that before, so deep it could be bottomless. If anything ever fell into it, the lake would drag it under and never give it back. I could have placed a stone on my tongue just to try to understand the density of the lake's colour. And there, I decided I didn't care if I died. If I had to die someplace, why not in the most beautiful and peaceful place I had ever stood?

Hours later, we came to some Inca ruins: houses perfectly lined up in rows, the structures made of red stone, the thatched roofs blown away or decomposed long ago. They looked like dollhouses, like a god could have just reached its hand into each one and arranged the furniture. I hadn't realized how high up we were until I saw a town five miles below us. Buddy pointed to the house we'd be staying in that night, a little further up the mountain. He said the woman who kept the guesthouse wouldn't be expecting us for a little while longer, so we sat down in the field and I settled into an exhaustion like I'd never known.

Afterwards, whenever I needed to be reminded how much the body can take, I went back to that place.

A month later, my father picked me up from the airport. During the ride home, I told him about my trip. Normally a keen listener, he seemed distracted. When I told him about Machu Picchu, his expression didn't change. He just watched the road, and I knew something was wrong with my mother.

She'd gotten herself addicted to narcotics (among other things) five years prior and my parents had been split up for the last two of them. But my father checked in on her constantly; he was so afraid of what might happen if she was left alone for too long. I'd been staying with her before I left for my trip and knew what her highs were like: mint chocolate ice cream in the microwave, the plastic coffeemaker on a gleaming red stove element, the smell of burning plastic, the kettle shrieking at 4 a.m. A few times I'd found her passed out, facedown and naked on her bedroom floor. Every time I prepared myself for her death, I found her still breathing.

We parked in the driveway and my father said he would wait for me to come back out and tell him things were OK. My mother had had a few bad highs while I was away and, out of anger, he hadn't been in to check on her for two weeks.

I smelled blood and cat urine as soon as I opened the front door. I dropped my backpack in the kitchen and saw the crimson pool on the hardwood, right in front of the glass pantry door, which had shattered. The blood was smeared on the walls leading to her room, and the cats had tracked it everywhere too. I felt nauseous. I stopped at her doorway and saw the lump that was her body under the covers. I held everything inside of me—I wanted to be brave enough to go to her, but instead I went to get my father.

He was leaning against the car, looking at me like he didn't want to know. *There's blood*, was all I could say.

At the hospital, the doctor told me faces bleed a lot. One deep, long cut across her face. One cut for all that blood. I stayed with her while they stitched her up, and my father went back to the house to clean the mess, to try to erase our memory of that afternoon.

It was late by the time they discharged her. She lit a cigarette in the passenger

seat, and I was annoyed but also grateful she was still high from the pills. She'd probably be out of it for days. That was the thing: She always got to come down from it like it was a dream, while my father and I carried her heavy memories in our throats. She took a long drag, and I hated her for how confidently she sucked in the smoke. Like she didn't even need air to breathe.

A year later, I was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, though at first I refused to believe it. The years of living away from my mother, wondering every day if she was still alive (she never picked up the phone), had finally taken their toll. Instead of fixating on her, I began to fixate on myself. I was obsessively aware of my pulse, my breath, and the small mechanics of my body. Often, I'd stare at my face in the mirror, just to prove to myself I still existed. My mind became completely separate from my body, and I no longer trusted my lungs to breathe for me once I fell asleep. My eyes closed only from pure exhaustion.

My doctor suggested I try yoga. At first, I ignored the instructors when they coached the class on how to breathe into each pose. In mountain pose we were supposed to press the crowns of our heads towards the sky; we were supposed to find length in our spines—but I only felt myself wanting to sink halfway into the earth. But I kept going every day.

A few months later I began to feel better, but I knew I would never feel "normal" again. One day, the instructor told us to find the space in our bodies where no storm had hit and the trees were still standing. I did not know of such a place. I started crying and continued to cry as quietly as I could for the rest of my practice.

Afterwards, I sat with the instructor and we talked, gently at first, about my anxiety and my distrust for my body. She read me a poem that said, *Each inhale is a blessing, and each exhale a prayer.* Yes, I thought. Every time my breath left my body, I begged for it to come back to me like someone stuck in an impossible love. I told her I constantly felt as though I would just drop dead at any moment. She said she understood. *But, your lungs haven't ever given you reason to doubt them, have they? Haven't they always held up?*

I supposed they had. There had never been a morning when I didn't wake up, never a mountain I'd died at the top of, never a nervousness or crisis so bad that my lungs wouldn't let me breathe again after I'd calmed down. I thought of my birth. *But even then, here I am.*

I often wonder if I will have a daughter someday. I'm still young and far from knowing if I'll have children, but sometimes I think of her. I imagine a nurse telling me to breathe as I guide her into being. I try to imagine the pain, but of course I cannot—I can only be sure that I will try to take breaths deep enough for both of us, so when she enters the world, cold and held, she'll take an inhale that expands her tiny lungs so big she'll never know what it feels like to have

them be empty. But the body makes no promises. Sometimes the best we can do is wait for another morning.

Alisha Dukelow

METAMORPHOSIS

And now the land and sea are not distinct, all is the sea, the sea without a shore.

—Ovid

Squirmers, we named tadpoles
scooped in ice cream pails of pond water,
fat raindrops, black pearls.

We steeped our fingers
in their slippery wriggle;
each morning, poked

for tail tickle, electric
flicker of eye, greening throat,
those *almosts*.

Then the leg sprouts,
the bulging head crowns,
but when lung sacs swelled

from pollywog gills,
they grew liquidlocked,
couldn't catch dry breath,

went still. Murked specks
mottling the yellow meniscus,
we lifted them half-limbed,

dun stones in our palms,
prodded their cool bellies,
thumbed for throb.

Whispered, *wakeup*.

Geoffrey Nilson

FRACTALS

*I would meet you now
and I would wish this scar
to have been given with
all the love
that never occurred between us.*
—Michael Ondaatje, “The Time Around Scars”

in the bookshop i turned to a bargain
copy of wordsworth on the long
table & your soft mass moved past.
not one infinite internet trace
comes back in the query of your smell
but you were between the rows,
swift off-white ghost, milky
palm that will not melt snow,
your form close to what i'd known.
i would meet you now

under suburban night. i'd be more
than a spider of airborne static
between dust & light. more
than cabin-fever. i would be
worth the cost of lust.
the selfish flirt with bizarre
in the cold sibilance of skin,
spine vibration under my hand.
i'll follow your lead & look far
and i would wish this scar

tattooed on my chest like a barcode
warning: i am human. happier
than when i left you at the pump,
hair draped like an auburn
stole, voice-rasp all but fuzzed,
hand in hand in glove.
i didn't have ties, want ropes
or crave what foundation meant.
did you see me lie? what a bluff
to have been given. with all the love

fractaled, self-similar,
scared of that bubble of warm
created in the space between chests
as one body descends on another.
the incubation of voice inside voice
saying enough, sisyphus,
enough, it's lonely on that mountain.
my hubris was like a conversation
with silence. there was so much
that never occurred between us.

GELIGNITE

I had to know how far to push him, where his edges were, what set him off. For all I knew he could've been my last chance.

After thirty years of marriage to an oaf, one day I hopped in the Chev. Said I was going out for milk. I'd had enough, and the kids were grown. I did like so many women and slipped out the door one morning and drove west, toward the coast, watching the house fade away in the rear-view mirror until I could cover it by holding up my thumb. I didn't tell him I was going, I didn't pee in his shoes like my friend Sally did with her dearly beloved. No note, no nothing, just gone. I bet he's still at home, waiting in his recliner for a supper no one's gonna bring.

I grew up on a fruit farm in the Okanagan; the only child of an apple man. Summers picking and hauling totes, sunlight warm on my bare brown arms, a babble of talk as the workers moved through the orchard. Winters pruning the trees, springtime spraying dormant oil and sulfur off the back of the tractor, me learning how to drive on that Ford 9N, bouncing and jerking the clutch—Dad hanging on and waving the spray nozzle like a knight in combat, laughing at my driving and yelling at the unseen enemy. But when the codling moths finally won, he got to daytime drinking in the dark corners of the empty packing shed and things got real ugly.

To this day I can remember hearing the soft flutter of grey wings as the up-valley wind brought the migrating adults, hundreds bumping blindly against the windows of our farmhouse. Dad just standing in the kitchen staring at his beat-down reflection in the glass. For every bug hitting the panes, there were a thousand in the trees laying their eggs under the bark scales. Some nights in bed waiting for sleep, just around that time between nodding off and staying up to reach for a magazine, everything fuzzy like the grey moths, I could almost feel them crawling on my body. Run. Squash them on the dirt path until it's greasy. Fall down in the slime. Bad dreams.

I was only eighteen when I met Harvey. He was selling agricultural chemicals out of the back of an old rusted-out van. He slept in there while he was on the road and for years after he still smelled of Atrazine and RoundUp. Didn't smell it then, though. I smelt adventure and escape so I married him. Standing up in the front of our church in the summer, pregnant by Christmas. What a mistake, but I didn't discover this until well after his ring wore a furrow round my finger. Still, he did get me out of one kind of valley and into another and gave me two kids that turned out pretty good.

Lordy, was he unpredictable. No more perching on the edge of the sofa when the truck crunched on the driveway gravel, wondering what sort of man's gonna come through the door. Hoping whatever happens, it doesn't wake the

kids again. Which is why I am pushing so hard now. So close to fifty, I can't afford to take chances. Don't have the time.

The first night after I left, I ended up in Princeton. Driving into the late afternoon, squinting like a day-caught orchard mole, I blamed the sun for the few streaks down my face. It was summer and full heat reflected from the dry mountainsides.

Thirsty work, leaving your life behind. The Princeton Hotel was a shaky old building which has since burnt to the ground. That evening in June, with a hot smoky wind coming from the wildfires up the Tulameen, it seemed like a palace to me. I got one of the few rooms they still used and tossed my stuff onto the bed. The squeal of lonely, tired springs told me it wasn't no Sealy like at home. After a quick shower and a touch-up on the old war paint, I went down to the pub.

Coming out of the bright glaring sun into the dark and cool parlour was like jumping into the Similkameen River, which I had done earlier—my hair still damp. Blinking my eyes to adjust to the dimness, I walked to an empty table and plunked myself into a worn seat, caught the eye of the bar lady and got my first cold beer. It went down with a satisfying sizzle, slaking the road thirst and beginning to build insulation around my recent sudden departure. The second and third joined it and the buzz crept in.

Tracing my finger through the wet rings left by the glasses, I didn't see him come up.

"Join ya?" A short fireplug of a man stood before me, blue eyes crinkling with his question. Nice teeth.

"Free country." I sat up and waved to a chair. My God, I think I even flipped back my hair and licked my lips glossy as he turned away and ordered two more before dropping solidly into the red vinyl seat.

The beers came and we clinked glasses. I leaned forward to study him. He wore clothes worked in but clean. A few tattoos coloured up his arms with a bruise-like blue from the ink slowly leaching out. Where does it go, I wondered. Into the blood, through the kidneys, pissed out into some cracked toilet. He had a shaved head that glistened with a slight sweat sheen. A soul patch dangled from his lower lip. Later I'd persuade him to grow a full bushy beard. But I told him you gotta let me shave your neck, keep it clean. I always wanted to shave a man. Something about holding a keen, sharp razor just over the jugular vein that keeps them honest on a customary basis.

"So, whaddya do for money?" I asked him.

"Professional homewrecker." He smiled and handed me a business card. *David J. McNeil, Licensed Blaster.* "I don't stand behind my work, I stand behind a tree." Funny guy. I needed a laugh.

Dave and I spent that summer running around the province blowing stuff up. I learned a lot about how things are put together by how you take them apart. We went up behind Lillooet to the old mines of Bralorne. There was this hundred fifty-foot brick chimney from an abandoned smelter. For years antique hunters and scavengers scraped and dug through the ruins and now the chimney

presented a real hazard of coming down on them. Dave thought that would be a just fate. Culture vultures, he called them.

The chimney towered over the abandoned company town. It's the same all across the province. Some big business comes in to dig up or cut down, and once it's all gone the playboys move on, leaving behind the breadwinners in flat distress to make their own way. There were a dozen houses with black vacant windows and kicked-in doors. Some of them half-burnt from drinking parties. I wondered about their stories—payday at the mine-site, dances in the hall, babies born, men mourned, never to come up from the shafts.

After putting out his warning signs and stringing up bright ribbon, saying "Danger—Blasting Zone" all round the site, Dave set to work laying the charges. I saw him glance up once at a row of shacks in the chimney's slim shadow and get a devilish grin. The first charge was placed in a cavity he chiseled out of the bricks with a pickaxe, sweating in the sun but still with that crazy smile. He called me to bring over a handful of what looked like fat sausages from Satan's kitchen. Stacking them in like on a Sunday brunch table, the last one he loaded with a safety cap and fuse. Then he went all round the chimney placing four more bundles with a delay fuse and linking them to the first charge.

When it was all set up he explained, "The first one, it goes off and takes out a wedge from that side. The chimney leans that way, and then the back ones go five milliseconds later. That keeps it in one piece all the way down, like a tree. Now, if I wanted it to crumble all in one pile, they'd all go at once. But I don't wanna do that, so watch this."

He pulled a Bic from his pocket and lit the fuse. Raised on a diet of TV cartoons with Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote, I kinda expected a lot of sputtering and sparks, but the fuse burned inside and just smoked. We had ninety seconds to get back behind the truck. Dave started his stopwatch and blew the signal on his air horn since a few spectators had gathered.

The crack of the first charge echoed back and forth through the narrow valley, followed almost instantly by the rest. For a moment the chimney stood still above all the commotion at its base. I glanced at Dave wondering what went wrong. He wasn't even looking up but was eyeing the row of cabins. Then, slowly, the bricks began to crack with a hollow sound as the eighty-year-old mortar bonds began to separate, and down she came. The cabins disappeared in an instant. What was once, now wasn't; their stories gone but safe from the vultures' scratching.

"Like I said. Homewrecker!" Dave grinned through the dust.

So what's the measure of a man like that? Playing with such high stakes each and every day, what does that leave him to give a woman? He didn't have a death wish. He drove sensibly, followed the WCB safety rules strictly, and kept his logbook up to date. Maybe playing with stuff like nitro and gelignite made him more aware of his own mortality, how he could be snuffed by a small miscalculation, made him live for the moment and that moment now included me.

Driving back that night to the Four Pines Motel in Lillooet, Dave had his sunburnt arm out the window. The dusk air was heavy with sage coming in

gentle over us. We had the radio on but it came and went with the bends in the road. Dave reached down and switched it off as if he wanted my full attention. He had it.

"I got a job offer up in the Yukon for the winter. Highway avalanche control. Sounds like fun."

Fun? Triggering off tons of ice and snow in semi-controlled chaos. Fun? The Yukon in the winter with all four hours of daylight and forty below. Some fun. More gravel clattered under the truck. Maybe I should thank the moths. I still felt the fuzzy buggers crawling on me sometimes. I once saw a blown-up picture of the adult codling moth, all frilly antennae scanning for someone to ruin. If it hadn't been for them, I thought, I wouldn't be here now sitting in the comfortable silence with Dave. I conveniently forgot the thirty years in between, the two kids now grown up, and the stucco bungalow back in Vernon with the oaf.

Can you do that? Just put half your life away when it goes bad. Drop a brick chimney on it and erase your version in a cloud of flying debris? Mix up some kind of memory insecticide and spray it all gone.

Dave was talking again. "If you wanted to come, I could call you my apprentice and we'd make more money. One winter up there and we'd be rolling in the dough. Enough to do most anything ya want."

So what did I want? No damn bugs and a good man to lie beside each and every night. Someone who doesn't get liquored up and nasty. Someone who asks me what I want.

Our last job of the summer was up in Prince George, at the pulp mill. Another stack to drop, but this one had to crumble straight down and it was big! We laid in the charges, connected the fuses and let 'er rip. When the dust settled, Dave looked worried.

"Shit, that was only seven. We loaded eight holes." How he could hear, let alone count the individual explosions, was beyond me, the apprentice.

Somewhere in the pile was a ten-pound surprise for the excavator operator waiting to load out the shattered chunks and Dave couldn't let that happen. He told me to stay put while he took a look around.

He was about halfway across the shard-strewn field when it went off. He was sat down hard and cut with a bit of flyrock. By the time I reached him on a dead run, he was staggering to his feet and giving me a goofy grin. The mill's first aid man was there with his kit and we fixed up the bleeding.

How do you give your heart to someone who might just evaporate? I didn't feel like starting over, making those first hesitant moves like we did at the Princeton Hotel, feeling all silly and shy. Going through that time of sneaking sideways-sparrow-looks at someone to size them up without appearing to.

Dave held onto my arm as we stumbled to the truck. I drove back to the motel on the hills south of town. We sat for a long time on the bed drinking a cold beer.

"That was a first. That misfire. Never had one before. Malfunction. Not our fault. There's some things you just can't predict or plan for." I squirmed around on the bed to face him. Things you can't foresee, forces beyond our control.

Moths, defective fuses, errors in judgment, bad choices. How often do you get another chance?

FLASH

I search through black and white photographs in albums, loose in cookie tins. Find his hockey pictures, baseball shots, his brother's wedding (I'm a bridesmaid), others at the beach, in the backyard, at our wedding, on our Florida honeymoon. In each his smile looks Photoshopped, enhanced with the flash of a twinkling tooth. I don't want the captured moments. Can't bring myself to toss the lot. Keep a few of the two of us because I looked damn good back then. The rest I put in the empty *Rieker Antistress* shoe box my boots came in.

Since the divorce, our lives touched once—a phone call at work. It was sales related, and the salesman my ex. He never expected to reach me. Nor I, him. I asked for his name and number. (The buyer was out.) He wanted to come over. I told him no.

I remember borrowing Aunt Lela's Ford. Waiting in the apartment parking lot after midnight, watching him go in, the lights go out. The scent of pine from the *Little Trees* air freshener dangling from the rear-view mirror. My eye exam—dilated pupils, blurred vision—the day I told him I knew. How clearly I saw.

Sandra Lloyd

SURFACE TENSION

Every year someone drowns in Go Home Lake:
a late-winter fisherman on a snowmobile
failing to clear the slushy gap
between ice and shoreline;
boats, loaded with drunken cottagers, whirring
at high speeds through the Haunted Narrows
hitting deadheads that float quietly
down Flat Rock Falls *from upriver*;
the child unsupervised by parents believing
their son has common sense enough
not to slip on damp rocks and be found
face down in the boat house,
blond hair a feathery fan
waving across the murky surface
dotted with tranquil water striders.

TRANSACTIONS

It all starts when Hal drops by and says he needs a car, and my brother Sam, acting like God, offers the old man's antique Buick for fifty dollars. Hal slaps his thigh, and asks if fifty bucks is all Sam's gonna give him. I stick my elbow into Sam's ribs. I want the little twerp to shut his face, but then Hal slides his dirty hand into his pocket and pulls out half a bill.

Well, what can Sam do? He's gotta take it. He fishes the keys up, while Hal glides around the old boat, kicking tires. I'm hoping one falls off, but no such luck. Hal trawls his commando knife out of his rucksack, then tosses his pack into the back seat. "Okay, boys," he says, waving his knife around, "Let's see what this junk heap can do."

It's a hot day but me and Sam both break a cold sweat. Sam tells Hal we gotta be some place, but Hal ain't listening. Next thing you know, we're all cruising along the highway, past the cows in the field, gold and green stripes of corn and tobacco, way, way out towards Essex just like we're going on a picnic.

Both Sam and me know Hal is crazy. He stuck a knife into some guy because he didn't like the way he talked, might have been the very knife he's strapped to himself for this joyride. It happened a couple of months ago down in Florida. He could have fried. They still use the electric chair down there, but his pappy's a judge and fixed it for him to come home. There was a whole big deal about it in the papers. Maple leaf forever and all that crap. Now Hal says if he's gonna do a murder, it'll be in his own back yard.

"Why'd ya go to Florida in the first place?" Sam asks like a retard. I could've kicked his ass.

"Old man sent me to Disney World. Some R & R after juvie, eh?"

"No kidding," Sam says, all excited, like he wants a blow-by-blow of the Magic Kingdom.

"Yeah," Hal says. He ain't offended at all. "It was real fun 'til this dip-stick got on my case for jumping the line at Space Mountain. 'Y'all know where the end of the line is?' he asked. 'Sure do,' I said and showed him."

Everyone knew Hal had a spur-of-the-moment temper. He never let on what he might do next. Even way back in grade school, he scared all the teachers. Mrs. Loomis was the only one who tried to get him any help. Instead of math, he got to go see the school counselor. She was fresh outta college, bleeding heart, all hopped up on *making the world a better place*. "Get in touch with your feelings," she told him. "Don't bottle it up."

He came back to Mrs. Loomis like a bomb about to explode. "My safety's off," he told her and went after Mike Riddell with a pair of pointy scissors. After that, there was no more counseling for Hal. His dad put him into "a special school" but they couldn't handle him there either. Finally he winds up hauling

water and chopping wood at good ole St. Jerome's. They call it wilderness therapy, but anyone who's been there knows it's just a cover to kick the shit out of troublemakers like Hal.

Sam knows enough to change the subject. He starts making small talk about UFOs. For a second, my heart starts beating normal again. Then the idiot twerp points at a cornfield. "There's supposed to be crop circles out there. I ain't never seen one, but I'd sure like to," he says. I would've smashed him in the face if he'd been sitting next to me, but instead I kicked the back of his seat and hoped he'd shut up. The last thing we wanted was to be in a cornfield with crazy Hal and his knife.

"All that UFO stuff is bullshit," Hal says. He's doing twenty clicks over the limit and swerves a little when he pops the lighter for his smoke.

"Oh yeah?" Sam says.

"Yeah," Hal says.

Before Sam can say another stupid thing, I butt in, "Maybe we can go for a drive another time, Hal. We really gotta be some place." I'm talking from the back seat, I'm sitting next to Hal's rucksack, I look into the rear-view and catch his eye twitch like a cricket. Hal slams the brakes so hard you can smell the rubber and the car skids. Sam's and my butt slide clear off our seats. Hal whips his head sideways like he's having convulsions.

"You mean you don't want to ride with me?" His eyes are bulging out of his shaved head like balloons.

"He don't mean that," Sam says, his voice all wuzzy like he's begging for mercy. "We like driving with you, don't we, Charlie?" I nod. I'm watching Hal in the rear-view, trying to decide if we ought to jump and roll, but then everything settles. Hal touches the gas. We're cruising.

Hal drags on his cigarette like I've seen asthmatics pull on their puffers. Sam's trying to look like he's enjoying the ride. "Them UFO sightings are all complete bullshit," Hal continues. "There ain't no such thing as UFOs, there ain't no such thing as aliens, and there ain't no close encounters."

"Lotsa people say different," Sam argues. "Lotsa people say they've seen weird lights and junk."

"Lotsa people is idiots," Hal says.

Yeah, I think, and Sam's one of the biggest.

"Before them crop circles appeared, people said they seen things in the sky. It was on the radio, a whole bunch a people, they seen fireballs and big round metal discs, and some official guy said it wouldn't surprise him at all if there was aliens or UFOs or shit like that. You got a smoke?" my A-hole of a brother calls to me.

I'm watching Hal's face, looking to see if his expression changes, looking to see if he goes for his knife, and when he don't, I throw my two cents in to let him know I'm on his side. "There ain't no such thing as UFO's," I say, "It's the Americans testing them nukes."

"No it ain't," Hal says.

"No it ain't," Sam says.

I notice Hal's eyebrow twitch again. I toss Sam a smoke and take one myself.

"So what do you think, Hal?" I try to sound like whatever he thinks is right.

"It ain't what I think," Hal mutters. "It's what I know for sure."

While we're waiting for Hal to tell us what he knows for sure, it suddenly gets cooler. The wind picks up and some mother of a black cloud rolls in outta nowhere and starts pissing rain. We hit the city limits and Hal says, "How fast can this shell do?"

Me and Sam didn't have the guts to ask Hal where he's taking us. We're moving so fast, my cheeks stick to my molars. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that Sam don't rile him, 'cause if Hal hits those brakes now, we're out on the highway with roadkill. I wonder for a split second if maybe I'm dreaming, maybe this is a nightmare, but then Hal twists the wheel, my head smashes the side window, and I know I'm not.

When Hal finally slows the car, he says, all gloomy-like, "I been to Hell and it ain't a ride I'd recommend."

Sam, being the moron he is, asks, "In Disney World?"

"No," Hal says, his voice all low and serious. "In the hole."

It's as dark as pitch outside now, and forks of lightning flash every which way. Rain thumps on the top of the old man's car, like he'll be thumping on us if we ever make it home alive and he finds out about this little pleasure trip. I'm trying to think of some trick to get Hal to take us back, or at least jog him into a happy place so maybe he won't kill us, but before I can, Hal starts in with that glum tone again.

"They lock ya up in a little cage, mattress on the floor, bucket to crap in. Strip ya naked, call ya names, sometimes if ya give 'em lip, they spray ya with chemicals that stop ya breathing, but that ain't the worst of it. You wanna know what's the worst of it?"

Hal turns off the highway and drives up a muddy country road; lightning and thunder exploding everywhere, hail like headlights pummeling the old man's car. I wonder if it's a trick question. If we answer "yes" will he pull out his knife and shank us?

But Sam don't think. He just blurts: "Sure."

I look in the rear-view and hold my breath. If Hal is planning on killing Sam, he ain't gonna do it yet. "The worst," Hal says, "is having no one but bed bugs to talk to, no one to listen to but them horrible voices in your own head. Them voices tell you you ain't nothing but a worthless piece of crap and the world would be better if you just slit your throat, and the worst of it is, you start thinking they're right, you start thinking about all the things you done in your life, and the hard cold concrete floor opens like a trap door, and you fall down, straight into Hell."

"For real?" Sam asks.

Hal slows the tank. There's this rotten gate coming off its hinges, and a sign you can just barely read saying *No Trespassing*. Hal levels his foot, and the old man's car jumps at the gate. Broken wood and bent metal scatter in the wet brush.

Hal laughs like a lunatic. "Jesus said, 'I am the gate. If anyone enters through me, he will be saved.'" He drives under a rusting arch. Hailstones shine like

birds' eggs in the long messy grass. "That's how I know there ain't no such thing as UFOs," Hal says, "because I been to Hell, and I met Jesus there."

"Is that a fact?" Sam asks.

I can't make out where we are, and can feel myself start to panic, then a rod of light hits a tree and brightens up a tall flat stone, and I realize this crazy bastard has brought us into an abandoned boneyard.

"I met Jesus there," Hal says again, "and Jesus said to me 'I am the way and the truth and the life' and 'I am God the great and powerful.'"

"I thought the Wizard of Oz said something like that," Sam says.

"Yeah, he said something like that too, but he really wasn't great and powerful and that was only a movie," Hal says. He slams the car into a gravestone and it topples. Then he parks on top of it. "Them lights in the sky ain't UFOs," Hal says, pointing at Sam, like suddenly he gets the fact that Sam disagrees with him. "There ain't never been a UFO. Them lights in the sky is rebel angels, just like the kind Ezekiel saw, coming down to earth, reminding us of our covenant with Jesus."

"Covenant?" Sam asks.

"Yeah," Hal says, "covenant. It means the deal we made with Christ."

"I ain't made no deal with no one," Sam says.

I boot the back of Sam's seat. "Cut it out, hard-on!" he whimpers.

"Let's go for a walk, boys," Hal says like he didn't hear Sam and like he don't remember it's pissing outside. He must think we're not gonna listen to him, 'cause he unstraps his commando knife and uses it to signal us out of the car.

"We're coming," I tell him, trying not to sound scared.

Sam walks ahead of me, and all I can see is his straight, stupid skull, bobbing up and down as the rain hits it. Hal walks behind. The point of his knife touching my soaking wet T-shirt. A thin vein of lightning crackles followed by an ear splitting kaboom. The air smells like sulfur. It ain't safe to be walking in this storm, I think, but then I feel the tip of Hal's knife, and don't mind the lightning so much.

There's this little tumble-down building, like a broken box, at the top of the muddy hill.

Hal makes us go in and tells us to kneel down. Above is a bunch of old wooden trusses, pointing up, making a triangle, and the floor is cracked wood and broken stone. I'm looking for a window to dive through, but all of the windows are covered with boards. There's only a few glints of shadowy light poking in, making the big rickety cross at the front glow like a UFO.

Hal's waving his knife around and telling Sam to get down on his knees. I'm already down and thinking to myself about that guy in Florida. "So this is the end of the line," I think and get sentimental and want to hug Sam even though he's such a jerk. But then Hal ruins the mood by booting me in the back. "Get your head lower," he shouts.

I'm waiting to feel the steel, wondering which of us he'll take out first, and where he'll dig first, and what he's gonna do with our bodies after, but the jab don't come. He's on again about being in the hole and knowing you have no one in a place like that. No one to help you but Jesus. Outside, the rain stops. Inside,

everything goes quiet. The glints of light through the boards get brighter and twinkly like stars. "I want you boys to pray for your souls, do you understand?" Hal asks.

I can't see Sam now, but I bend my head a little lower, hoping to God Hal makes a clean rip, and we don't have to lie on this cold stinking floor bleeding to death. It's driving me crazy waiting, and finally I turn around. Hal is kneeling in a dim twinkling halo. He's kneeling just like we are, except his hands are folded together. I can tell by the way his lips tremble he's talking to someone, and then I notice diamonds of light. Diamonds of light, like hailstones glistening and melting down his cheeks, falling from his shut and wrinkled-up eyes like rebel angels falling from heaven.

Michael Johnson

IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE MOUNTAIN

The sun broomed snow into piles
and elders saw each moon pull its brightest tide,
saw the river beacon their salmon home.

The *moon of dances* and *angry moon*,
the *moon of good salmon*
when the river dozes in its algaed flowstones,
when the geese wing over the stubble fields
the hills bruised in early autumn,
when the wolves come piping their sad prayers.

In this place of coming together
the words for the way moss fills the shadows
under the trees do not mean *bow*, not *fall*
on your knees, that is just how they are spoken.

RAINMAKER

They called you in their need,
none believing in your ricketed
legs and bird bones, the desiccated
eagle head you carried.

You shook your liontail scepter
at their quiet ridicule,
strutted your beads and spat the dark fuel
of your prayers into the fire.

After the thunder and cloudgrace,
were they tears on weathered faces
laughing their thanks? Did they
ever believe in you rainmaker—
or was it enough they cried, *Asante!*
Asante! and drank the water?

HELL

No lake of fire, no, it is waking
to find a drunk driver took her years ago,
and the child, briefly, aching, on a machine,
and every waking they die again.

Hell is her holding her belly in an ambulance,
who didn't wake, only believed she woke
in the growing dawn, birds just opening their throats,
their song spread into the waters of night like a stain.

Think of only believing you woke.
Where she felt a sunrise like a foundry of opals
and the tinder bones of suns, really
there was the windkept croon of winter
on housecomers, the sun gone raggedly
into the last leaves. No more dapple, no sway.

No one would know what toppled firewood
or rusting pail was growing small
and hunched to gnomes of snow.

No one would come in spring and see
between the willow boughs
the chime he hung of hollow reeds
the whittled trinkets that look like his family
whose hands in a breeze come together.

HELL

The gates are made of gold, jasper, pearl.
There is no rain, no storms, just calm blue sky.
Graffiti doesn't exist. Or dissent, friction, doubt.
Wolves and lambs graze together in vegetable patches.
The birds sing in unison, all in the same key.
None of them squawk or shit or beg for crumbs
from old women with plastic bags.
There are no old women. Everyone is
nineteen and fit, like they never were in life.
They can have exactly what they want,
whenever they want. A kind of poolside holiday
where the buffet is always open,
and cocktails with bright tropical fruit appear
miraculously in your hand on the hour.
There are no hours. And your entire
extended family is there with you. All of them.
They grin endlessly in the sublime parasol shade,
reclining and content, tapping their feet in time
to the birds, faces tilted up to a cloudless sun
that never moves, never burns, never sets.

FINGERNECKLACE

Peppermint saliva lips, two numb bums. Lick, stamp, stick around the salvaged oak table in the common room where Joe and Gus compete on Fish Friday. First one to lick and label five hundred envelopes gets his pick of the fresh cod Mrs. B will serve tonight with garlicky roasted red peppers.

"All good, my jumbles?" Mrs. B scans the mail metropolis forming at Gus's elbows. "Break for fresh air?"

Joe stomps his feet. Gus pinches a perfect three-fold letter, head low.

"Suit yourselves."

Mrs. B has been group home supervisor since her husband accidentally shot himself eight years ago. Now she pitches lifebuoys in a sinking, four-storey heritage house in Greektown that Gus calls the HMS Shitstorm. Tomorrow when she's flat-lining on the couch with a migraine, he'll try to kiss her on the lips.

Joe flicks the long braid that dangles down his back like a fat black squirrel tail. Whenever he squirms, Gus feels the rodent claw up his own spine.

"Don't steal my Cheerios," Gus howls, slapping Joe's hand away from the cereal bowl between them. Gus pulls the mournful face that makes him look like a plumpish plus-fifty, though he's only thirty-six.

"You chew like an Indian," Gus shouts.

"You stink like catfish," Joe replies, stomping his lizard-skin boots. His face braided with sun and age, soft as kid leather.

Marlee enters, slumps down next to Gus, who is quietly nibbling at the edge of an "O." She and Gus grew up on the wrong side of sane so they're next-door neighbours. Nuthouse Knobs. Crackpot Criminals. *The Deranged*. Marlee came in off the streets, the thing men fucked behind dumpsters. Now, she's on low-grade watch at the home. Not that she'd ever go through with it, but one rainy afternoon she swallowed a jar of paint thinner just to wash the stench from her throat. The last time Gus acted out—packed his life in a duffel and hitched the Don Valley to his brother's place—Donny sent him back on the Greyhound from Peterborough, pronto. That was two summers ago. He's been good all year.

Mrs. B returns, pointing to her watch. Gus plucks two skinny whites from his silver pillbox. He'll be slow-mo soon, bleary by dinner.

The rice is one item on the plate. The rice is yellow and smells like buttered bones. The red peppers curl, sodden and sad in their oily, garlic swim. At the dinner table, Gus pokes at his rumpled fish, feeling his organs flip.

"Last time," Mrs. B says, rising from the table. She fixes Gus a peanut butter sandwich she glues together with clover honey. With a quick flash of her blade, she splits the sandwich four ways. Dropping the plate before Gus, she taps the table.

Gus is squeezing his head. He can see his mother's ash fingers tap-tap the ashtray. She is butting the stub out, covering her ears. Can't stop the blue-splitting shrieks.

"Come on, Gus," Mrs. B taps again. He shakes his head, tries sorting patterns on his mother's yellow peeling linoleum.

"You need your energy. Donny's coming tomorrow," she adds.

Donny's greasy jeans are tucked into oil-stained work boots in the living room of the care home. He checks his watch, pacing. Crew's on site. Fuck. Shit. Piss. He's got the engineer's change orders. Cost overruns. Goddamn job is killing him. Looking up he sees Gus lumbering down the stairs still wrapped in his white terrycloth robe. Big as a hollowed oak, premature belly spread. Donny shakes a full prescription bottle at him.

"Don't skip out on me, Gus. You know what happens."

Donny watches his younger brother's eyes dart around the room, taking inventory. He sees Gus freeze at the sight of his work boots.

Gus bunches the terrycloth belt in his palms, squeezes, lets the fuzzy ball drop to the floor. He yanks it back up like a fishing line, absently lets it drop. Donny pats the couch cushion, coaxing his brother over.

"Look, Gus, we can't do our usual pizza run this aft. Got a date with a wrecking ball."

Gus bunches the belt in his lap, blinks wet, wandering tears. Donny wraps his arms around his big old stump of a baby brother, tries to hold the roots down, keep the disease from spreading. Root rot. Runs in the family.

Gus sobs into his brother's neck. "I want to come home."

Donny holds him close, tries to stop twenty years of trembling. Five years, six major episodes, a thousand pills and private dreams between them.

He can see it in his brother's puffy eyelids, the grey, candle-drip skin. New meds are doing a number. He looks more like her now. Same mess of auburn hair, same staple-sized crease below his lip. Donny pictures his mother seated on the stairs, the dim glow of her after-dinner cigarette, eyes going in all directions.

And Gus at nine years old, past the biting and moodiness, withdrawing into his mumble mouth, doing after-dinner dishes in the pyjamas he's worn all day. While Donny fucks off to his buddy Cheevie's house for double dessert. Cheevie's dad has Nintendo on the set, a mother who never once tried to pry open their bedroom door with a chef's knife. Smooth exit man, just like the old man.

Donny loosens the belt around his brother's waist. "Gus, you can't come home. You know Pinky's happy as horses with the house all quiet."

"Fuck Pinky," Gus says, turning away abruptly.

What's he supposed to do? Gus left them broke, wandering for days then begging for money on their doorstep, sending his wife for depression pills. Pinky won't let any more of his bad blood in. Last time they took Gus back, he sold Pinky on the internet. Amazing how many men will drop the price of a used car on a mail-order Chinese wedding. Gus posted her picture on a dodgy-looking website advertising Exotic Lucky Asian Brides. Pinky was wrapped in white and

pink wedding chiffon, a purplish-pink orchid in her hair, something bite-sized dangling on the end of a shrimp fork. Gus wrote that she was petite, submissive, ornamental. Some old goat paid Gus \$1,400 cash on a subway to share his life with "Pinky Cameroon Sparkle."

Cheap Chinese take-out, Gus said to Donny, winking, flashing his wild smile, as he handed over a wad of hundred dollar bills in the hallway. Donny could tell Gus was on a mounting high, about to go from glue-headed to God in a few hours. Meds were sparks going off, Gus had told Donny. Light screaming through his skull, flash fireworks, followed by the inevitable hours of blind panic. Gus said he was only trying to pitch in. Pinky was ready to move out.

Gus pulls his belt from his housecoat, tying it like a tourniquet across his bicep.

The familiar phrase rattling in Donny's skull. Think you can save your brother? You can't even save your marriage, useless fuck.

"Pinky will come around," Donny says, trying hard not to look restless. "Her dad's covering my new equipment loan."

Gus starts to flap his arms, a whooping crane in a stiff wind. Donny holds his brother's arms down. Gus wrenches away, rising to his feet.

"Pinky's got a face like the back of a shovel."

"Gus." Donny orders, trying to wrap his arms around his brother's aches, hold his burden tight.

Gus steps away, shouting in a faux-Asian accent. "Twyme, twyme, me, money backgawantee." He flaps and turns away again. "FuckPinky."

Donny met Pinky in one of those mahogany and brass steakhouses with the deer antlers mounted above the bar. She was serving rib-eye steaks to men who chewed the fat over real estate deals. Turns out her dad owned the place. Owned three apartment complexes and a dry-cleaning franchise. Her family was an empire. His was a broken tenement. She danced through the room, pale blue moons dusting her eyelids, still as a watercolour. He knew he wouldn't be worthy but he asked her out anyway, tumbling over his syllables. On their fifth date, he made a nest of his long arms, cupped her bird bones inside, called her My Lily Hands.

Donny pulls Gus's hand away from his dismal face, turns to see Joe pound down the stairs toward them.

"Get away Tomahawk Chuck," Gus shouts.

Joe grabs Gus firmly by the terrycloth shoulder. "Smoke break. It's noon polar bear. Let's migrate," leading him toward the front door.

Donny moves in to help, but Joe raises a dismissive hand, motioning for him to stay put. Gus is led to the front door. Donny hurries to stuff an envelope filled with pizza money inside Gus's housecoat. Joe shoots him a puzzled look, stomping his feet.

Native guys float, they had told Donny. Mohawk or Cree, toeing twenty-storey beams, steady rivet gun in their hands. It was all bullshit. Joe preferred doing the ground metal framing but left to repair a support brace on the 3rd floor. Crew said he must've had a rubber backbone the way he bounced down in one piece. Whatever was on his mind back then never came back. Joe was on

his own so Donny found him a place with Mrs. B. Once Joe settled in, Donny figured it would be good enough for family so he dropped Gus off with two green garbage bags and a blue duffle bag, two days after his brother had set fire to their shower curtain. Abandon ship! Blame Pinky? Sure. He was fucking free.

On site two hours later, the frontload driver shouts down to Donny: Okay to take another run? Donny nods, directing traffic. Raising its toothy bucket, the driver steers the front loader through wet mud, shattering glass on a downward strike. Whining like a beaten dog, the low-rise splits in half. Burying his toe in sharp debris, Donny thinks—this is the job. Build an extension off the house to give Gus his own entrance. Donny returns to his truck, roughs up his estimate pad, knowing the numbers won't add up. Pinky will never go for it. Her parents would pull the loan. He's nothing but a low-level contractor. Pinky's mother is a princess. Her tiara's halfway up my ass, he thinks. Fuck it. He'll find the money. Set Gus up in some studio apartment close by. Take him out twice a week, get his meds on track.

Donny knows the drill. Pour concrete slab, pound the building out, pad an invoice or two. Take his commission off the top. Throw me an extra buck, he'll tell the subs, I'll throw in the townhouse complex too.

Things Gus will do for a dollar:

Clean the kitchen floor with a soapy grey mop.

Commit to Cheerios in the morning and finish them.

Buy Marlee and himself cigarettes when she gets her Thursday cheque.

Gus pulls two turtle blues from his pillbox when Donny leaves, his arms heavy rubber fins. He lumbers to the bus stop, watches the number 12 roll up. He stubs out his cigarette and climbs the stairs. Staring down at the fare box, he watches the coins tickle the steel throat, then spit out a paper tongue at him.

"Alberto's pizza," Gus slurs like a drunk directing a cab.

Brusquely, the driver motions him to the back of the bus. Gus sits in the last row, opens his pillbox, swallows another. Blearily, he watches Bookbag get on. She sits up front with a friend but waves back. Gus can't lift his sweaty hand. They rumble on for ten minutes until Alberto's red neon lights up. He yanks the cord.

At Alberto's, an alert hostess ushers Gus to a back table. He's blinking fast. Skipping ropes and twigs start to stretch and snap in his head. Flat bottom spinning between the temples, Gus stabs a fork into his leg so he's clear enough to order his usual Hawaiian Special. When the silver tray arrives, a large pie, thick crust smeared with pineapple and ham, he dips a wedge into his Coke. He orders another coffee, adds six sugars, then pockets the spoon. The table is pivoting, but he needs to piss.

Along the corridor in the restaurant, Gus counts gold diamonds fringing the emerald carpet all the way to the men's room. He teeters before the urinal next to a bank of stainless-steel sinks. The burly man next to him bounces on his toes. Watching him, Gus bounces too. The man zips. Gus pulls slowly at his

fly. The man calls him something Gus can't grasp. He grabs his crotch, fumbling furiously.

"Pull that faggot shit on me again, you're dead." The stout man drops his shoulder and drives Gus hard into the mirror before walking out the door.

"Don't you cry," Gus says, pounding his thigh on the bathroom floor. "Don't."

He weeps silently, then rising, pictures himself racing up the stairs of his mother's house, hands locked around a pair of scissors. He digs his keys into his thighs.

Gus enters the middle stall, unfolds the tabloid paper left behind on the floor and drapes it across his lap. When he's through emptying his loose bowels, he scoops out his own faeces with the newspaper.

"There's stuff in here that could bring me down," he mumbles, folding the mess up on his way back to the table.

When he returns, the manager is waiting to escort him out. Rain flooding the streets is gunfire in his head. He slaps at his skull while he waits for an overcrowded bus to stop.

Donny thwacks his muddy work boots against his truck. His cell is ringing the special tone. He holds up a finger to the impatient engineer.

Gus has left his shit (Mrs. B says excrement) on the table at Alberto's Pizza. Donny listens, but the phone cuts out so he asks her to repeat it. She does. "I can't just leave," he shouts at the phone. "I'm the fucking guy in charge," he says, instantly regretting his tone. He punches the truck door, feels acid backing up in his throat. Donny digs his boots into the muck. Mud sucks his ankles until his boots disappear to the top red stripe of his wool socks.

Beetles storming his lids, something loose crawling. Riding back to the HMS Shitstorm from Alberto's Pizza, Gus paws his eye socket, fist deep, until he sees lime-coloured streaks. He slides the bus window open and breathes; the stench of sweaty fish seat making his stomach churn.

At the next stop, the bus door opens with a shudder. Bookbag waves from the aisle, then sits down next to him.

She's dressed in black, wishbone thin, prickly teenaged forehead. Gus watches her smooth back her raven hair, bunch a ponytail she never fastens. Her fingertips sift and sort, thunderbolts, won't stop moving light around.

Gus pockets his balled fist. He tries to focus on the brittle slogans screaming across her tits—no blood for oil—draft beer, not war—fuck yoga. Seeing the bulge in her breast pocket, he taps two fingers to his lips. She slides out a Player's Light and hands it to him.

"You okay, Gus?"

Gus drives his palm heel into his cornea. Her voice, too shrill. He closes his droopy lids, makes a wish, opens—she's still there. Emma twisting the curling iron at her cheek. An orange ball bursts from the rod, ashes dusting her gingham blouse. A mouth opens—a thousand night birds shrieking.

Gus pulls out the spoon he's stolen from the restaurant, licks the metal, and

sticks it to his chin.

"That's cool," Bookbag says, "like a shiny goatee." She rakes her fingers through her tangled hair.

Gus can't stop the screams, sees all the bones in Emma's cheek shattered.

"Savemesavemesavememoneybackguarantee." Gus's mouth begins running on bus rhythm.

Bookbag pulls Gus's hand from his face, gently turns it over. His whole body vibrates while she smooths the padded skin. After a while, Gus's baggy body slumps down in its seat. Together they look out the rain-spattered window, watch the hanging duck breasts glimmer along the gluey sidewalks of Chinatown's Dim-Sum Drive.

"This is me," Bookbag says, rising uncertainly. "Gonna be all right?"

Gus hauls her back down. She stiffens when he slaps something into her hand. A wad of bills crackles in her palm. Gus is rocking in his seat again.

"Okay, okay I'll keep this safe for you," she says uncertainly. "Four more stops then pull the cord. See you tomorrow?"

Gus watches Bookbag climb down the stairs, light up, blow a silver plume through the open doors. He fans the sulphur sting, feeling sharp metal boxes clang and clip the corners of his skin.

Mrs. B is waiting for Gus in the doorway, knowing better than to make him talk. She leads him back to his room and settles him down on the bed.

"Trouble comes," she says, patting his hand, then pulling a tight arm around his torso. "Blame genes, or blame Jesus, just don't let it get you down." She rises to fetch water for his pills. "Better tomorrow."

Gus lies with his back against the wall, watches the floor beams split, the light shattering him in a thousand pieces.

Two heel-clicks, three stomps down the hall before lights out. When Joe knocks on his door, Gus doesn't answer. Gus swallows two white pills, letting the night swarm slowly under his chin. Metal flies and bounces from the top of his skull. Knife prick fingertips until his hands go numb.

By 3 a.m., he is still wide awake. His knocking head won't quiet. He decides to slip downstairs to the kitchen, grabs his favourite apple green cereal bowl from the cupboard. Mrs. B is lying on the living room couch, a wet facecloth across her forehead. Gus fills his bowl with Cheerios, tucking the box under his arm. Creeping past Mrs. B, he sees her hand jerk on her belly. He bends over, kissing her lightly on the lips. Her eyelids flutter but she hardly moves. Padding back up to the third floor, he pushes on to the end of the hall, closing the bathroom door behind him.

From the back of the toilet tank, he removes the pills he's been collecting all year. He drains the last of the Cheerios box, mixes the blue turtles and "Os" with water, watches the candies sink and toss in their oat sea. He tosses in another few. He pulls the restaurant spoon from his khaki's pocket and stirs the mess before shovelling it into his mouth, craving a long, cement-headed sleep.

Mrs. B is clutching the cordless when Donny arrives. The ambulance attendants are balancing Gus on the stretcher as they descend the stairs, Joe yelling at them to hurry.

Donny orders them to put his brother down in the living room. Reluctantly, they set their burden down. With all his force, he lifts his brother's torso from the stretcher, works his way down the arms, torso, feels for the broken soul bones.

Sirens silent, he watches the ambulance roll down the street.

Donny motions he'll be right back, needs to get the cell from his truck to call his wife. He closes the front door, making sure he hears the solid click.

In the truck, he steers straight for an after-hours bar. Head swimming in booze, he drives all morning until he remembers.

On his way home from his buddy Cheevie's house, pie-stuffed and pleased with himself after winning drunken Pong on Nintendo. Light on in his sister's room above the garage. When the acrid stench reaches him in the hallway, he mounts the stairs two by two.

From the doorway, Donny sees Emma on her knees, hair locked in a curling iron set flat against her skull. Smoke streams from the brittle strands of Emma's hair. Everyone is screaming. Lying next to his sister, Gus is face down, his right hand closed around a pair of scissors to set Emma free.

Head swimming with Cheevie's dad's cheap rye, he watches Emma punch out weakly with her left arm. His mother is giving Emma the old fingernecklace from behind, her hands locked around his sister's fragile windpipe. Donny touches his throat. So drunk he can hardly move.

It won't stop.

Not when Emma falls forward, face striking the bed stand.

Not when his mother tears the electric cord from the wall, lifts the ceramic lamp overhead.

Parked on the demolition site, Donny sucks in a chestful of diesel. The smell comforts him, in a quiet way, as dawn breaks between glass and steel, bathing Yonge Street in fractured yellow hues. He bends to tighten his bootlaces, then rising, deliberately smashes his face against the side-view mirror.

Gus and Mom and he and Gus and Pinky and Joe and the sharp, bottomless world tucks a rusty hook in his mouth, hoisting him over the city twenty storeys. His swooning face a wrecking ball, Donny cracks a fat-lipped grin, the momentum in him growing, knowing now he'll never be able to avoid the crash.

Richard Kelly Kemick

BRITISH MOUNTAINS, YUKON RIVER WATERSHED, 1851

Explorer Robert Campbell faces starvation with only a mountain range between him and the Porcupine herd's aggregation, where groups of caribou number up to 95,000.

He saw wolves on the ridge two days past
but didn't have the strength to follow;
waiting for things that never come.

His ribcage sprouts from his stomach
like the barbed blossoms of creeping nettle,
their sharp demands of growth, and later

he'll swear, his skin is transparent
enough to see a root system of bone
and tendon growing out his fingertips.

The earth has ways of knowing
what it's about to eat. It circles beneath him.
He wonders what hurts worse,

a frozen or a phantom limb:
to not feel something that's there
or to feel something that's not—

if it aches more to think of the people
you've met and will never see again or
the people who'll never know you were alive.

This intensity of failure is unique to wanting
to be remembered, to raising a lantern
amidst the empty spaces of the heart

and seeing only shadows, all of which
are your own. And everything is so far away
from where it was supposed to be.

His body turns east to the sunrise.
A smattering of hooves,
the mirage-lines of antlers.

GHAZAL OF THE CARIBOU FENCE

The fox yips of hunters and the herd gallops uphill into the corral's red throat. Sinew-snares wait with a guillotine's hunger.

Inside a five-foot storage tank, a Humboldt squid—*diablo rojo*. Her tentacles corkscrew against glass, her body pulsing kaleidoscopic.

Sockeye spill themselves into natal streams: their mouths frowning into masks of Greek tragedy, gulping the broken glass of air.

A grizzly pries open take-out containers like clams, nails clicking. The neon of a Chinese restaurant smears his shadow across the parking lot.

The fox finds the fallen nest with the thrill of a knife finding a tomato. The snow holds the juice like a cutting board.

Steven Slowka

ARCHAEOPTERYX

*A genus of early bird that is evolutionarily transitional
between feathered dinosaurs and modern birds.*

When our bones have settled,
and the twisted sheets of my bed
have filled themselves in around us,
like a layer of warm sediment,
I think of photographs I've seen
of ancient, fossilized birds:
Their limbs, ambered by time.
Their twig-thin skeletons
articulated into dance.
I consider the time it took
to freeze them there, the pitch
of your forearm around my ribs,
the angle at which a wing might tuck
a body away from a storm, and the eons
that seem to blow right over us both.
Our legs cement together.
Our chests bead out particulate heat.
It feels compact, transitory,
just before flight.

WHEN THE KILLER WHALE BROUGHT EVIL TO THE TOWN OF PARADISE

The first time we saw the killer whales, they were hunting sea lions in the bay. The beasts just showed up one day, a whole malevolent pod of them. We had never before seen one animal hurt another, had never even done so ourselves, and so we watched, with a shared sense of unease, as the black dorsal fins breached the surface, gliding closer and closer to the shore. Abe Crawford summoned his men to keep an eye on the beach, and soon half the town was there, looking on as the whales tore into the sea lion herd with sudden, gruesome enthusiasm. They tossed the floppy bodies in the air before clamping down their smiling jaws, like kittens toying with yarn. But these were the days when our kittens were vegetarians—we were all vegetarians, man and animal alike—so the blood and the violence was new to us. These were the days of before.

The water was still churning and dark red when Abe Crawford announced that he'd made up his mind. These creatures had carried some evil to our fair town, he said, and it was our duty to do something about it. We ought to catch one, he said, and figure out what these animals are all about, these huge dark things with the false white eyes. The whales had brought the sea lions—which, moments earlier, had been sleeping and fucking in peace on the beach—to an early death, and that's something neither man nor beast has the right to do. Who will come with me, he asked, and in that moment he became the first brave man in the world. I will, slurred Abe's brother Carl, and we all laughed, for Carl was the first fool in the world, and had been so for a long while. Carl took a drink from his brown bottle.

Only Mary Lawrence spoke up then, sweet Mary Lawrence who was a doctor and a healer and a witch. Good people, she said, we know nothing about these animals and perhaps that is for the best. What strange forces might we welcome into our town if we capture one and keep it as a pet? There are some things better left unknown. But we didn't listen to Mary Lawrence, and as Abe assigned orders and duties to his men she walked over to Carl and put her arms around his shaking shoulders. Mary was a kind soul. Our town was called Paradise then, in the great state of California.

How to catch the whale? There was no such thing as a net in those days, so the men cobbled one together using chicken wire from the petting zoo and rope from the playground. Officials from both the zoo and the school objected, because now the Shetland ponies might wander into the llama pen, and the children had nothing to climb on, but the men insisted. We also needed a tank in which to keep the whale, so we released Hindenburg—the town's unofficial mascot, our ancient, beloved pet manatee—back into the ocean, an arrangement he protested in his silent, disapproving way. With the arrival of the killer whales, the sea was newly dangerous, and Hindenburg seemed to sense this, his eyes wise

and terrified beneath his wrinkled brows.

That evening, the men shoved out to sea in Abe's pleasure boat. The killer whales were circling harmlessly a few miles out, and they welcomed the boat as a new distraction, a way to pass the time until their next slaughter. There was one calf that approached the men with particular gusto, wriggling in the water like a worm the size of a Volkswagen, so Abe decided that this was to be our town's object of study. Neither the calf nor his mother seemed perturbed when the men lowered the net and began tugging him toward land. This was the age before hunting, so there was no reason the whales should feel fear. Perhaps they thought that the little calf was just heading out on a brief adventure. In a way, he was.

We brought the calf ashore and slipped him into Hindenburg's highly chlorinated tank. He swam about happily enough, and he soon attracted a larger crowd than the old manatee ever had. Our children clapped with delight as the calf moved back and forth. Our dogs chased him good-naturedly from the other side of the aquarium wall. Abe, though, declared that this thing wasn't a pet to be loved—he was a subject to be observed. As she stood before the tank, her hands on the glass, Mary whispered his name would be Skookum, old trading slang for "big." One day, she said, he wouldn't be a little calf anymore.

*

Skookum didn't like to eat vegetables, which was a problem. As the days went on, we tossed him cabbages and eggplants, sweet potatoes and soybeans, gooseberries and dragon fruit, but eventually it all just collected at the bottom of his tank in a pile of rotting detritus. His swimming grew listless. He's going to starve, Mary said. This is wrong. Don't you see this is not what he eats? He wants flesh. That's what the whales eat.

None of us knew what it was to eat flesh, so we shuffled our feet and looked at the dirt. We had not thought this through. But Abe spoke up, as he often did, with an idea. Skookum's pod had killed many sea lions. Their blood turned the sea crimson and their carcasses washed up on the beach. We could collect the meat of the dead sea lions and feed it to little Skookum. What was the harm in that? They are already dead. It is, Abe said, in the interest of Science, which is a word he made up on the spot, though we all understood what it meant: the path through which we might better understand the new world of Skookum and his terrible family.

The men of Paradise wandered down to the beach. Abe was right, as he often was; it was littered with entrails and haunches and lonely severed flippers, washed ashore from the bloodbaths that now occurred a few miles out with unsettling regularity. What a sight! We knew death, of course, but not in this way—we cremated our dead, man and animal both, with solemnity and gravity. This was something else altogether: life brought to a premature end. We decided to call this Killing, after the killer whales.

Not all of our men could handle the bloody task; some of us, we will admit, retched on the beach as if we had drunk too much seawater. But not Abe. He and his fellow stoics set to work, gathering up the bloody scraps like they were

so many mushrooms. Then they plopped the sea lion parts into Skookum's tank, and for the first time in many days the whale seemed to blossom into life again, tearing into his food with that sickening grin of his.

Mary Lawrence stood by the aquarium. Whenever she wasn't stitching a cut or mixing a tincture, she stayed at the tank, talking to Skookum, watching over him. She loved and hated that whale; loved him for his obvious intelligence and sense of delight, hated him for whatever he represented. We all knew Abe was one of her lovers, and rumour had it that, at the end of their every encounter, while she washed up and he lay back on her large feather bed, she begged him to let Skookum go, to let our town remain innocent a little longer.

Abe, of course, would have none of it. He also kept Skookum company, but in a different way; he rallied the assorted alchemists and warlocks and inventors of Paradise to build him an arsenal of instruments, which he then employed to study the whale. How fast did Skookum swim? How many pounds per square inch could his jaws crush? What were his various behaviours and bodily functions? Soon, Skookum's tank was filled with telescopes and endoscopes and microscopes of every conceivable size and shape, which registered their measurements in a never-ending flow of printoffs and microchips. Results! Abe regularly exclaimed, from his workstation at the rim of the tank. Finally, some Results!

Sometimes Carl came to the tank too. He didn't care for Skookum, but he loved Abe and Mary Lawrence, equally and equally fiercely. He, more devotedly than anyone, collected sea lion flesh from the beach and brought it to the whale. Carl was a ghastly sight—his stringy beard, his yellow teeth, his ropy arms carrying a load of skin and guts, his whole being covered in sea lion blood and stinking of liquor. He dumped the meat into the tank and looked to his brother, who grunted without glancing up from the ones and zeroes on the computer screen, and then looked to Mary, who patted his cheek and smiled and said thank you. Then he wandered off, happy enough for a while.

One day, Carl visited the aquarium with his usual delivery. He climbed the ladder and dropped the meat in for Skookum. As they always did, the hunks of flesh floated at the top of the tank for a while before soaking up enough water to sink, trailing wisps of blood behind them as they eased to the bottom. Suddenly Mary Lawrence let out a cry. There, bobbing in the tank, was the head of dear Hindenburg, our poor old manatee. His eyes, once gentle and sad, were different now—angry in their glassy deadness, newly accusatory. The children at the tank wept and turned to their mothers. Abe stood at the rim, stunned for once into silence. Then, as if taking pity on us, Skookum swooped in and swallowed the head whole.

*

More and more of the people of Paradise came to see Skookum, and his size swelled along with the crowd's. What a creature! Fifteen cubits long, thousands of stone in weight, his skin as black as the hair of our children, his spots as white as the heat of the sun. As he grew he became hungrier, and it was difficult to feed

him with the remains of the sea lions alone. Soon all of our dead animals were thrown into the tank—sinewy okapis deceased of old age, goats succumbed to cancer of the udder—and Skookum gobbled them indiscriminately.

His mood began to change too. No longer content to commune with the children and the dogs who scampered the other side of the glass, he now rammed the walls of his tank, as if craving escape to dry land. Let him go, Mary Lawrence begged, to which Abe Crawford replied, Results! We were never sure what these Results meant, but Results there were: graphs (both pie and bar), equations, formulas, diagrams, charts, theses, hypotheses, hypotenuses, Hippocratic Oaths, PowerPoint presentations. This animal is a *carnivore*, Abe said. He eats *meat*. We are *herbivores*. We eat *plants*. He divided the world in two. There were carnivores and herbivores; there was a then and a now.

Through it all, Mary Lawrence stayed at Skookum's side. She liked to perch on the lip of the tank, dangling her toes into the water and speaking with the whale. There was one song, a sad old sea shanty, that she particularly loved to sing to him:

*Somewhere beyond the sea
Somewhere waiting for me
My lover stands on golden sand
And watches the ships that go sailing*

One morning, as Mary Lawrence sat at the edge of the tank, cooing at Skookum, the whale heaved his great mass out of the water, fixed his jaws around the woman's long black hair, and hauled her below the surface. The rest of us watched in shock. Skookum towed Mary through the tank for a few minutes, then breached the surface again and hurled her upwards, just as he might have done with a sea lion. Her limp body twirled in the air before falling back into his teeth, and he clamped his maw tight, bones cracking sickeningly.

A cry went up among the assembled crowd: Mary! We poured into the tank, dozens of us, led by none other than Carl, who appeared to have gone more mad than ever: his face twisted and scarlet, nonsensical screams pouring from his lips. We jumped in, one after another and, confused, Skookum let Mary go and repaired to a corner of his enclosure. Mary drifted to the surface, and we all laid our hands on her, tugging her to the side, where Abe waited. He was frozen, silent. Mary's body was blue where it wasn't red; one of her legs was missing. At the lip of the tank, amid the beeping instruments and blooming whatsits, Abe placed two fingers on Mary Lawrence's neck and declared her dead.

*

Something changed in our town. We had seen the whales kill sea lions, but the killing of a human—this was new, unprecedented. It felt intuitively different, a shift in the natural order. What was to be done? We looked to Abe for guidance but found none. The death of Mary Lawrence did something to his brain; he retreated to his hut for days on end, and when he appeared in public he muttered

and raved. Oddly and increasingly, he grew to resemble his brother, or rather the man his brother had once been. Carl was also affected by Mary's death, if in a different way. He became silent and steely, stopped drinking liquor and sat for hours in front of the tank, staring at Skookum. The whale, for his part, was becoming thinner and deader because we had stopped feeding him. He had eaten enough meat for now.

One morning, Abe shuffled to the town square and stood on a box of soap. He wore a threadbare brown robe, and new whiskers dusted his cheeks. I have had a vision, he said. A being he called Deus had come to him in the night. This entity was neither man nor animal but something larger and otherworldly; where before we had thought that everything simply existed, Deus claimed to have created the world wholesale. It was time, Deus said, to impart certain principles upon creation: Life, Order, and Justice. That is, Abe said, his voice quaking, the sanctity of Life; the Order of creation; and the delivery of Justice upon the world.

What is Justice? someone asked, and Abe crowed, Aha! What indeed!

Abe's revelation seemed to reinvigorate him, and he set about a new task. Once again he rallied the inventors and engineers of Paradise. This time, though, he aimed not to build a plethora of instruments but a single, massive device. Without Mary to keep him company, Abe stayed up all night, feverishly drawing plans and schematics and blueprints. Carl stopped spending all his time at the whale's tank and started observing his brother, though not in the happy, puppy-dog way of before. Instead, Carl watched his brother as if tracking the man's every move, his face hard and hungry.

First Abe's engineers constructed, overtop Skookum's tank, a huge raised platform of wood and iron, fifty cubits across, with a trap door that swung open at the push of a lever. On this platform they built a tall metal scaffolding, from which a long, strong chain dangled, looped into a circle at its end. The chain swayed ominously in the breeze as Skookum, confused by the construction and starved of food, swam in hypnotized circles beneath the platform.

The morning after the construction was completed, Abe called the town to Skookum's tank. He sat on the platform behind a table and carried a hammer in his hand. This is a Trial and a Sentencing, he announced, and pounded the hammer on the table. He no longer looked mad; in his brown robe he was noble, impressive. Skookum the Killer Whale, he said, you are charged with Murder Most Heinous, Infamous Disregard for the Goodness of Life, and Animal Complicity in the Death of a Human. For these crimes, the High Court of Paradise sentences you to Hang Until You are Dead.

We gasped. What was this new law? Were we killers now too? But Abe cried out, above our objections, This is what Deus has told me! A fin for a hand; a life for a life. Skookum the Killer Whale must know what it is to be killed. And so Abe ordered the men to begin.

The trap door opened and the chain was lowered into the tank, where the loop undulated slowly. One of Abe's men hooked a chunk of sea lion meat onto a line of rope and tossed it into the tank, just within the circle of the chain. At the scent of fresh blood, Skookum perked up and darted forward. The man flicked

the meat in and out, up and down, as Skookum chased after it, frantic and unhinged. Finally Skookum swam straight through the loop. Now! Abe cried, and the man let the whale catch the meat. Abe pressed a big red button at the control panel, and suddenly the chain winched closed, tight around Skookum's body, so tight we could see the beast's blood billow out as the metal cut into his flesh. He began to thrash, but his struggles only seemed to tighten the chain further, until it seemed almost as if the loops might cut through Skookum's whole body and slice him in half. Now! Abe shouted again, spittle in his beard, and he lifted a lever, and, with agonizing slowness, the chain began to reel itself in.

The great contraption lifted the great whale clear out of the water. He rose above the surface of the tank, through the trap door and above the platform, where, at last, Abe pushed down on a joystick and the chain stopped its terrible ascent. Skookum, the life pouring out of him into the water below, struggled feebly, lifting his tail, twitching his fins, trying to roll from side to side as if he were in the water. But he wasn't in the water; he wasn't even on dry land. He was in the air, hanging.

Justice! Abe said, and began to laugh, something he had not done since the death of Mary Lawrence, though there was no mirth that we could detect in this new laugh of his. Hearing this, Skookum began to cry out too, but his high, keening whistles carried no threat; they were pathetic now, terrified, the sounds of the end. In his cries we heard real pain for the first time, real fear of death's shadow. We had unleashed something. Skookum lifted his head and rolled his eye, his real one, not his false white splotch but the portal to his inner life, and we saw the twilight of our old order in it, and he gave a final call—in warning, perhaps—and then his huge dark body slumped and was still.

*

We had killed something. There was no other way to say it. We had done what the killer whales did—what we had never even thought to do before they came along. Now we were as guilty as the whales. But no, Abe insisted—this was different. Skookum had Murdered our Mary Lawrence, he said, but we Executed the whale. The former was a lawless, individual act; the latter was something we had done together. I don't recall agreeing to hang that whale, Carl answered, his voice even. That was you. We were shocked, for Carl had never spoken against his brother before—had never even strung together a sentence so long or coherent. Abe looked flustered for a moment, and some tough old part of him flicked momentarily across his face. No, brother, he said. We did as Deus asked. Abe's men lowered the body of Skookum down to the platform and opened the chain with a plasma cutter. One, two, heave, they grunted, and rolled the whale to the lip of the stage before pushing him off the edge. Skookum smashed against the ground and rolled some more, fins twirling, and then came to rest on his back, his white belly glaring up at the sky. The animal will remain here, Abe shouted, as a reminder to others who might undo a part of Creation. There shall be no killing—except of those who kill.

And so Skookum's enormous corpse remained in front of the tank. None of us knew what to do with it, and eventually the thing began to rot, giving off a terrific smell. It was an ugly sight, and most of us now did whatever we could to avoid the tank. Those who dropped in from time to time for a look, however, reported strange sightings. Sometimes, one woman said, under the cover of night, our dogs would congregate around the body, sniffing curiously and growling among themselves. She swore that a few of the boldest among them even took bites of the whale's meat—small, cautious nibbles at first, then entire mouthfuls, rings of red growing around their jaws. Another woman said that, around dawn, she saw a few gulls swoop down and peck at Skookum's blubber before returning shamefacedly to the air. And one man even swore that he had seen Carl himself dart up to the whale, glance around as if to ensure no one was spying, and fix his teeth into Skookum's skin, blood creaming into his beard.

As Skookum's body shrank into bones and gristle, his gleaming ribs arcing into the air, Abe set about a series of new tasks. First he ordered the construction of a new building next to the tank and platform and chain, which he called the Court. Here, killers like Skookum would be tried and condemned. Nearby, he ordered the construction of a second building, made of stone and adorned with fantastic creatures, which he called the Church, where, every morning, the people of Paradise were to give thanks to Deus. Finally, in the town square, he ordered the construction of another building, taller and more gleaming than the rest, which was made of concrete and glass and scraped the sky, and this he called the Government, where he would reside and decide the affairs of the day. The time has come, he told us, for Creation to be ordered. There are new threats. There is, at long last, darkness in the world.

Abe spoke more and more. His madness seemed focused now; he held forth on States and Markets, Faiths and Mores. We rallied behind him. He had, he said, history on his side. He roiled through town, shaking hands, holding small children, petting cats and tapirs. All the while, Carl followed him, never speaking, never challenging his brother's proclamations, but watching carefully. One day, as Abe stood at the altar of the Church, discussing a vision from Deus, Carl walked forward, down the aisle. Brother! Carl called. There was a time when I could not decide who I loved better: you or dear Mary. But then the beast you brought ashore killed my Mary, and in that moment I knew: I loved her more than anything in this world or the world of your Deus. I hate you for what you have brought upon us. And Carl reached into his tunic and brought out a blade. There are some who swear the blade was actually one of Skookum's teeth, though we will never know for sure, because in the carnage that ensued the evidence was lost. But we do know that Carl lifted his blade and surged toward his brother, whose cloudy eyes grew wide and whose ever-pontificating mouth could now only let out a desperate wheeze. Carl plunged his blade into Abe's body, again and again, blood bursting onto the altar as Deus and all of Paradise looked on. The two men lurched to the ground, Carl holding Abe in his arms, and the murderer leaned down to kiss his dead brother on the cheek.

*

We had seen beast kill man and man kill beast, and now man had killed man—brother against brother, follower against leader. We sat in the Church and stared at Carl weeping as he cradled Abe. Then one of us stood, and then another, and then another, and we lifted Carl from the altar. He did not protest—not as we steered him out of the Church and into the street, not as we walked him, instinctively, back to the site of where it all began, back to the tank, not as we brought him into the Court, where we, all of us, our voices speaking as one, tried him for the murder of his brother, and where we, all of us, condemned him, not to death but to a lifetime of confinement in the greatest cage of all. We led Carl back outside and steered him into Skookum's carcass. There, in the whale's ribcage, now picked clean by dogs and birds and men, Carl stood behind bars of bone, and we realized that we had built the world's first Prison.

We all eat meat now, every one of us, and we still go to Church every morning. Some of us preach there, some of us sit in the Court, some of us in the Government. A great many of us do none of these things and are content to be ruled. A smaller number are not, and commit unjust acts: kill other men and women, steal from the new Bank, perform buggeries with the animals, who now run in fear from us and so must be caged. We cage our criminals, too, with Carl, and Skookum's ribs grow ever more full of evil men, the worst of whom we hang as we did Skookum himself: from the chain that dangles over the aquarium where Mary Lawrence met her end. Carl we keep alive, though, as a memory of what we once were and as a reminder of what we've become.

Michael V. Smith

PRAYER FOR SOLACE

He presents me
a hummingbird, the dark
head of a seal rising
abovewater, a heron
& four wasps
in a log beside me

we are here
for our pitiable
bodies
 lush trails
mock our fumbling, zippers
and latex.

PRAYER FOR RENEWAL

Beach, again.

Drawn to the quietude—
the men a trick
for arriving, I think,
some resistance
to commitment, either
to this inwardness
or to them

what's here?

at the water's edge
a hundred feet down
across the straight
the city
so many small boxes.

LETTER, 10:28 P.M.

Clothed in bed. The day is pressed into my shirt.
Goats, gelato, beach, strawberries, popcorn.

So much indulgence I'd rather
have practiced my French.

Step into my bedroom, a mess from being half
unpacked. Remind me your lips
are fresh with mischief.

Paul Celan

translated by Iain Higgins

CORONA

Fall eats its leaf from my hand: we are friends.
We shell time from the nuts and teach it to walk:
time returns to the shell.

In the mirror is Sunday,
in the dream there is sleeping,
the mouth speaks true.

My eye descends to my lover's sex:
we look at ourselves,
we speak darkly to ourselves,
we love each other like poppy and memory,
we sleep like wine in the seashells,
like the sea in the moon's bloodbeam.

We stand entwined in the window, they watch us from the street:
it is time people knew!
It is time that the stone got down to blooming,
that unrest beat a heart.
It is time it was time.

It is time.

CORONA

Aus der Hand frißt der Herbst mir sein Blatt: wir sind Freunde.
Wir schälen die Zeit aus den Nüssen und lehren sie gehn:
die Zeit kehrt zurück in die Schale.

Im Spiegel ist Sonntag,
im Traum wird geschlafen,
der Mund redet wahr.

Mein Aug steigt hinab zum Geschlecht der Geliebten:
wir sehen uns an,
wir sagen uns Dunkles,
wir lieben einander wie Mohn und Gedächtnis,
wir schlafen wie Wein in den Muscheln,
wie das Meer im Blutstrahl des Mondes.

Wir stehen umschlungen im Fenster, sie sehen uns zu von der Straße:
es ist Zeit, daß man weiß!
Es ist Zeit, daß der Stein sich zu blühen bequemt,
daß der Unrast ein Herz schlägt.
Es ist Zeit, daß es Zeit wird.

Es ist Zeit.

Bryan Castille

LETTER FROM ICELAND

*I hope you don't think mail from strangers wrong.
As to its length, I tell myself you'll need it,
You've all eternity in which to read it.*
—Auden

The winter sun rides low on the horizon, somewhere behind a field of blue and violet clouds, and beneath it the tarnished spires of the old city are bathed in a glow too dim to call daylight. The new city beyond is a greyness whose edges blur at the sea. The view is heavy, too heavy for an outsider like me, I'm discovering, weighted, as it were, by a vast and terrible history, a symptom of many of the old cities I've visited, especially the cities of Europe.

I have come here, to Copenhagen, to comfort Malou in the wake of her brother's death. One week ago, the police found her brother, Søren, floating facedown in the Christianshavn Canal. From the roof of the Rundetårn, or "stone tower," we can see the city. A man with a megaphone says the Rundetårn is the oldest observatory in Europe, and that Christian IV had commissioned it. The helical ramp winding up the inside, the man says, had been built so the king might be carted to the top in a horse-drawn carriage. From there he viewed the stars.

I'm disinclined to trust a man with a megaphone, I explain to Malou. It's like the pinky ring of voice amplification technology.

When she reaches for my hand, I wonder how she means it, whether out of friendship or romance. The muddling of boundaries never bodes well for me.

There's a light in her skin. For her, I'm the fireman raising his ladder, the coast guard pursuing the source of a flare. I think she believes I've come to save her from her grief, but all I'm going to do is make it worse.

You suspect the man is lying, Malou asks, about the history of Denmark?

The megaphone, I say. If he didn't have it, I wonder, would anyone be listening? If I were him, I'd make it all up. *Fiction is fact without authority.*

My brother used to say that.

He could convince you of anything if you let him talk long enough.

I remember the discussion we had about the first American moon landing, she says. The longer he talked, the more I started to doubt the facts, the more suspicious the video seemed. I watched it on YouTube like a hundred times, and each time I watched it I fell a little further into doubt. And despair.

Are you paranoid? I ask. Chem trails and HAARP and depopulation?

I don't know. What do you think?

I think you're a terrible scientist.

If you only knew, she says. I've adopted all kinds of theories. This is only the

beginning.

The last time I saw Malou was three years ago, in college. She and her brother, Søren, shared an apartment with me from sophomore year onward, in the Delmar Loop in St. Louis. They had come from Denmark on scholarships to study physics. They believed in parallel worlds.

At some point, Malou says, gazing out again over the city, it becomes real, but for now it is not real, it is purely speculation. Imagine if it had been you who answered my door. The policeman says he found your brother's body in the canal. I can only think in circles now—every thought leads me back to that moment. I've become obsessed. I've taken to fashioning all kinds of explanations for how he'd wind up dead, and none of them involve the facts the police presented to me. I don't want their facts. I want a myth for him. I think he deserves that much.

Fog obscures the Swedish coastline. I peer through a pair of cheap binoculars from the souvenir shop. Another country, near enough to see, yet hidden, a nearness that makes me anxious.

It has started to rain when Malou hails us a taxi. The clouds, if it is possible, have darkened, and the city has become vexing to me for reasons I can't quite locate, and perhaps even a bit penal for its barriers of iron and stone. The streets are shadowed from beneath, by what is buried. In the taxi I nod off until the driver awakens me with a diatribe on European politics. Malou is resting her head on my shoulder. She is singing a Danish lullaby.

Do you want to talk about it? I ask her.

She sighs.

No, she says. Not now. Let's not spoil this.

The driver's voice gets louder the more he talks.

And does your American media tell you what happened to Lech Kaczynski? he asks, nearly shouting. I answer no. The man is adamant, glancing back and forth between the road and the rear-view, tugging on the steering wheel with both hands. How could they not tell you? he asks. It was Putin! It was the fucking Russians!

Who's Kaczynski? I ask.

Everyone has theories, Malou says, and then she sighs again, grips her head as if in the throes of a migraine. The man is weaving a narrative for me—a vast conspiracy of revenge.

Stay with me, Malou says. I kiss her, and I feel so guilty doing it.

Hotels are so lonely and so cold, she says. I can never sleep in hotels.

The taxi drops us at Nyhavn. Down both sides of the canal are brightly coloured row houses—teal, yellow, orange, red—each façade checkered with at least a dozen windows. The ground floor of each house has been converted into a restaurant or tavern, complete with patio tables and white umbrellas, and at the street are blackboard signs with menu items written down in chalk.

I suggest a drink. Malou reminds me that she doesn't drink. She isn't hungry, so we keep walking, holding hands like younger versions of ourselves. Had we dated once, briefly, or was it only sex? I recall her body vaguely, the way the moonlight struck the shallow anthills of her breasts. Our bouts of discreet fucking (she didn't want her brother to find out) have catalogued themselves in my memory as a

dream, or something like one. I cannot remember the particulars, or how her face looked while I was inside her, or whether she ever told me she loved me.

The canal runs down the centre of the street. The old wooden boats in it bob under the adoring, watchful eyes of tourists waiting to board the ferry.

Christianshavn is much the same as Nyhavn, except smaller, wealthier, and with trees. The wind picks up. I tie my scarf and fasten the buttons of my coat.

I want to sleep with you, she says. It's been on my mind all day.

Is that a good idea? I ask.

She looks offended. Is it a bad idea?

This time her kiss is forceful. She has both hands around my neck, nails digging in. I think of Søren, and for some reason I can't picture his face, at least not as it was when he was alive. I see it in the water, me somewhere below him looking up, the sun crowning his head and making a shadow of his features. My memories of him have always come in intermittent flashes, in rhythms, some days endlessly, other days not at all. Today I am plagued by the same image as Malou, the same circularity of thought leads me back to his submerged figure like the loops of a clover. Sex with Malou is the last thing on my mind, but as she slips her hand between my coat flaps and squeezes me I know it is the first thing on hers.

We look down into the canal together. There are tears running down Malou's cheeks. On her face I see a complexity I can't interpret. It reminds me how little I actually know about her, how well, through those three years of college, she kept herself hidden from me.

This is where they found him, she says. She kneels as if her legs have given out, and while she's looking down into the water she reaches out for me blindly.

The day after graduation, Søren and I headed for Iceland. It seemed the most ideal place to unwind, a mythological landscape far from the cities that had contained us for so long. We wanted nothing to do with the tropics, the touristy resort strips along beaches that bore no resemblance to the countries behind them.

We covered the Ring Road's 832 miles in a barely running '96 Ford Mondeo. By the end of the week the Eyjafjallajökull ice cap had erupted, shutting down air travel all across Western Europe, stranding us on the island another week and a half. It couldn't have happened at a more critical time. The worst came out of us, as often happens while travelling, until we could not even say good morning without it spiralling into an argument. We parted ways at the airport in Reykjavik without saying a word. I thought he might turn back eventually, that he might call or send a text before I boarded the plane—*Don't be pissed at me*, the sort of thing he usually tried to pass off as an apology. I remember thinking I would probably never see him again, because after the Iceland trip he was planning to return home to Copenhagen with Malou.

I boarded the plane (Søren stayed on in Iceland, though I don't know for how long), and while I was waiting to get to my seat a little girl in front of me of maybe four years old whose mother kept dragging her by the arm saw me sobbing behind my sunglasses.

It's awful, she said, and grabbed hold of my right index finger, as if she knew me. What she'd said struck me as peculiar for two reasons. First, because she could

have no clue as to my predicament. Second, because she seemed to grasp, with uncanny empathy, my anguish.

I fastened my seat belt and looked out the window as the plane taxied and lifted off the tarmac. The clouds were still tinged grey with ash. The seemingly mundane moments of our lives—airplane taxiing and takeoff, for example—yield the deepest insights. Epiphanies arrive in the midst of a bowel movement, at the forty-seventh sit-up, on the threshold between wakefulness and dream. Never when you're trying. It might have been the uncomfortable seat on the plane, or it might have been the ashen clouds, but something sent me back to the eve of college graduation, some two weeks prior. Malou had disappeared somewhere that night, so it was only Søren and I in the apartment together, cutting up lines of ketamine on the tabletop and snorting it up each nostril in search of that parallel world.

Søren described the effects to me, because I had never done drugs.

You're describing a nap, I said.

It's like a lucid dream, he said. Ever had one of those?

I said I hadn't.

Thirty minutes later we were strewn across his bed with a dozen record albums wedged around us. I picked up one of the albums—Quadrophenia—and gazed at it as if it held the secrets to the universe. The apartment was hot and stuffy. I got up and opened the window above the bed to let in the night air, sweet with honeysuckle. There was an old dressing mirror I'd found cheap at a shop on Cherokee Street, which I moved on top of the doublewide dresser Søren and I shared. I could see, from where I lay on the bed, our reflections in the mirror. We were shirtless. The gold light of the bedside lamp illuminated us as if in a painting.

You're my best friend, Søren said. He kissed me, kissed my neck and shoulder, kissed my chest, slipped a hand down my gym shorts. The whole time we were going down on each other I kept imagining what implications it might have for our friendship.

Later on, when we were reclining against the headboard, sweaty and spent, I glanced again at the mirror, and found nothing particularly stunning about the image other than our nakedness and the curtain billowing in the breeze streaming through the open window. I had nearly fallen asleep when it hit me—the mirror did show a painting, specifically the Waterhouse painting “Sleep and his Half-Brother Death,” a dreamy, somewhat erotic depiction of Hypnos and Thanatos. The two daimons are sleeping on a bed together. It was this painting that had solidified my notions of the relationship of sleep to death—the former perhaps nothing but a less convincing iteration of the latter. I got up, dug through the closet, and found the textbook from my art history course. In the textbook is a reprint of the painting, as well as a critique by the nineteenth-century art critic J.A. Blaikie, originally published in *The Magazine of Art*, which includes the following observation: *The two figures are both young, and the beauty of youth belongs to one as much as the other... the strange likeness and unlikeness of the recumbent figures.*

The Mondeo had a cassette player that switched tape sides whenever we hit a bump in the road or hung a sharp turn. “Dear Prudence” would suddenly warp into “Piggies.” Our conversations tended to meander and shift abruptly from one

subject to another as well. One entire afternoon had been spent leaping back and forth between Wittgenstein and occult symbolism in pop music performances.

We drove for eleven hours that day, over barren landscape, flat, stony fields and bald hills blanketed in volcanic ash. We watched the red lightning flashing around the crater. The sun was setting, and as the sky grew darker, the lightning became brighter, more terrifying. Too tired to drive any further in the night, we fell asleep in the car, each of us with our face pressed against a cold window.

The next morning, wild horses had appeared and were nuzzling through the ash for something to eat, and a scattering of sheep, utterly immobile, gazed incomprehensibly up at the blackened clouds.

We drank cold instant coffee from a thermos. Søren read me a tale from a book of Icelandic myths. I thought of it as a peace offering. The story wasn't very long, but it was bleak, like everything in Iceland. The tale involved a troll wife who tried to ford the channel between Iceland and Norway. The channels were very deep, Søren said, and the troll wife was very afraid. She reached out for a passing ship to hold onto—her last desperate attempt at survival—but the ship steered clear of her (the crew were frightened), and she drowned. To this day her body remains asleep at the bottom of the sea.

At a certain age, Søren said, you have to make a decision: Will you look for the hope or the dread? Look at those sheep, for instance. Jesus Christ, look at their faces. It's like they think something terrible is about to happen.

The ray of light shining through the clouds and onto my face—I remember it as distinctly as the sour taste of his breath when he kissed me good morning, as well as that feeling, deep down, that I had fallen in love.

A collision of atoms, he said, and then kissed my cheek. Positive and negative charges, he said, unzipping my jacket and unbuttoning my shirt. He was always undoing my clothing. He hated barriers.

A collision of atoms, I said. That's all it is to you?

We watched the smoke rising from the crater. The morning wore on, but neither of us felt like driving.

I know you were fucking my sister, Søren said at last. It kind of sucks that you did that, if you want to know the truth.

I thought you didn't care who I slept with? I said. You said we were friends.

Does this feel like friends?

I don't know what it feels like.

Ah, he said. That makes sense. He rested his head against the window, beneath his curled arm.

I received Malou's email in the middle of the night, Thursday. It said, *Caleb, something's happened to Søren. Call me ASAP – M.*

The email came to me as no surprise—I'd already received a letter from Søren a few days before. Upon finding it in the mail basket I could not open it, some foreboding seemed to emanate from the small envelope. Instead, I buried it in the bottom bureau drawer, beneath a stack of old syllabi, a spool of orange thread whose purpose escaped me, and a thimble—an attempt to hide it from myself and, as had happened with the other, seemingly random items in that drawer, I hoped to

forget about it. On the television, a talk show host asked one of the guests whether she was still in love with her ex-husband, who had left her for another man. The guest responded in precisely the same way I imagined I would have, if I were in her place, with the question: What do you mean by love? And the question: What do you mean by *still*?

I made my dinner: a bowl of Grape Nuts and a banana. I sat down and ate my dinner, and while I ate I read the letter. *Dear Caleb*, I said aloud, and then decided I did not like the sound of my voice reverberating off the kitchen walls, as it tended to do. That final evening in Reykjavik, Søren had punched the window in our hotel room. The blow had left a cluster of tiny blood streaks on the glass. As I read the first few sentences of the letter, I wondered if any of the impending three pages might contain an apology for that blow, not that I necessarily required an apology. I didn't blame him for his jealousy. I would have done the same thing.

She's my sister, he'd told me, and left the room without telling me where he was going.

I unfolded the letter and flattened it out on the table. It began pleasantly enough, but about halfway through the tone soured, and finally I had to put down my spoon and shove the bowl away from me. I must have kept shoving it, because the next thing I knew it shattered on the floor.

I finished reading the letter, folded it back up, and put it back in its envelope. I went for my evening run. I carried the letter the whole way in my jacket pocket. When I returned to the house, I removed the letter from my pocket and found that it had been soaked through with rain. Every line of ink had bled together and could no longer be read. The only discernible thing was the metre stamp on the envelope:



—this was all that was left. At that I lost all strength in my body. I could no longer stand. I lay down on the tile, clutching the letter to my chest and then, once I came to terms with the fact that it was no longer a letter at all, but something ruined, I crushed it in my fist.

I forgive you, he'd written—

I flew to Copenhagen the next morning.

Søren had gone back to Iceland sometime later, after our trip there. I have no idea why he went back or how long he stayed there. He said he'd had a hard time finding a job, that he was running out of money, that he got bored often, that he'd been staying with Malou and that she never let up on him, that he'd been rereading Wittgenstein and didn't know what he ever saw in it. *It's hands*, he wrote, *just hands hands hands*. He drank oolong tea, disliked the morning as much as the night, especially dawn, especially dusk. And of course, he wrote, he was planning to take his life.

Malou and I are lying in bed together. She is covering her mouth with one trembling hand. I can hardly hear her voice until she says the police called it a suicide.

And why wouldn't they? I ask.

She rolls away from me, hides her face from me in the darkness.

An officer came by here the other day, she says. A young, handsome officer. Just a boy. He came all by himself to tell me the news. *This is not how we do things ordinarily*, he said, meaning in person. I said so many things to him that I can't remember. But I remember one thing, that I said I loved him. I might have said that. He smiled. That's all boys ever do, they smile. He took off his hat. He said, *I'm so sorry, but the department has ruled your brother's death a suicide. There is no evidence of foul play.* I tried to kiss him. I lunged into his arms. He grabbed me by the arms and said, *You can't do this to me, this isn't proper. It isn't proper, okay?* I begged him to come inside, to be with me. I didn't want him to go. He hasn't returned.

The apartment is dark like a wine cellar. The black curtains are drawn.

Fuck me, she says. I can't see her, I can only hear her voice.

Not now, I say.

When?

I fall asleep, and when I awake, Malou is fiddling with something in the dark. I reach out and take it from her. It's a thimble.

Where did you get this? I ask.

In your coat pocket, she answers. Why?

I get up and begin to gather my things.

It's just a thimble, she says. Calm down.

I know it must be the thimble from my bureau drawer, although I cannot recall moving it from the drawer to my pocket. I tell her about the old syllabi, the orange thread, and the thimble—about everything I kept in the bureau drawer except the letter from Søren. I hope she will take all those seemingly unrelated objects and fashion some meaning for them, some kind of wild theory that ends with alien bases on the dark side of the moon. The more ridiculous, the better. I tell her about the bureau itself, how I had purchased it from a Brazilian man I once fucked at a bathhouse in Boston.

You paid all that money to have a bureau shipped to St. Louis? she asks.

You don't understand, I say, it's a beautiful piece of furniture.

Was it really about the bureau?

When I get to the door I realize I've not even gotten dressed yet. I rest my head against the door and take a deep breath.

While you and Søren were in Iceland, she says, I saw Marina Abramovic on the street in New York.

I'm not familiar with modern art, I say.

She was hailing a taxi, and she gave me that look—the unfazed blankness that seems to be the resting face of the twenty-first century, the look you see on her face in pretty much any of her pictures. I mean, Google her if you don't believe me.

Did she say anything to you? I ask.

Neither of us spoke. I tried—she tried. We were like two fish. I was so disappointed that she didn't say anything. I thought, at the very least, she'd say

hello. That would've been enough. Or that's what I believe, anyway. That someone will come into my life and give me clarity. But of course that isn't going to happen, because that person doesn't exist. People are people, and nobody's profound in the end.

I nod.

Don't nod if you don't know what I mean.

Knowing there is no other way to do it but straight, I tell her, The truth is, your brother took his own life.

She is silent. She is somewhere, there, in the darkness, ghostlike, a disembodied breath.

Do you know what else was in my bureau drawer? Besides the thimble and the thread and the syllabi? A letter. It came in the mail the week before I got your email. Do you know what the letter said?

Why are you doing this?

I asked you a question. Do you know what the letter said?

No, she answers. Her voice has moved across the room, as if across an ocean. I hear it as if through fog.

Do you want me to tell you? I ask.

If there's a letter, she says, then why don't you let me read it? Go on. Get out your letter and I'll read it.

The letter's ruined. I went for a run and—

You went for a run.

It was raining, and I took the letter with me—

Come here, she says, crawling onto the bed, pulling me on top of her. I can't see her eyes, but I find them, cover them with my hands, pretending I'm the god of sleep. For a moment, I start to believe it. I start to think it's true.

SHARPENING SKATES *(an excerpt)*

She places mine on the bathroom counter.
Grey as cygnets, they lack elegance
but get the job done at the rink every day.
I know where the Zamboni lives,
the third bleacher, the powdery heat
in the women's change room,
the bitterness of the urinals in the men's.
She brings a tin of oil
from the bottom drawer
and peels off its plastic baggie skin,
wets the stone with oil
until it darkens like a whale's eye,
slides it along the flat of the blade
in circles like the loops she will trace
tomorrow morning at Earlybird.

CONTRIBUTORS

Jenny Boychuk is a graduate of the University of Victoria's Department of Writing. Her poetry and creative non-fiction can be found in *The Malahat Review*, *Room*, *Salt Hill Journal*, and *Birdfeast*. She currently lives and writes in Blind Bay, British Columbia.

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Paul Celan is the pen name of Paul Ansel, one of the twentieth-century's major poets. He was born into a German-speaking Jewish family in 1920 in Czernowitz (in then Romania). Having survived WWII (his parents died in an extermination camp), he radically remade both German and lyric poetry in response to his experiences. "Corona" comes from his second book, *Mohn and Gedächtnis (Poppy and Memory)*; 1952). He committed suicide in Paris in 1970.

Paddy Chitty was born, raised, and resides in Hamilton, Ontario. She is an alumnus of the Banff Wired Writing Program and the Sage Hill Poetry Colloquium and has had poems published in *The Great Lakes Review*, *Women's Words 20th Anniversary Anthology*, *Room*, and *The Antigone Review*.

Carla Drysdale's first book of poems, *Little Venus*, was published by Toronto's Tightrope Books in 2010. Her poems have been published in such literary journals as *The Same*, *LIT*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *Canadian Literature*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Global City Review*, *Confrontation*, *Come Horses*, *97 Inc.*, and in the anthology *Entering the Real World: VCCA Poets on Mt. San Angelo*. She is currently completing her second manuscript of poems, *All Born Perfect*. She lives with her husband and two sons in France, near Geneva, where she works as an editor and journalist.

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Iain Higgins is a poet, critic, and translator living in Victoria, BC. His version of the medieval bestseller, *The Book of John Mandeville*, received honourable mention in the 2011 MLA Scaglione Prize for an Outstanding Translation of a Literary Work. His books include the poetic collection *Then Again* (Oolichan, 2005).

Michael Johnson is from Bella Coola, British Columbia. His work has appeared recently in *Cascadia Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Poetry East*, *Weber*, *Forget Magazine*, and *The Fiddlehead*, among others, and has been selected for the Best American Poetry and Best Canadian Poetry anthologies. He works at a vineyard in Okanagan Falls.

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Mark Lavorato's third novel, *Serafim & Claire*, is published by House of Anansi. His work has been featured in magazines such as *Arc*, *Descant*, *Vallum*, and *Grain*, as well as anthologies, including *The Best Canadian Poetry in English 2013*. His debut collection, *Wayworn Wooden Floors* (Porcupine's Quill, 2012), was a finalist for the Raymond Souster Award.

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Harold Macy lives in Merville, BC surrounded by old hippies, fundamentalist Christians, badly-aging cowgirls, loggers, and urban defectors—great sources of character and story. He has studied writing with the UBC Mentorship Program, Victoria School of Writing, Sage Hill (SK), and North Island College. His first book was *The Four Storey Forest: As Grow the Trees, So Too The Heart* (2011).

Meryl McMaster is an Ontario-based artist and a BFA graduate from OCAD University. She is the recipient of the Charles Pachter Prize for Emerging Artists, the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship, the Canon Canada Prize, the OCAD Medal, and the Doris McCarthy Scholarship. McMaster has exhibited in various galleries including the Ottawa Art Gallery, Prefix ICA, the Eiteljorg Museum, MacLaren Art Centre, and Harbourfront Centre.

Artist's Statement (2012): **Anima** means soul or life in Latin and in many cultures, especially Aboriginal culture, butterflies represent the souls of your ancestors. I was also drawn to the symbolism butterflies have in connection to metamorphosis, which had significance and correlation to the story I was telling in the body of work "In-Between Worlds." Through this body of work I want to transform the way the viewer and I understand the past from the perspective of the present. Throughout all the images there is an ethereal feeling occurring. I wanted to continue this feeling and give a surreal quality to the image by having vibrant

coloured butterflies in a wintery landscape. Butterflies fly south for the winter and wouldn't survive the cold days and nights of Canadian winters. I am also turning into an icy figure or fading away, and they are landing on me to almost bring me back to life or even to feed off me like they do a flower to keep their spirits alive. So we almost need each other for survival.

Lori McNulty is a writer, traveller, and digital storyteller. Her work has been published in *The Fiddlehead*, *Descant*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *The New Quarterly*, and *The Globe and Mail*. She has been a finalist in both the 2012 and 2014 CBC Literary Awards. Africa is next on the horizon.

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Miranda Pearson is the author of three books of poetry, *Prime*, *The Aviary*, and *Harbour*. *Harbour* was shortlisted for the 2010 Dorothy Livesay prize. Her next collection, titled *The Fire Extinguisher*, will be published in 2015 by Oolichan Books. Miranda lives in Vancouver.

Rachel Rose (rachelrose.ca) has won awards for her poetry, her fiction, and her non-fiction, including a recent Pushcart Prize. She has published poems, short stories, and essays in Canada, the US, New Zealand, and Japan. Her most recent book, *Song and Spectacle*, won the 2013 Audre Lorde Poetry Prize in the US and the Pat Lowther Award in Canada. In 2011 she was commissioned to write the libretto for Canada's first lesbian opera, working with composer Leslie Uyeda, which premiered as the opera *When the Sun Comes Out* in August 2013 in Vancouver.

Steven Slowka was born in Fredricton, NB, and currently lives in London, Ontario. He is in his third year of studies at the University of Western Ontario, pursuing an undergraduate degree in sociocultural anthropology. His poetry has previously appeared online in *Occasus*.

Michael V. Smith teaches creative writing at UBC Okanagan Campus, where they pay him to make queer short films, do devised performances, and write subversive books.

Madeline Sonik is an award-winning writer and anthologist who teaches in the Department of Writing at the University of Victoria.

Timothy Taylor is a bestseller and award winning novelist and journalist. His most recent novel is the CBC Bookie Prize-winning *The Blue Light Project*. His non-fiction magazine work has appeared widely in Canada and the US. He lives and walks his dog in Vancouver.

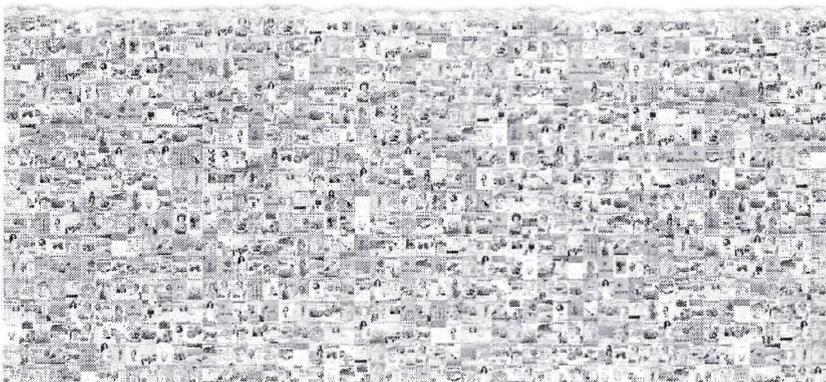
Julia Zarankin's writing has appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *Antioch Review*, *The Dalhousie Review*, and *PRISM*. She lives, writes, and watches birds with gusto in Toronto.



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Thanks for another fantastic trip through the creative washing machine.

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Lots of fun! A totally different poem than I would normally write. Always interesting to see what comes out!

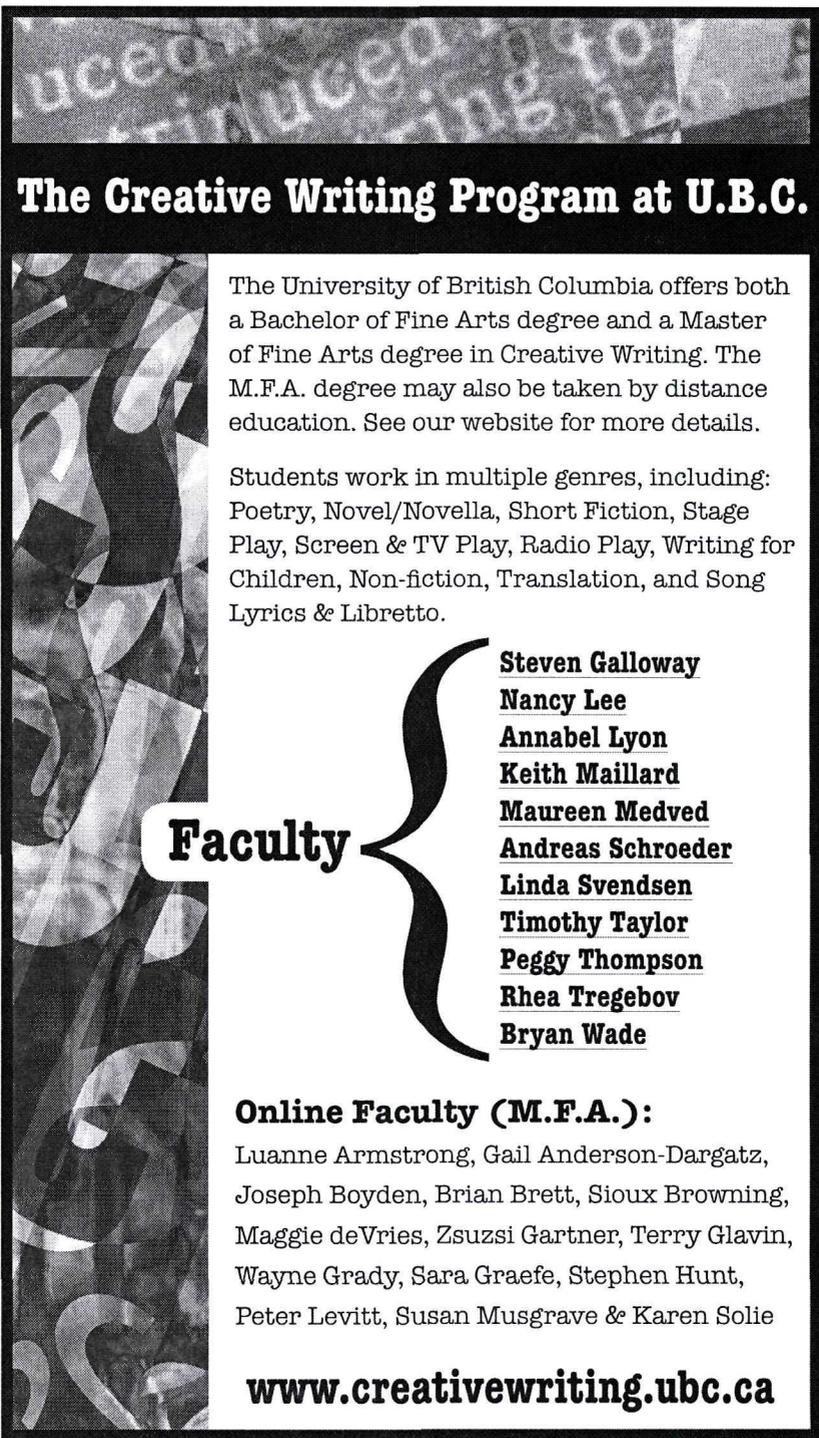
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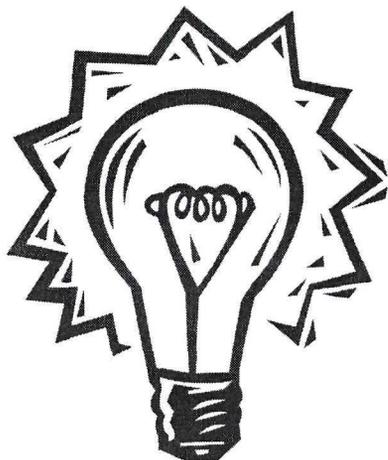
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