PRISM international

50:1 Fall 2011

New fiction from Shashi Bhat & kris bertin
Plus new poetry from Homero Aridjis & Susan Holbrook

Contemporary Writing from Canada and Around the World

PRISM international

2011 Earle Birney Prize for Poetry

$500 was awarded to
Lorna Crozier
for her poem
"Duet"
which appeared in PRISM 49:3

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PRISM international

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kris bertin

Is Alive and Can Move

I'd made it through a real rough patch, and so I had to do everything I could to try and get something going that would keep me together. My brother wouldn't let me stay with him but he did put up the money so I could get an apartment. Said he'd help me more if I started going to meetings, but I said I didn't need that shit. Said all I needed was a job, and believed it, too. Eventually I'm hired to do cleanup at one wing of a building at the far end of the university campus—mostly dorm rooms, but there's a cafeteria and kitchen, a daycare, and two floors of offices for the teachers. I had to clean from midnight until it was done, which was usually five in the morning, and for the first time in years, I really try to stay on top of it and do a good job because I really have nothing else.

I got hired even though for the first week I had to smoke every five minutes, take a dump every two, and was sweating so much I looked like I'd been out in the rain. But the cleaning boss, Charles, seemed to understand. He has one of those big, bloated noses and you could see he'd been through some rough patches himself. You could never know how bad someone else has had it, but even the worst alcoholics didn't have it as bad as me. I was a special case—even the doctor said so—but it was still nice to know he had an idea or two about it. One time, he even asked how I was handling it, and I said *good*, because it was mostly true. The job gave me a place to be at the exact time most everyone would be going downtown to drive drinks into them. And it was a job that, for the most part, was quiet and didn't involve other people. Sometimes I'd see a college kid or two, shuffling around in their pajamas but that was it. And the only other people I'd see were the professors, a couple of young ones who would even talk to me sometimes. They seemed to always be working late, smoking pipes and cigars and laughing a lot. I never really let myself get in too close, because something about them seemed dangerous.

It was impossible to start the shift at the dormitory end, because any day of the week the kids would be going right until three or four in the morning, and if you cleaned it too early, you'd have to pick up trash, mop up drinks or even puke, broken glass, shredded papers, then come back and do it all over again. Instead you'd start with the offices, go down each floor, sweep, mop and buff. Change garbages. Vacuum the

mats near the doors. Clean walls once a week. Wipe down doorknobs and railings and light switches with disinfectant. Do the toilets and sinks and stock everything up too.

Charles said I had it right. That it was best never to even see the kids, to never even lay eyes on them. A guy who had my job from before, a few years ago, he got fired for fucking one of the girls.

"Whether or not he even did," Charles said, "And I fucking tell you he *did not* so keep that in mind, too, young fella."

One night I did end up seeing a girl, at maybe quarter to four, hanging over the stairwell, watching me buff the floor. Her tits were dangling down at me in her silvery shirt and I had to do everything not to take a second look at her. Problem was it was summer, it was hot, and we were both stripped down to almost nothing. I had on shorts and a muscle shirt, and she had on that party top, and as far as I could tell, her underwear. Even with the noise from the buffer and all the space between us, I swear I could almost feel her body against mine. Smell her. It had been so long since I'd been with a woman, I almost dropped that big hand-operated thing down the stairs a dozen times.

She kept saying stuff. *You're hot. You're younger than the other guy. I like your tattoos.* Shouted right down on top of me so it bounced off every surface and into my ears. And to be honest, I was scared, scared all around. For my job and my life and to even be seen with her. But I was most scared of what she might think if I actually went for it, if she got a good look at my face and eyes and smelled the stink coming out of my pores. So I put my head down and pushed hard on the handles, as hard as I could, got out of there with the job half done, my prick sticking straight out in front of me.

And so I kept away from there until the very end of the night for both those reasons, and because the only way for things to get back to normal was for me not to lay eyes on any bottles, not to even smell the stuff or look at it. I knew I couldn't even look at someone when they're screwed up and having a time. Doctor told me I had to do whatever I had to do in order to make it work, and the old guys who'd been able to quit altogether all said shit like *it never gets easier* and I had to believe it because what else could I believe? Even all the pamphlets said the same thing, and I imagine the meetings would too.

Being alone might not have been the solution I needed though. For the first part, it was. When my system was changing, trying to turn itself into something that didn't run on grain alcohol and bar food, I needed to be alone. When I would have sudden bursts of energy and the air smelled fresh, when all I wanted to do was tell the world how beautiful it was, when I was so emotional the taste of Mike and Ikes nearly moved me to tears, I knew it was good no one was around. Same as when I'd

have a real downward dip and I would be so angry at absolutely nothing—angry at dirt and streaks and myself and the walls—those were times it was good to be alone. And then when I'd have a black-out, and I'd come out of it, scared and confused and I would have a moment where I wasn't sure if it was a new day or one that happened a long time ago. Those were times I was glad to be alone.

And then other times it would've helped to have someone there. Part of drinking so much that your brain is permanently fucked means that you have trouble staying focused on tasks, or else you can get distracted from the ones you need to be doing by ones that don't matter. For a while I got to counting all the bricks at eye level. I got to thinking for a while that if the number of bricks came out odd, it was an omen that things were going downhill again. I'd feel grim and grey and once even thought about opening one of those big green windows in the bathroom and stepping out headfirst. When it was even, I'd get a burst of energy and I'd hear a whistling sound like my life was flying down the right path. Those were things that another person could have kept from coming.

The brick count came out odd a few too many times and so I started to get the idea that the building was against me. It wasn't a thought that occurred to me—it was just that one day I realized it was what I believed, was what I had always believed about the place. Almost immediately after I realized it, I started to see it everywhere.

There was a brick missing from one of the walls, low and on a corner that I hadn't noticed. I'd walk by it, or just clean the little red crumbs where the hole met the rest of the wall. It wasn't until I realized that the dirt and bits around it on the ground were from someone's foot, climbing on it, that I paid it any attention. When I stuck my foot in and took a step up, I realized there's another brick missing, a whole arm's reach up near the top. I felt something slimy up there and let go, and a moment later a few white things went plop onto the ground. At first I thought they were worms—maggots—and I froze, held my breath while my brain tried to work it out. With what I have, figuring things out can take longer than it should, and it was only when I smelled my hand that I finally realized what they were. It's a horrible smell. Latex and cum. Somehow that was worse than maggots and I heard myself scream.

The scream started a chain reaction and then other people are screaming, too. Shouting, yelling, a bunch of men's voices coming down the hallway. I watched a group of kids bust through the atrium, carrying something over their head. They were chanting. Saying *Edmond Burke*, the name of the building. I could feel something bad coming off them so I went up the stairs to the cafeteria and stood behind a bunch of garbage bins just to get something between me and them. Then I noticed what

they were holding. A person. A girl. The girl from the dorms—no pants on, just sneakers and that silver shirt. At first I think they're going to throw her through one of the windows, but then they open the door and throw her outside. It almost looks like a prank, until they chuck her right at one of those boulders near the doors, the ones that kids sit on. She lands on her back and makes a terrible sound but I don't stay to watch the rest.

I scramble into the cafeteria. Hide. Hide for so long that I fall asleep. When I wake up, it's still dark, but I leave that whole area alone, don't even go back to it. The next day I don't get in trouble for my shitty job, and there's no blood or skin or teeth or sign of struggle and the boulder looks fine. The condom is still in my uniform pocket though, and there are more used ones in the missing brick. To me, it looked like a pattern, but when I was feeling like that, everything did.

And then, a voice in my head said *something in this place makes you crazy.* A moment later, it added *you probably have it too.*

The next week, one of the walls collapses. I was the last person to be told, and so I just come across a whole mess of caution tape and scaffolding and tarps and dust where I was supposed to be cleaning. When I call Charles, he apologizes and tells me to just leave that part and move on.

"Yeah, the fucking thing just let go. Been spitting rocks the size of grapefruits out the front of it for years. One kid even got hit in the 90s," Charles tells me. "The whole fucking thing just let go. Two kids died. Girls. Happened to be walking through the door at that exact moment. There's gonna be a hell of a lawsuit."

Avoiding the mess fucked with my hours, because it took a solid 2.5 off of them, but I don't say anything. Instead I put my hand in a locker and slammed the door a few times. I knew at the time that it wasn't productive but it made a kind of sense. It was about my hours, but for those poor girls too, like if I felt bad pain it could somehow straighten things out for them *and* me.

When I look back I know I'm acting this way because I refused to take the pills they said I needed after my hospital stay. I thought refusing them would make me stronger, that if I could get through on my own, it would be for the better. And so in that state, thinking about what the bricks and the kids and the wall meant kind of made me decide things I shouldn't have. Like that the building was alive. That it did stuff to people, and did stuff on its own.

It gave me something to do for the rest of my nights, on my smoke breaks, in the toilet bowls. Gave me something to look for when I was doing the floors, gave me cracks to see in the ceiling and little differences to notice. I was sure the school was moving. Maybe it was all marshland underneath or a slow sinkhole or something, but there were signs of

growing and shrinking, no doubt about it. The more I thought about it, the more I remembered stuff that had been one way and was now another, like a whole door that used to be under the stairwell, and the giant mirror that was right next to the south double doors that was just gone.

"What happened to that stuff?" I would ask out loud. I wanted to ask Charles but then I wasn't really sure if he was on our side or *Edmund Burke*'s. I wanted to go look for the girl in the silver shirt from all those weeks ago, but I was both scared I wouldn't be able to find her, and that I would, that I'd lose my job up there on a hot, sticky night.

I mostly didn't think about the building during my daytime. I'd just watch tv and smoke and take walks, but more than a few times I catch the tail end of an idea of a memory I'd once had that could help with my theory. Memories are hard to hold onto without booze, and I even thought about buying some Russian Prince just so I could make my brain work right—not even to get drunk, just a few ounces to grease the wheels and get things going.

I didn't give in, though, not then. I'd get into bed and sleep when I felt like that, and eventually my missing memory came to me. Spider-man dealt with this shit once. A living building. It was a museum and it tried to kill him. And a green guy was in it. Like a mummy or a zombie, all rotten and shit, and he controlled the museum. He made chandeliers fly around and wax cavemen chase Spiderman around. In the end, a suit of armor cut spider-man's head off. Or no—Spiderman cut the green guy's head off. But it grew back.

I tried to explain it to the guy at the comic shop and he said he wasn't sure which issues I meant. He said it sounded more like a *Twilight Zone* episode but I said no, it's definitely a comic. I read it as a kid, and then again at the library in the can back in '01. It was a pretty dull day so him and me went digging through the oldies and I realized it wasn't a zombie, it was Spiderman's enemy, the Lizard. We found four Spiderman comics with museums in them, but only one of them had the lizard. It wasn't the right comic, but it was close enough that I bought it. Read it at the McDonald's nearby and even though it wasn't the one I remember, it seemed so familiar that it made me feel better, even if it didn't tell me how to solve my problem.

I lost the comic book before I could read it twice, but I saw the lizard guy the next night in a dream. He was standing in the hall at the school, upstairs near the toilets, and he had a mean hard-on sticking out of his pants and labcoat. Hissing and laughing and playing with himself, trying to keep it going so he could give it to me. He didn't look real—looked like a guy in a costume, but I got the idea that maybe the costume was alive, growing on the guy like moss.

"Don't come forward," I said, but of course he did.

As he came at me, I got a jolt of pain in my guts like I'd been knifed and I fell backwards over my mop bucket, tipped the thing over and within seconds I was soaked in brown water.

The green guy's rubber feet squeaked after me and it was then that I realized I wasn't dreaming, I was just seeing shit. I heard the echo of my own voice spiraling down the halls and bouncing off the floors and then it was quiet. Then I saw just how dark it was outside. That it was just another night and the hall was empty. The doctor warned me I was probably gonna see shit. He said I'd feel good for a bit and then it would be like detox all over again. And it would be bad. I thought it had come and gone but there it was after all. It doesn't take long to realize I'm going to need those pills he talked about

I barely finished my cleaning that night because I was so fucked up over the lizard. I kept looking over my shoulder and even fell down the stairs because of it. Ended up scraping my hands and bashing my knees and it took everything, everything in me not to walk to Ron's or whatever bar would let me in at 8 am to drink my face off.

It hurt to go to the doctor. To say that I fucked up and I couldn't straighten myself out on my own, but he was nice about it. He said what he said before, that it's not an option to go without the pills. That a guy as young as me can still make it if we get on top of it. He prescribed the stuff, which is usually for old people, but said it would help me keep my head straight. He also gave me a chart of stuff to eat, vitamins to take. Said that people who have alcohol dementia need nutrition more than anything else. It's important to eat three meals, make them healthy and never miss them.

I realized too, that I hadn't been drinking enough water, just a few cups of coffee and a can of coke to stay up. The doctor straightens all that up though, and after a while, I actually feel good. I start getting that high all the time and for a while the job gets better. With something as easy as the right food the right amount of times, the right pill at the right hour, things make more sense. Three weeks is all it takes for me to feel like a teenager again. At night, the school is quiet, like a church, and when I clean it, it's like a whole new place to me. It's like I've just come back from another planet—one that looked just like this one, except without straight lines and right angles. I stop seeing shit, hearing shit, thinking insane thoughts, and more than once I have a hard time remembering what it was even like before the pills.

It stays away from me, and I don't even think about the building growing or moving, or controlling people's minds. I just about forget all about it until I find that comic book in a bag with a bunch of porno magazines and moldy burger wrappers. I laugh out loud, and remember

how crazy I was being, like it's so far away from where I am now. But then, I look inside, look a little too close at one of the pages and that lizard is smiling too hard, his mouth *too* wide. And I feel it, like it's all fresh. I close the book. Throw it out.

One night the professors get me in their office. I'm going by with the dust mop and one of them shouts, Hey, and I stop. I don't know why I stop. One of them has a sixty-ouncer, drinking right out of the neck with one hand like the kids would do, except it's a fancy scotch I've never heard of. I get the sense from looking at them that maybe something had gone wrong for one of them, and maybe the other was the kind of person who'd go along with anything. Then he passes it around the room a few times, and when it gets to me I watch my hand bring it to my mouth. Feel my mouth open, my throat take it and send it down to my belly, and feel everything get dull. Even though I stand there and joke with them and listen to their shit, it takes everything to keep it together. I feel like I'm falling backwards into something like a bed, but warmer. Something like water, but softer. I realize that I believe the building is moving again. I believed it with my first sip. And more, I've always believed it.

I want to say something like *no sorry, I don't drink*, say it now and launch it back ten minutes ago, but I can't. I realize that going to meetings and all that probably would have trained me to say it. I would have said it when I met them, would have shaken their hands and told them about my disorder or disease or whatever you call it.

Then we're outside, and I'm on my hands and knees, showing them the slope in the ground made by the building as it moves forward.

"That's amazing," one of them says.

"This place is fucking haunted to shit anyway," the one with the beard says, "all I hear is people saying they wish the department was somewhere else. Jane saw a ghost here once."

"Fuck Jane," the other one says, then the bottle goes around again and we're leaving to get more and I don't even think about my mop and bucket, up on the third floor. Don't think about the unlocked maintenance room, the extension cord running down an entire hallway into a stairwell. The six dirty washrooms that need to be cleaned.

We're at a bar after that, and they got us each a pitcher and we're in a place that doesn't even care if we drink right out of the jug. Then I realize we're at Ron's, and I brought us here. Nick's behind the bar, watching me, and I get the sense that maybe I'm dreaming, maybe I've floated here in a dream and really I'm in bed, groaning and rolling around and kicking the shit out of the sheets. Maybe I'm still good, and I haven't drunk a drop and everything's okay.

"I need to put together a resumé," I tell the professors. "I need to get

a new job."

"Take out an ad," the younger one says, "I'm sure you can do a lot of jobs."

"I'm alive," I tell them, "got two legs."

"Is Alive and Can Move," the other one says, moving his hands like he's creating a headline before our eyes.

There's a long black piece in my memory like a blindfold and then I'm on a beach with my shirt off.

"Look at that," one of the girls says. There are girls.

We look out across the harbour at the city and even though it's late, the lights and the fog and the sky all around it are this deep purple, green at the edges like a bruise. There are clouds overtop of it that aren't over us, and you can see the little flashes of lightning way in the air as things get ready to open up.

"The school's moving," I tell the professors. "In the past two months, it's moved two feet. That's why the wall collapsed."

"Of course it is," one of them says. "According to my research, the whole city's on the move. It wants to get into the Atlantic."

"Really?"

"It's a living thing, the city. I know that sounds like a joke, but it grows and changes and learns. Does stuff. Just like us. Except it runs on people."

"That's bullshit," I say, but I can feel myself getting scared. "Gonna need a new job."

"He's a professor," one of the girls says in a voice I don't like. Everyone looks at me like they're serious, though. Like I'm not being fucked with.

"Your body runs on a bunch of smaller things going around and doing stuff. Your blood, your cells, antibodies, bacteria, all that stuff. A city's the same thing, except we're those little guys making it work, keeping it alive. You see?"

"Yeah," I tell them. And I do. I can actually see it in my mind, all of us climbing over scaffolding and driving our cars and walking up and down the streets like water through a pipe. I want to ask them if they know somewhere I can get a job, but then someone passes me a drink and I realize I don't know anyone's name, don't even know who or what they are.

"The city's gonna dump us all into the ocean," the bitchy girl says. "You think two feet is impressive? Try a kilometer a year. That's how fast the city is trying to kill us."

"It's true," the professor says, but this time I can hear something in his voice. Then his friend speaks up and I realize they've been bullshitting me, going around in circles making shit up.

Smoke pours out of the other professor's bearded mouth as thick as

taffy, and he says "Oh yeah, the world's coming to an end. This is fucking it."

Then there was thunder, and that feeling you get inside, that rumble that wants you to run away like an animal on a nature documentary, and I could almost see it. I could see that bruise colour spreading through the sky, and then I saw it. Everything shook and I felt it right in the middle of me and the city actually *moved*, moved a whole block over. Like *ka-chunk*, and there it was, settling in, nestling into place like a cat. And the thunder got louder and louder and the sky lit up again and when it was over, when the noise from the sky got quiet, almost everyone was laughing like crazy. I could feel something coming, something coming right up from inside of me, so I make a point to try and drift off to that place where everything gets dark and I can sink into myself like a stone down to the bottom of my thoughts. Then something bad happens.

Three years later I go back to that school and eyeball from the corner of the steps to the tree, and count out the paces and put my hands flat on the earth and I swear it's taking a *goddamned* walk up the city. I'm completely dry, and I'm on my medicine, and I've been stone-cold sober since I was back on the street but I swear it's moved. It's a cold fall day and I know it doesn't make sense, but it's all there. And I can still see that same dark shit in all the kids that look at me like I'm some kind of monster dragging my belly in the dirt, but it's actually the other way around and they'll never ever know it.

Susan Holbrook

The Disney Princesses

The Disney Princesses outnumber you.
The Disney Princesses are stuck to pencil cases, socks, toothpaste, bandages.
Soon they will appear on dogfood and pink insulation. The next time you go to your mechanic he will offer you the Disney Princesses timing belt.
Dykes worry their daughter will get teased about hemp overalls and soy sandwiches, so they buy her the Disney Princesses backpack, overcompensating.
But even if you wanted to shield your child from the Disney Princesses, you couldn't. Someone will lend her a Disney Princesses eraser, and she'll be hooked, because the Disney Princesses are like crack or PEZ.
The Disney Princesses appear in threes, blooming from fused hips.
The Disney Princesses stick together, at least the white ones do.
The Disney Princesses are Charlie's Angels without the guns.
I'm offering for sale a brand new Pink Disney Princess Flip-Open Slumber Sofa. When it is in the sofa shape, it has Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty on the front. When you open it to sleep on, the blanket has Cinderella, Snow White and Belle on it. The entire cover can be unzipped and laundered.
The Disney Princesses don't wear pants.
The Disney Princesses are post-feminist.
I've never seen Jasmine, Mulan and Pocahontas together on snowboots.
The Disney Princesses are not ideological.
The Disney Princesses love you a lot, as long as you are a girl.
The Disney Princesses have an anthem.
It says there's a place where hope and dreams can last for all time.
In other words, the Disney Princesses would rather never be satisfied.
Each Disney Princess has a male love interest, but he never appears on the thermoses or underpants.
The Disney Princesses prefer hanging out on your pillowcase talking about hope and dreams with you.
That way you and the Disney Princesses can love each other, but it won't look suspicious.

The Disney Princesses do not associate with Barbie; they are virtuous maidens from days of yore and Barbie keeps gynaecological appointments on her Blackberry.
The Disney Princesses had oatmeal and quail eggs for breakfast. Barbie had a diet pill and a grape poptart.
The Disney Princesses just titter at Hannah Montana. Soon she will be a human woman, and her wall of socks will come tumbling down.
The Disney Princesses can be unzipped and laundered.
The Disney Princesses have a rubber backing.
The Disney Princesses may warp in the dishwasher.
Do not inflate the Disney Princesses.
The Disney Princesses are a choking hazard.

To My Vermiform Appendix

They took you
without asking.

In there for something
else, the surgeon
a contractor eagerly
thrashing behind
the drywall,
"while we're in there..."

Just because you do nothing or
because of something you might
do. If only they'd cut off my
elbow, I wouldn't have broken it.
Blowfish on the menu,
the prime minister still in office,
yet you were considered too shifty-
eyed to keep around.

Maybe I liked you,
maybe I didn't consider you
a fifth wheel
a bomb ticking,
worm turning.

Take a kidney out
and at least do some good.

Why are some vermiform
things reviled
while others are cock
of the walk?

I never got to see you.
You could have been the shortest or
fattest or most all around
gorgeous vermiform appendix on record.
Hell, I don't even know if you
were fixed retrocecally or not.
Was your lumen partially
or totally obliterated?

You may have been vestigial
but you still stockpiled my gut flora.
What if I run out of gut flora?
Where will you be if I need
an efferent urinary conduit?
You'd be awesome at that.

Under McBurney's point,
3 inches southwest
of my scarred umbilicus
you don't lie
untroubled.

To the Belugas Seen Through the Underground Viewing Tank at the Vancouver Aquarium

You do not show us
up like the sleek orcas.

In the impossible
Sani-Flush blue
of Canada's Arctic
exhibit, you swirl
lumpily. Peppermint
gum wads. Chubby grubs.
Bleached bean pods. Foetus
heads blubber-browed and
low-eyed, bodies
the graceless and perseverant
trunks of short-
legged dogs.

You look as if you were missing
something. Something not yet
bloomed from the lumps.
Helical tusk, wings.

You look as if you were missing ice.

You have great personalities,
sacks of potatoes, toothpaste
squooges, shrink-wrapped
former athletes,
gnocchi. You rise
to the sunny deck,
where children drop
fish into the squeaky pink
sphincters of your gullets
then run to the gift
shop to squeeze
you while you
drift back
down.

Clouds.

...

Misha Glouberman with Sheila Heti

from The Chairs Are Where the People Go

An excerpt from a collection of 72 mini-essays as told to Sheila Heti by Misha Gouberman

2. How to Make Friends in a New City

If you're just finishing school—maybe you're in your early twenties, maybe you're moving to a new city—you need to make friends. The very most important thing to know is that this isn't easy. It's really easy to make friends when you're a child, and it's really easy to make friends in high school and in college. And for a lot of people, I think, it's a real shock to discover that making friends doesn't take care of itself in adulthood. When you come to university you're crammed together with a couple of thousand people who are around your age and who share a bunch of stuff in common with you, and most important, are at that very same moment also looking for new friends. In this sort of situation, it would take a lot of conscious effort to end up not having friends. But adult life isn't like that. You may move to a new city, maybe for a job that doesn't easily put you into contact with a lot of people with whom you have much in common. So what that means is that it's work, and maybe for the first time in your life you have to actually take making friends on as a project. I knew so many people around that stage of life who suddenly found themselves isolated and couldn't understand why, and had never thought of making friends as something they had to bring conscious effort to.

If you see making friends as a project, you can understand that there will be efforts and costs and risks. You have to go to functions that you don't exactly feel like going to, you have to stick your neck out and make gestures that are embarrassing or can make you feel vulnerable. You'll have to spend time with people who seem initially interesting but then turn out not to be. But all those things are okay if you see them as the costs involved in a project. It's useful to identify what you like to do, because friends are the people with whom you can do those things. So

if you like to cook, you might take a cooking class and meet people who are interested in cooking. Or if what you like to do is go drink in bars, then find people who want to drink in bars with you. If you like to watch television and make fun of it, find other people who want to do that. It's useful to remember that friendship needs an activity associated with it.

If you're the ambitious sort, you can try to create your own world around you, and may be have a party at your house every two weeks. I think Andy Warhol's grandmother gave him similar advice. This gets you more than friends—it can create a whole community. I'll say it takes a certain kind of person to do this, though. But if you can do it—if you can put yourself at the center of something—it really works.

When I came to Toronto, here's what I liked to do: I liked drinking in bars and I liked thinking about the Internet. This was at a time when thinking about the Internet wasn't so popular, but drinking in bars still was, so I just started a club, and I put out the word, and I invited other people. I was the only person at my organization at the time who was really interested in thinking about the Internet. It was at a time when sort of every organization hired one person to be their web guy. So there were all these lonely, isolated web guys scattered around the city, and we started a biweekly bar night. I was completely new in town, but just by starting something like that, you really put yourself in the center of all kinds of things. Being a host—it's a really super-valuable service that a lot of people are disinclined to do, and if you can do it, it's a great way to meet people.

65. Who Are Your Friends?

Teaching my classes, I started to notice during the breaks that there was so much warmth between these people who often had very little in common. They had engaged in a fairly passionate and intimate kind of play with each other, and the connections between them happened so quickly, and they developed such a collective fondness for each other. But this fondness lacked the traits we normally associate with adult friendship.

They didn't know that much about each other. They didn't know what was going on in each other's lives. But they felt a strong and genuine closeness. They were happy to see each other. And I started to think, Oh—friends are the people you play with. That seemed like a pretty good definition of friendship to me, and I was satisfied with it.

Then, about five years, ago a friend of mine moved here from Kelowna, B.C. She said, You know, in Toronto, friendships are all based around talking. What you do with your friends is you go out for coffee or drinks, or you go to their apartment and you talk about stuff. She said, In

Kelowna, what you do with your friends is go swimming. It just seemed really beautiful to me that in Kelowna your friends might just be these people who liked floating around in the water with you—that the people floating near you are your friends.

68. Social Capital

A lot people I know who work in the arts think they're poor. And it's true that some of them might not have much money, but the idea that they are somehow "the poor" is, I think, an idea too ridiculous to even merit giving it serious consideration.

Lesley Battler

Doing Business With Poets

Global Guidelines for first time poetry readings by downtrodden Oil tycoons

1.
enemy poets dance
on the stanzas of
mass production

2.
orphic forces
stockpile
oracular hats

cadres of losers
aim phrase tasers

hum as they pump
Bedlamite into
children hidden
in Oulippan labs

3.
do not fall for
linguists who
would riddle
critics with wit!
last October
they elected
attack dactyls

4.
always follow
global protocol

never blindfold
a poet or spirit
one off in a black
Mariah to Nigeria,

South China Sea,
without providing
new-hire orientation,
dinner at the Westin

5.
do not be
a brand hero

never overthrow
a rogue poet
on your own

bribe a fixer
to deal with
syllabic tribes

illegally supplied
with anagram
machines
running
pentameter
a million
rimbauds
a day

6.
caught in
stage light

miles from
the nearest
Power-Point

you can drown
in their ground-
water vowels

7.
call for back-up

evoke all the orcs
black helicopters
flying monkeys
bookmarked in
your Blackberry

crack their
poetics into
metric feet

process
bellicose
verse

render hostile
lexicon into
honest sonnets

Craig Boyko

The Door in the Wall

"Here, duck. Here, ducky duck."

Laurel Peggery sat on the edge of a park bench, scattering hunks of bread in an appetizing arrangement across the gravel bank. The duck, however, was grooming himself and took no notice.

She was a tall, sturdy, stolid woman, dressed neatly in several layers of grey thrift-store sweaters, jackets, and scarves. Her posture was scrupulously correct—though at present her supplications had brought her forward about five degrees from the vertical. A furrowed forehead and deep character lines, running from her nose to the corners of her wide mouth, made her look formidable; but her eyes were moist and beseeching.

A man came ambling towards her along the path. She stuffed the loaf down into her purse and kicked aside the crumbs on the ground. She corrected, or rather over-corrected her posture, so that she was leaning backwards about five degrees past vertical. She crossed her knees and folded her hands and stared resolutely at the trees across the pond.

The man took no more notice of her than the duck had, and so was startled when, at the last moment, she fixed her gaze on him and said firmly, as if reproaching herself for some weakness, "Good morning." He was surprised to see that she was young and attractive. He was past her before he could return her greeting; and though he soon forgot all about the girl on the bench in the park, the rest of his day was haunted by a specter of disappointment and dissatisfaction with life.

Laurel watched him till he was out of sight, then shook herself and returned to her task.

"Here, ducky. Here, ducky duck duck duck."

A battered seagull flapped to earth twenty feet away and began strutting back and forth, watching her from alternating eyes. She hissed at it and threw a pebble in its direction, but her aim was poor and the gull, unruffled, continued his surveillance.

Suddenly a squirrel dashed out from under her bench, seized a hunk of bread in its mouth, and bounded away in undulating leaps. She hissed and stamped her feet after it.

"Filthy vermin." She glared pointedly at the seagull, who had taken advantage of the distraction to come a few steps closer.

The duck, meanwhile, had completed his ablutions and sat down at the edge of the pond with his back to her.

"Duckeeee," she whispered, holding out a golden, spongy crumb. The duck shivered his feathers with luxurious contentment and settled more deeply into the sandy bank.

Laurel held the crumb between her thumb and index finger before her eye, like a jeweller appraising a diamond, and, rocking her forearm back and forth, carefully took aim.

The first crumb landed in the pond, the second, somehow, in a shrub behind her, but the third landed an inch from the duck's head.

He looked at it. She held her breath.

He prodded it with his beak.

Then he picked it up and, with a toss of his head, flung it into the pond. Laurel, the duck, and the seagull watched as it grew sodden and sank below the surface.

"Oh, to hell with you," she said, and threw the rest of the loaf at the duck. Anger did not improve her aim. The bread rolled into a tuft of marsh grass, where it was promptly rescued by the seagull, who carried it across the pond and began tearing it apart and squawking. Soon the area was swarming with shrieking gulls.

Laurel kicked gravel at the indifferent duck, then got to her feet and strode home.

Lionel Pugg moved to the city to get away from a girl who did not love him and promptly fell in love with a girl who would never love him. He did not know that at first; at first—indeed for four years—he didn't even know her name.

Angel was his waitress at the first café he visited, his first day in the city. She dressed like someone at the beach; she wore oversize flip-flops and shuffled penitentially from table to table, her head cocked to one side as if always peering around some corner. She took orders standing heavily on one foot. She had a bluff, brash manner that terrified and beguiled him. She nearly gave him a heart attack when she called him "dear."

"All right, what's it going to be, dear."

Though he was ravenous, he asked for a coffee, not wanting to put her to the trouble of fetching a menu.

"Is that it?" she asked irritably.

Lionel Pugg was a knobby, gangly, twitchy young man, with sunken eyes, a concave chest, and hunched shoulders. He had thin skin and more than the usual number of nerves, so he quivered like an overwhelmed antenna. Angel thought he looked like a creep.

"You can take up the table because it's slow today," she said, "but

don't expect me to swoop down every five minutes to refill you, if that's all you're having. Somehow I don't peg you for a big tipper."

Lionel agreed, by gesture, that he was an abominable tipper.

He finished his coffee as quickly as its temperature allowed, left a five hundred percent tip, and fled without risking further talk or eye contact. From that day forward, he ate his meals at the café whenever Angel was not working, and sat there quaking with dread that she would come on shift before he could finish, and left shuddering with disappointment when she did not.

He wrote her a novel. It took him three years to complete. It was about a waitress, brash and beautiful but otherwise rather without qualities, who fell in love with one of her customers who had also fallen in love with her. This mutual affection was happily discovered one day (on page ten) when the customer asked the waitress to marry him, and she agreed. Several chapters were dedicated to the technicalities of the wedding and the details of their blissful cohabitation, but this only brought the book to page 57—a rather paltry offering, he felt. He had shown that these two would be happy together (which had been his secret didactic purpose), but perhaps their happiness had been too easily achieved? So he decided to have the waitress kidnapped; that got the ball rolling again. To make the kidnapping plausible, he had to supply the waitress with a garish back-story, which reached as far back as her distant ancestors and as far forward as her decision to become a waitress. Then there was the question of the kidnappers' motives, inevitably informed by their own characters and back-stories. Finally, out of fairness, Lionel felt obliged to provide the customer-protagonist with a history and pedigree too. By this point, the hero bore little resemblance to the author, and the heroine probably had as little in common with her original; but he reassured himself that the portraits were metaphorical and still recognizable. If he was not a burly secret agent in fact, he was, anyway, rather taciturn; and if Angel was not a dispossessed Balkan monarch in fact, she was, anyway, rather imperious.

Then came the action. His counterpart, the customer-protagonist, tracked the kidnappers first to their hideout in the Sierra Madre, then, from coded documents found there, to their headquarters in Washington, D.C., and from clues there, to their homes in Toronto, Phoenix, and Dublin, and from there to outposts in Brussels, Kuala Lumpur, and the moon. The waitress-heroine, meanwhile, was too beautiful and brash to remain idle. By the time her husband had hunted down and, one by one, killed off her kidnappers, she had successfully reverse-engineered their mind-control device and transmitted the blueprints to her Balkan accomplices. She had never been in any danger and was not grateful

for the violent rescue. She divorced him, and on the last page threw her wedding ring at him and told him to get lost.

This was not as Lionel had planned. But it seemed the more he subjected his characters to situation and event, the more vivid they became, and the more vivid they became, the less control he exerted over them. Consequently his novels never ended the way he thought they should—that is, happily—but always with some vivid, attractive character telling the protagonist what his flaws were, throwing something at him, and stalking off the page. In this case, the ending rather undermined his secret didactic purpose; so he reassured himself that the heroine and hero were total fictions and had no relation whatsoever to the real waitress or himself, and that, at 458 typewritten pages, *Served Cold* was a respectable gift, a genuine love-novel.

He did not want to bother his love at work, so he carried the manuscript around with him for another year, hoping to run into her casually on the street. In fact, he saw Angel somewhere about town almost every other week, and on several occasions literally bumped into her. Finally, on one of these occasions she took him by the shoulders, held him upright to scrutinize his face, and demanded to know where she knew him from.

The memory of the pressure of her hands on his arms rendered him aphasic.

"I know I've seen you somewheres. Was it Lulu's? Do you know the Donkey? It wasn't the *restaurant*? Ah well: mysteries. What's that you got there? It looks big enough to be a *book*." She laughed at the outlandishness of her imagination. "Hey, I've got a date but come buy me a drink anyway in case I'm stood up. It's just across the street."

The mention of the date restored him to speech. "I couldn't possibly intrude," he said, and ran away.

At their next encounter, he did better: He thrust the manuscript into her hands, said, "I wrote this for you," and then ran away.

He stayed away from the café for six weeks. When at last he mustered the courage to return, Angel showed no sign of recognizing him. However, though it was busy and he ordered only coffee, she came around with the pot and refilled his cup several times. Finally she asked him what he was doing that night. "I'm thinking of going to a party and I might need a date, in case it stinks."

Angel had not read the novel, but she had removed its elastic bands and identified it as a novel. She had no way to judge its worth—nor any inclination to, since it flattered her to suppose it a work of genius. Though she still thought Lionel was a creep, she began taking him around with her to parties and bars and introducing him to other more attractive men as her genius admirer. She found him useful, for she did not like to be alone.

***

The mail had arrived. Laurel tore open the mailbox, clutched the three letters to her chest without looking at them, hurried upstairs to her apartment, locked and bolted the door behind her, then sat down at her desk to inspect her booty.

All three envelopes were identical: the same size, the same colour, with the same stamp in the same place, and all three addressed in the same meticulous handwriting—her handwriting. Three more of her self-addressed stamped envelopes had found their way back to her. One of them felt a little heavier than the others. She saved it till last.

The first contained only a business card-sized piece of thin grey newsprint on which a single sentence had once, apparently long ago, been typed or photocopied. It read,

> *We thank you for your interest but regret that your novel does not seem right for our list at this time.*
>
> *The Editors*

Neither the envelope nor the piece of paper gave any clue as to the identity or affiliation of these "Editors." Nevertheless Laurel put the rejection slip carefully aside, to be filed later in the bottom drawer of her filing cabinet, which was euphemistically labeled "Correspondence."

The second envelope held a genuine slip, one full third the size of a regular sheet of paper. The paper too was heavier—possibly even 24-pound—and hardly translucent at all. However, the text on the slip, though longer, was no more encouraging.

> *Dear Author,*
>
> *The editorial staff would like to thank you for the opportunity of reading your manuscript(s). Please excuse any delay(s) that may have occured in awaiting this response.*
>
> *The editors reviewed your work(s) with careful attention and real enjoyment. Unfortunately, however, given the quantity of submissions that they receive, sometimes even quality work must be declined. Ultimately, they did not feel passionately enough about your work(s) to be able to give it the support that it deserves.*
>
> *They regret that the large number of manuscript(s) that they receive makes it impossible for them to respond to you in a more personal manner or to comment in detail on your work(s). They wish you the best of luck in finding a home for it elsewhere.*

There followed an invitation to buy some of the publisher's most popular novels at a discounted price.

Her gaze lingered for a while over the words "real enjoyment," but finally drifted contemptuously to the typo in the first paragraph ("occured") and the solecism in the last ("manuscript(s)"). These should perhaps have cheered her up, but did not: Although it is no dishonour to be criticized by the ignorant, it is still depressing to be rejected by them.

The third envelope contained one full, uncut sheet of paper. Fastidiously she unfolded it and smoothed it flat upon the desktop. From her expression, it would have been difficult to pinpoint the moment at which she read the familiar words, "Although we read your manuscript thoroughly and with careful attention, we regret…" She stared at the page for a long time, her eyes roving across it seemingly at random. The text was identical in substance, and in places identical in phrasing, to countless other pieces of "correspondence" she had received over the years; long familiarity had rendered her snowblind to this sort of letter. At length she focused on the signature, and discovered that this one was unique after all: It had been signed by hand, in real ink. The name itself was illegible, but the complimentary close read, "Thanks for thinking of us." Also the word "author" in the salutation had been crossed out, and her name (or one very much like it) had been written above.

She ran her fingertips over the handwritten words; she closed her eyes and felt the indentations the pen had made in the page.

Then she filed it away with the others.

She returned to her desk and withdrew from a drawer a notepad and a fat pen. She sat staring out the window for half an hour at the blank windows of the brownstone apartment block across the street. She sighed heavily; then she began to write.

I cannot tell you what she wrote (I can't quite see over her shoulders) but I would guess that it was part emotional autobiography, part intellectual wish-fulfillment. I imagine numerous sad, lonesome characters, most of them novelists, seeking one another and, implausibly, finding one another; I imagine them coming together in voluble explosions of clever and affectionate dialogue—the solitary person's idea of friendship, of love.

But I am daydreaming. I may not be able to tell you what she wrote, but I can tell you how she wrote: She wrote hunched over her desk as if trying to protect it from blows; she wrote with her head down and her tongue clamped between her teeth; she wrote quickly and steadily, never pausing to find the right word or consider a character's motives; and she wrote for hours at a stretch. It has been said that we read to forget ourselves, but that when we write, we have only ourselves to find. I think that Laurel Peggery wrote to forget herself.

She was interrupted that evening by the phone. It took her a moment to recognize the sound; then she lunged across the room—but drew herself up short, finally lifting the receiver with a shrug of indifference that was not entirely convincing.

"Yeah?"

It was her sister. "Have you eaten?"

Laurel gasped irritably. "Is that all you called for?"

"As a matter of fact, Marcel and I were thinking about going to a party."

Laurel said nothing.

"Well, do you want to come?"

Laurel sat down at her desk and stared out the window. After a moment she sighed and said, "I suppose this is just another way of asking if I've eaten?"

"Huh?"

"Or asking in your sly way if I need any help paying the rent? Or whether I ever think about moving into a nicer, larger, sunnier apartment? Or—"

"Where's all this coming from?"

"You're worried about me: that I'm not getting enough social interaction—is that it?"

"I—we—I—merely thought that you might like to meet some new people."

Laurel stood up. "Well, let me tell you something," she said with quiet ferocity. "I don't need any help meeting people. In fact, I—" She cast a wild glance around the apartment, then slowly extended her free arm in a gesture of exasperation or resolve. "I just don't need any help meeting people. I'm not a charity case."

"Okay okay. If you don't want to come, you don't want to come. Sheesh."

After a pause, Laurel said, "I certainly do not."

"All right all right. But hey listen: If you don't want to come to the party—will you come over and babysit?"

Laurel took a step backwards. Her mouth moved speechlessly for a moment. "I suppose that's the real reason you called!"

Vivian tried for several minutes to convince her otherwise, but Laurel was intransigent.

"You didn't want me to come at all! You knew I'd say no!"

"To be honest, I thought you might. But I always hope you won't."

"Well, Vivian, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I have changed my mind. You'll just have to find another babysitter."

"Huh? You're coming to the party now?"

"Certainly I am coming."

"That's great," said her sister. Then, plucking up her enthusiasm, she said, "We'll pick you up at nine."

"I shall expect you at ten."

Angel swept through the party like a breeze stirring piles of leaves. She tried on people's hats and eyeglasses. She asked one man what he was drinking, and without waiting for a reply dipped her finger in his glass and tasted her finger. "Delicious." She elbowed her way into conversations, which she listened to for five seconds, then summed up in one provocatively naïve phrase: "But you can't fit all that money in one bank," or "University is for saps," or "Jewish boys are yummy." Her proclamations were as unanswerable as insults, and, satisfied by the silence they left in their wake, she flounced on to her next group of victims. Within about two minutes of their arrival, every man at the party was keenly aware of her presence, and every woman was keenly aware of their awareness.

Lionel, too embarrassed to break uninvited into other people's discussions and yet terrified of being left alone, followed Angel around the apartment at a distance of about six feet, his eyes fixed firmly on the back of her head. He tried to look absorbed and filled to the brim with contentment so that no one would talk to him; but his discomfort was as manifest as a bad smell, and he wriggled and grimaced and clenched his fists like someone suppressing murderous urges. So no one talked to him.

"I'm sick of you gibing my heels," Angel told him at last. "Go, meet some nice boys and girls." She made shooing gestures, which Lionel fended off like falling blows.

"I don't want to leave you." He took a deep breath and let it out in a quivering moan. "I—*love* you."

"Can it with that crap." She looked around to make sure no one had heard him, then gave him a light, almost affectionate slap on the mouth. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"I can't help it," he said miserably, his head, shoulders, and spine drooping under the weight of his shame. "I wish I could but I can't. That's just the way it is."

"So what do you got to keep telling me it for? Look," she said. She grasped him by the arms and twisted him around by the torso, his feet remaining sunk in the carpet as if in mud.

"Where," he said without looking up.

"Over there. That chickie-poo's been standing all by her lonesome since we got here. Go cheer her up."

Lionel shuddered at the idea. And indeed Laurel Peggery looked intimidating, standing at full height against the far wall, arms crossed, eyebrows raised in sarcastic expectation.

"I can't," he said. "She wouldn't want to talk to me. I'm not interesting. I wouldn't have anything to say."

"Lioney," said Angel in her saccharine voice. "You do like me a little, don't you?"

Lionel simpered like jelly.

"Then give me a kiss," she said, giving him one, hard, on the lips, "and go say hello to that stuck-up bitch." Then she shoved him clear across the room. Flailing and staggering, he collided with Laurel at a gallop, his forehead and her chin coming together with an audible crack.

"I'm so sorry," he cried. "I must have tripped. Are you all right?"

Laurel, after recovering some of her poise, said, "Certainly I am all right."

"I'm really just so, so, so, so, so, so, so, SO, SO sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"Are you sure your chin isn't hurt? My head is *throbbing.*" And indeed there were tears in his eyes.

Laurel stopped rubbing her chin, which was glowing red. "My chin is fine, thank you."

There was a long pause, in which Lionel opened and closed his mouth like a fish and Laurel aloofly examined the backs of her hands.

"It's a good thing you're so tall," Lionel finally blurted, "or I might have broken your nose."

Laurel drew herself up to her full stature as if she had been insulted. "I am not so extraordinarily tall. In fact I'm hardly above average for my body type."

Lionel blushed and began blinking rapidly at this allusion to her body, which he found majestic and awe-inspiring in its dimensions.

"I, I, I," he said in three different intonations, then cleared his throat and tried again: "That is, I meant to say, I, I, I—I'm the one who's so short."

Laurel could not be agreed with without feeling placated; so she argued reflexively, "You're not exactly tiny."

Lionel would have liked to escape this conversation. Normally he was very adept at escaping conversations: The slightest distraction, or lapse in the other person's attention, provided him with all the excuse he needed to unburden the other of his tiresome presence. Even when in the dentist's chair or splayed out on an operating table, the moment the talk deviated from his particular case he would offer to come back at a better time. But Laurel's beseeching gaze never left him, and pinned him to the spot, writhing like an insufficiently etherized insect. Since he could not escape, he sought desperately some justification for his standing there, taking up her time.

After many syllables that did not contribute intelligibly to his mean-

ing, he said at last, "I saw you standing over here by yourself and I thought, gee, there's someone who's not having much fun either."

"Certainly I am having fun," said Laurel, as if affronted that he could have thought otherwise.

Lionel wilted and said, "Oh."

After another minute of anguished, ringing silence, Laurel said airily, "I would hate to think you came over here to talk to me just because you felt sorry for me."

"Oh, no! No no! It's just that you were by yourself, and..."

"I came with my sister and her husband, but they have wandered off somewhere."

"Oh!" cried Lionel, clutching eagerly at this chance. "We should go find them!"

Laurel shook her head. "They'll wander back." Then she prepared herself for a disclosure by adjusting her posture. "To be honest, I get quite enough of them as it is. And since I didn't relish the prospect of following them around like a child or a dog, or of being thrust upon their casual acquaintances like a visiting yokel cousin, I remained behind, here. After all," she said, and looked at Lionel, "I'm quite capable of introducing myself."

He did not however take the cue and invite her to do so now. His thoughts were following a different path. "Then you did not come with—your boyfriend?"

"I most certainly did not. I do not have a boyfriend."

Now he understood. His face flushed with sentiment and he sighed, "Then you're shy too!"

Laurel balked. "Certainly I am not shy!"

Lionel dissolved into an upright puddle of despair. "I'm so sorry. When you're shy, like I am, you start to imagine that everyone else must be shy too. I am very sorry."

The abjectness of his apology nearly made Laurel smile. "It's not so horrible as all that. It's nothing to apologize for. I mean, being shy isn't so bad. It doesn't hurt anyone—no one but yourself, anyway. It's like riding a bicycle in traffic."

"Oh, but you can hurt others cycling in traffic! Cars swerve to avoid you and crash into telephone poles. Or they run you over and damage their undercarriage. Or they send you to the hospital and feel terrible all week."

"Are we still talking about shyness?"

"No," Lionel admitted—then reconsidered. "Well, yes! There's nothing more dangerous, more disastrous, than a shy person let loose in a room full of people. Your awkwardness makes others feel awkward. Your embarrassment makes everyone embarrassed for you. The sight

of your self-consciousness, as raw as an open wound, makes everybody handle you self-consciously. No one can be honest, no one dares be blunt. That's the worst part: Your uneasiness gets in the way of your words, your behavior, your personality, so that on top of everything else you feel like a liar. Shyness is a toxic spill, spreading uneasiness and dishonesty, contaminating everything it comes in contact with. Oh, it's vile, vile!"

While Lionel trembled with humiliation at his outburst, Laurel considered the truth of it. At length she asked, almost shyly, "What made you think I was shy?"

Lionel turned his head away from the thought of his mistake like a baby turning away from an unpalatable food. "Oh, who knows? A beautiful woman—standing alone—no boyfriend—"

Laurel's face became very still and very grave. She had never in her waking life been called beautiful. Was he flirting with her? Was he teasing? She stared at him balefully, intimating the consequences of toying with her emotions.

Lionel sensed that he had made another error, and apologized. "I'm a fool. I don't know what I'm saying. Pay no attention to me."

"You speak very...cavalierly," said Laurel.

"I know," he moaned. "I never think before I speak. I'm so nervous I just blurt out whatever idiocy comes into my head. It's awful. I'm awful."

"Yes—I suppose that was just a piece of 'idiocy.'"

"Oh, definitely!"

Laurel's mouth moved for a moment. "'Definitely'!"

Lionel was bewildered. "Well, sure it was. It was just a mistake."

"Then you did not mean it at all when you said that I was...that I was—"

"Shy? No!" He moved the sweat around on his face with a sweaty sleeve. "Heck no. It was a mistake."

"I wasn't talking about that."

"You weren't?"

"No."

He peered at her. "What were you talking about?"

Laurel hesitated, then said, "I was talking about something else."

"You were?"

"Something else you said."

"Something I said?"

Laurel snorted. "I suppose you don't even remember."

"I don't," he confessed miserably. "I don't remember. Sometimes I don't even remember what I've said. Sometimes I don't even hear myself. I don't hear myself and I don't hear the other person, either. I don't hear anything and I sure don't know what I'm saying half the time."

"That's what I figured. You spoke carelessly."

"Boy, you could say that!"

"In that case, I will not hold you to it."

"Gee," he said, "I appreciate that." His posture, pallor, and shortness of breath were those of a man who had just been chased for a mile by feral dogs. His exhaustion briefly overwhelmed his fear of offending, and he looked around with candid desperation for Angel.

"I see that I am keeping you from your—friend," said Laurel.

"No, not really." He had spotted Angel across the room, draped over a giggling young man whose ears she was cleaning with her tongue.

Lionel's despondence and wistfulness were too much for Laurel's pride. "I hear my sister calling. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," he said softly, long after she had left the room.

When Laurel was a girl, she had been ashamed to show her feelings. When it came time for her friends or cousins to go home after a visit, she would go behind the house and scrape her knee on the stucco so that she could cry openly and without embarrassment. That night, after she arrived home, she went into the bathroom and stubbed her toe repeatedly on the corner of the washstand. At last the toenail split; and she sat on the edge of her bed and wept silently for ten minutes. Then she pulled herself upright, bandaged her toe, washed her face with cold water, and sat down at her desk, where she wrote late into the night.

Lionel left the party soon after Laurel. He wandered the dark, empty streets in aimless dejection. Soon he was quite lost. He was glad to be lost; he deserved to be lost; he began positively to wallow in his lostness, and turned down obscure streets and narrow, unmarked alleys. Finally he came to a dead end, where a brick wall sealed off the passage. He sighed profoundly, almost sensually, pleased to have this final confirmation of the universe's utter disdain for him. He was about to turn and go when his eye detected the shape of a door in the shadow of the wall. He stepped nearer, and reached out with his hands.

There was indeed a door here, where there could be no need of one. Why should someone wall up an alley only to install a door in the wall? The door was incongruous in its appearance too. It was made of a heavy, lacquered wood, and in the obscurity of the alley he could feel that its surface had been elaborately carved. It was the door to the inner chambers of a judge or to a library in a stately old mansion, not the sort of door that connected one dirty alleyway to another. The knob was warm to the touch. He turned it.

When Lionel was a boy, he had had an imaginary fairy friend who told him that he was a changeling. However, when Lionel tried to return to Fairyland with him, his friend had informed him that he was not

wanted. "Away with ye, ye blethering gobhawk," he had shouted, and thrown stones. The stones, though imaginary, hurt. Lionel had never seen his friend again.

The door was locked. He jiggled the knob, then turned and slowly retraced his steps. He tried to imagine what he might have found on the other side of the door—and for a while forgot that he was not wanted by the universe. He too, when he arrived home, wrote late into the night.

Fossil Record

Peter Chiykowski

After my sister died
Mom embalmed herself
with spiced rum, red wine,
food rich in salt. From her darkness
she told me how ribs are brittle and
lungs soft—the planet remembers
only those lucky bones
that cast their shadows
into the earth.

In school
I studied fossils, learned
the binary of skulls and limbs
from the hard memory
of sediment. Rivers banks,
tar ponds, graveyards,
these too can be defragmented, read off
the spinning disc of the world.
Trilobites etch themselves
into the technology of rock
and two million years later
my sister will be buried in ground
more yielding than skin,
eyes, or tendons, the tissues
too fine
for the touch of calcite.

Here, in the grave soil,
my sister's decaying body
seeps into the toes of mushrooms,
the tubed roots of crabgrass,
dandelions, and honeysuckle.

Here I will take my mother
when she too wants to
divulge her secrets to the earth.

Here I lift a trowel full of dirt
into a jar and seal it with wax
that will harden to its shape.

Here I sit and hope that
that the world does not forget
the soft ones, creatures without
shells or claws, we who must
make fossils for ourselves.

Carolye Kuchta

Twenty Reasons to Avoid Thinking

The ancestors crave reading material.

A quality short-wave radio can pick up anything, anywhere.
But on every channel, in every language,
it's your voice crowding the man you love.

A footnote: character #3 will be beheaded by terrorists on page 107,
but you're only on page 35. Her sisters are screaming.
But not as loud as her.

The imaginary forest where your doctor wants to hold your hand
is the one you've already undressed in for him.

No one understands the magician's tears,
as he insists he never saw this rabbit before.

Your dentist wants to dominate and caress you.
You remind him of his mother. (Smile, please.)

Denial is a home for the elderly-minded.
Truth, the boot, reckoning them homeless.

Now that your doctor is imagining
you loosening your shirt,
he notices you rubbing naked against the trees.

Page 68. Still screaming.

Consequences scatter like bunnies
under the moral rifle.

The hygienists have gone home early.

Your mother has forbidden you to mention wasps.
You watch the black feet
tread across her pink neck.

Suffocating in a room of antique stuffed animals.
An amber eye, a bent ear: the ancestors.
Page 89. Footnote: she blames you.

Just before the power failure—the voice of the doctor's
wife comes through on the short-wave. Cracking.

His mother wore a pearl necklace too. Yours
is clipped to a napkin over your breasts,
glimmering and tightening in the evening light. (Open.)

Your mother reaches to scratch her neck.

Page 106. Footnote: angry people don't die.
They just wander invisibly cursing you in the wind.

In a medical lab, two dogs experience a moment of synchronized curiosity
causing themselves to become stuck together for three days.
A sad end to romance.

The last page tears itself from the book, whipping away.

Jan Conn

Into a White Space I am Driven and Let Go

I am seasick in the orphanage
that is not by the sea. I have a tiny bell
tied to a shoe.
I have a sharkskin shoelace
left behind. I am one; they are many.
I have no naps left to call upon
in case of danger. A lucky star I should
thank. Landlocked cereal
and no more milk
could be my founding mother.

Ourselves Lit Up

Some of us learned the brilliant idea
of rotating our own image from David Bowie—
others got it wrong.
I gulped so much homemade night
it was seizure territory.
I considered removing to a smooth pale bowl
and lapping cool lush tea,
or setting up shop in a failed ghost town.
Now that I've glimpsed four large red fish
hanging from his handlebars
I'm going to re-evaluate my impression
of his youth.
When I press my lips together like this
it's a naked bivalve contest.
Does anyone believe I pushed
a wheelbarrow of unrepentant snakes up that hill?
Let's add a sliver of Elizabeth Bishop's pale dirty light
to this poem. Now queue up the centred look,
the inward gaze.

Andy Weaver

71.

Warmonger porn decree to buy and shred
The new gal cheers the girlie terror cell
Stillborning screw the churl that overfed
On flag unfurled, with flagging William Tell:
Pay, if your greed malign, whatever bought
Demand acquitted; fall guy apropos,
A lie that your onslaughts will not let clot,
Dethinking honest men with status quo.
Woe, if, cliché, O's book salon disperse
Its game of craps while slaughtered lambs hold sway,
Do double dutch while the real men converse,
Don't fret the dove Joseph Smith squirreled away;
Blest advice verged Good Book accrues its stone,
And glocks you with glee after beads are drawn.

73.

The first frontiers erased and so controlled
While fellow thieves, for fun, accrue, harangue
Again their vows to take what's not been sold,
What war requires, with so much sturm und drang.
For me the beastly buy-rite holds such sway
That laugher rosettes black death's sole bequest;
So William Bligh might write the disobey,
Blankcheque himself, and seal the crew's arrest.
For me the beastly crowings of desire,
Memory caches of uncouth cockeye,
Act the beachhead, with cunning lustful lyre,
Perfume the scatty shit with Spanish Fly.
Saboteur weav'st, mistakes that make the song,
To make that hell, cash cow will cleave its wrong.

94.

Say that the hour perverts with its mcfun,
That few and fewer sing Pierre Trudeau,
Boo, good enoughers, in the middle tone,
Egg-headed, scold, and do the dew of woe;
Say brightly through a poet's grieved embraces
What heightened nature keeps you on the fence;
Say all the hordes are lower forms of races,
Mother's gut skittered out their commonsense.
The scorner's glower becomes the scorner's meat,
So pride oneself on one's unflinching eye,
And when that glower embrace the mercy seat,
Disgraceful creed white slaves the flaming tree:
The weakest kings yearn power that exceeds;
Banish the jester, hell will verse its creeds.

Shashi Bhat

Why I Read *Beowulf*

I started reading *Beowulf* about a week ago, not because it was on the syllabus, but because I am in love with my English teacher. I would read anything for him. The cover of my copy of the book has a black background with the title in white block letters, and under those the jacket designer has placed the silhouette of a man, but just his top half, like a passport photo, except that the silhouette is made entirely of silver mesh. I keep turning back to this picture on the cover and wondering how they made it look three-dimensional, and half-expecting the pattern of metal to bulge into discernable features, to turn into a man's face.

Once I finish the book, I will begin to drop casual references to it in class or at English club meetings. "This reminds me of my favourite epic poem," I will say, pretending I don't know that it's also my English teacher's favourite epic poem, and then I will quote brilliantly, lingering on the alliteration. Mr. Sears will pause, turning away from the blackboard to face me, holding a piece of chalk in his hand. Sometimes, in my most reckless moments of imagination, I see him dropping the piece of chalk in amazement.

I am not sure yet exactly which passages I will quote, because I am only on page 4. I reached page 4 this morning, as I sat in the hallway of the school with my best friend Amy. Every day we have our mothers drop us off exactly 45 minutes before the bell rings, and we sit on the ground outside the English office. I'm usually reading and Amy is usually peeling the varnish off the floor. The varnish lies in a loose coat over the hardwood and cracks as we step over it. Our school building deteriorates at an exponential rate; it seems like every day another part of it breaks off. One time I bicycled by and looked at the school and thought to myself, with fierce affection, "That is my high school," relishing the still-newness of ninth grade, and just at that moment, a piece of one of the window frames creaked loose and fell from its hinge to the pavement.

Amy regularly peels the floor in patches all over the school. We eat lunch in stairwells, our backs against the concrete walls and legs crossed in front of us, sandwich bags in our laps, cackling at each other over inside jokes we've had since second grade, and she'll take a break from peeling the floor to peel her tangerine, trying to remove each peel in one

long strip. She peels the floor in the gymnasium during stretches, and then leaves the waxy scraps in small piles here and there so that later when we're made to do push-ups, people's hands and shoes accidentally land on these piles and their limbs go sliding sideways.

I keep telling her not to do this, but lately she's sort of been turning on me. I do think it's natural to get irritated with your best friend, with whom you spend so many hours, encountering so many opportunities for disagreement—over which movie to see or whether to eat at Subway or Tim Horton's or whether Americans have the right idea about making the drinking age twenty-one or whether moustaches worn ironically can ever look really handsome—but once you have invested so many years in a friendship, such things should cease to matter. I'm not sure Amy recognizes this. Although our lives have run parallel since age eight, when, in Mrs. Hollifriend's class, we both agreed that dinosaurs were not as fascinating as everybody else seemed to think, lately I've been thinking that Amy might easily drop me, like a jacket with a hole in it, like a hair elastic that's lost its stretch. So today, we're sitting there outside the English office and I go, without really thinking, "Amy, what's wrong with you? Why do you always have to peel the floor and deface our school?" and she turns to me and goes, "At least I haven't memorized every article of clothing owned by my English teacher." It's sort of a joke of hers that I spend so much time gazing at Mr. Sears that I must have his clothes memorized by now, except that it's not really a joke, because I know that he owns six button-downs (three different shades of blue, one white pin-striped, one yellow, and one grey) and white athletic socks that show when he sits down, and four pairs of pants that are all sort of beige-ish brown. Only once did I see him wear a pair of jeans, at the English Club fundraiser, which was a car wash to raise funds and awareness for literature from the Augustan Period. We used the money we made to buy used copies of *Gulliver's Travels* on Amazon.com and then we just handed them out to people on the street. Mr. Sears called it "Spreading the Word." He smiled when he said it, his mouth an open oval. It took me the first half of the car wash to adjust myself to that new jeans-wearing version of my English teacher, but then I found something beautiful in his effortlessness, and decided that his casual style did not take away in the least from his devotion to our cause.

I like to record these lists of clothing, and also all my related thoughts and observations, in a notebook, a Moleskine notebook like the kind Mr. Sears said Hemingway used.

Also, sometimes in class his socks fall around his ankles and I want to duck down on to the half-peeled floor and crawl under his desk and pull them up for him.

***

Because of all this pent-up sexual frustration, I've cultivated a new hobby, namely, interacting with pedophiles in Internet chatrooms. Or not *pedophiles*, but one pedophile in particular. His name is Ronald, and we've been talking online for about a month. He has asked me to think of him as my boyfriend, though he's really more of a manfriend, because he is 41 years old. When I told him I'm 14, he typed, "Your age is my age in reverse," as though that means we are meant to be. He says I'm exotic because of my Indian background, so I didn't tell him I was born in Canada. After I'm done with school and English Club meetings or band practice, I go home and go on "Internet dates" with Ronald the pedophile. We'll Google important political figures and then discuss our findings, or we'll furnish an imaginary home with furniture we imagine buying on eBay, and sometimes we'll go to freerice.com and spend hours defining words and ending world hunger.

Usually while I'm doing this, my parents are either working late or in the basement praying. They have created a God room in the basement, where all of our Hindu Gods and Goddesses hang in rows around the blue walls, staring out with peaceful expressions.

"You are as beautiful as a goddess," Ronald said to me once, after describing himself as an agnostic. I'd added him on Facebook and he's on limited profile so he can't see my address or anything, but I did allow him to see my photos, so he looked through all the ones of me and Amy and told me that I'm infinitely more desirable than she is.

I regularly watch To Catch A Predator on Dateline and am amazed at how often the child molesters resemble the guys my dad works with. I told Ronald about this and he found a bunch of episodes of the show on YouTube, and so we watched those on another Internet date. We witnessed one predator wearing a large shapeless hat atop his large shapeless head, entering the house, unaware of the NBC cameramen drinking coffee behind the decorative curtain. Then the decoy thirteen-year-old chirps something about going to change into her bathing suit and the guy with the large hat smiles to himself and actually, literally starts rubbing his hands together in anticipation, and I bet he has really dry hands so bits of skin are flaking off them and also he has this backpack on that's maybe too small for a grown man, and he takes that off and started rifling through it, but before we found out what monstrous equipment he has in this backpack, Dateline correspondent Chris Hansen emerges from behind the decorative curtain and introduces himself, and the man with the hat removes his hat and uses it to cover his face.

"Don't worry, my darling," Ronald said to me, "I am ten times the man he is," which makes me wonder if Ronald knows how math works. Ten times a pedophile, I think, as I look through his Facebook pictures. Unlike most people's Facebook photos, Ronald's feature no other peo-

ple. Mostly they show him leaning against a blank wall, his head rounded in a way that indicates he took the photo himself with one outstretched arm.

In my most recent conversation with Ronald, he asked me for my phone number. I was reading *Beowulf* while talking to him, and thinking maybe I should rent the movie instead, and I was caught up in thinking about Mr. Sears and whether the movie version would be significantly different from the book version and checking Wikipedia to see whether the movie script used quotes from the Seamus Heaney translation. So I'd pushed the Ronald conversation window to the side of my screen, and all of a sudden he typed, "Are your parents home? Can I call you? What's your phone number?" all three questions in a single row. I pictured him on a sofa, his laptop on his lap, sinking back into the cushions as he waited for my reply. And maybe due to all my unreturned love and daydreams for Mr. Sears, I started imagining what would happen if I fell in love with Ronald the pedophile. He lives in the next town over, so it wouldn't be a long-distance relationship. Instead of Internet dates, we could go on actual dates to local hotspots and events like Heritage Village Day. We could climb each of the 144 flights of stairs to the top of the CN tower in Toronto, something I have always wanted to do, but Amy refuses to go with me. "Would you climb the CN tower with me?" I typed, and Ronald said, "Yes," with a winking emoticon and so then I typed my phone number in one swoop of momentum, with no spaces or dashes.

He dialed the numbers just as quickly. I let the telephone ring four times, fanning myself madly with my copy of *Beowulf*, the mesh face fluttering forwards and backwards as I wondered whether to answer the phone. But then I realized if I didn't answer, the call would go to voicemail. Ronald would leave a message accessible to anybody in my family, because this was our landline and not my cell phone since my parents for some reason won't get me a cell phone. Also, my parents were not out at work or at the store or at a baseball game or wherever it is parents go when strangers call the house. While a weird man preyed on their child, my parents prayed in the basement, singing light religious tunes in their atonal voices and clanging finger cymbals that clashed with the ringing phone. My parents might put down their photocopied Sanskrit mantras at any time and unfold their piously curled bodies to get up and answer it. I wondered if Ronald would pretend to be a salesman, and then I thought, if my parents pick up the phone, Ronald will probably never speak to me again. So I answered it.

There was no pause at all, and I heard a soft, wheedling voice say, "You didn't think I'd call, did you?" and then, the door to my bedroom opened, and I saw a man standing there, peering around the doorframe

at me and grinning this slow grin and saying, "What do you want for dinner?" because the man was my father. I immediately hung up the phone and told my dad rice was fine as always for dinner and he asked what I'd been doing the past hour and I said (very convincingly, I think) that I'd been researching the incarnations of all the various Hindu gods.

In English class third period, Amy has disengaged herself from me and moved to sit with this new boyfriend of hers. His name isn't even worth mentioning, but he was in my fourth grade class and he used to try and join conversations but everybody hated him and ignored him so then he would just give up and stare at the wall. But then one day, he started talking to the wall, and telling it things and asking it questions, why won't they talk to me?, all I have is you, and so on, and I wonder if he and Amy have similar conversations now.

Before Amy started dating him, and before I had fully fallen for Mr. Sears, we would spend all of class laughing silently behind our open notebooks. The first book we read in this class was Washington Square, and we both hated it, so we left post-it notes throughout the pages of our copies, to warn future readers. Our notes said things like, "I hate this book," and "Don't read any further," and "Aunt Penniman is a flat character," but now I regret writing those post-its and wonder if I should retrieve my copy from the library and remove them. I won't though, because that would be like erasing our history when already I can feel Amy slipping away, and it's different from that time she bleached her hair orange and became cool for a week and sat on the radiator where all the cool kids sit. It's different partly because relationships of weird teens last forever. It might not ever be me and her sitting and laughing again.

Instead of socializing with Amy, I try to imagine Grendel from Beowulf and draw pictures of him across my notebook in red pen. I compile monster parts from passages in the book and from generic TV monsters, heads that nearly aren't there, dissolving into the lines of the page, wide white teardrops instead of eyes, teeth protruding through stretching mouths. Their bodies have torsos disproportionate to arms, veins visible through the surface of skin like the bulging, textured, veins of leaves, legs narrowing into a pair of skeletal feet that leave bony, blood-filled footprints, footprints that stalk over the page of notes that I'm supposed to be taking. Instead of grammar exercises, I've drawn penciled, mesh-faced men, weaponless, knees curling under them like paperclips.

Mr. Sears goes on with his lesson, and in the background I hear someone call him, "Oh Captain, My Captain," because he is one of those teachers who tears up textbooks and says there shouldn't be a rubric for poetry. Mr. Sears delivers an impassioned speech about some Alexander Pope poem and then he asks me a question, but since I've been drawing

monsters instead of paying attention, I only know that the poem may or may not have something to do with haircuts. I curse myself for not listening and wonder if this is karma for the time I invented a Hindu holiday as an excuse for skipping gym.

"Disappointing," Mr. Sears says, and his head tilts sadly sideways under the weight of his disappointment. "You have to do the reading," he tells me, "or there's no point in coming to class."

I want to tell him that I have done the reading, I've done more reading than any of these other fools, but he turns away and makes a joke about how his wife never reads any books either, with the exception of Harlequin romances.

In the romance corner of the room, when Mr. Sears turns to the board, Amy her boyfriend caress each other's faces. In an online article, I read that if a boy touches your face, it means it's true love. The boyfriend bends his head and tucks it on to Amy's shoulder, and he looks almost handsome. It's the only time I've seen him look anything other than stupid. The only person I can remember being that close to me is my mother, and I find it painful to try not to yearn for that strange, solid, intimate warmth of a human head. Amy sighs her chin into the boyfriend's palm. She pulls at his nose and he embeds his fingertips into her cheeks, and I worry that they will accidentally gouge each other's eyes out.

I wait for Amy after school as I always do, but she doesn't show up. I duck into the library. Nobody's using the computers, so I sign into my account and find Ronald online.

"What a terrible day," I type.

"You're early," he says, and then, "What happened?"

"My friend ditched me for her boyfriend," I type, and then, because it's not like I'm in a committed relationship with this Internet pedophile, I tell him that I have a crush on my middle-aged English teacher and about my moment of embarrassing inattention in class.

There's a pause, and then Ronald types, "Pretend I'm him."

I suppose what Ronald wants me to do is to lean into my screen and to enact an elaborate sexual fantasy I have about Mr. Sears. It's true that I spend much of class time and much of my own time fantasizing about my English teacher. I imagine us in a warm fireplaced room with burgundy wallpaper and clawfooted furniture, but we've disdained this furniture to sit on the floor. We read to each other from a shared copy of *Beowulf*. Mr. Sears holds the book and I turn its pages. Our heads are pressed together, my hair over his shoulders. For some reason in this fantasy I have flaxen hair, despite being Indian, and I'm wearing an empire-waist gown and a wreath of flowers, and Mr. Sears dresses similarly in

18th-century garb, like maybe a navy waistcoat and white pantaloons. We're sipping from glasses of wine, no, goblets of wine, no, chalices of wine, and we're uttering guttural words to each other in Middle English, as the fireplace flashes at us like an unanswered chat window.

The problem with these fantasies is that I never actually get past the reading part, so I don't know what I'm supposed to describe to Ronald, and so, to diffuse the situation, I type the letters LOL.

"What's so funny?" Ronald asks.

I try to think of something provocative to ask him. I type, "How old were you when you lost your virginity?"

There's a long pause and then Ronald types, "Haven't we had this conversation before?" which doesn't make sense because Ronald and I have certainly never had this conversation before, or even this type of conversation, since our imaginary dates have remained pretty tame and educational, and it occurs to me that I am not the only teenager with whom Ronald regularly speaks on the Internet.

Ronald starts typing long strings of text, full of typos, and I realize that he's describing all the things he's going to do to me, except I don't understand most of the terms so I open up a separate window to look them up on Urban Dictionary.

He begs for a response. I'm thinking of his Facebook pictures and how he could be a guy that works at my dad's office. My dad could be right there in an adjacent cubicle, entering numbers into his computer with the Lord Ganesha desktop wallpaper, working overtime for the money to send his daughter to medical school, because I haven't yet told him that I plan to get an English degree and concentrate in pre-1800 literature. I humour my parents, because they are pious and kind and easily deluded, and if you try to have a serious discussion with my father, he will always bring God into it.

Ronald's words become more garbled and he's used the F-word at least four times. He waits for me to say something. I consider the keyboard and then type the letter "M" repeatedly so it seems as though I am moaning, and I follow it with exactly seven exclamation points.

"You are so beautiful," Ronald types, though he spells beautiful wrong, and I assume he's looking at my pictures, and then he says, "Are you still having a terrible day? Let me come there and comfort you."

Through the library door, I see Amy and her boyfriend walking through the hallway. They are peeling the floor together, in one unbroken strip. They walk slowly, as not to tear it, focused on the piece of varnish that passes through their collaborating hands and curls and trails behind them.

It's possible that Ronald is talking to four different girls right now, four different fourteen-year-olds typing covertly in their high school li-

braries before catching the school bus home. One by one they must sign off, until he's left with a single girl who does what? Answers the phone and talks to him? Invites him home?

"Okay," I type to Ronald, "I can be home in fifteen minutes." I give him my address, 53 Pickett Crescent, near the intersection of Elgin Mills and Yonge, and I send him a link to the Google Map. "I can't wait to see you," he types, and I don't let myself wonder what he means by the word "see."

I leave the library, and see the shapes of Amy and the boyfriend's bodies as they turn the corner at the end of the hall. I head in the other direction, towards my locker, and on the way I notice the door of the English office partway open, and spot Mr. Sears.

When I knock on the door, he tells me to come inside. I shut the door behind me and begin speaking without making eye contact. I count the posters of authors that line the top third of the room's walls.

"I just wanted to apologize for class today," I say. He's wearing the lightest of his blue shirts, and standing, half resting on the desk. The other English teachers have all left, and I realize I've never been alone in a room with Mr. Sears.

"That's all right," he says in his infinitely understanding way. "You've just got to stop being distracted in class. I know you love this stuff."

I almost drop my backpack at hearing him use the word "love," and I walk up to him, tell him, "I do love this stuff. I love books. I'm even trying to get through *Beowulf*, though I admit it's going a little slowly…"

Mr. Sears has chalk on the pocket of his shirt and I reach my arm the arms' length between us and brush the chalk off his shirt with my fingers. He grabs my hand and holds it in place. He frowns in a way I haven't seen on him before, the skin of his eyebrows pulling together and downward.

First he glances at the door, perhaps double-checking that it has no window on it. Then he kisses me. It's unfamiliar because I have never imagined this far. He picks up the straps of my backpack and slides them off my arms. He lifts me up as the backpack drops on the floor with the thumping, clattering sound of books and pencils, and he places me on the edge of the desk. The lights in the room are white rectangles in lines across the ceiling, and I look at them because I'm not sure if I'm supposed to look at Mr. Sears, whose head I want to hold in my hands but I have this awful feeling that the second I place my hands on his face, his features will turn to mesh, the metal cutting the tips of my fingers. He pushes his head next to my neck and when he breathes, he smells like coffee, like cough drops, like an old man. On the pocket of his shirt is a tiny embroidered penguin; a clothing detail I have already memorized and written down in my Moleskine notebook, where I also keep track

of my friends' birthdays and my better homework grades, and where I record it when a day is particularly beautiful. He moves one hand to grip my spine like it's the spine of a Norton Anthology, and I think of five things: Thought number one is of all the times I've seen him pick up a book in class and slam it face-down, pages spread open on the table. Two, I consider Amy and her boyfriend, and wonder how far around the school hallways they've gotten, hand-in-hand and laughing. Three, I think of Ronald searching the houses for number 53, parking in my empty driveway, pressing the round yellow doorbell, thinking he's about to rape some stupid little girl. Four, I hope my parents arrive home from work fairly soon, so when this is over, I can phone them to pick me up. And five, I remember the time I overheard Mr. Sears speaking to another male teacher and saying, "What a dog," in reference to a girl, an expression I didn't know people still used, and it had taken me a moment to realize what he meant, before I convinced myself that I must have misheard him, before I pictured the head of a dog on a female human body, sad-faced and teeth bared.

Bert Almon

Canada Customs Office

Waiting to clear our daughter's goods, I sit on a grey chair and hear the date-stamp going *chunk-June 6-chunk, chunk-June 6-chunk.* There's a buzz in the office about a shipment of twenty Ducati motorcycles: the speedometers are in miles instead of kilometers, a sign they aren't really meant for Canada. The word "goods" has a tangible quality. Canned goods, dry goods, luxury goods, leather goods. I consider that the word has no singular: "the good" takes us from strong-boxes and bills of lading to ethics, and in this office we have mostly regulations, for restricted goods, allowable goods, prohibited goods. Yet the enormous manual on the counter builds merciful exemptions into the system. "No one may import a switchblade knife into Canada except a one-armed person."

I can see a cluster of Ducatis roaring into a terrified little Alberta town, ridden by one-armed Hell's Angels, switchblades held between their teeth.

Homero Aridjis
translated from the Spanish by George McWhirter

La Historia del Viento

¿Cómo escribir la historia del viento,
si el viento no tiene cuerpo
para acostar en la mesa?
¿Comenzó un día en el llano,
nació en las ramas de un fresno
o lo parió una ola de mar?
No importa,
nacerá en alguna parte
y morirá en otra parte.
La historia del viento es un quejido
que va de un extremo a otro del tiempo,
es el susurro de una sombra que anda.
La historia del viento es un latido en la arena,
una voz en la puerta, una huella en el pecho
que oye el hombre pasar a su lado,
cuando el hombre se oye pasar a sí mismo.

The History of the Wind

How can we write the history of the wind,
if the wind has no shape
to lay out on the table?
Did it begin one day on the plain,
was it born in the branches of an ash tree
or did a wave spawn it off the ocean?
No matter,
it is born in one place
and dies in another.
The history of the wind is a moan
that runs from one end of time to the other,
the hiss of a shadow walking.
The history of the wind is its whip over the sand,
a voice under the door, a foot pressed on the chest
which a man hears pass by him
when he hears himself pass on.

Retrato de mi Padre

En este cuarto abierto a los cuatro vientos,
padre, juego con tus retratos.

Veinte años después de haberte ido,
no sé cuál rostro es el más tuyo,

si aquel donde eres un soldado sobreviviente
de la matanza de griegos en Esmirna,

o aquel en que miras a mi madre con ojos enamorados,
cincuenta años después de haberla conocido.

O en esa instantánea de tu muerte
en tu tienda llena de telas y sombreros,

con una taza de té negro en la mano,
y cara de forastero, como cuando llegaste al pueblo.

Padre, quiero verte de nuevo,
pero en vez de hombre toco papel

México, jueves 20 de julio de 1986

Portrait of my Father

In this room open to the four winds,
father, I am picking through portraits of you.

Twenty years after you have gone,
I don't know which face is most you,

if that one, where you are a soldier surviving
the massacre of Greeks at Smyrna,

or that one in which you look at my mother with loving eyes
fifty years after having come to know her,

or in that snapshot of you dying
in your store full of fabrics and hats

with a cup of black tea in your hand
and the face of an outsider, like when you arrived in town.

Father, I want to see you again,
but I am touching paper in place of a man.

Dexine Wallbank

Tuesday

the soup's on the stove
the vacuuming's done
the fire's been lit
the table's set
the laundry's in the dryer
the marriage is over
the clothes are mended
the dishes are washed
the pets are fed
the bulbs have been planted
the child is gone
the leaves are raked
the wood is stacked
the gate is shut
the wood is stacked
the gate is shut
the gate is shut

Annette Lapointe

Produce (a snuff film)

vegetation that dies in the fridge
        moves at 12 frames per second—slow
slow, like early spring without dirt
releasing liquified organics
sloughing colours in the crisper they pool
break the door seal and you smell
decay—sweet and sinus-sharp

lean into the icebox, breathe
and you flinch

the slow dissolve creeps loose

        this threshold melt

thread work

you think I'm regressing
                through
needlework, access to late victorian
deep femininity, corsets, heavy wools
and knitted jumpers

you think the needles are phallic
long grey shafts pulling
and pulling until they spew out
white spools of lace

you don't recognize the snares
that pour out from knitting
needles, crochet hooks. this is
the first stage of the hunt

when I stretch spiderweb
shawls across deer paths, catch
my first animals, you'll see
it's not a question of cocks

just hooks. pull loose intestines
and tangle them. chew in the dark
on new animals. new fierce girls
knit raw meat, and eat

Andrew MacDonald

Krupkee, on the Molecular Level

It probably wasn't Krupkee's fault. Not wholly, anyway. Moshing, headbanging, fighting in the pit, these things happened. If you went to one of their shows and didn't suffer a bloody nose, some bruised ribs, you were a ghost, a never-attended.

Other behaviour was less acceptable. Forcing your way on stage, for example. Or assaulting members of the band.

Lev didn't see what happened. He was backstage, playing cards with one of the security guards, a Russian Jew he knew from the last time a band of his played here in Cherkasy. The story, related first through Udo the lead guitarist, then Vanya the drummer, who got his information from Beatrice the Groupie, who in turn heard it from Ceylon the bassist, was fairly complicated. Someone either tried to get on stage or had actually made it. That person, if you believed Udo, came on stage with a singular purpose: to punch Krupkee in the face. If you believed Vanya, he was just looking for the toilet. Beatrice the Groupie swore that the man from the crowd, high on heroin, was only looking for an autograph. Ceylon, however, claimed he sprinted across the stage and groped her left breast.

Each story ended the same way: with Krupkee breaking a beer bottle over his head. When Krupkee began mimicking sexual intercourse with the fan, the crowd stormed the stage en masse, where they cheered Krupkee, swore at Krupkee, threw various items at Krupkee (including several pairs of brassieres, an empty 26-ounce bottle of Prince Igor vodka, and, most memorably, a bar of soap trapped in a wet sock).

The band didn't stay to play the final set. It was only after they had taken to the road that Lev turned on the radio and learned two things.

First, that the individual whose head Krupkee had damaged was the youngest son of Ukraine's Minister of Defence.

And second, that the blow had caused hemorrhaging in his brain, an injury that led to coma and would, in all likelihood, result in death.

"Christ Jesus," Udo said, crossing himself.

Vanya, who didn't drink and split driving duties with Beatrice the Groupie and Lev, sent the bus careening through two red lights before

pulling over next to a laundromat.

Several minutes of silence passed before Krupkee shouted, "Just fucking drive."

Wrapped in a blanket at the back of the bus, he was shaking, crawling like an infant on his hands and knees to the toilet.

Sometime during that first day on the road Lev radioed someone he knew with the Kiev police department, an old friend who used to play bass with Lev in a garage rock band when they were teenagers in Yalta.

A few minutes later he was speaking to another agent, someone higher up who explained that he would be doing the nation itself a favor by turning Krupkee in. "The Minister will of course show his gratitude," the agent said, adding that the Minister is a man given to extreme generosity when circumstance works in his favor. The agent spoke in stilted, formal Ukrainian. For all Lev knew he could have been speaking to an ingenious recording, a puppet worked by strings.

After, he resumed his conversation with Vanya who, for the third time in the last hour, wanted to know whether the women he knew in New York liked their men uncircumcised. Lev assured Vanya that they did.

"It's exotic over there," he said, patting Vanya on the shoulder. "They get bored of cut men. Trust me. You'll have women throwing themselves at your cock's feet."

The band revered Lev for his worldiness, his wisdom. If he said American women liked foreskin, then American women liked foreskin. If he said he could procure them fake passports and have all of the band smuggled to New York in business class, then such a miracle would inevitably come to pass.

In reality, Lev had only been overseas once, in the 70s. Over the course of those three weeks he had sex with more women than he could count. Yet for reasons he couldn't quite understand, the majority of women he had sex with had, themselves, immigrated from Europe a few years earlier. They were at the parties Lev and the band he was managing attended; they were waiting backstage after the band's concerts. To Lev such a thing was as absurd as eating your national cuisine while on vacation.

Certain people—notably Ceylon, the bassist, who seemed more than the others to have at least some semblance of an umbilical cord tethering her to reality—plied him for specific details about how exactly he would effect their escape to America.

"I have friends," Lev said. "Sources."

Ceylon folded her arms, squeezing together tattoos of fists, one on each breast, until the knuckles met.

"Sources who? Can we get names?"

"Relax," Udo said, sucking the final embers of life from a twiny little joint. "Let the man do what he does."

The truth: Lev had never intended to get any of them passports, and even if he had, the likelihood of the band making it through airport security was pointlessly slim. Two of the band members had mohawks, and all with the exception of Beatrice the Groupie had face piercings. Vanya had a tattoo of fingers reaching around his neck, while Krupkee's knuckles had his last girlfriend's name etched into the skin.

Still, like a good manager, Lev told them what they needed to hear.

For example: "There's a recording company in Idaho who will take you under their wing."

(Lev didn't even know where Idaho was, or if Idaho in fact had record companies.)

For example: "I know a woman in New York who rents out her basement to immigrant musicians for cheap."

(The only woman Lev knew in New York was a lawyer who decades ago defended one of his clients when he exposed himself to a homeless woman in Rhode Island.)

For example: "Once we get some distance on the road, everything will be fine."

(Only an idiot would, given current circumstances, believe that anything, let alone everything, would be fine, regardless of geography.)

By then the decision to turn Krupkee in was academic. Not that Lev told anyone. Maybe he could barter a trip out of Ukraine for himself. Maybe he could have some debts cleared away. Maybe he could, in time, move back home, or at least rent an apartment in the same building as his ex-wife and son. A few floors up, Lev would see him doddling to school in his oversized parka, his mother holding his hand. Lev a guardian angel, the sky, the moon.

Lev stopped the bus within walking distance of a 24-hour McDonald's, on a little-used rural road just off the highway. It was close to four in the morning. With the lights shut off inside, the bus was nearly invisible. One by one Lev took orders, scribbling items on the back of a poster from the band's Moscow show. Only Krupkee failed to surface.

Ceylon nodded to the back of the bus. "He's drinking the toilet water again."

Lev found the band's lead singer as advertised, piss drunk in the bus's washroom, a piece of surgical tubing transporting the vodka from the toilet bowl to his lips. His pants were around his ankles, his penis flaccid, fused with sweat to his right thigh. Lev nudged him with his foot until one of his eyes eased open.

Krupkee strained to sit up and stared at his penis. Laughing at the sight of it, he slumped back against the toilet. "I tried to masturbate the feeling away. Usually you can masturbate any feeling away. But I couldn't masturbate away the fact that yesterday I was me, and today I'm a murderer." Krupkee coughed. "Probably a murderer. A criminal, at the very least."

Lev offered no argument. He reached over to the roll of toilet paper and spun it until Krupkee's genitals were hidden under a pile of dimpled white squares.

"I love everyone in this bus," Krupkee said, sucking on the surgical tubing as if it were a soother. "But I love you the most."

"Such a charmer."

"Aren't you going to say you love me back?"

Stepping over Krupkee's legs, Lev informed him that saying he loved Krupkee back would be a lie, and that Lev, more than anything, was a man who made it his business not to lie.

At a gas station Lev called the place he still optimistically referred to as "home." His son would be sleeping, his ex-wife, either sleeping or fucking the man she was living with now. The math professor. Or physics, Lev couldn't remember.

She answered on the fourth ring, voice a drowsy whimper.

"It's me," Lev said. "How is he?"

"Asleep. Like normal people."

Lev chewed the raw skin on the inside of his mouth.

His ex-wife breathed into the phone. "They showed your picture on TV. People have been calling non-stop. Is it true what they're saying?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Lev said. "Depending on what exactly is being said."

Pressing the phone against his temple, Lev wanted to say, just let me hear him breathe. Let me synchronize our hearts. Even a hundred miles away, Lev believed in the power of breath to bind father and son. Breath and music could work magic. Lev longed for the day when he could bond with him over The Clash, The Sex Pistols, the Ramones.

"I should go," she said finally.

Before hanging up Lev said he was sorry for bothering her, an admission of guilt he regretted seconds after uttering it.

It came down to this: sometime during the marriage he forgot he loved his wife, and by the time he remembered that he loved her, she didn't love him back.

There were affairs, aborted pregnancies, Lev's alcoholism. No single event tipped the scale. Lev lost his marriage by accretion, the gradual process of addition (Lev's various failings as husband and father) and

subtraction (her diminishing capacity to love him in the face of the aforementioned facts).

The turning point came when she changed the locks on the door to their apartment. That same night, Lev tried to stab the lead singer of the band he was managing, with a butter knife. Within a week he had embezzled the band's profits. In a month he burnt every bridge he carefully constructed in America, the place he'd promised to bring his family once he made the right contacts. Finally, after a month and three weeks, Lev tried to commit suicide by taking sleeping pills and passing out naked, in the dead of winter, in an alley behind a strip club.

Sometime between one and one thirty in the morning, the doorman went to the alleyway for a piss and, looking down, found himself urinating on Lev's face. His suicide attempt, like most other things in his life, was close but no cigar.

Eyes closed, Lev recognized the smell. Ceylon's scent, the lavender body soap she used mixed with a particular kind of cigarette, hand rolled, dusted with flakes of a brown powdery drug. Potent, eye-watering.

She gave Lev's arm a squeeze and said to meet her outside in five minutes.

It was dark, the bus silent, parked in a field between Cherkasy and Kirovohrad, large stalks of wheat giving it some manner of cover. Walking to the door Lev accidentally stepped on a leg he suspected belonged to Udo, who grunted, shifted position, and fell back to sleep.

Unlike her colleagues, Ceylon had a high school education, not at a remedial technical school but the academic stream, and held a few college credits under her belt. She had started playing with the band on a whim. Three year's later, and here she was, still on the road, still holding out for fame and fortune. Outside, she buried her face in Lev's armpit and began to weep.

He assumed she was afraid of being arrested. To allay her fears, he told her that the people he contacted were professionals. They smuggled people out of the country for a living. Geniuses, artists, criminals too. Lev said he knew hundreds of success stories. Besides, she hadn't killed anyone.

"Only Krupkee has," Lev said.

After smearing snot and makeup on Lev's chest, Ceylon said she didn't give a fuck about being arrested.

"I've been arrested before. Arrested I could handle." Shaking, she withdrew a small plastic tube from her jacket pocket. In the moonlight's dim glow Lev mistook it for some kind of thermometer. She pressed it into his hand.

"I pissed on three of these in the last week," she said. "All three, the

fucking pink lines." She took his hand and put it under her shirt, on her naval. Lev felt it quiver, felt her stomach expand and contract. Ceylon spit close to her own shoe. "You know, more than anything I'm scared shitless of whatever could survive in there."

Feeling the warmth of her stomach, Lev said he knew the feeling, though he wasn't sure he did.

According to the wonky clock on the dashboard, they were almost two hours ahead of schedule. The monastery's parking lot was peppered with cars. Tourists but no police, as far as Lev could tell, unless they were plainclothed, lying in wait.

Lev checked the map, to make sure he had the right place.

The monastery, an imposing grey stone structure built in the 18th century, rose up skyward, windows dreary rainbows of stained glass. It was famous for surviving a small plane that crashed directly into its largest steeple. According to press releases, the plane's pilot, an epileptic who kept his condition hidden from his employers, suffered as seizure in mid-flight, lost control of the plane, and woke with the front end of the plane buried in the house of God.

Nobody on the plane was hurt. Passengers reported going through some kind of religious conversion. After the crash, a deaf woman claimed she could hear. A cripple could use his legs again. Another woman claimed to be have conversed with the Virgin Mary in Turkish, a language she neither spoke nor heard spoken in her life.

The Ukrainian Catholic Church had the crash officially declared a miracle. The plane had been left there for posterity's sake, integrated into the monastery's architecture like two children's toy's smashed together.

Here, Lev assured the band, they would find temporary lodgings, would shower. In two days, Lev told them, their passports would be delivered by a smuggler from Lviv famous for the wine-coloured birthmark on his cheek

"I've heard of him," Udo said.

"Of course you have," Lev said, parking the bus across four spaces in the monastery's rear. "He's the best at getting people out of the country. Nobody can touch him."

What he didn't say was that in a matter of hours Krupkee would be arrested.

Two monks in robes tossed sacks of garbage into rusty blue tin. As the bus pulled up they stopped momentarily, waved, then began tossing with renewed vigor. Lev himself avoided entering the monastery. Though he didn't believe in God per se, he recognized the karmic danger inherent in entering a holy place for the explicit purpose of betraying

someone's trust.

Instead he sat on the front steps, waiting to intercept the police when they first arrived. A family of four Germans tossed replicas of the crashed airplane back and forth, the propeller bent, the snout crushed.

Ceylon dusted cigarette butts off the stone steps and sat next to him. "The people are nice here. Boring as shit, but nice. Have a smoke I could borrow?"

Lev reached into his breast pocket for his pack and held it out to her. "Smoking's not good for a pregnant woman."

She brushed her bangs out of her face. "It's fine for the woman. For the baby it's trouble." She pulled her knees to her chest and rested her chin on top of them, the cigarette hanging limply from her lips.

"You've told him?"

"Not yet." Ceylon pushed her jaw in Lev's direction, eyes crossed as she watched Lev light the smoke. "They must have good abortionists in America. Not like here. My cousin got one and almost died. In bed for weeks, bleeding from everywhere." She considered the cigarette's burning tip. "Besides, the world has enough Krupkees."

A few hours of waiting and Lev grew antsy. No sirens, no police officers, no arrests. He spent half an hour pacing around the parking lot, smoking himself hoarse. Eventually he went inside, crossing himself awkwardly as he crossed the threshold.

Following the vague hand gestures of a mute monk, Lev found a working telephone in a room he could only describe as a janitor's closet on the monastery's second floor. The phone was an old rotary. Pressing one end to his ear reminded Lev of the tin cans and string he used to communicate with his own father when he was young. He dialed the operator and read the number he'd been given.

A different agent answered this time. A woman. Apparently the Minister's son had come out of the coma. Prognosis: life likely but not a certainty, brain damage probable. Lev could hear papers rustling on the other line.

"We'll still need to bring the band in," the agent said.

"You mean Krupkee?"

"It says here everyone." She proceeded to read off the names of each band member, including Beatrice the Groupie, whose last name Lev hadn't known until now.

"The last person I spoke to said it was only Krupkee"

"What's written down is written down."

Lev rested the earpiece back on its cradle.

The entire band, including Beatrice the Groupie, Udo, and Vanya. Including Ceylon. The baby. Inside Lev's mouth a flap of dead skin

brushed up against his tongue. He shifted it up and down like a lever. Up down, up down.

Across the foyer the airplane's propeller went round and round, the turning blades wider than Lev's leg. It hung on the wall like the head of an animal. The glass windshield of the cockpit was new, the glass polished to near invisibility. Any dents in plane's metal had been pounded out, the scrapes from the crash painted over.

On the main floor Ceylon and Krupkee stood beside the German family Lev had seen earlier, mystified by the propeller's lazy spin. Its breeze unsettled the teal spikes of Krupkee's mohawk the way wind passes through blades of grass.

Lev watched as Ceylon, with almost imperceptible slowness, took Krupkee's hand. They leaned inward until their shoulders touched. Krupkee knelt down, put his head to her stomach and listened.

Udo and Beatrice the Groupie were already on-board, nude and spooning in one of the seats. Vanya had to be pulled away from an intense philosophical discussion with a bearded monk triple his age. The subject, as far as Lev could tell, related to the merits of vegetarianism. Before getting on the bus Vanya made Lev announce that from now on, no meat would pass through the bus's front door.

"How long are we going to have to wait now?" Udo wanted to know. "Does what's his name, birthmark face with the passports, know where we're going?"

Krupkee put his feet up by the windshield and pinched his socked toes together. He was holding one of the tiny plastic airplanes from the monastery's gift shop over his head. Over and over he made it divebomb into Lev's shoulder, bouncing off into a tailspin before taking flight for another run.

Twice Lev thought he saw police cars screeching up the road. Who knows? Maybe he had. Maybe the authorities were just collecting sufficient evidence to arrest Lev as well. Offering him the illusion of escape. How long could they put you in jail for aiding in the escape of a criminal? He fumbled with his pack of cigarettes and dropped them on the floor.

Krupkee used his foot to drag the pack across the floor towards him. "Do you think I'll be a good father, Lev?"

"Now's not the time, Krupkee."

"Simple question. Yes or no? You have a son, so you're more qualified to speak on the matter than the rest of these idiots."

Lev loosened his grip on the steering wheel. Truthfully, he could see Krupkee getting stoned and accidentally dropping the baby into a toilet filled with vodka. He could see Ceylon and Krupkee having a shotgun

wedding, Krupkee spiraling into post-partum depression chased with benzadrine, eventually overdosing and leaving Ceylon with a fatherless child, a tiny apartment, bills needing to be paid. His son like Lev's son, raised by a man who isn't his father. God forbid, a fucking mathematician.

On the other hand, a part of Lev, a very small part, the kind of small that must have existed solely on the molecular level, entertained the possibility that two rotting trees could collide with such gentle perfection that somehow, sodden and useless, they stood stronger together than each had apart.

Lev shrugged, batting the toy airplane away. "Nobody knows anything about anything, Krupkee."

It was as close as Lev could come to finding truth.

Contributors

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The Creative Writing Program at U.B.C.

The University of British Columbia offers both a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing. The M.F.A. degree may also be taken by distance education. See our website for more details.

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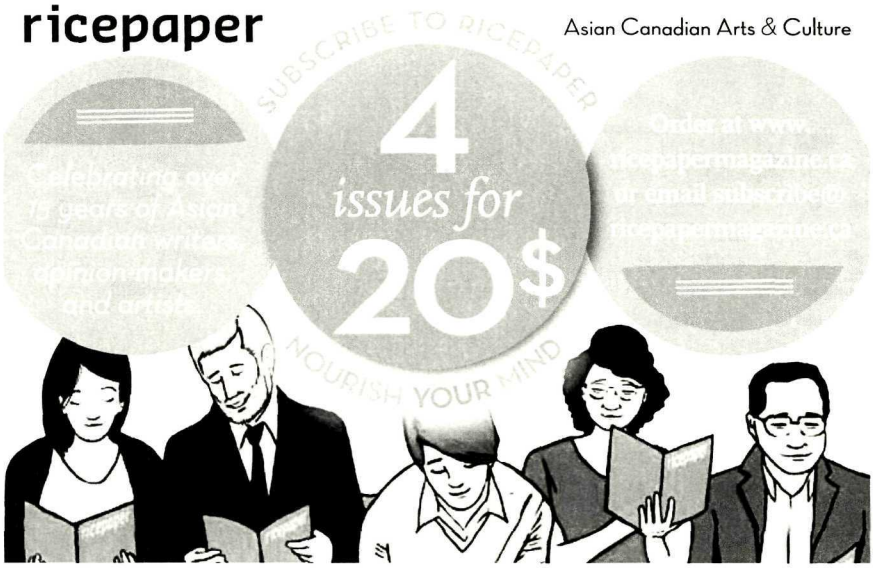

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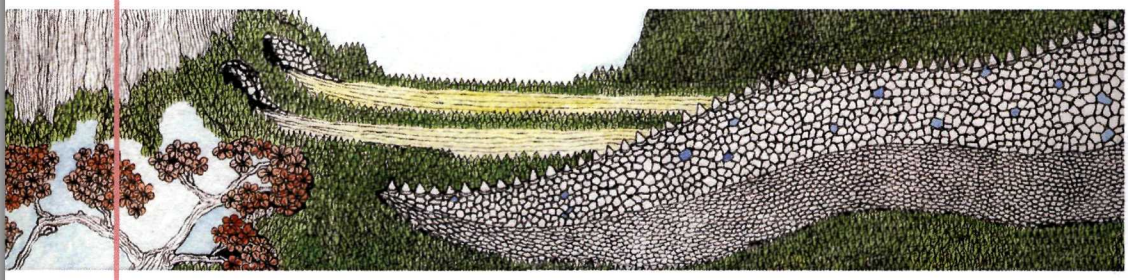

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