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Contemporary Writing from Canada and Around the World

PRISM international

2009 Earle Birney Prize for Poetry

$500 was awarded to
Sue Sinclair
for her poem
"Cherry Trees"
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PRISM international

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Jeff Steudel

Hornby Island Vacation

In a dry field that slopes to the ocean
and belongs to the farmer
who made his fortune
in the parking lot business,
I watch the dragonflies
sell the sound of electric
crimped air, their glide
uneasy, even clumsy
as they sputter and fall
until double-winged charges
prop up their flight path; surely
they must go broke.
The bee's golden parcels:
drop-off, pick up;
the wasp's tenacity
around the peach pie—
and me, knowing I will soon
leave this small economy
when September comes,
top-heavy and buzzing,
to get back to work.

Good Light

Comes with shadows. There are cherry branches
on this page, their serrated leaves dulled, the edges
lost. Through the tall maple, circles of sun shine
kaleidoscopic on the long dry grass. The woodshed
heaped in hops. Like me. The old blue paint
chipped on the window frame around four panes
caked with resin—dirty like the years of home
renovation when we all slept in the same small
basement room. In the dust and in the sun, things
take new shapes. A fern touches a cedar bough
like I want to touch you. Green on green. Limelight
glows through new growth of red-spine leaves
over the cabin door. To one side of this lawn chair,
ants climb into pine cones, over yellow moss, and up
blades of grass. To the other, the lost light of us.
And though the eastern sky still holds—blue, a wisp
of cirrus—and the sinking sun flashes its finale
on the aluminum chimney cap, nothing is brighter
than the sound of you chopping tomatoes in the kitchen.

Anna Mioduchowska

Outside The Frame

—after *The Song of a Lark*, painted by Jules Breton

Everything but the bird here.
A field waking from mid-summer sleep,
an outline of a village. The sky
flushed with the effort and the pleasure
of reinventing itself.

Bare throat straining from a white blouse,
a young girl caught in the act—
hand attached to sickle, waist to hay bag,
lips in the upturned face parted
as if sound could be inhaled.

The rest of her passerine brown,
kerchief, mid-calf skirt,
bare feet kneading the path.
Those feet too are all ears,
as the dirt under them, the dew.

The lark is outside the frame,
the frame on a wall of an air-conditioned
room embedded in tone-deaf matter.
The song a concrete, heart-rending
presence.

Jordan Mounteer

Waterskitter

It is never too long to watch them, skating over
patterns of koi. Their poise is a truce with water,
untraceable logic. Legs like thinnest poplar twigs.

Condensation on the grass rises in a sustained note.
Morning's dewy lactations. Smoke from a brushfire
settling. Behind the teahouse a woodpecker
ratatats on the neck of a birch.

A whine. Mosquitoes are the arrogant cousins,
who will never know the elegance of two dimensions.
They buzz protests to three candles, wicks dipped in citronella.

The pond surfeits a waterfall I vainly tried to stack in May,
finding its own course through the antlers of ferns.
A tiny tributary, like an afterthought, a tongue's wet cluck

while it ponders at something. I've worked on the little stream
all week, each day brushing off fresh algae and fitting green
and grey stones in the channel.

It's a cobblestone road only waterskitters use,
up and down with useless business.

Nashira Dernesch

Mennonite Boys in Wet Underwear

After swimming the dam, defiant
to horseflies and clots of manure,
you pulled the leeches from my back,
breath hot as the blood
easing its luscious path down.

I had read the word eroticism
on the back of a stolen novel
and spied then what shape it held;
those white briefs dripping and transparent
in the sun, boys escaping up the riverbank,
sliding in the silt against each other's skin.

Julie Booker

Geology in Motion

Lorrie and Katie tended to say too much.

Imagine two fat ladies in a kayak!

In skin-tight wet suits. Eek!

Talked up Alaska until they couldn't back out.

Over egg white omelettes in Lorrie's kitchen, Katie read: "If you meet a bear, stretch your arms overhead and say, 'Hey, bear, hey.' The bear will come toward you, but it's a bluff charge. Only drop when he's one foot in front of you."

"What about the camper in the news last week," Lorrie asked, "the one who got mauled?"

"The grizzly was ten feet away. He dropped too soon."

"He dropped too soon," Lorrie repeated, as if measuring how close she could come to fear. Animals, she trusted. She had other things to worry about. Since the bariatric surgery she'd dropped 140 pounds. Another sixty to go. Katie had chosen the slow route—melba toast and tuna—but the scales held stubborn at 280.

Lorrie didn't know why a flashlight was on the gear list from the kayak company, considering the twenty-four hours of daylight. She and Katie went shopping for neoprene gloves, inflatable Therm-a-Rests, checking the strength of the nozzles. Oversized Gortex pants were difficult to find. In Mountain Equipment Co-Op, they lay on the floor in XL sub-zero sleeping bags, trying to imagine the frigid night air. Drawstrings tight under their noses. The manager smirked, made them practice stuffing themselves into sleep sacs, two giant blue pills.

At the Anchorage airport, Lorrie said a quiet prayer of thanks they were going to Seward. They weren't joining the lineup of men boarding a small craft to go further into the bush, overgrown beards and never-cut hair, second-skin parkas and dusty knapsacks. Two dour Native women in line with the bushmen. As if the loudspeaker had called, "Last flight to Severe Depression."

It took a while to get to Miss Cathy's B & B. As the van passed through town, Lorrie watched the back of Katie's little-girl head peer out the window. When had she gone grey? Her hair in a tight ponytail on top like a fountain, ends spilling down towards her triple chin. Not that Lorrie

felt superior. Before the surgery, she wore her hair high like a bird's nest. Anything to draw the eye up.

"The Yukon Bar Steak House. Hobo Jim's Pizza. Sourdough Bakery," Katie whispered, as if the words themselves might bring on the weight. "Everything's poison to me but no reason you can't live a little now that you're nice and slim. And look, Chinese right here in Alaska."

The B & B had a rusted iron bed frame at the end of the driveway, flowers growing through the springs. Miss Cathy waved as she crossed the yard, her figure trim, not counting the beer belly.

"How are you girls?" Her voice raw from cigarettes. "You're in the Bear's Den around the back. How long you staying?"

"Just tonight. We're off to Northwestern Lagoon tomorrow."

Miss Cathy's mouth dropped. "You girls got balls."

She unlocked the cabin door, handed them the bear paw key chain. "Don't be lookin' so worried. That ain't real bear. It's squirrel. The kitchen's in the back of the house. Help yourself to whatever."

"Jeezus," Lorrie said, once Miss Cathy was gone.

The room barely held the two of them. They shimmied round the bed, having to turn sideways, Pardon me. Katie fell back, smothering a dozen black bears in migration across the comforter. Lorrie held up two cushions in front of her breasts, shook them so the tassels quivered.

"Are those teeth?" Katie asked.

Lorrie inspected the tassels. "Plastic."

Katie turned to the side table, tapped the nodding heads of three miniature grizzlies.

They wandered through the backyard, the tangle of wildflowers. The outhouse door was open, a flush toilet inside. They went in the back door, past stalagmite magazine piles, knives and forks like weeds in cups on the laundry machine, into the kitchen where Lorrie made herself some green tea beneath a sign: Life is short. Eat dessert first.

Katie filled a bowl with Honeycomb, brought the box with her from the kitchen. The two of them sat at a round dining table that cut into their bellies, looking at the framed maps, sailor figurines and dusty nautical instruments. Books crowded the shelves. A ship porthole stood on the sideboard with a murky Jesus behind. His arms open, pointing to the surrounding titles: *Finding Health. Healing Yourself.*

"That new appetite suppressant's making me hungrier," Katie said between mouthfuls. "And the nightmares. I drop off for an hour and wake up thinking, Now where did that come from?"

With Katie smack up against her in the bed, Lorrie tried to sleep, but the midnight sun called to her through the drawn curtains. She went for a walk along the highway. Surgery won't help a bit if you don't change the way you live. Cars whizzed by her. All this way for pine trees and

asphalt. When she returned to the Bear's Den she found Katie asleep on her back, one arm high across her stomach, anchoring herself, the other hanging over the side of the bed, her fingers twitching in the icy Pacific, dangling over the edge of a kayak. A nightmare probably taking hold right then.

"Most visitors do a half day jaunt in Resurrection Bay. Some go further out to Aialik Bay," Wendy, their guide, explained the night before the excursion. When they showed up at Alaska's Here, Wendy was kind enough not to do the usual full body scan, to scowl at the obvious challenges. "Our water taxi will take your gear and kayaks out to the farthest bay west of Seward." Wendy was rosy-faced, fresh out of college. The type that burns energy just by standing still.

"Northwestern, where the glaciers calve all night like thunder," Wendy had said a month ago on the phone to Lorrie. "It's magical." When Lorrie had called other outfitters, they'd described their trips as nice, great, beautiful. But not magical. One thousand dollars for three days, booked solely on the hint of transformation.

On the boat-taxi out to the campsite, Katie shivered in the cabin while Lorrie stood on the deck, hanging onto the yellow recreational kayak, its cockpit larger than a sea kayak's. She'd learned the difference after a bit of a mix-up on the phone. "No, not for larger bodies of water, for larger bodies." Lorrie faced the wind, loving the spray on her face. She saw islands of rocks, then the almost-camouflaged, spindle-shaped harbour seals, unabashedly sunning their big bellies. Puffins flying so low to the water, she could see one's red and black eye looking at her, a dozen fish held crosswise in its beak. Look at all the snacks. She missed the comforts of home for a brief moment before spotting the grey bumps in the water. Porpoises. The boat gained on them. Lorrie watched their sleek bodies slipping over and through the waves, perfectly designed for play. Further out, Lorrie pointed at a shot of spray just ahead of the boat. She looked back at the cabin, but the driver was chatting with Katie. Lorrie watched the whale move alongside like a shadow. It was mammoth, appropriately insulated, swimming effortlessly. She knew she was the only one who'd seen it.

The taxi dropped them on a remote, stony beach. The two of them struggled to pull their kayak and equipment high up past the tide line. Lorrie extended the poles as far as she could until her arms shook and Katie took over. They draped the tent, bending without grace to pin the corners, then straightened up to get their breath back. They hammered pegs into shifting rocks, taking frequent breaks. Careful not to trample the beach greens that had survived the elements, taken hold without soil. No-trace camping meant no fires. No digging toilets. They teetered to

pee along the shoreline, balanced just long enough to shit into silver foil Wag Bags.

The sun slipped behind the glacier, but it was only a dimming, a signal for the bugs to swarm. Wendy cooked while they strolled along the shoreline in D.H. Lawrence-style mosquito net hats.

"I'm starving," Katie said.

"Me too."

Every time the glacier across from them thundered, they froze like space creatures stepping over moonstones. Looked up to see what had fallen. Of course, they missed it every time. The sound delay about thirteen seconds.

"There. Where the new waterfall is. Where the ice is still tumbling. See it?" Lorrie said.

They sat on the rocks, lifting the nets of their hats for each swift spoon of curried noodles. Lorrie ate watching the glacier like a TV, the constant sound of running water from the ice mass. When she looked over at Katie, Wendy was ladling more soup into her empty bowl. Lorrie's was still half full. How did that happen?

Wendy read to them before bedtime about geology in motion. She pointed to maps printed earlier in the year that showed the glacier sitting where they now camped.

"No one's sure why the earth is warmer. It could be because we've damaged the earth's atmosphere. But maybe our orbit's altered. Or continents are shifting near the poles, or maybe the sun itself has changed." She didn't sound sad, like time needed to be slowed down or humans were at fault. The glaciers just had their own journey. And while they were shrinking, heading for the sea, other geological features were expanding, like the mountains in Resurrection Bay. Tectonic plates were continually shifting. No one was to blame.

They went to sleep with the glacier framed in the tent vestibule window. Fully lit by night sun. Lorrie slept in shorts she would never wear in public, her mummy bag unzipped, not needing as many layers as she'd anticipated. Ice rumbled, masses fell while she snored. In the morning, Lorrie pointed to where new rock face had come to the surface.

The first day was a leisurely paddle following the shoreline. Katie and Lorrie shared a double kayak floating dangerously low in the water. Wendy paddled close by, sipping coffee from a thermos. Lorrie could hear Katie behind her, habitually reaching into the Smarties trail mix baggie on her spraydeck.

They passed hanging valleys carved out by glaciers, mountaintops rounded by migrating icebergs. There were the beginnings of moss, wildflowers, yellow, white and pink, a lonely spruce tree springing out of

grey rock. Succession forests, Wendy called them. Like they had come to the end of the earth to see the beginning.

On day two, Wendy pointed in the direction of Northwestern Glacier. "That's where we're going today. Four hours paddling."

They passed Anchor Glacier and Ogive, topped with blue, the only colour of the spectrum able to escape the dense crystal. Ogive tiered with striations of grey rock like a soufflé after it's fallen.

Northwestern Lagoon was a bowl surrounded by mountainous glaciers. Lorrie felt the temperature drop suddenly. Their tiny kayaks, red and yellow tinder on silt-green water. The regular sound of thunder like a storm moving in. Every time Lorrie heard it, she paddled faster, wanting to get to the source.

"This is close enough," Lorrie heard from the back of the kayak. Had Katie said it to herself? Or to her?

Lorrie kept paddling. Ice chunks all around, a floating sculpture garden. A flock of misshapen forms heading somewhere, in no apparent rush.

"Wendy, can you tell us where to paddle so we don't hit these?" Katie called out.

"Look. That's like a cormorant," Lorrie said. They banged into one, a half-trout, complete in its reflection.

"Can you just tell me where to steer? I can't see what's up ahead."

"It doesn't matter if we hit the small ones, Katie." Lorrie kept paddling forward.

"Wendy," Katie called out.

"Just follow my path," Wendy said.

"Why go closer? They won't look any different."

They hit another piece of ice. Lorrie shifted a little so she could pick it up and put it on the spray skirt. She'd heard the Japanese imported it for their drinks. She sucked the pointy end. The instant freezing of her lips, wet pouring down her chin, taking her back to the ice cube diet, but this was too solid to bite into.

"I'm really not enjoying this." Katie's paddle cuffed the hull. "Just drop me off on a beach somewhere with my lunch. Pick me up on the way back."

Don't be absurd, Lorrie wanted to say. "A beach somewhere" was at least three hours away. Wendy was ahead of them. The boat teetered with each erratic knock of Katie's pole against fibreglass, but Lorrie didn't turn around. She listened to what she thought were sighs, then realized they were quick breaths. Katie stopped paddling and Lorrie suddenly felt the weight in the rear of the kayak, and her own heaviness, how vulnerably low they sat in the water.

"Can't you tolerate it a little longer?" Lorrie said. Her paddle gentle

in the water. A few more strokes, she knew that was all she had. Wendy kayaked back to them.

"You gals okay with this?"

"No," said Katie.

Lorrie longed to axe the boat in two, paddle away.

They sat watching the glaciers calve for an hour. Chunks the size of apartment buildings fell. They were so far away the waves didn't even reach them. As close as they would ever be. When the sound hit seconds after, Lorrie cheered. Wendy clapped.

"What's the big deal?" Katie said quietly.

On the way back, the floating ice chunks seemed to have multiplied. The sculptures spun from their own weight, forward and back, like gymnasts in warm-up. Crackling like bubblewrap. Wendy stayed close. Lorrie tried her best to call out, "Left," or, "Big one on the right."

Wendy pointed to otters diving for their dinner. "Not an ounce of fat," she said. "A high metabolism and insulated under-fur keeps them warm." The mammals floated in the sun, snacked on fish tucked under their stubby limbs, then placed their paws together as if in prayer.

Katie began to match Lorrie's rhythm as they cut into clearer water, back toward the campsite. Past Ogive and Anchor glaciers, old faces that had softened in the late daylight.

While Wendy cooked dinner, Katie and Lorrie donned their mosquito hats, perched on camping stools, exhausted. Katie explained that it had all seemed too big. The height of the glaciers, the sound of thunder, the depth of the fjord, the frigid water. The space in the kayak had gotten tighter. "I almost had a full-blown panic attack. I just focused on things in front of me: the water bottle, my camera, the paddle."

"You did great." Lorrie quietly searched the beach, hoping to bring back a piece of Alaska. She had a new sense of calm. The afternoon's chaos had rippled from kayak to ocean to glacier, right down to the tectonic plates, see-sawing both her and Katie onto land. Onto shifting stones that now felt solid. She held up a big rock to show Katie. A ball of granite, with streaks red, white and grey. A perfect sample.

"Do you think I can get this through customs?" she laughed.

"I think I'd prefer smoked salmon or chocolate bear scat from the duty-free," Katie said.

They sat on the grass by the kayak shop waiting for the airport van. Katie ate the last of Lorrie's trail mix, the Smarties long gone. Lorrie looked out at Resurrection Bay. Her pants definitely felt looser. The place where the waistband usually cut a fold in her belly had shifted. A group of children spilled into the daycare yard next to them. Two supervisors organized a game of Frisbee. Some kids played patty cake under the trees, dug in

the dirt, maneuvered tiny trucks on the grass. Two boys with freshly-cut hair took turns concealing a neon orange soccer ball in the yard. Under a bench, behind the garbage can, by the tree. As one walked close to it, the other called, "Warm, warmer, warmer, hot!"

Lorrie closed her eyes, too, while one hid the ball before calling, "Okay!" She opened her eyes. Unlike the boy, she saw it immediately. Like an Alaskan sun pulsing in the short grass. The persistent sun Lorrie missed already. Slipping behind the glacier right now without them.

When the kids ran out of hiding places, they tucked it in the same spots again, pretending not to notice it right away. Then they pointed to the long grass near the kayak trailer, even though the supervisor had told them not to go off-property.

The boys walked closer, exploring, then stopped when they saw Lorrie and Katie.

"You're fat." The boy was looking at Katie but he could have been talking to Lorrie. His own layer of baby fat could go either way.

Katie stood up, in full bluff-charge. It took her a few strides. She snatched the ball and called out, "Hot, burning hot!" She held it against her belly for what felt like an excruciatingly long time. Lorrie saw the boys' faces recoil, the strength in their cheeks and jaws recede. She watched them get younger. And she knew if Katie held on much longer, they would crack. Babies in one thundering cry.

Katie cast the ball onto the tarmac and the boys chased after it.

No matter how old we get, Lorrie thought. No matter where we go.

matt robinson

Citadel Hill

Citadel Hill National Historic Site, Halifax, NS

the elephant, you
might say, in the room. or, that hulking, hillocky
older kid—clad all in the kitschy, just
just past-style
hand-me-down trappings of a brother who's long since left
home, this town. and how he stands
there, here in the eye of the storm, with recess
hub-bubbing each and every which way around him; and him,
slope stolid, seeming oblivious. a languid
precursor of force; a loose laundry pile—all folds
and tumbles and grass-stain—of slow-twitch muscle,
unused.
a mountain of gaze. how, like clockwork,
he'll shuffle and spit, hock thunderous.
how he never forgets.
in the end, though, it's how he looks. looks:
down, and over, and out.

Inland, From *The Ocean*

VIA Rail Station; The Ocean Line—Halifax, NS to Montreal, QC.

leaving. the afternoon
is hot, is thick with it—this smutch of breath.
passengers
gather, a paned condensation by departure
gates, by windows. bags rasp, clasp-cough against the tile
floor, its subtle ruts. as our time
approaches, tide-like,
an order develops, redevelops; wears the once-crisp edges of this
leaving; leaving us dulled and sullen.
later, in motion, the window
is a charcoal or pencil sketch, smudged; a concrete newsprint
stuttered all along with a ragged stitch
of power pole T's: repetitive, unsteady—
a grade one printing exercise. somewhere
before bathurst we are a drive-by theatre; we are a travelling
circus, midway. an old man, a buick,
a mother, two kids: soda pop sticky with summer, people
stare and wave themselves away, after
coffee, the drummondville morning
is workmanlike; a grass stain on faded denim. on approach,
montreal is a spilt pallet:
so many cardboard boxes, bleaching in the sun.

Leanne Averbach

A Thing Past

may be plucked of a sudden from the well, its memory
cavity. No query is necessary, nor forwarding address.

It can arrive dull, meaningless, slathered in vague clutter
like numbers on a grocery receipt, or rise pristine to quake us, better

than ever from nowhere. It will peel us raw
in a flash—that muted ransom. It repeats, no will to resist,

harnessing us to the bed. It has a keen sense
of smell and fashion. It remembers a friend

of a friend who knew all about the incident. It is a witness
who doesn't show up as you make the case, again, again the indefinite

verdict, an urge to call someone. *Hello? Am I okay?* Ruby cascades
of elixir in your glass help alternately to hold it, send it back into the well, create

new files in which to keep it. That awkward taste of the half-
learned, the feel of being tattooed inside, an extra set of organs

for recalling. Out the window Canada Geese point elsewhere,
passports in their brains. They take one last look at themselves

in the lagoon before slipping off the radar as gulls scratch
the air, bragging winter-worthiness

through rubbery feathersuits and I drift
beneath the shadowy flim-flam of love.

Patricia Young

Interpretation

So much has been written about this dream,
we don't know what it means anymore.
Though we do remember the dream
had babies and high heel shoes and cocktails
that levitated. The men in the dream
were talking about cisterns, they didn't know
what else to talk about, while upstairs the women
uncorked bottles of pink, effervescent wine.
And then we were at a summer house on a lake.
There was a lot of work to do, sweeping
and scrubbing. *Goddamn maggots.*
We remembered the dream had a bar,
fancy drinks. We kept sneaking little sips!
The floors so slippery the old dog slid
on its belly all the way to the burned-out wharf.
A rat turned into a Victorian poet wearing
a buckskin jacket. He was destitute,
needed cash bad. Some said the dream
meant creativity, others that freedom was nigh.
No one could agree. It was a mess. It was
pretty straightforward. And then my mother
showed up in a golf cart and cleared the desk
of papers and books. *Beware*, she said,
of tiny fig trees taking root in your lungs.

Taboo-Girl

...the tendency of the female to sexual intercourse during menstruation... has everywhere been overlaid by the ideas of a culture which has insisted on regarding menstruation as a supernatural phenomenon which, for the protection of everybody, must be strictly tabooed.

—Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*

Old women beat the bushes with sticks,
mad at the reptile that made me bleed.
Do I look scared? Ha! I am Taboo, last
hurrah priestess, girl with an angelic roar.
Milk sours. Wine turns to vinegar.
Sugar blackens. Meat rots. Father says,
Now look what you've done. Mother says,
Get back in your cage. See my neck
covered in bites? Don't come near me,
sand fleas will sting your ankles. And yet
the sight of my breasts calms the sea.
Lightning, cowed by my nakedness,
is so pure that Holy Dove flies in my face.
Once I was half-boy. That was before
Lizard-God cut us down the middle.
Now I'm married to Snake, I yank his tail
out of my mouth. Serpent's my lover.
When I walk into the world, vermin
fall from ears of corn, caterpillars drop
from curled leaves. Father says, *Don't
touch the ground, don't look at the sun.*
Mother says, *Cut your hair, burn your soiled
clothes.* What does it mean, this theatre
of fire and blood? Electricity jumps
from my fingertips. When no one's looking
I get down on my haunches. *Uh-nuh
uh-nuh uh-nuh.* Out slips Salamander-Baby,
all slimy mucus. I roll her in dust, down
the road and into the lime kiln.
All night, Baby bakes like clay.

Dance?

Dancing is a perpendicular expression for a horizontal desire.

—George Bernard Shaw

I would like to dance the rickety-dance across
the narrow bridge with you, dance
the coastal trail when the fog
has lifted: whiff of salt, tug and pull
of tides. Where the forest meets the sea
and scrubby pines cling to cliffs
like ravaged ballerinas, I would like to
tap-a-toe, eat-a-beat, flick-a-wrist,
And if the dance goes AWOL, I would
call it mealberry, draw you like a green
shoot through the pupil of my eye.
For the sake of the root-dance,
I would rotate my pelvis, lash kinnikinnick
shoots to my ankles, rarely stray from
the dance in which your legs like a happy
accident entwine with mine. Once,
I danced alone on an untrammelled fist
of land but now my buttock-dance
ties your tongue in knots, my heart and thigh
muscles grow strong. So slap your feet,
scuff your heels, look the groin-thrust in the eye.

Warren Heiti

Metamorphoses, Book 10

When Agriope plays piano, the shades
listen, the poplar and the willow are still
with listening, a single hawk
nails itself against the wind.
The light staggers three times
through the house of Pisces,
the geology of Hades' city
dances in a rigid grid. She is
stiff-fingered, her grief
is small as a salamander's
hand, her hair is long
as the rain's.
Every tree in the grove,
an interval of silence.
The ivory gate,
open. Echoing.

Sadiqa de Meijer

Where The Sky Is

A girl was missing.

Rosie had seen the poster when she went downstairs to get the mail. The errand was still new for her, and she performed it with a sense of gravity, the space between her eyebrows pinched as Oma handed her the coin purse with its ring of keys. Closing the apartment door, Rosie would sprint down the corridor and into the lobby, press the down button, and listen for the elevator rising from the depths of the building with a high-pitched whine.

The wait took courage. Three doors converged in the lobby from different wings, so that no matter how Rosie turned, one was always at her back. Sometimes footsteps or the swell of voices reverberated through the walls. The carpet was a hostile pink, the plastic plants too sparsely leafed to form a hiding place. Still as a statue, Rosie would soundlessly recite the city's bus routes: *1 Walling, 2 Valentine, 3 Barter's Bay.* She knew them all from *1* to *16.*

But then there was the poster. A grainy photo of a laughing girl with curly hair. *MISSING since Tuesday,* Rosie read. *Melissa. Last seen in a blue sweater, jeans and purple and white running shoes.* Rosie felt her insides somersault, as if she had looked down the narrow gap that formed between the floor of the lobby and the open elevator doors and seen the mess of cables, the depth of the shaft. Where did *MISSING* people go? She thought of hibernating snakes, how they waited in a hidden burrow, their heartbeats slowed.

The mailbox was full. Two supermarket flyers, a newspaper and an envelope with thin, slanted writing addressed to *Mrs. L. Plank.* That was Oma's name.

They shared no obvious resemblance. Oma was soft and broad, and tapered down to sturdy, high-heeled shoes, her silhouette matching those of her claw foot chairs. Rosie, knock-kneed and slight, played shipwreck in the width of the seats. Her grandmother moved languidly, unrushed, while Rosie hurried from here to there. Rosie spoke quietly and Oma near shouted. One common attribute, a quirk of inheritance, was their fascination with the city buses.

Rosie loved those heaving vehicles. She loved the yellow cord that lit

the *Stop Requested* sign, the perforated tickets and the vinyl seats, the hiss of the opening doors. Whenever she stayed at Oma's, she loved watching over the buses from the apartment windows. Sighting an unusual formation or an unforeseen sign change could halt the most pressing of activities. Rosie would shout *Four in a row!* pushing aside her sketchbook and coloured pencils, and Oma would come with her knitting to stare out the window, lowering her glasses and letting them rest on their pearl chain. Or Oma would call out *Special Express!* in the middle of a phone call, and Rosie would come running, holding a half-folded specimen of the paper planes that she often launched from the balcony.

Rosie stayed with Oma on the weekends. Her mother cleaned offices, and when Rosie was younger she used to go with her on Saturdays and Sundays and play among the cubicles and swivel chairs while her mother sprayed and mopped and rinsed. They brought a play pen for her brother, and meals in microwave trays. When the shifts were late ones, Rosie and her brother would sleep on the staff room couch until their mother woke them to go home. Once in a while, an office worker stopped in. Rosie's mother would greet the person as if they were all supposed to be there, but Rosie could hear the strain in her voice. "When you're older," her mother would say afterwards, "you'll have sleepovers at Oma's house."

Oma lived in a high-rise. The view from her windows was vast. In the distance loomed the factories and smokestacks, blowing soot that settled on windshields and streetlights and coats. Closer were the blocks of small houses, aligned in duplicate rows. Only geraniums, tough as barbed wire, bloomed in the miniature yards. Gulls dove and rose, airplanes left streamers of smoke, and clouds passed over in unrepeatable arrangements.

Oma and Rosie never dwelled on those sights. They watched the roads for the solid bodies of the buses crawling dependably from stop to stop. The terminal was across the road from Oma's building. Each bus had its designated shelter there, pausing while their drivers read the newspaper or smoked a cigarette. Rosie could read the route numbers unassisted, though she sometimes used binoculars to monitor the streets. She relayed the significant findings to Oma, who recorded them in the pages of a notebook where they also glued their collected transfers and schedules.

When Rosie returned to the apartment, she heard the shuffle of Oma's heels on linoleum and rushed into the kitchen. She told Oma about the posters, and the downstairs lobby with the scowling man and the woman holding an enormous purse.

The man had looked at Rosie, then at the notice board that held three

posters of the girl, then back at her. "They're looking for you," he said.

Rosie had felt her face flush. "No, that isn't me."

The woman, leaning in towards her, brought her face close enough that Rosie could smell her fruity breath. "Her eyes are different," the woman said. "I'm almost sure."

"I'm not missing," Rosie told them, "I'm here. My Oma lives on fifteen." She gestured upwards with the mail. The man and the woman continued to stare until Rosie lowered her eyes and counted the stripes on her shoes.

"Is that right?" Oma frowned, stirring sugar into her coffee, the spoon clinking.

Rosie took the cup of hot milk from her and asked, "When nobody knows where you are, are you still visible?"

"Sure. And you can still find your way home."

"What if you're lost?"

"Look at me," Oma said, "leaving breakfast crumbs on my bosom." She wiped her hand across the merged shelf at the front of her dress.

"Those are your breasts," Rosie said.

It was a regular day. They played board games. Oma read the newspapers in her reclining chair, emitting clucks and *Dear, oh dears* from behind the newsprint screen. They went out to mail a letter. In the lobby, Oma scrutinized the poster, shaking her head and hugging Rosie in a sort of vice-grip. "I shouldn't have let you go downstairs. We'll do it together from now on." While Oma cooked spaghetti, Rosie cut paper snowflakes and practised handstands on the soft living room rug.

But she could not forget the girl. She had always been afraid of the city children, who seemed tougher and more vocal than the ones in her own town. At the end of every week, Rosie and her mother and brother bought a few groceries and took them to Oma's apartment. Sometimes, they all walked to a park, where Rosie's mother might point out the riotous kids on the climbers and say *Go ask them to play*, and Rosie would cower, preferring to sit on a bench. Now one of those city kids was *MISSING*, and Rosie felt disoriented. Could anything happen to anyone? Melissa, with the right kind of runners and a gap between her front teeth. Melissa, who could be sleeping in a sand box and eating crabapples to survive.

When Rosie was in bed, Mrs. Corin came by for tea. Rosie was having trouble sleeping. She missed the sound of her brother's breathing, and the blurred blue of his nightlight by the door of their room. Oma's blankets felt abrasive against her skin, and she could hear the conversation in the living room, although its subjects felt remote. Her attention only

rallied when she heard her name.

"Rosie," Mrs. Corin said, "she's shy as a mouse."

"Sometimes," said Oma, "but not with me."

"They call it streetproof," said Mrs. Corin. "You wouldn't want the guilt."

Rosie stayed awake after Mrs. Corin left. She heard the inscrutable clunks and rinses of her grandmother moving about the bathroom, and then the distant door of the bedroom clicking shut. She crept from her bed and snuck down the hall, opening Oma's door just far enough to look inside. She had meant to ask about *streetproof*, but the sight of her grandmother lodged that question in her throat. There she was, past the edge of the door, without an undershirt or bra, a drooping, wrinkled breast on one side of her chest and the flat gash of a scar on the other. She was putting her teeth in a glass, and her expression was more forlorn than Rosie had ever witnessed before. Rosie walked backwards, waiting to let out her breath.

The living room looked different in the moonlight, as if the furniture and the plates on the shelves and the heavy green tablecloth had grown sentient, watching every move that Rosie made. She had decided what to do. She pulled out her sketchbook and tore out one page, and then another, and another. She took a red marker, kneeled on the floor and wrote *MELISSA!* on each sheet of paper. Then the number *1509*. That was Oma's apartment. If Melissa found her way upstairs, Rosie would give her a glass of milk and warm a bowl of leftover spaghetti. She would even let her sleep on the pull-out bed in her room. She folded each page into her best model of paper plane, opened the balcony door to a gush of cold air, and released the planes towards the city lights below, watching them drift and plunge until they disappeared.

Every so often, Oma and Rosie chose one bus to ride from the terminal all the way back. The nest morning, they took the *12 Hollis Park*. It was one of their favourite routes because it left the city for a few minutes and passed through the marshes. There were no stops on the marsh road. The waving grasses and expanses of water seemed part of an untouchable world. Rosie was good at spotting the shapes of herons and turtles among the reeds. The only other bus that went outside the city was the *16 Eastlake* that ran to Rosie's town. Oma would take Rosie home on the earliest one the next day.

They took a thermos of hot chocolate. When the bus turned into the marsh, Rosie scanned the green for signs of Melissa.

"You look on that side," she said to Oma, "for footprints or a hut. Or maybe smoke."

But there was nothing remarkable to see, and soon enough the bus

was back in the city, where Rosie knew that everyone was already looking. Or so she assumed—some people, like the woman checking her watch at a stop and waving the *Hollis Park* past, or the butcher standing outside his store, did not seem unusually alert.

After they returned to the apartment, they made lunch and played crazy eights, and Rosie watched a television show about the Great Barrier Reef.

Just as they finished eating dinner, the doorbell rang. Rosie recognized Mrs. Corin's shape through the textured glass of the door. She opened it.

Mrs. Corin sang down her "Hello" as if Rosie was still small. She leaned intently on her cane and her breath came in rasps. "Is Oma here?"

Rosie moved into the closet to make room for her grandmother, pressing herself into the perfumed winter coats.

"There's a rumour," Mrs. Corin said, "that they found the young girl's sweater." Then her voice lowered to a whisper, and Rosie had to strain to hear, "I only hope she wasn't raped."

After Oma closed the door, Rosie asked her what raped meant.

"You're too young. I can't tell you that," Oma said, her mouth closing tight.

But Rosie pestered her. She asked as she helped clear the table, and she asked as she dried their plates and cutlery, and pleaded while they warmed a pot of milk, until Oma finally said grimly: "It's something awful that a man can do to a woman, when they're naked."

That was enough for Rosie to contemplate.

She opened her sketchbook to a blank page and began a new drawing, starting with the sky. Rosie was proud of her skies. Her brother still drew them as if they were a bar of blue along the upper edge of the paper, but Rosie knew they reached down to the ground, that there was sky touching the tree branches, separating people's fingers, caught between bicycle spokes. She paused her drawing just in time to say, "They're turning in!"

That was a predictable, peaceful thing the buses did on Sunday evenings, all of them.

"Yes," Oma said, "I'm coming."

Then Rosie noticed the white cars with red lights, police cars, that were parking in front of the building. Three of them blocked the driveway. Another one pulled up to the laundry room exit. "Look at that," she said.

Oma clucked her worried sound. "I hope it's not a burglary."

Rosie and Oma stood close to the window, in the carpeted haven of the apartment, the glow of the globe-shaped lamp. Rosie sharpened a

pencil, slow and thoughtful, and Oma knitted so quickly that the needles ticked. They watched as the white cars waited in a line. Gulls streaked past and smokestacks fumed, and the buses pulled in one by one, a herd of sleepy, benevolent creatures, their lights going out.

E.A. Carpentier

The Dumb Supper

Tonight we use what's left of the family
china, French and rimmed with an old kind of green
and gold, a frivolous curlicue of a "C" right there
in the centre of the plates like a meal.

There are only two of us but we've set many places,
counting back all the dead we can remember
and name; tonight we light
black and white candles, for absence and remembrance.

I pull gauze from the closet, and
linen, frayed and stained,
more the colour of old tea. I want us
to pretend, dress up, to be other than ourselves
and you refuse as you do
every year; you won't entertain
the thought of parties, crass
celebrations that don't, in truth, bear any known relation to the dead.

So here we are instead with our silent meal,
our empty table full of food—
pumpkins, rice, whisky—
sotto voce, we attempt articulation,
speak of love and the missing, mix longing with dark wine.

Ronnie R. Brown

Skin

For almost a year now
she has been facinated
by the way razor blades
glide through the surface
of skin. Scars
on every inch of her
attest to this facination.
Her father recalls
her perfection, how
when she was born
he couldn't believe
skin could be
so soft. Now he tries
to comprehend the fact
that something is very,
very wrong.
Later, after she sneaks out
in the middle of the night,
purchases starter fluid,
sets a portion of her arm
on fire, he will note
how burning flesh smells
remarkably like pot roast—
he will say this
with the kind of incredulity
you might use if,
on entering your daughter's room,
you found her
floating high above
her bed, or perhaps,
spun into a cocoon
awaiting metamorphosis.

Lauren Carter

The Double

Let loose in my twenties, she is
still at the bar,
staring into some mirror—
draped with lights

made of plastic chili-peppers
or miniature
disco balls—looking for
a lover.

I cannot help what she does. She
is at least writing
it all down. I read the script,
at night, as

she sleeps, as we sleep together,
both in a blur
of a dream brought on by
antidepressants.

I know, I know, neither of us
should be drinking
but I let her do what she wants.
Follow the watery

trail of the moon down
an alley lined
by garage doors, face to face
with startled

cats, with a surprised man who tugs
up her skirt and
pushes her against the crumbling
brick wall when

she asks him to. I am out of breath
just trying to keep
up with her, my own life
a blank plain

untouched by much colour other
than the blue lines
that run evenly across
the page. I

love her, even though she starves
herself, forgets
to shower, believes in the
darkness that

builds fortress after fortress in
her brain. She lies
beside me, pressed against
my belly

and my breasts, and I sing to her,
a lullaby
I have almost forgotten,
but in a voice

deepened by cigarette
smoke, she fills
in the missing words.

Lucretia Smith

Pop Star Sparkling

Andy Gibb wants to marry me. His song "Shadow Dancing" has been Number One for seven weeks. On the back of the album cover, he is wearing platinum satin pants and an unbuttoned silvery silky shirt. I can see the hair on his chest. I can't believe the way he looks on that album cover. His legs are open, and I am slowly understanding what is between them, under gleaming fabric.

He takes me out to dinner where I can eat everything I want. He has his guitar. The restaurant is fancy. Champagne dances in pale cups that are upturned half-bells. The napkins are cloth, too. I wear black chiffon, the gold threaded in my semi-sheer black dress a disco glint, just like the top I saw at the mall. Only better. I am in Junior High but with Andy it doesn't matter. I am mature for my age. I bloomed early. His smile is sweet as he orders for me: Fettuccini Alfredo and Tab on ice. Then we go swimming and he holds me in his arms. We splash around. The sun is setting, and everything is orange and pink, even our skin. I wear a gold swimsuit. His is sea-green. He sings one of his songs for me as the water moves like music around us. We are sea creatures. Coming up for air is fun, sputtering water looks like diamonds scattering. I tell him if he wants to visit me at school to ask for me over the intercom.

We walk barefoot on the sand. We have dessert under the stars. Baked Alaska, or maybe cherries jubilee. He holds my hand. I count his freckles. He calls them sun kisses. He has so many of them, I could connect them like dots with the tips of my fingers, or the tip of my tongue. I am too shy to tell him this, or to do this. We both wish on a shooting star, but do not tell each other what we wish. It's bad luck to say what you wish out loud. I have a career so I have to get up early. Andy drives me home with the top down, my hair drying in the wind. There are a thousand stars in the sky.

I see the same stars out my open bedroom window. I watch the night's luminous blue deepen into black. My skin is clean and smells like the beach. I fall asleep in a plump pink bed that smells freshly laundered, like flowers, or as if the ocean wind dried the linens.

***

Instead of going to school the next day, I go to work. I'm a real career girl. My black pencil skirt is tight, pinstripe, and has a matching vest. I button the vest and wear it as a top, with nothing on underneath. I have nail polish on my fingernails. It's on my toenails, too, but it's a gleaming red secret beneath my scrunchy boots. I look like my favorite model in the comic *Millie the Model* or in the magazine *Cosmopolitan.* All day long I make up names for lipsticks. Fire and Ice. Cotton Candy Pink. Melba Toast. The day passes quickly. Lots of people want to talk to me. Andy sends me a bouquet of flowers and everyone sees them. Daffodils, or daisies. They smell earthy. He also sends me a heart-shaped box with an assortment of chocolates. I like the ones with cream. I really like the ones with nuts but cream is sexier.

The year before I loved Andy, I loved the band Kiss. They played hard rock. They wore costumes, and make-up, and they had their own comic book. I read they put their own blood in the comic book's ink. On the way home from my career I see them walking down the street. The whole band! The band on my turntable, the band shouting out loud in my headset, the band painted in black, silver, and white with just a little bit of red on my mirror at home. They all follow me. We look like shiny sequins in motion on rich velvet.

Paul, the one with the star on his eye and the red kiss lips, waits until I unlock my door then he walks fast up to me and slams the door behind us. Somehow, my front room feels like an outdoor garden. There are huge potted plants, the smell of a thousand tiny white flowers, the sound of a miniature waterfall. What are you doing, I ask, but he grabs me and kisses me. It feels good, but scary, like when I listen to his music—I am never sure what will happen next, and so I keep listening. I run my hands through his long dark hair. I really like your skirt, he whispers as he lifts it and kisses me some more. His hands—those long, strong guitar-playing fingers—on my bare thighs. His red-lipsticked mouth opens. His tongue is pink and soft, and tastes that way too, like candy. I remember Andy and push Paul away. Let's just go for a walk, he says, so we walk to a stream by my house. We hold hands, swinging them back and forth, and now I am wearing a long white skirt with three tiers in it and a white top with off-the-shoulder sleeves made of lace. The skirt flows even when I stand still. Paul kisses my exposed shoulder. His makeup is bright in the starlight. My feet are bare and wet, or maybe I am wearing those gold sandals that have shiny ribbons winding up my calves. He pushes down my shirt some more and keeps kissing my throat and it tingles and then he starts to kneel me down sort of backward as he hugs me to him, and

he's looking so good doing that. I have to have you, he whispers in my ear. His voice is low and husky. He's a real man. I feel tendons pulsing. When he says the word "come" it is just like in the song, the star on his eye, stars in mine, just like the bits of glitter in my mirror at home. But then I hear boots splashing, and I look over Paul's shoulder, and it's Andy! Just when Paul is unzipping his tight white jeans under my triple-tiered cotton skirt.

Andy hits Paul over the head with his guitar. Paul falls to his knees. See what happens when you leave your guitar at home? My clothes are wet and see-through, and both men are looking at me. A love song plays in my head, the one Andy sings about words and music, raindrops and snow, so I walk off with Andy under the whiteness of the big full moon. Andy gets down on one knee. Will you marry me? At our wedding, my tiara will be simple but elegant. I will carry white roses. The wedding cake will look like a turntable, or a mirrored disco ball. There is a tiny black velvet box in his open palm, a heart-shaped diamond like starlight inside. Come with me, he says. That sweet smile, just like on the cover of his album. The emerald green leaves wave in the evening sky. We both turn into glitter and sparkle away.

Aaron Giovannone

You Will Sit Here Until You Aren't Embarrassed to Look at These Photos

There's someone pretty sitting on a wall in San Gimignano
in big sunglasses, looking perfect above the Tuscan landscape.
She's shaking a pebble from her boot, like her memory of me.

Here are all of us in an impromptu drunkenness
clutching plastic cups of *glü win* in a piazza at Christmas.
I still had the bomber jacket with the fur-trimmed collar

in a club where we bobbed to the *boom-chick* of eurodance.
She closed her eyes, pursed her lips, leaned closer
and I
turned to the table for a drink.
My jacket was gone

and my odd gait speed-walking home
with my hands in my pockets
said *idiot.*

Smoke Machine

Smoke pours from the smoke machine,
hisses out, spills upside down into the air
where we're at a party. Ta da.

I don't know you
but we're talking.
It's a miracle of drunkenness
not reproducible under sober conditions.

Whatever's said dissolves in the machine's hum,
whatever's seen in time's fumes.
It smells like a wedding reception in 1987.

Apparently we dance
and having forgotten this I feel
even farther from you.

A Constellation of Inattention

was throbbing on the windowsill:
a cactus pointing everywhere.

Some days I noticed it
and some days I didn't
and that's how I'll describe my summer there.

The sun scorched my nose
but I was always catching *raffreddori*
which felt colder than colds
blasting through the open car window.

I whipped around the mountain curves
staring at the olive groves that stitched up the valley

when a cyclist swerved from the rock face.

Slamming on the brakes you
left yourself behind.

Grand Opening at a Winery

In Niagara-on-the-Lake, they have one "piazza"
and according to the brochure, it's under this patio.

The pinot grigio is pretty generic
but the chardonnay snaps back like a half-cracked walnut.

These tenderloin slices feel like lips on my lips,
the liquid surface of my being being rilled

and when I drained that last pinot noir
the pressure in my head dropped.

The lovely sommelier (sommelière?)
fills her mother's glass before mine

getting my mom drunk, she laughs.

Ben Hart

Faldero

It's burlesque—the way he undoes
his top button, strays into a tune
about a faldero like himself, *un hombre*
who loves *todas las mujeres.*
Seems unfair. Him stuck on stage
while they're on the floor.

Everyone overdone and spinning.
Red skirts, moustaches,
black silk shirts. But not him.
The faldero is shadows and thinning
hair. Loose skin. His clothes
threadbare. Tango show accordion player—

that handle used to carry some weight. Now, he carries
weight. Fat hanging like a sack of flour
from his waist. When he sang songs
about getting women, he got women.
Now, when he sings, it's about forgetting
women—songs about all the women
who've forgotten him.

Flâneur

—after *Flâneur, Granville* by Fred Herzog

In that photo from the sixties, he's in a fedora
and an overcoat, propped up against a stone facade
thrown in marquee glow, doing his best Baudelaire,
fingering a hand-rolled and blowing smoke.

You don't get much of his face. The camera angled
over his shoulder so you see him as he sees
what he sees. Ask what
he's doing, he'll tell you what he's doing
is not doing a goddamn thing.
To be an observer, he'll say,
you have to observe
this distance. He'll let you know
it's all for his benefit—

> girls snooting around in leather boots.
> Dudes shooting up in the alley. Kids cruising
> on motorized scooters. Old kooks
> in zoot suits. Summertime
> parades. Chinatown. Honey-glazed
> heaps of noodle, doughy bits.

But, shit, man, he'll say, it's hard work
bearing witness to all this. And, sometimes,
it seems a waste—standing out front,
watching folks file in, but never bothering
to buy yourself a ticket for the show.

Mary B. Valencia

Blue

When you went into rehab I developed an addiction to home renovation shows. In fleece pajamas, slouched in the worn green wing back, I surfed between HGTV and W, *Colour Confidential* and *Property Virgins.*

Contractors tore up stained shag carpets with X-Acto knives, pulled and peeled them to unearth pine-knotted floors. Plaster walls crumbled to studs. Hutches and sideboards were hauled out for open concept kitchens. *Flip This House* said to uproot garden grape trellises for new buyers. Property values rose $100,000 in eight breezy months.

The hours evaporated. Under the weight of my feet, recently stripped hardwood bounced because of the rotting sub floor. I peeled away green painter's tape from around the light socket and flicked the switch. Too awake, I popped your valerian and set the kettle for chamomile tea. The tip of my nose was cold. Since you left, the heat sat at sixty to save money. You wanted to help with the mortgage but I said to save for first and last. You would need that nest egg when you returned to the city.

Upstairs, I slept on the bare mattress with a duvet on top. I hadn't cleaned the sheets. They smelled too much of you—smoke and alcohol strained through sweaty skin. Besides, the dryer had broken and I didn't know where to hang them. When you fell in the bathroom the wire dry rack from Walmart bent under your weight.

***

"I'm better now, I understand everything," you promised on the phone.

At Clear Heaven, you cross-country skied in the afternoons, following wolf tracks down to the creek. In the evenings, you completed fill-in-the-blank cognitive behaviour therapy homework and practiced "Let it Be" on your acoustic.

You told me about the guy from North Battleford who snored on the top bunk and laughed too hard at dinner. How you felt sorry for him, because someone had masturbated in his *Mind Over Mood* textbook.

"I'm a model student," you said.

***

We went paddling last August with Donna and Miguel in Algonquin.

Each pair of us in a canoe. You liked their matching red bandanas tied around their necks. At a river bend, a blue heron lifted up above the pines.

You cocked your head up. "That's a sign."

I wanted to crawl over the rocking floor of the canoe and kiss your face, that lovely ginger five o'clock shadow. You dipped your paddle, pushing us along the river bed. We floated forward. Grey antlers blended in with reeds.

"A moose," I whispered.

You nodded, balancing the oar on your lap. Under magic hour light, the pines were velvet-tipped marker green.

"*Uno, dos, tres,*" Miguel shouted.

We raced each other to the campsite at Proulx Lake.

"I'm tired," you said, and slowed down, catching your breath with each stroke.

Donna and Miguel were half a canoe ahead of us.

"*Cuatro,*" I said, pushing you. "So am I. Let's keep up. *Cinco!*"

You steered sloppily, holding us back, but I kept counting.

***

I woke up choking, forgetting how to swallow. There was so much plaster dust. It collected and piled up like thick grey cotton under the night table. It stuck to the unfinished oak floor and the plywood counter tops. It covered the Peace Lily, waning her waxy leaves. I hadn't washed the furnace filter. It was too big for the laundry room sink.

***

We were the only ones on Pont des Arts that icy January night. It was dinner time and Orsay sparkled above the Seine. Your hands cupped my ears, warming them.

"I love you." Steam puffed between your syllables. I had just yelled at a security guard for shoving us past Yves Klein's *Blue Monochrome.* We had been savouring Klein's stillness—a six-foot high blue rectangle, the only piece in a white room. It was a pure, perfectly concocted ultramarine that soaked into our skin.

"Excuse me," I pointed to the hanging clock, "there are still twenty minutes to closing."

"Time to move along," the guard said. He blocked the painting, arms crossed.

"This is bullshit," I swore. "*Une histoire de con.*" I spun around and walked out of the museum, afraid to look at you.

Outside you told me again, "I love you. You know you did something wrong and you won't do it again." You smiled. "It's okay."

I reached up and rubbed my cheek against your beard. I wanted you to be my dad then. I wished you had always been with me. That's why I hung onto you us for so long, because of that moment when you loved me so perfectly. You kissed my hand and we walked arm in arm to the Latin Quarter. You bought me a Nutella crepe.

***

When we bought the house, you paced back and forth in the realty office. Your hands were clasped behind your back like my grandfather used to do. You were a man with an important decision weighing in on him, focused, reeling in all the lines that were to tie you down. That made me happy. I loved your pacing. Your pressed pants and handshakes with the agent connected you to my daily deadlines, 6:30 a.m. alarms and bimonthly paycheques. On Saturdays we would sip morning coffee together, then tear out the faux wood kitchen cabinets or rip up the mauve linoleum in the foyer.

The first night we moved in, you cabled the television outside and hung a navy tarp to protect us from the rain. We watched the Habs beat the Leafs. It was end of April, chilly, and we tugged on our windbreakers to keep warm. The pear tree had blossomed white petals and the branches scratched the top of my head. The earth smelled like green mud.

***

I tried to wash away your wiry red hairs with the hand-held shower head. Congealed with shampoo, they stuck to the tub no matter how hard I scrubbed. I traded in the baking soda and vinegar for Ajax. I crawled in the bath and lay on my back, drizzling hot water on my belly. My skin turned blotchy from the heat. Outside the window, snowflakes spat on the slate-sloped rooftops between bits of blue sky. You weren't there sleeping off a hangover in the next room, pushing the day away. It was quiet. The emptiness was there, but now it was only mine to navigate.

I dried off and walked downstairs without any clothes on. I never did that. I didn't care that the back window had no curtain, that there were nails and sawdust on the floor, that a snake's den of cable hugged the walls.

***

On Tuesday I rolled the recycling bin to the curb and lifted the blue lid. Empties. I picked out a crumpled cider can, Tennent's Extra-Strong Lager and a Smirnoff forty ouncer.

"Dad." Down the street, a little boy looked up to his father, one step ahead, in a grey parka. "Is that a star?" The boy pointed to the night-orange

Toronto sky. A plane flew overhead—its light bright and singular.

I carried the bottles back through the house. Yellow beer drops dotted the kitchen floor. I swung the back door open and flung the bottles clear across the yard. The Tennent's smashed against the cinder block garage wall. The others landed safely on a blanket of snow.

***

I didn't understand the consequences of owning a row house. *Love It or List It* said that it would limit the appreciation value.

"Make sure it's well insulated," the agent repeated, and sped off in his green MG. We made the most of the shared wall. Their bathroom was our headboard, and I listened to them brushing their teeth at night. We used to laugh at their horking. I wondered if they heard the morning alarm, our heated penetrating breaths, our grunting, or crying, then arguing. Did they hear me the time I ran up the stairs and threw your bottle of vodka against the wall? Did they hear you vow, "I'll just go buy more!"

***

You hated the chain link fence until I pointed out the visual depth. We weren't constricted by six-foot high wooden fences. We sat under the vine trellis, swollen grape bunches heavy. Our garden was framed by the fence line. The border was defined by the holes. Right through the holes, the neighbour's prairie grasses, lavender and Rose of Sharon. Green reached all the way through the chain links to the other yards. If you stood at the base of our pear tree, you could see an entire row of fruit trees—cherry, peach, apple—a stretched outline, a secret orchard in the city.

***

I stared at our closet before pulling out your clothes. It was narrow, so the coat hangers hung sideways. Candice Olsen from *Divine Design* would have suggested we deepen it, borrowing from the hall linen closet, adding Ikea Pax built-ins.

On the closet floor was a cardboard box. Inside were your journals—a collection of Hilroy spirals and Moleskines. The latter a gift from me, dedicated in my own handwriting: You are in my hair, my mouth and my spine. Underneath the journals were more bottles.

I ran my hand along the top closet shelf, over rolled sweaters. I pulled out two empty cans of Guinness and a very good Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. I searched my office and the cold storage. I searched under the front porch.

***

Sunday night at eight o'clock the phone rang unknown name, unknown number but I knew it was you. You called from the pay phone in the television lounge. Your bunk mates reclined in brown La-Z-Boys with Bart Simpson blaring in the background. You told me how healthy you were and that you'd be able to drink moderately when you got out, even though my counselor said that guaranteed a relapse.

"What about three months sober with me, for us." It sounded like I was begging.

"Because I don't want to," you said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm in control now."

"You're not the exception!" I slammed the phone down.

***

Do you remember walking through the open house, just for a look? Your hand rubbed the small of my back as we looked at the garden. We would turn the double garage into your music studio. The agent punched numbers into his calculator and suggested we rent out the basement to lower payments. He said to picture the living room without the bulky furniture or porcelain statues.

Downstairs, the owners made red wine—oak barrels filled the cold storage cantina. It smelt of malt and mold.

"We can brew beer down here," you said and lifted up one of the fermenting tubes.

"S-ure. Whatever brings us self-sufficiency."

***

I found more bottles behind the washing machine, under the Nova Scotia pine hutch, in the coffee table storage, and in-between the box spring and the mattress in the guest room. You certainly were industrious.

I dumped the empties out the back door. I let them roll down the steps, get kicked around by the wind. I crawled back on the couch and pulled Nan's red afghan up to my ears. I watched Mike Holmes from *Holmes on Homes.* Teary-eyed women reached out to him after he'd sealed foundations, retiled cracked entrance ways and added radiant flooring as a surprise.

After the show, I pulled a Winston's from your leftover pack. I smoked it on the front porch. A neighbour had let his husky loose on the soccer field across the street. It zigzagged between the goal posts. Behind the field, the beer store sign poked up.

"It's like we live in Quebec," you said to me once with a twelve-pack propped on your shoulder.

I leaned on the front railing and let my weight fall. The cigarette tip was pointy from the wind. I dropped it and slowly smushed the filter with the heel of my rubber boot.

I walked up the street to the liquor store. The man in line behind me set three tall beer cans and a mickey of Canadian Iceberg Vodka on the counter. He flipped his long hair behind his red ears.

"I love the LCBO," I said extra loudly, passing my credit card to the cashier. "It's good to monitor distribution."

"Yes?" he asked. He reached for my Henry of Pelham.

"Alcohol's the only thing that'll kill you when in withdrawal," I said. "Not even heroin can do that."

The cashier flattened his maroon tie and handed me the receipt.

"Thanks for the tip." He scanned the man's vodka bottle.

***

It had been a long while since I poured a glass of wine, re-corked the bottle and let it sit on the kitchen counter. I made a box of Annie's Mac and Cheese, chewed loudly and slurped big gulps of wine while I watched *Garden by the Yard.* An excavation technician dug deeper trenches in a city garden for increased vegetable yields.

"It's always about the soil, reverence for this living organism," the grey-haired host squinted at the camera.

When the credits rolled I went out back. The February sun had kick-started the sap. New brown branches sprouted from vines. The snow had melted along the garden cement path. I could see, between a chocolate bar wrapper and a brick, the garage door opener. You had lost it before Christmas.

The air was still. I blew perfect smoke rings. They floated up to the blue evening sky—Yves Klein blue. What was the yard like before these brick houses, garages and alleys? On the edge of this great lake, was there still a forest of tree roots under my feet?

In the garden patch, the snow was rough, granulated like sugar. This was where our heirloom tomatoes, green peppers and eggplants grew last summer. I picked up your empty bottles. I planted rows of blue Lowenbrau, green Harps and mini-keg Heinekens. In between, cigarette butts lined up like budding orange Styrofoam seedlings. In the last row, arranged in degrading order, were the Smirnoffs—forty ounce, twenty-six ounce, mickey, half-mickey. At the very end of the row, a clear little Ativan bottle you stole, prescribed for my air travel. I left the bottles there. They're waiting for you to claim them.

Jane Munro

What if a name

bestowed character? Became itself—
as does an iris taking on
hazel or grey or green or brown
precipitated from a newborn's navy blue—
by hauling in a mysterious anchor,
stowing in the namesake's locker
wet coils connected to other sea bottoms,
to flanges cutting under anemones,
cast shells, tilted rock?
What if a name
carried, encoded in its voicing,
a link to other speakers
who spoke it—scathingly, urgently—
calling it out in woods and hearing it
shoulder through leaves,
hurrying, hurrying to the one
within hailing distance?
Or the murmur
when a lover turned his head, lips
no longer on her lips,
sighing her name?
Subtle signature—
a mitochondria of usage—is this how
a word knows so much?

For see how the jasmine releases and lets fall its withered flowers

The clutter and clatter
of what I drag
along behind me—a dilapidated cart
rocking on its wooden wheels
over roots
and rubble on a track
through second-growth alder, wind-bent spruce,
past trail-side mounds of sharp-edged grass
habituated to salt air,
splay of knotted ropes
pulling chairs, bedsteads, tables, hutches,
even an overflowing Turkish han—market and caravansary—
like a tottering museum piece, oozing smoke, spilling
tears and grain and silk-wrapped books, stinking
of saddles and piss-pots in its corners
and, trailing after this rattletrap,
the silent child
with her kites of longing, their shard-coated cords
slicing each other, paper fishes
drifting off to clouds—no wonder
it takes such energy
to get going:
can I not
emerge from the past's brown days, leave them
dropped here, to decay
with toppled trees and fallen branches, overtaken
by salal and coated with moss, and walk
quietly and freely on my way?

Here, the air is visible

each particle carries
a mirror of water

spruce needles
ferret out beads of moisture,
collect a delicate rain
for their dry roots

elsewhere, the sky is clear,
the day warm—
bees keep busy, cats loll in the sun—
but this fog
is not moved: it holds its seat

the air gathers more lumen—
its mirrors coated with mother-of-pearl:
breath's lustre—
as if the usually transparent atmosphere
sat brooding
on its acumen, hour after hour

determined to see itself
to memorize
its features so that when it gets up,
stretches, and begins to act
it will not forget itself

The inner eye

while practicing asanas,
turning out hip sockets
like the white linings of trouser pockets,
emptying the walking sticks of femurs into its palms
and rotating their noggins (as if thighs
could walk away from knees, quit sharing messy desks
criss-crossed with phone lines and ligaments)—

that little eye on its fine tube
trained in pranayama
to probe the airways: lung's tennis court
jammed with pup tents—note taut rows
neatly inflated, scouts running about,
trading hats and badges—then saggy, sleepy rows—
even the abandoned bundles in the cubbies
under the collar bones—that little working eye recording
findings, reel after reel of documentation—
the little everyday eye following the breath,
watching as troops head out on many trails—turning up
for a rescue: scrambling onto the edge of pain, watching
breath throw out a line, haul the injured one up to a stretcher,
tuck her under a blanket, give sips of tea from a thermos—
the little eye by her side, taking her hand—

yes, the little eye
on long holdings withdrawn
to the map room, to the charts it can unroll
across the navigator's table to pinpoint a channel
sounded one rainy afternoon—the eye sketching a route,
persuaded by a visiting yogi that there's a fine blue passage
running from inner ear to lower brain, down through
vertebrae (five, six, seven), branching
out to an iris on the shoulder blade, down arm,
across elbow, out thumb—a thread like an embroidery yarn,
each stitch visible in the body and marked on his chart—
an eye willing to see blue lines and red lines
like wiring inside the skin, an eye
like a hydro electrician bent on lighting up a plant—

and at rest,
the closing eye's drooping gaze
sliding down the nose like ghee, a fat drop at its tip,
falling into the soup, watching while not watching
the pot as tiny bubbles creep up the side
and something circulates, perhaps a chunk of carrot—
feeling the gaze spread wider, glaze over
until things extend into their reflections
and light dissolves all density—
the eye out of sight
and sense
still clarifying
the body while it simmers—the eye
dropped like a strand of egg white
into stock, turning over,
tumbling into threads—blindly collecting what's opaque,
withdrawing it—at work even when
at rest: yes, that eye
clarifying

S. Kennedy Sobol

End-Effectors of Series A

1. Tammy

Tammy sat in the cube next to me at work. Every year when she planned her vacation, she called ahead to the zoo in the city where she'd be staying to find out if there would be any animal babies on display at that time. You could say that I was in love with her.

2. Plans

My very first robot was a sweeper. It had rubber wheels and a dustpan chin. A long arm like a windshield wiper extended out in front, with a brush attached along the bottom so that it could pull dust and hair and bits of things towards itself. The idea came to me when I lost my job in the accounting department. Before I left the building. Before I left the room even. As I sat there listening to Johnson, my supervisor, my eyes couldn't keep their focus. The outline of his thin white dress shirt blurred in and out of the foreground. He got so agitated as he explained why they were letting me go that by the end of it he was on his feet, pacing back and forth.

"We're trying to maintain a certain environment here," he said. I pictured the office as some kind of pristine biodome, an oversized terrarium whose carefully cultivated plant life and moisture levels I had contaminated.

Behind him, on a lacquered, dust-covered credenza, was a paper plate and a Dixie cup left over from the previous week's party. Tammy was in charge of those types of things (the birthday fund, pizza Fridays, the office picnic), and as I stared at a plastic fork resting close to the plate's edge, it became clear that this world was now closed off to me forever.

In the next instant I had it all planned out: not just the sweeper robot, but an entire series of small, household robots for every imaginable domestic task. Robots for dusting and folding and painting and mending, robots for opening jars, turning mattresses and pouring drinks. A grasping robot for retrieving things from hard-to-reach places, and one to feed the family pets. As Johnson spoke I swivelled back and forth in my seat, knees and feet twisting from side to side, my mind perfectly still

and calm. I was no longer an accountant. Without leaving that maroon-coloured chair, I had become a maker of robots.

Johnson had stopped talking and was just watching me, like I was a shipment that had arrived defective, but my heart was jubilant. Nothing could mar the sense of purpose I felt. I stood up, shook his hand, and left.

3. The Mailman

The mailman leaves elastic bands at the end of the driveway. He takes them off bundles of flyers and envelopes and chucks them there. When the snow melted, a loose pile of them had collected in a rut between the lawn and the asphalt: brown, green, faded rubber ball-red. I wanted to take them all and hurl them across the windshield of his van. But I didn't have the nerve, and now that he stops by every Tuesday morning to check in on me and my robots, I have given up on that plan.

I started small, with robotic insects built from pre-made kits. A beetle that changes direction when you clap, a grasshopper with light-sensitive antennae. I subscribed to *Everyday Practical Electronics* and *Robot Magazine.* The mailman, seeing this, offered up a trove of old electronics textbooks that he had inherited. Inside the front cover of each one was inscribed the name Hart McCarty, sometimes over and over again in a single column.

"My father," said the mailman, whose name was Hart McCarty too. "He liked repetition."

Now I've got him hooked on *All My Children* as well. It airs around the time that he comes by, and he sometimes takes a coffee break with me. It's Tammy's favourite soap opera, so if I ever run into her again, we'll have something in common that we can discuss. Recently the daughter Susan Lucci put up for adoption tracked her down. Her name is Kendall and now she is falling for Anton, the romantic Hungarian son of the romantic Hungarian Dmitri. They are royalty in some way, and have a fortune, and an estate called Wildwind, with horses. Probably that was a thing that would appeal to Tammy most, the horses.

4. Neighbours

"Shame about your apple tree."

I keep tugging at the weeds. I had successfully ignored my neighbour for half an hour, making sure to always have my back to him as he shuffled around uselessly between his garage and his front step, picking up planters, rearranging them, coiling and uncoiling garden hoses. Now he has wandered across the street and is standing over me, casting a

shadow across the earwigs scattering from under the flat rock I have just overturned.

"Oh yeah, how's that?" I say without looking up.

"Well," he says, at a loss and gesturing toward all the apples that have fallen off the tree in my front yard. They have begun to form mashed orange patches of rot all over the grass. I stare at him. He continues speaking.

"I mean, don't you make apple pies or apple...tarts?"

I keep staring. He nods his head a little, rhythmically, as though he's running through a list of recipes in his head, trying to come up with another use for apples before I can say anything.

"What is the matter with you?" My voice is loud. It surprises me. Besides Hart, I haven't talked to anyone in almost two months. "Can't you see that this tree has a blight?" I yell. "They're no good!"

He backs away, but he knows I'm right. It's not my fault I can't keep up with these fucked-up scarred and gnarly apples—the tree is overproducing them. Each branch is heavy with a cluster of fruit three times fuller than normal; where one or two apples should be, there are five hanging off the same heroic twig, misshapen and growing into one another, none of them round, all covered in indents from the pressure of other apples growing against their sides.

5. Highlights

Tammy had highlights done once every six weeks, and unlike all the other admins, who wore their hair short and feathered back at the sides, hers was long and perfectly straight. She would always look up at you when you walked past—eyes coal-bright, like a rabbit or a bird—with a smile like she was just seeing you for the first time in years.

6. The Robot Laboratory

I don't miss my office at all. Everything that's important to me now is in the basement, in the robot laboratory. I built the lab myself, in one weekend. I went to an auction and bought the entire contents of an old dentist's office. All-metal cabinets, pale green and seamless, with a stainless steel work surface. I thought at first that I would line them all up against one wall, but when I got them home I discovered that it was possible to arrange the sections at right angles so that they formed three walls where they stood in the centre of the basement, a separate room. I keep my plans and schematics tacked to a large piece of corkboard at the back of one counter, and my tools arranged neatly below it. In the middle of the lab is a long metal table, and this is where I do my best work. When a

robot is finished I test it out here for a while, then if I'm satisfied with the results, I move it upstairs.

7. Haunted House

I dream that I've built a haunted house. It isn't really a house, just a single room containing a family of small robots. There are two kids, a mother, and a father who carries a briefcase like he is going off to work, though he never leaves the room. At night they stop moving and a ghost robot begins to hover smoothly around the dark cube, glowing soft and translucent like a jellyfish moving through a band of light.

8. Tad Martin

I see Tammy at the Dairy Queen. It's a total coincidence, but then I follow her in my Pinto to the Giant Tiger, or the GT Boutique as it is known, and then to her house. She walks up her driveway with a large plastic bag knocking against her legs, the face of a yellow cat beaming out from it. She gets momentarily tangled up in the bag, and stumbles forward a little. I can't see her face but I picture her smiling to herself and biting her bottom lip. One time, I tried to say something nice about her freckles, but it backfired. *I hate them*, she said, actually angry, not at me but at the freckles somehow, and I was so surprised by this side of her that all I could think to say was no. No. She bit her lip for a second, then laughed as though nothing at all had happened.

I imagine that I am Thaddeus Martin, who is kind of a private investigator on *All My Children*. If that was the case, I mean if I was Tad and she was Dixie, say, I wouldn't be out here crouched down in my car, parked behind the drooping branches of a massive Scotch Pine. We would be the loves of each others lives, and when I made a joke her eyes would sparkle. Instead I am watching her through a narrow channel where the hallway overlaps the entryway to her kitchen, with my Blizzard all but melted in a wax cup on the floor of the passenger side.

9. Mail Order

The box of parts for my big project finally arrives. I am going to build a family of ducks, mother and ducklings, and use a remote control to send them across the road single file, with instructions to tear up Asshole McAppleton's lawn with their bills. As soon as Hart leaves I rip the cardboard open, cutting my fingers on the reinforced tape that is holding the box together. There are circuit boards and a bag of assorted resistors like little striped bugs in their multicoloured plastic casings, and

a special pen that lets you draw conductive silver traces on any surface. I pile everything onto the floor and close my eyes, imagining the feeling of accomplishment I will have when this is all done. From the other side of the room I hear a scuffing sound. The sweeper robot is stuck in the corner, bumping into the fireplace bricks over and over again with its sweeper arm caught on a lint-covered sock.

10. Double-Entry System

I built a robot that records what you say in your sleep, then repeats the phrases back to you over the course of the day. In the early evening it prints up a report, in case you happened to be out of hearing range while it was playing. I couldn't wait for that first report, to see if my words matched my dreams or if somehow, while sleeping, I knew all the right things to say. But the printout revealed only gaps and fuzzy connections. There was a dream in which I was made to go back and repeat an exam from fifteen years ago, yet I spoke cheerfully of holidays and hotel reservations. In another my house was a pastry shop, and my yard a giraffe conservation area. I had rigged up a special feeder that funnelled food and water through a tubing system from the kitchen into little pouches suspended in the tree outside. As I poured pellets of almond meringue into the tubes I remember thinking how happy I was, but I awoke in a cold sweat. On the recording the sounds I made were indecipherable, sped up beyond all understanding.

Near the morning, while dreaming of calm lakes and fireflies, I called out three times for help.

11. Zookeeper

Tammy was part of a company-wide network of administrative ladies who called each other on the telephone all day long, arranging to meet for smoke breaks and telling each other when a new email full of cute photos (kittens hanging from branches, ducks and puppies in love with each other) had been sent or received. Her cubicle was covered in posters and calendars featuring animal babies of all kinds: gorillas and orangutans, lambs and foals. Fawns with spots were her favourite. She even had a small corner of her desk devoted to what she called the "ugly-cute" type of animal baby, which included goslings and warthogs, baby pelicans and crocodiles. The warthogs were captured in a panoramic scene, bounding single file across a stream behind their mother. Tammy didn't have any children but often sold chocolate bars on behalf of her nieces and nephews, to raise money for their elementary schools. She would leave them in a box on top of the water filter, with "Please pay Tammy

$4 per" handwritten on one of the cardboard flaps.

At the Christmas party, which had been pushed further and further away from Christmas to the point where it was almost Valentine's Day, I finally got up the nerve to say something to her. I thought it would be a good time, since she seemed to have drank quite a bit so if she didn't like what she heard there was a good chance she wouldn't remember it. But it didn't go right.

She was rummaging around underneath the tree (she had put up and decorated an artificial tree, even though it was February). She wanted to make sure none of the gifts for the children of employees had been missed. There was no Santa, just Johnson dressed up in a Hawaiian shirt and a Santa hat. She stood and moved behind the tree, and I thought of that scene in *White Christmas*, where Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney are finally reconciled after a big misunderstanding.

I don't even know for sure anymore exactly what it was that I said. I wanted to compare her to the angel on the tree, let her know she was as beautiful as that, freckles and all, but what came out was more like: *you'd make a great angel.*

"What?" she said.

A glass ornament near our faces started spinning wildly when I knocked a branch, and she grabbed at it and made it still.

There was more, too much more. I tried to tell her that I understood about the animals. That people could not be relied upon, and that she and I were the same. Tammy didn't say anything but when I stopped talking I could tell from the look on her face that everything was the opposite of what I had imagined. Her eyes were wide, and stayed that way, like she had been startled and couldn't become un-startled. I came in on Monday morning like normal, and that was when Johnson called me into his office.

12. A Miscalculation

Many of the robots use a tank track-style mechanism to move around. Some run on wheels and some are stationary, but singularity of purpose is common to all. Hart suggested that the whole initiative was a little cold, and actually he was right. The trick, I have since discovered, is to anthropomorphize each robot in some way. It makes them sympathetic. For example, there's a vacuuming aardvark with a miniature fedora attached to his head, and I have plans for a parrot who dusts with one wing and holds a cigar between two feathers at the tip of the other. I made a robot sentry with arms like a gorilla, just a bit longer than his legs and body combined. He has a little red t-shirt and propels himself by rotating his arms over his head, and when his flat hands hit the ground his body

raises off the floor and swings forward. He is weighted at the bottom but I made an error when I calculated its size, so his head and torso rock gently back and forth between his shoulders each time.

13. Do-Nothing Machine

All my robots have a purpose. Each one can perform a certain task, even if that task is to entertain. No matter how small or trivial, it can do something. This should be obvious to anyone.

"What about a do-nothing machine," Hart says to me as I hand him a coffee. "You know, it could be like an art project."

I have run out of space for my plans downstairs and am taping them up in the breakfast nook. Series A is almost complete, and then I will move on to Series B. Already almost an entire wall is covered in sketches and diagrams.

"Or maybe, you know, you could just take a break," he says. "Step back a bit."

He runs his thumb along the inside of his waistband, where his shirt is tucked into his shorts. He is still wearing his summer uniform, even though it is almost October. It dawns on me that I haven't been outside in months. I think of the mass quantity of elastics that must have accumulated by now at the bottom of the driveway.

"No Hart, no do-nothing machines," I say. I keep my voice steady.

"Well I just thought it would be kind of neat. You know, work on something a little less serious for a while."

"I think you better leave," I say.

Two minutes later the doorbell rings.

"What do you *want*?" I say as I swing the door open, thinking he is back. There is a woman on the front step with buck teeth and smelling of mothballs, clipboard in hand. She asks if I would be willing to contribute ten dollars to the community association.

"I just gave you ten dollars last week, what the hell was that for?"

"Oh no, that wasn't the Community Association, that was the Neighbourhood Association. The ten dollars was to put your name in the directory."

"What directory? What's wrong with the fucking phone book?"

The woman gapes.

"Tell them I don't want my name in the fucking directory!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to contact them yourself, Sir," she says. "We're not really affiliated."

I think very seriously about pushing her backwards off the step, into the rotten apples that are drying in the thatched grass.

14. The Possibilities

Some nights I can't sleep, my mind pulsing with the possibilities, a list streaming like an endless ticker tape: a god robot, a gatherer robot, an owl-shaped robot with a tablet face upon which one can register columns of sums. A robot that draws, replicating the sketches of famous artists, and one that stays clamped to the end of the bed, by your feet, and tucks in blankets when they become untucked.

15. A Misunderstanding

The fair is the biggest one in the region, but even still I have a feeling I will see her there. Because of the animals. I head straight for the agricultural hall to see the livestock competing for this year's prizes. Sure enough, there is Tammy over by the piglets. A group of judges moves up and down the rows, and I use them to keep myself out of her line of vision.

A little kid is hanging off the gate of the piglets' stall. He asks Tammy if she knows that pigs will eat meat. She says yes.

"Oh you did know that," he says. "But what most people don't know is, a pig ate my brother's goat."

"Oh my gooshness!" says Tammy. She thinks that gosh and goodness both sound too much like God, so she combines them. She's wearing a dress I've never seen before, pale blue with little pink rosebuds all over it, and I realize with a vague disinterest that this whole time, day after day, everything at the office has been going on without me.

"Yeah. And something else most people don't know is, a pig ate my mother's brother."

The kid jumps off the gate and runs away. The hall is made of corrugated steel and Tammy's laugh spirals along the metal ridges towards me, but now the judges are blocking my way and I lose sight of her.

Beyond the wide doors at the far end, the fairgrounds open up like a small universe, a black canopy with constellations hung low across the horizon. Nestled in the haze and the smell of sweet grease is the midway, with its Ferris wheel outlined in electric blue lights like a ladder joined end-to-end and spinning. The smaller rides dot the field, red, yellow and white like a collection of prize chrysanthemums.

I decide to ride the Hurricane. While I wait in line, "Back in Black" blasts from small cone-shaped speakers positioned on posts all over the grounds. Beside me the Octopus spins in a dizzying tangle of slick black pods and tentacles, with bolts and grommets like rusted suction cups. Finally it is my turn on the Hurricane and I get a car all to myself. I sit and feel the hydraulic pulse of the rigid arms as they shoot upward and

the whole thing spins, the music growing louder during the descent, then fading with the upswing. The town spreads out below, with the city blurring in the distance. The space in-between holds the place where I once worked in a tall building at the edge of a vast parking lot. Where I was once an accountant.

I see her again by the duck pond game. They've changed tapes and now it seems the Hurricane will never end, nor the suddenly woozy strains of "TNT" stop their cyclical swelling and receding. Finally, the ride stops. My legs are wobbly as I make my way across the worn grass to a stretch of hard-packed dirt that divides the concessions and the games, strewn with black spots of flattened chewing gum. The plastic ducks bob green, yellow and pink along an oval-shaped track of black water. The man running the booth is telling someone that they can't lose, every duck is a winner. Tammy plucks one up by its head so that it just dangles there between her fingertips, and then she puts it in the palm of her other hand. The man in the booth flips it over and declares, *seventy-one!* He gives her a multi-stranded clutch of purple feathers attached to a roach clip and, winking, reaches under the counter and gives her, in addition, an oversized plastic comb.

I know that she sees me. She turns and walks away, first down concession alley and then darting between two of the tents. Still, I follow her.

"Tammy," I say. Behind her, in the gap between the tents, I can see the midway's electric skeleton in reverse, and behind it, the light from the agricultural hall, a half-circle rising out of the ground like the sun. She turns from me and as she starts she trips over one of the thick metal pegs that hold the tents in place. I grab for her arm, to reassure her. Her wrist is damp with grey duck pond water.

"Hi Tammy," I say. "I would like to tell you about my new profession."

16. Octobot

In the basement at night I'm wrapped in the sheen of the metal cabinets, the reflected light from the pendant I've installed overhead. All the other lamps are off, so the rest of the basement is obscured in darkness, the lab green and luminous like a lush island. So many of my plans have been turned into prototypes, occupying my house like roommates, chugging around fully functional, and still I consider them intangible assets because their worth, I think, is all in their potential.

The fair gave me a good idea. As I watched the Octopus and its whirling arms I felt sick and agitated at first, because so much seemed to be happening at once. The whirring and the people and the noise seemed to signify the inversion of something essential. But the tangled-ness was

an illusion; the interspersing of limbs organized and without danger. As a maker of robots I know that no problem exists for which there isn't a mechanical solution. I feel sorry now for those that that have been made redundant in my household, but what can I tell you? The Octobot is a real multi-tasker.

17. The End?

They are going to point the finger at me, but I have learned something. On soap operas, if there's no body, they're not dead, so I can go on imagining, forever. When I close my eyes at night I see the lab below me in the basement, glowing with promise. Tammy is there, and she floats ghostly through the room, her blue dress and her body of equal transparency, palms open at her sides as if in invitation, queen of my robot menagerie. Her face is the same, but her expression has changed, from one of cloudless welcome to something mute and impermeable, a dumb pool of nothingness. Is she thinking about me now? It's a question I ask myself all the time.

Contributors

Leanne Averbach is a Canadian poet and filmmaker. She has been published and has performed with musicians across Canada, the U.S. and Italy. Her first book *Fever* (Mansfield Press, Toronto) was shortlisted for the national Gerald Lampert Memorial first poetry book prize in 2006. Her companion CD *Fever* is a fusion of her spoken words and the blues/jazz accompaniment of the Vancouver group Indigo. Averbach's second short film based on her poetry, *Teacups & Mink*, has garnered numerous awards. For more information go to www.leanneaverbach.com.

Julie Booker's writing has appeared in an anthology published by Coach House Press, as well as in *The New Quarterly*, *Descant*, *The Windsor Review*, and upcoming issues of *Prairie Fire* and *Exile*. She won First Prize in The Writer's Union of Canada 2009 Short Prose Competition for Developing Writers. Her short story collection, *Silver Hearts*, was shortlisted for the Metcalf-Rooke Award in 2005.

Ronnie R. Brown's work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies including *Arc*, *Vallum*, *The Fiddlehead* and *Event*. The author of five books of poetry, her fourth, *States of Matter* (Black Moss, 2005), was the winner of the Acorn-Plantos People's Poetry Award. A sixth collection, *Rocking on the Edge*, is scheduled for publication in 2010.

E. A. Carpentier lives on the Sunshine Coast in B.C. She is currently working on a poetry manuscript and a non-fiction project relating to her years in the environmental movement. In autumn 2009, she will be launching a small letterpress studio, Selkie Press.

Lauren Carter's poetry, fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *Grain*, *Prairie Fire*, *National Geographic Traveler* and several other publications. *Lichen Bright*, her first collection of poetry, was published by Sudbury, Ontario's Your Scrivener Press in 2005. She is currently working on a novel at her home in Orillia, Ontario.

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Nashira Dernesch studied Creative Writing at York University where she co-edited the literary journal *Existere* for three years. In 2006 she won the Art Bar Poetry Series' Annual Discovery Night. Her first chapbook, *It's No Secret You'll Feel Better* (believe your own press), sold out within two days of publication and is now in its second printing. *This Snowing Under* (The Emergency Response Unit), her newest chapbook, is also going into its second printing. She lives in Toronto and is currently at work on a full-length collection of poetry.

Aaron Giovannone's poetry has appeared in a number of magazines and literary journals, including *Canadian Literature*, *Descant*, *Event* and *The Fiddlehead*. He has won grants from the Canada Council for the Arts as well as the International Council for Canadian Studies, and he recently spent a year at the University of Siena researching Italian poetry and translation. In the fall, he will begin doctoral studies in literature at the University of Calgary.

Ben Hart is working on a novel about waterslides, the circus and flying pizza pies. His chapbook, *Dough Rolled Perfect*, was published by Frog Hollow Press.

Warren Heiti is studying philosophy at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Some of his work was anthologized in *Breathing Fire 2: Canada's New Poets* (Nightwood Editions, 2004).

Shuxin Liang is originally from Southern China. Having studied in Edinburgh, she now lives in Melbourne as a freelance artist. With a BA and Masters Degree in Graphic Design, Shuxin likes to use visual communication as the most direct way to express herself. She uses her art work to show her love of all things sonic, as well as her fascination with the natural and human-built world.

Anna Mioduchowska's poems, translations, stories, essays and book reviews have appeared in anthologies, journals, newspapers and on buses. *In-Between Season*, a poetry collection, was published by Rowan Books. *Some Flowers Do Well in Flowerpots* was published by em-press. *Eyeing the Magpie*, a collection of poetry and art, was published in collaboration with four fellow poets.

Jordan Mounteer is currently finishing his fourth year at the University of Victoria in the Creative Writing Department. Most of the material for his poetry derives from the Slocan Valley, a place he returns to for inspiration. His friends and the creative tutelage of Lorna Crozier, Tim Lilburn and Steven Price also fuel his poetry.

Jane Munro's fourth poetry collection, *Point No Point*, was published in 2006 by McClelland & Stewart. Her previous books include *Grief Notes & Animal Dreams* and *Daughters*, a finalist for the Pat Lowther Award. She is the winner of the 2007 Banff Centre Bliss Carman Poetry Award.

matt robinson works as a Residence Life Manager with Dalhousie University in Halifax, NS. A new chapbook, *Against the Hard Angle*, is forthcoming from Greenboathouse Press in Fall 2009. Previous collections include *no cage contains a stare that well* and *A Ruckus of Awkward Stacking.*

Lucretia Smith's award-winning writng has appeared in *The Los Angeles Review*, *RE/Search!* and *Flyway Literary Review*. Her films and art have been exhibited nationally and are held in private collections. She has a BFA in filmmaking from New York University, and an MFA in critical studies from California Institute of the Arts.

S. Kennedy Sobol lives in Toronto. Her story "Some Light Down" appeared in PRISM Issue 46:1 and was nominated for the Journey Prize in 2008.

Jeff Steudel has written for *The Republic of East Vancouver*. In 2008, he was shortlisted for the *Arc* Poem of the Year Contest. In 2006, he received an honorable mention in the Vancouver International Writers Festival Poetry Contest. He lives in Vancouver with his wife, his two boys and two cats.

Mary B. Valencia is a graduate of the Masters in Media and Creative Writing program at the University of Wales, Swansea. Her writing has appeared in *Descant*, the *Globe and Mail* and the *New Welsh Review*, among other publications. She lives in Toronto where she is working on her short fiction manuscript *One Block from the Prison, Two Blocks from the Sea.*

Patricia Young has published nine books of poetry and one of fiction. In 2010, Sono Nis Press will publish a new collection of poetry. She lives in Victoria, B.C.

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