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PRISM international

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Contents

Volume 44, Number 1
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Poetry

Jason Guriel
Autumn at the End of The Third Man / 24
Cleaning Kill in the Kitchen at Midnight, Father Made a Good Point / 25
Rosebud / 26

Tammy Armstrong
Portuguese Cove, Nova Scotia / 27
Sam's Hardware / 28

David Zieroth
First Thought / 39
Had I Stayed on the Farm / 40

Tom Wayman
Inguinal / 42
Take My Word For / 43

K.V. Skene
Nothing Arrives But Weather / 44

Elana Wolff
Potentilla / 45
Silhouettes / 46

Terrance Cox
Heck of a Parade / 51

Daniel Scott Tysdal
Zombies: A Catalogue of Their Return / 66

Dave Hickey
Amusement Park Dragons / 68
Airways / 70

Fiction

Martin West
Cretacea / 7

Halina Duraj
Witness / 29

Dariush Alavi
The Edge of Happiness / 47

Jay Dolmage
Hey! Funtown / 53

Franklin Fisher
The Painter / 71

Contributors / 74

Martin West

Cretacea

A White Tail deer went down over a wire fence and lay sprawled in the middle of the road right on the centre line. The animal contorted on the pavement with a broken leg in the shadow of the old red wheat king and so I put a single 303 round through its head. Part of the skull blew off into the ditch and one of its antlers spun across the pavement to the shoulder. It was the only humane thing to do. Problem was, I wasn't finished shooting stuff then. I lined up a couple of abandoned televisions that a pawnshop had dumped down by the petrified oyster bed and blew the screens out. The screens imploded with a sucking sound and one of the 1950's style knobs shot into the sky like fireworks. After that, I walked down the street and shot out a few lamp standards and three car windows. A Dodge, a Ford, and a Toyota 4x4, I think. On the edge of town, I perched myself on a big drumlin so I could get a good view of Main Street. Everything was mine for the taking. I took out a store window with a garden gnome on display and a fourteen foot plastic Triceratops that floated above one of the department stores. The beast was filled with helium and attached by a long string to a fire hydrant; its green florescent body bobbed slowly in the evening breeze, so basically it was an easy target. Next, I blew apart the golden symbol of a clown that was embossed on a mock chapel of a hamburger restaurant and put a round into the gut of a dead cat that had been lying on the corner of Main and Second Avenue for three days. Nobody had bothered to pick it up. As for the ecumenical brass clown, that thing had always bothered me a lot, and I felt much better after filling his orange hair with lead. In a few minutes, the sound of police cars and fire engines filled the streets of our little prairie town so I figured it was probably time to start the long walk back to home. Besides that, I was almost out of ammunition.

Half an hour later, when I arrived back at my bungalow in the middle of a sage field at the bottom of the Red Deer Valley, not much had changed. My satellite dish in the cottonwoods had still not been hooked up, a stack of magazines and books still lay unsorted on the balcony, and on the other side of the field, in the grey layers of ancient sediment, a thousand prehistoric beasts still slept silent with their secrets.

I went out into the field and put my rifle in a metal tube, dug a small trench at least two feet deep, and buried the weapon as per the instruction

in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. Then I used a rake and piled some rabbit grass over the hole to make sure everything looked natural. Off in the distance, the red and blue blinking lights of emergency vehicles still flashed away in the night like there was a wedding or Christmas celebration going on, but after an hour or so, the lights grew distant and then disappeared altogether. I guess the authorities must have caught someone who they believed was the right person or else just given up.

There was a documentary on Channel 273 that looked interesting called "Last Dreams of the Dinosaurs" but as the dish was still not connected, there was no point in even turning the TV on. Instead, I sat on the back porch with a glass of Canadian Club and read some poetry by Butler and Yeats. (From time to time, I wished I had someone there to read it with me.) I watched the dead sage roll across the road and dozed off.

Every action has a reaction, and the smart ones have none, so sure as shoot first thing the next morning a police cruiser came rolling up my driveway. There's a plastic dog that sits at the foot of the driveway with a solar panel on his head and a motion detector embedded in his nose, so every time something passes by, the dog barks and his eyes light up bright red like he's possessed, but of course, this didn't scare the police away. I was actually out back washing my hands off with vinegar and baking soda, because this dissolves the cordite on palms in case one is subject to scientific tests. I put all of my things down and went inside to put tea or coffee on as this usually makes the police want to stay and chat for a while and many times they have interesting stories to tell. A few years ago, an elderly Corporal named Macnee came investigating some cattle thefts—actual cattle rustling—and stayed for over an hour. Macnee wasn't much into poetry, but he became obsessed with my fossil collection and we spent many weekends scouring the Badlands and drinking Black Label beer looking for some kind of "missing link." Black Label was his favourite. He didn't drink anything but Black Label. Sometimes fifteen or sixteen in a row. We never found the "missing link" or any fossils of much significance, but we had a good time drinking on my front porch and Macnee suggested I get a dog to keep me company. Sadly, he got transferred to Nova Scotia because he had embarrassed himself during a drunken rage at the Bronto Beer Inn, and I never saw him again.

The police car stopped outside. I dried my hands and opened the screen door and wasn't really prepared for what stood in front of me. An Amazon blonde female Constable with wisps of yellow hair falling over her forehead and a few dozen freckles spattered over her cheeks leaned against my doorframe and chewed on her pencil eraser. She was about five nine and obviously spent most of her time finding just the right perfume when she wasn't working out in the gym. Her eyes were the same colour as the

prairie sky. She looked me over once and the right-hand corner of her mouth curled up just a little. "Hello," she said.

"Hello," I said back.

"Want to know why I'm here?"

"Sure," I said. Any reason would be good enough.

"I'm conducting some neighbourhood inquiries about the shooting last night," she said and pulled out her notebook. She tried to find an address by the door, but of course there wasn't one.

"Shooting?" I said. "What happened?"

She shrugged and pushed a wad of chewing gum between her front teeth. "Someone went crazy with a gun and shot the town up. Probably drunk or totally right wing. Did you see anything?"

I put one hand on the doorframe and leaned forward into the crux of my elbow ostensibly to show some sign of remorse or stupidity, but in effect to get a closer whiff of her perfume. What is that stuff that smells like dust? Patchouli? Petunia? Permian Extinction? "Shoot," I said, and read off her name tag. "Constable Holocene, you know I feel like a total idiot now. I did hear something last night that sounded like shots. I knew I should have called you guys."

"Really. About what time?"

"About seven."

"Seven? Are you sure it was that early?"

"Well, I thought so. Wasn't paying that much attention, really. Sometimes the ranchers shoot at cattle pretty close to here, or anything else that moves."

"Yeah," she cut in. "And they're not supposed to inside city limits. Anyway, how many shots did you hear?"

"Only two or three," I shrugged.

"That's it? Two or three?"

"Was there more?"

"Ah, maybe." She hesitated. "What direction did they come from?"

"From somewhere down the Dinosaur Trail," I said and pointed way to the west of where the White Tail had met its merciful demise. "And then they just got fainter towards town."

"Yep," she said, and scribbled a few lines in her notebook. "That'd be it."

"I feel really bad about not reporting last night," I said. "It just didn't seem like anything out of the ordinary."

"Oh, this time it was. For this part of the world, anyway." Then she looked at me with those blue summer eyes and said, "Do you keep any firearms in the house?"

"No. Not even a BB gun."

"Mind if I have a look?"

"No, of course not, please come in," I said, because it was a perfunctory

question and I am an expert at spotting those. I ask them so often.

I stepped back and begged her inside. The good Constable came in and made quick reconnoiter of my cluttered living room. She seemed more interested in the stacks of books and catalogued fossils lying around the floor than any location that might conceal a weapon. "You're into fossils?"

"I'm especially interested in the Juliana deposits," I said.

"And..." She picked up a book off a waist-high stack. "Poetry."

"I do reviews. For a living. Sort of."

"Ah, really?" she said. "For a magazine?"

"Yes. For a national magazine."

"For that slightly right-of-centre national magazine or that slightly... "

"Yes, that one."

"Good on you," she said.

"Would you like to have a cup of coffee or tea?" I asked. "I actually have both just about on the brew set to go."

She looked me over again, put the book down and smiled. "I'd really love to," she said. "But we have to have a meeting with Staff Sergeant at nine about the 'incident.'" She raised her finger in the air to quote the word.

"Though the leaves are many, the root is one," I said.

"I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun," she quoted back.

That was really all it took.

If you believe in God, you will do the following things: 1) Attend all public meetings in the local town hall about shootings or acts of national subversion that have occurred recently in your area; 2) Accept the fact that everyone in your home town either has a gun or wants a gun or wishes they wanted a gun or wants to do something important with a gun, but if you actually do something with a gun, then this is blasphemous; 3) Try not to throw up when everyone at the meeting is really upset about something that has happened and assumes that their elected leaders are doing nothing because they elected them.

I pass on all three. One far right-wing group who named themselves the "White Cattleman's Petroleum Revenge League" had threatened to ask American President George Bush to send in the US Marine Corps if local officials weren't going to act quickly. There was no mention of the White Tail deer that had died so pathetically tripping over a barbed cow fence. I figured it might be fun to watch (the meeting, not the invasion), and besides, somewhere in the middle of the night it had occurred to me that the first round to be dispatched lay somewhere embedded in a Cervidae carcass not too far from my own home and that had to be retrieved. Evidence is evidence, as they say, and this had to be dealt with.

I walked down the Badlands road with the smell of sage and the sound

of cicadas heavy in the air. The height of summer shimmered wet off the hot concrete and I knew this was the only place in the world to be. When I got to the spot where the deer had died, there was not a hide in sight. No bones. No hooves, no tail. This was the right place all right—centre of the road right, third fence post from the creek, directly under the red wheat king that school kids had painted a giant yin and yang sign on. If one looked harder at the cracked wood, one would find even older graffiti that dated back to the fifties and even one curious faded scrawling that read, "D-Day Is Ours." But no deer in sight. For a moment it seemed possible that the police had impounded the entire animal for analysis, for lead content, or maybe they would conduct a polygraph, but a closer inspection revealed the obvious truth. In the right hand lane, a thin stain of red blood spread out funnel-like westwards on the road. Bits of squished deer fur had been ground into pavement and the piece of antler that had scuttled away from the impact scene lay in the ditch. This being a well-used road, the poor White Tail had been run over dozens, maybe hundreds, of times in the course of the night; the dead furry pancake had been reduced into a red smear towards the western horizon. In a day or two, there would be not a trace left. The chunk of lead would be an indistinguishable metallic shape and the cartridge just another shiny object sinking into the Cretaceous dust of the Badlands.

With some sense of relief, I ventured into the Maple Leaf Grocery Store to buy a strip beef jerky and a copy of *Prehistoric History Today* before the meeting. The tales of shooting were on everyone's lips and everybody had a theory. Over nine hundred rounds had been discharged. One round penetrated a sensitive geoseismic centre and the oil industry in Alberta would surely be ruined for it. Another round was specifically sent through the theological centre of town in order to demoralize the city's righteous population. The actions were terrorist related, but not politically motivated, and attributable to some non-sectarian cult group. When I was paying for the beef jerky, curiosity got the better of me and I had to ask, "So what happened, anyway?"

"You haven't heard?" the clerk said. "Someone shot up the entire town last night."

"The whole town?"

"All of it. There's a lot of bullets laying in bad places."

"Is there a good place for a bullet to be?"

"Not where these ones are. The whole thing is very weird," she said, and nodded. "What's in that magazine, anyway?"

"You've never read it?"

"No, but we sell a lot of copies. I don't get it."

"There's a lot of pictures. Photos. Of stuff that's relevant."

"That's too weird. I don't know why they put it right up front at the

check stand, it doesn't belong there."

I stuck a wad of jerky in my mouth and walked to Main Street. I really shouldn't eat this stuff. It pulls out my filling and gets stuck between my teeth and then I'm in a bad mood until I can get a toothpick or floss it out. Usually I carry emergency floss with me, but the Cherry-Mint flavour that I buy at Loo's Import Market that comes only from Beijing had not yet arrived that week, so when I went around the corner onto the scene, I was feeling very vulnerable and agitated. The place was still a carnage. Not one piece of damage had been picked up. Instead, every site, hole and perturbation had been cordoned off with yards of yellow police tape and men in suits were doing triangulation with laser theodolites. A few Constables leaned against lampposts making sure no one crossed the line. The saddest sight of all was the poor green plastic Triceratops that lay deflated in the middle of the sidewalk with the collar and string still tied around his flat neck. The bullet had pierced his heart and had carried on in an unknown direction.

The meeting was housed in the elementary school gymnasium with red and blue lines painted on the floor and the place was packed. They had set out over a hundred metal folding chairs and they were all full, so the next hundred people stood against the walls. A few of them were drinking beer, but no one paid too much attention to that. Lined up against the far wall stood six overweight men in black jeans and black T-shirts. The shirts all had a giant red C printed on the chest with a white skull and crossbones in the center. They looked very stern and threatening except for their stomachs that folded in two or three rolls over their belts. They were holding hoods, scrunching them angrily between their fists, which I presume was because the police told them they couldn't wear hoods during public meetings.

Mary Holocene was on duty again and leaned against the back wall under the basketball hoop wall with an elderly Sergeant who looked rather nervous, like maybe he had to give an explanation about all of this. A wisp of hair fell over her forehead; she seemed pained to be there, too. Every time one of the Cattlemen tried to slide a hood over his head, or even got it above crotch level, she raised one finger and shook it until he retreated.

Some things reveal themselves quickly about people who you find attractive or interesting and already I had deduced many things about Mary Holocene. She was a non-career officer by choice and no doubt came to the Force through some biographical accident. By looking at her, I could also tell she probably had some dark or at least embarrassing secret in her past that she wanted to forget or bury so deep that not even the earth would know. The best thing about revealing truths about people who you are attracted to or interested in is deducing what their deep and dark secrets are and where they lay. Burying the secrets deeply would be an

essential component for Mary to leave her past behind and embark on a life change in a paramilitary organization. She would have to convince the polygraph examiner that either the perturbations didn't exist or else that there was really nothing wrong with them. But what could those acts be? This was the stuff that novels are made of. No doubt Mary as a small girl stole pears, hot-knifed hash oil, and attended "Love-Ins" at Stanley Park (she was brought up on the West Coast), or doused her Barbie with kerosene and lit it afire until it spread to the curtains or carport or perhaps a slumbering cat. But then, every Canadian child does these kinds of things and this is nothing to be ashamed of. No, I could sense Mary's perversions ran deeper that this. No doubt they were formulated during her adolescent or pubic years. Perhaps they involved strange interactions with older gentleman or retired school marms. Candle wax or Catholic school clothing may have been utilized. But even this was not the Elixir. The *event* would come years later. Some archeological ego-versus-id metaphor that her partner could not understand. Frustrated, she left the relationship and then left town, trying to leave the remnants behind in the gathering dust. But this is not an easy thing to do. Mary soon found that she was only attracted to others with a perverse mindset such as her own and constantly had to be leaving affairs and leaving towns for lack of satisfaction and growing security concerns. Then one day in desperation, when towns had run out, she visited a recruiting office and a few weeks later found herself at the training depot in Regina. These things happen.

The inside of the gymnasium was getting very hot and droplets of clear sweat had spattered on the shiny floor. I wandered down the hall to a pop machine and dropped a Loonie in the slot. The coin rattled into the guts of the machine, but nothing came out, so I dropped another inside and the same thing happened. I had a pocketful of change, so I went over to the next machine and tried a third time. Three bucks gone now, never to be returned. There's no point in shaking or kicking these machines so I moved down to the fourth dispenser in the line and gave it one last shot. This time a soda rolled out at the bottom and then two more followed it. I had an idea.

With three tins in hand, I walked back to the gymnasium. Under the basketball hoops, still leaning against the wall, were Mary and her Sergeant. I offered them both unopened tins.

"Thanks," the Sergeant said immediately. "I've got to get up in front of these morons in a minute and tell them everything that I don't know. My throat is bone dry." He took the tin and swallowed half of it in one gulp.

"You look like you were having problems with the machines there," Mary said and took the second tin from my hand.

"Yeah, you have more patience than I do," the Sergeant added. "I would have shot the damn thing."

The three of us grunted a laugh, but not too loud, because shooting wasn't that funny a topic on this occasion.

Mary told the Sergeant that I did fiction reviews for national magazines.

"Really?" the Sergeant said. He was thinking about his upcoming speech and had the jitters. He played with his tie clip. "Which ones?"

I ambled off a rather long and detailed list.

"Good for you," he said. "I like books. Especially books about fishing."

Mary nodded approvingly and understood the names didn't mean much to the Sergeant. What I said was actually true. I have published reviews in such magazines, but I wasn't going to volunteer the information that my last three publications had been in *Screw Magazine*, *Hustler* and *The Northern Beaver.*

The meeting got going. I spent most of my time sneaking peaks at Mary's vest-covered breasts and trying to smell her cologne.

The investigators of the incident had determined a number of facts. First, that all of the targets were hit at long range. Second, that the weapon used was probably a 303 with very old ammunition. Perhaps even war ammunition that had been stored well in a cold dry place. Third, every target had only one bullet in it and no "stray" shots had been found, meaning that either the shooter was an expert marksman or had a scope with remarkable precision. Fourth, that the targets all seemed to be of a "symbolic" nature and the Sergeant appeared pleased with the use of this word, like he had just picked it up in something other than a police manual. Last, that sadly as of yet there were no suspects; although some interesting leads had been uncovered, there was simply nowhere to go. This bought an angry cry from the black-shirted Cattleman's Revenge League who hooted and hollered that the police were in cahoots with Eastern Liberals and that if everyone could carry a gun around with them then the shootist would have been shot dead before he did any more property damage and land-owning people should be entitled to shoot things out as they so wished. Generally, the crowd didn't side with the Cattlemen, and the Sergeant, no green horn at dealing with angry people, concluded by adding that this incident *could* have been the work of extremists, which shut the Cattlemen up right quick and made at least half the crowd cast disapproving glances back at the four fat men who now looked rather silly holding black hoods somewhere around crotch level.

Even a small town has its dark side when it comes to humour and our little town is no exception. The community cable channel has a weekly comedy spot that is actually filmed in the storefront window of a woman's dress shop just off Main Street. People stop and watch it being filmed with

bundles of hockey sticks or tubs of antifreeze under their arms, not because they think the show is wise or funny, but mostly because they want to catch a glimpse of themselves on television the following Wednesday when the show is aired in case the camera did a live pan of the audience.

This week they had three contestants who insisted that they were the "shootist" and were trying to prove it to the host by answering tricky historical questions. The contestants were Karl Marx, Indera Gandhi, and Ivan the Terrible. Jesus Christ had been pulled at the last minute and so one chair was vacant. One of the producers shook his head as he muttered to his director that this was still a Christian town and Jesus Christ had better not show up on the set if they wanted any funding next year. As I sat inside the store watching the show, it occurred to me that all of these people wanted to be the shootist. The Cattlemen's Petroleum Revenge League wanted to be the shootist. The grocery store clerk wanted to be the shootist. When Ivan the Terrible was asked at the end why he thought the audience should vote for him as the shootist, he replied, "Because then at last everybody would know who I am."

Outside the mall-cum-TV studio, I asked a construction worker, a gas station attendant, a bus driver, and a very modern nun who wore a blue suit with a red tie who they thought Ivan the Terrible was and none of them knew.

On my way home, I walked by the Animal Shelter and thought I'd better ask one more person to make the study scientific. Inside, a pimply high school student leaned over an aluminum counter reading a superhero comic book. There was a bucket filled with disinfectant and a mop behind him, but he didn't appear too interested in scrubbing the floor. When I asked him who Ivan the Terrible was he said, "Didn't he have something to do with the shooting?"

"Shooting?"

"Yeah, shooting. Don't you know? Do you want a dog?" he asked.

"Not really, why?"

"Because this is the pound."

"No thanks," I said.

"Then why did you come in here? Don't you have a job?"

"Yes, I have a job," I said. "I work at home. In the publishing industry, actually. Aren't you going to clean that floor?"

He looked down at the bucket and then back at me. "No. Take a dog, would you, Mister."

"Don't want one."

"Then we have some old dogs that won't live very long. You'd only have to put up with it for a little while before it died so it wouldn't be much of an investment."

"I'm not sure if that's a good deal or not. What would I do with a dog

anyway?"

"It'd keep you company when you're lonely," he said.

I thought about it for a moment. "What kinds of dogs do you have?"

"All kinds. Big ones. Black ones. Small ones."

"What would you recommend?"

"Well, personally I'd take one that's been here the longest so it doesn't get put down. That's sometimes very traumatic for them."

"Okay, show me."

The young boy put a tick in the right-hand column of the white folder he had on the counter and took me to the back of the pound that smelled like dog fur and disinfectant. In the last cage, an ugly black dog cowered in the rear of the run. Long whiskers stuck out of his snout and white froth bubbled around his mouth. He looked like some combination of Heeler and Lab. "I'll throw in a leash for free if you take him," the boy said.

"Free leash?"

"No charge. And a collar, too."

"All right," I said.

The boy did the paperwork then got the black dog from the cage and found a leash and collar. The dog sat there patiently in the front office wondering what kind of unhappiness he'd got himself into this time, but figuring it was better than whatever awaited him in the cage. I clicked the leash onto his collar and we walked out the front door together. For the first few blocks, the dog was enthusiastic to be outside. He looked from side to side and sniffed at a bunch of rabbit grass and growled at a mailbox like he was looking after me, but after a while he slowed to a geriatric crawl and finally by the bridge that crossed the Red Deer River under the giant green Tyrannosaurus, the dog sat down on the hot sidewalk and would go no further. I picked the animal up, but he was too heavy to carry more than a few steps, and outside the Dixie Queen with yellow Durham husks in the air, we stood with no resolution.

A police car stopped at the corner and Mary rolled down her electric window. "New dog?" she said.

"Well, he's new to me. I just got him and he's too old to make the trip home. I should have brought the car."

Mary bit her lip, adjusted her rearview mirror then popped the electric lock on the passenger side. "Get in," she said.

I sat in the front seat with the dog on my lap. The inside of the car smelled like Iso Gel. Mary started down the country road. She talked as she drove and steered the car with one hand. We bounced over a set of railway ties at a hundred and five kilometers an hour. "Isn't this against policy or something?" I asked.

"Probably," she said, and drove on with her right hand on the emergency brake. "What made you decide to get a dog, anyway?"

"I'm not sure. He was in the cage by himself and looked lonely. Besides, the guy in the pound assured me that he was a good copy editor."

"Hah," she laughed and was going to say something but the dispatcher on the radio called her in a scratchy voice that only police can understand. Apparently, a tractor had overturned on the highway and some pigs were pinned under the rear wheels. "Oh ferfucksakes," Mary muttered and pushed the car up to a hundred and thirty. She slid sideways in a cloud of dust near my driveway and popped up the door locks. "Sorry, got to run," she said.

"Okay." I got out and walked the dog back to the house.

I found a big wicker basket that had been used to store magazine reviews, tossed the paper out and put some blankets inside. The dog curled up and went to sleep. Later that evening, I made hamburgers and the dog ate a whole paddy and we sat out on the porch drinking rye, watching the summer sun turn red into twilight.

The top half of the ridge caught fire the next afternoon while the dog and I were down on the back porch dozing. The dog was in his basket curled up like a doughnut and only shifted from side to side as the first particles of soot settled on the unpainted cedar strips around him. One moment the edge of the coulee was brown and still, the next minute it was jumping with bright yellow flames. Thousands of sparks flew into the air as the rabbit grass ignited and then the sky filled with sweet grey smoke as the sage began to burn. It was all very exciting. Reams of smoke rolled down the coulee like waves breaking on a beach and the smell of summer filled the valley bottom. Cacti make these strange popping noises when they burn under very high temperatures and all of the eastern slopes were now bursting like tiny landmines. To add to the excitement, I lit up a Camel cigarette that a friend of a friend had assured me was in the backpack of an actual GI at Que Son during the Vietnam War. The dog rolled over and chewed on a biscuit that had been baked in the oven under very high temperatures and I decided since it was after four o'clock (one minute after, actually), having the first rye of the day would be okay. I have rye with all kinds of things: with ginger ale and rootbeer, with tomato juice and lemon water. Sometimes, I have rye with ice or other sentimental objects melting in the bottom of the glass. A spike taken from the Canadian Pacific Railway. A piece of chopstick from Mrs. Chung's Chinese Restaurant on Fourth Avenue which serves amazing almond chicken. A shred of the original Canadian Constitution Act that was torn from the Senate Chambers when Pierre Elliott Trudeau signed it in 1980, or so my source tells me. About the only thing I can't drink rye with is milk, and that's probably got something more to do with the aesthetics of the milk curdling like the satellite photo of the moon than with the actual taste. Today I had it straight though, no mixing necessary, because it's always

better to have your alcohol straight when something exciting is happening right on your back door.

Just to keep things safe, I went down into the basement and got a hundred feet of irrigation tubing that the previous owner had left behind when he'd sold the house. I hooked the hose to faucet under the bathroom window. The faucet was huge and probably used for farm purposes because a lot of pressure came out the end. I drenched the roof and walls of the house and then dragged the hose as far out back as it would go. The hose and me ended up by a windmill with a rooster on top right near a creek that ran through the back of my property. When I opened the spigot, the water squirted another hundred feet towards the coulee. I watered down the single cottonwood in the backfield and then sprayed the grass that looked sad and droopy in the August sun. It's pretty hard to tell where my property ends and the grazing lands begin. I have ten acres altogether and the cattle fence that was once at the back of the property has long since fallen down. The ranchers never bothered to put it back up again. I'm not sure if that's because the land down here is no good for cattle or whether the ranchers couldn't care less if the cows wandered onto my property. Anyway, it's all flat down here for a thousand feet until the edge of the Badlands rise up steeply towards the prairie. When the sage on the flats started to burn, the smell was bitter like myrrh. The bitterness made me think I was in a tomb, and of course, for many ancient animals it was. I started to think about the seasons changing and layers of time being exposed and yielding up the dead and the next thing you know there's half a dozen fire trucks ambling towards me over the grass with their red and green lights spinning away.

I'm not sure how they got so close without me noticing, but the firemen in their heavy burlap coveralls were very excited and shouted instructions at me as if in semaphore. In a way, I was sorry that they showed up. The burning sage was a perfume—pears and birds with pink feathers and Mary enticing me, grain by grain, to think of the passing of ages. Then, the grass flames were like fireworks, only better, because they raced round in circles and leaped from bush to bush, which is something fireworks can't do.

The fire trucks came to a stop where the playa met the steep cliffs of the Badlands and sprayed everything in sight. They used three hoses held by nine men and they sprayed a dozen bushes at a time with water and white bubbly foam. The foam quickly degraded into a grey sludge that was going to leave a horrible mess all over the bunch grass. One of the firemen even uncoiled a long hose with a filter on the end and ran down to the creek to suck some extra water out. I thought this was uncalled for, because it wasn't really a big fire and I probably could have handled it all myself if the thing hadn't burnt out on its own accord first.

Then the police showed up. Mary and the Sergeant drove right up to my back door and Mary jumped out shouting. I waved to her, but she

didn't as much wave back as she motioned frantically for me to come over. At that precise moment, a curl of dried grass caught fire just to the east of the cottonwood tree and two rabbits squirmed between the two fingers of flames. They ran around and around in circles not going anywhere, so I shut the hose off and walked out through the smoke. The ground must have been hot because even with my rubber boots on the heat came through to my feet and the stench of burnt rubber made me choke. The rabbits were either paralyzed with fear or stunned by the smoke. They just cowered there motionless and I yarded them both up by the scruff of the neck and carried them back to the house. I knew the dog wouldn't chase them because he was still eating biscuits, so I put the rabbits into his basket and covered them up with a red terry cloth.

The fire trucks had driven all over my backfield and drenched everything that moved. They squirted the "Hot Spots" a second time after one of the firemen inspected the ground with infra-red glasses and then the "Big Tank" truck drove right up to my house and gave it a precautionary dousing. Problem was, the hose was so strong that it ripped off a dozen shingles and shattered my bathroom window. After they figured they had done enough damage, they gave me a friendly wave and turned the hoses off. The show was over. The fire was out. That's the thing with grass fires. They come and go in an instant and they look worse than they really are.

Mary and the Sergeant stood on my back porch. The Sergeant had picked up one of the rabbits and held it in his arms. Mary was scratching its neck. "Do you mind if I keep them?" the Sergeant asked.

"Sure," I said. I had no idea if he wanted them for his kids or if he was going to cook them up in a stew. They weren't really mine to give away.

"Thanks," he said. He picked the second one up and coddled them like he had a newborn set of twins. The four red eyes of the rabbits disappeared into the chest of his khaki uniform. "Well, I'm out of here, Mary. If you want to take care of the report, fantastic. No Further Action, I think. Glad your house didn't burn down, Mister."

"Me too," I said.

The Sergeant left with the rabbits. Mary and I stood on the porch looking over the flat valley bottom. The flat earth had a dusting of black soot. A stench of burned bush moved in from the south. On the western horizon, a grey thunderhead rose tens of thousands of feet into the sky.

"Good work with the rabbits," Mary said. "The Sergeant loves rabbits."

"I wish they hadn't put all that foam on the ground," I said. "It's going to stink. It looks really ugly and it's going to irritate my asthma."

"Better than a burned down house," she said.

"Maybe, but it's mostly rock out there. It probably wouldn't have come this far. Besides, grass fires, flash in the pan, so to speak."

"Still, it's a good thing you called."

"Called? I didn't call."

"You didn't?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't have a phone. There's no phone line in here. The phone company wanted a thousand dollars to hook it up. Got something to do with my distance from the road."

"Don't you have a cell phone?"

"Why?"

"So people can get in touch with you. Like, say for example, they want to meet with you sometime in their busy schedule, but can't do it because you're not near a landline, they can get you on your cell phone."

Landline? Cell phone? Did I? Yes I did. The producer of a pornographic film company had once given me a "Cell Phone Package Certificate" while drunk one night in a bar after I had written a favourable review of one of his pieces. He must have been desperate. "The battery is dead," I said. Like I would know. I have never received a call on the phone, never received any billing for it, and have never phoned out.

The dog ambled out into the backfield. He was angular as he walked, like maybe his arthritis was giving him problems.

"Let's see it," Mary said.

The cell phone was under a pile of papers beside my desk, which sat by the west-facing picture window in the living room. Who puts a desk in their living room?

"This is ancient," she said and rolled the bulbous chrome body over her palm.

"I'm not one for modern technology."

"How about the modern novel?" Mary pried out the spine of the cell phone and then sniffed the guts. "Yep, this is dead and buried. But I think I may have one that will fit it."

We walked out the back door and around to her squad car. Out to the east, the dog was digging away at a section of land that the firemen had excavated with their hoses.

"What is your dog doing?" she asked.

"He's digging at something."

"Yes, that's apparent. At what?"

"Who knows. Dogs do that kind of thing."

And then, only twenty feet away from us, the dog wrenched out a black tube from the ground and all of the air gushed out of my lungs.

"Is that a hose?" Mary asked.

"No, I don't think so."

"We should check."

"Actually, it just a piece of tubing. There were farmers here before me."

"Well you don't want him eating that do you?"

Mary took a step across the driveway. We were close enough so the glue sealing the end of the tube shut could be seen. Apparently, the wrong kind of glue had been used because it was already starting to peel off the tube.

"Actually he does it all the time. It's that non-toxic kind of agricultural tubing that was popular during the sixties. Besides, I just try and let dogs do their dog things, I mean, who are we to intervene?"

"Okay," she said and shrugged.

We went out to her car and in the passenger seat Mary had a big black bag. She had a small plastic case with a dozen batteries in it.

"What do you use all those batteries for?" I asked.

"Hah," she said, selected one and fit it into the back of my cell phone. The digits lit up on the front panel. Mary handed me back the phone and as she did her fingers slipped over my palm. "Here's your phone," she said. "Does it have a number?"

"Yeah. I think I etched in on the back."

"Well, what is it?"

I turned the phone over.

"I'll call you on it," she said.

"Sure."

"Have you got any books you could recommend?" she asked with one hand on the cruiser door. "I guess what I'm asking is could I read one of your reviews?"

"All right," I said. I went back inside the house and scanned the jungle of paper. I selected one from a slightly left-of-centre magazine that had no pornographic reviews that month and took it out to Mary. She held out her hand and accepted the rolled up paper. "Bon appetit," I said.

"Good work on the rabbits," she said and smiled, and then she kissed the end of the newspaper and reached out and rapped me on the back of the head with it. "I'll call you."

The smell of burned sage folded over the road as Mary's blonde head turned and ducked into the squad car and all of the yellow flowers of the bitter bush and pink prairie cactus opened to the sun even as the dog dug out the last of the tubing and tried to drag it back to the house.

It was true. I had been in love many times but had never been loved back. And so after emptying my pockets in front of those who did not know me, I realized there was nothing left to give. I did what anyone in this small town would do in such an event: I went to the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontological History.

Churches and museums and monuments like Stonehenge and perhaps even pornographic theatres are built for certain reasons and that is because people believe. And here, people really believe. They come loaded down

with rosaries, notebooks, diaries, wineries, backpacks, furlongs, condoms, and guidebooks of famous fossils. They mutter on joy and ecstasy and the rustling of golden curtains of wheat that leave their traces by their door. Sometimes, they just try to forget what ails them.

They keep their heads raised, as if to the heavens, admiring varnished skulls and polished vertebrea. They awe over stuffed flora and petrified fauna. To be certain, there are those who came here by accident or because a tour brochure had said to do so when the golf courses were closed, but they are invisible and pass like ghosts through the tiled walls and well-preserved ancestors.

In the Geological Science Centre that is situated directly before the first huge dinosaur skeleton, I played with the sedimentary marble game where you churn a bunch of balls around up and watch them settle according to their colour, so you can see how the past covers things up in a very precise kind of order. Then I learned the difference in leverage between a beak and a jaw by manipulating a set of chrome calipers, and came to understand why some animals once thrived while others perished. But of course this was all foreplay, because the moment I walked around the next corner into a dark amphitheatre, a huge petrified skull gazed down upon me from the top of a twenty-foot frame. The Albertosaurus stretched out his tiny hands and his hollow eye sockets were filled with hunger. And although the beast is long dead, it could still snatch up a victim at any second. At that moment, a young boy of ten or so ran around the corner and shouted aloud, "There HE is. There he *is!*" like this was the one and only Albertosaurus in the world.

The young boy stood by in wonder with his arms raised in supplication and, right then, something rumbled in my pocket. At first, I though I had backed into a museum display that was shorting out, but nothing was near me. The object vibrated again and I couldn't remember sticking any battery operated sex toys in my clothes. I suppose it was possible a bee could have come in through the double glass doors and gone down my shirt. The blooming sage out front attracts them by the thousands. Maybe even a giant insect had been resurrected from the Badlands' past through some misdeed of cloning and had found its way into my pocket. I fumbled through my clothes and pulled out the cell phone. It played a little tune and a light went on and the whole body convulsed as if it were having some kind of seizure.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" a woman beside me asked.

I punched a number of buttons on the front and a variety of tones and squeaks came from the machine. Finally it stopped, although I had no idea why, or really what had made it erupt in the first place. No sooner had I put the phone back in my pocket when it started to ring again. A line of sweat broke out across my forehead and then above me, the giant

Albertosaurus moved his stone head over, as if he was gazing down in pity on this lost soul, and let his petrified mouth creep up just an inch in irony. I started for the door. I pressed a combination of number signs and red squares on the phone that said, "Omit," "Save," "Return," and just as I got free of the museum, the phone sputtered out and shut up again.

The cacti in the Badlands bit through my shoes and the walls of the coulees grew steep and narrow until the museum vanished into the background. In a while, I was down a small creek bed with only a tiny wedge of flat mud in the bottom. Mosquitoes and blackflies rose from the slough in funnels that looked like tiny tornadoes and soon even the sounds from the highway were gone. Some creosote from an old fence post brushed off my leg and a chunk of petrified wood rolled down the layered walls of the Badlands. My throat became very sore, as if maybe a terrible flu was on the way or someone had strangled me with leather belt.

Rummaging down there in the Badlands, I found many remnants of the past: a roll of duct tape, mosquito repellant, high school yearbooks, a tube of lip gloss without a cap, a leather satchel with a soiled magazine inside, a safety pin, and a black wristwatch with one strap missing. Not that it's a junkyard, but rather a cemetery. There was a green datebook and a tie clip, the tip of a fishing rod and a bookmark sticking out of the mud, and an old dog collar, too. Under a chunk of fossilized oyster I found a rusted shell cartridge, probably an old military issue and, at that moment, the phone started going off again.

A rusted spade with a box handle was resting against an abandoned roll of cattle wire beside me. In a moment, the spade was in my hand and I opened a great trench in the soft mud of the August creek. I dropped the ringing phone into the hole and covered the hole up with dirt and cottonwood twigs and sage and grey rocks so the secrets of the Cretacea would stay down in the earth with the ancient beasts who knew them best.

Jason Guriel

Autumn at the End of *The Third Man*

What could Joseph possibly have said to Alida
if she'd paused to consider him
on her long way down the cemetery road?

Leaves left their trees and turned,
slow as Ferris wheels
against an Austrian sky, and though

Joseph was within seconds of his last
lonely cigarette, there were still (it seemed)
a thousand chances for Alida to pause,

for two near-lovers to gaze across
a grand moment at each other, Anton Karas'
zither score inoculating the season.

Cleaning Kill in the Kitchen at Midnight, Father Made a Good Point

He noticed me on my way to bed,
holding his violin by the neck
as if it was fresh game, and said,

"She always leaves you in autumn,"

while outside, through the window
through which Bach (cooked by bow)
would later waft, night seasoned its sky
with eighth notes in negative.

Rosebud

A dying man is apt
to be ambiguous,
to recall an odd, unsatisfying
detail that he may then
utter mysteriously
as prelude, a trailer
for the soul.

He shatters a snow-
globe because he can—
the dying are entitled,
after all, to release
little blizzards from their
swirling sentence—

and he expects
the afterlife to privilege
that clean tint of white
particular to his
industrious nurse's
simple smock.

Tammy Armstrong

Portuguese Cove, Nova Scotia

Where the Japanese trawler shored
not seaboard after all but outcropped
massed foreheads furrowing the hull
locals crept down to the barrens
to meet novice tellurians—
a syllabic fandango
chipping the grotto's walls
the pools where basking sharks
prowl after dead-end typhoons.

Elongated shadows suspended
in sound footing, intuition
to contact lovers sleeping near Shikoku
far from the video cameras, media falconry.

Land of the dead, displaced regattas
they will tell grandchildren the Atlantic holds
apathy toward night travellers—
a tremolo rosined with expectations
its promises to leave no scars.

Sam's Hardware

Your hand missing all but two fingers
crowed boxes of roofing nails
rope and thumb screws.
Garters of shoptalk never took note
of the minutiae you filled your pockets with.

At the door
summer knocked itself senseless
through thick blankets
of hydraulic monotony
small town euphemism.

But for me at five there was only
the New Brunswick flag slapping outside
the paint mixer's conniption in the corner
your pockets filled with more
than loose change, beer tabs.

Magpie father
careful when you paid
for a measuring tape.
What's the damage, Sam?

Pockets filled with silver and brass
a theft too inadequate to build anything.

Halina Duraj

Witness

I look around the dining room: Dad, Mr. Williams, the bird lady, and a little old man I've never seen before. Roberta, one of the nurses' aides, sweeps plastic trays off the tables, dumps the little plastic dishes and wrappers into a big, blue garbage can in the centre of the room. Sometimes she clears the patients' trays before they're done eating. I try to smile at her when she leans over me to take Dad's tray. I wouldn't want to work here either.

Dad was sleeping in his chair, clutching a food-encrusted plastic fork and spoon when I walked in, but I woke him up. I want him to know I came. He gives me the tiniest, fleeting smile. Each day when I arrive, he looks at me hopefully, expectantly, as if today's the day I'm telling him it's time to go home. But when all I say is, "I like that shirt they put on you today. That's a pretty plaid," he looks away, stares at the beige-flecked wallpaper. And then he closes up, his mind locked away in a vault and I don't know the combination.

When he first came here, a couple of months ago, I tried to lighten his long hours of boredom by reading to him. For the past few years he had been nagging me to read more Polish, so I brought *Pan Tadeusz*. But when I read the first paragraph, his eyes teared up, and he twisted his lips and tapped his index finger to his temple, the way he used to do to Mom when he was convinced she'd thrown a bill out with the trash. I looked from the Polish text to the English translation on the left side. *My country, thou art like good health. I never knew till now, how precious till I lost thee.*

Now I come earlier, around dinner, so at least I can comment on the food. "Those peaches look good, don't they? You always liked canned peaches." And I can make sure Roberta doesn't take his tray before he's done.

Cars pass on University Avenue below. I touch the flowers in a tiny white ceramic vase on the table. Small orange and pink-tinged stargazers, purplish carnations. Mr. Williams is parked by the window, punching his arms straight up into the air over his head and then punching straight out in front of him, like a boxer warming up in the corner of the ring. He is wearing the same grey sweatpants and sweatshirt I see him in every day. He mutters to himself or maybe to me. Last week, he tried to grab my ass by the elevator.

After Roberta takes the tray, I say a little to Dad in Polish. "How are you feeling? You look good. Nice haircut." My brother cuts Dad's hair now, brings a special electric haircutting razor to the nursing home once a month. When we were kids, Dad used to cut our hair in the kitchen on Friday nights. He'd gone to barber school when he first came to America—something to fall back on if he couldn't find a machinist's job. He told us the whole story each time, joking, jovial, as we dragged the special swivel chair from the basement. But if something had put Dad in a bad mood that day—the deaf German he worked with at the machine shop, or Mom's slightly pigeon-toed walk across the kitchen floor—then we clenched the sides of the chair, our backs rigid, as Dad laid the cold metal shears flat against our necks, our foreheads, snip-snipped our wet hair into identical bowl cuts.

I bring Dad a little paper cup of orange juice from the nurse's cart and place it in his hand. He looks at it, sets it away from him, returns his gaze to the wallpaper. Then at the next table, a voice—"Miss!" I turn around.

"Yes?"

I stand up, go closer to the little man I've never seen before.

"Sit down." He has an accent and I can't tell from where. I laugh, the way I do to fill in awkward silences when I don't know what to say. Usually, it's the Alzheimer's people who call me over to ask questions. Barbara asks me every time I step out of the elevator if I've got fifty cents for the bus—"When is the bus coming? I've got the get to the bus, got to get out of here." Then she screams, "Aaaa-dam, Aaaa-dam, come get me. I don't wanna die."

This man has clear plastic tubes stretching from a metal tank by his chair up to his nose. On the outside of the tank is a plastic pouch full of liquid. I can't tell what it is. He leans across the table towards me, says, "This is your grandfather?"

"No, my father."

"Where is he from?"

"Poland."

I glance at Dad—his head has turned from the wall. He watches us now. The old man nods his head. He has blue-silver eyes, round and pale and watery. His skin is soft and pink, deeply wrinkled. A smooth, pink bald head ringed in white fuzz. A red and white striped shirt and maroon bathrobe. A tiny, skinny wisp of a man. Brown leather slippers, bare ankles. His eyelashes white and a curved, soft beak of a nose.

"Where are you from?" I ask, although I already know.

"Poland," he says.

"What's your name?"

"Jack Silverstein." He looks me straight in the eye. "I was in Auschwitz." He holds up his arm and pulls up the jacket sleeve. His number is a little

blurry around the edges, but still dark as night. "They killed my parents...everyone."

I glance at Dad. He heard. He has paused his inching struggle to come over. Then he resumes, more jerkily, more intently. I stand up and pull the brake levers on his chair. He hasn't learned how to propel himself properly, as if he thinks that if he learns how to use the chair, he won't also learn to walk again.

I sit down again beside Jack Silverstein and say, quietly, "My dad was in Auschwitz, too."

"He was? Does he have number?" His eyes are questioning, his face scrunched and intent.

"No," I say. "No, he was in the labour camp. He isn't Jewish."

He leans back, nodding, weighing this information, looking at Dad as if appraising him. Dad is now halfway over to us. I get up and wheel him over. The nurses say to let him try to do things on his own, but sometimes I can't watch that painfully slow shuffle, pulling himself forward just by inching his feet along, the chair dragging beneath him. Dad has never met another camp survivor in America—I think there are only two left that he remembers from his barracks—they are old and live in Warsaw. They wrote letters until Dad's stroke, and Mac has written to them now, letting them know that Dad can't read or write, or speak.

Jack Silverstein holds out his hand to shake, and Dad grips it so tightly that I see Jack wince. His knuckles turn white.

And then my father starts to cry. Like a little boy. His face all balled up and tears pouring out, his lips curled up high over his gold incisor. My heart pounds. I look around for the nurses' aides. I don't want them to think that I've made him cry.

When I was in the fifth grade, one of our assignments was to write a story. Mine was about a family of pumpkins living in a patch. On Halloween, one of the baby pumpkins is torn away, carved, sent to pumpkin heaven, gets reincarnated as pie. I got an E—excellent. I showed it to Dad. He laughed, shook his head, said, "If you want to write stories, write my story."

"Don't cry, don't cry," Jack Silverstein says, prying his hand out of Dad's grip. He rubs Dad's arm. The spot, I notice, where if Dad had had a number, it would have been tattooed. "It is over now. You survived," Jack says. Still Dad cries. "It does no good to cry. There is always hope." Still, Dad cries.

Finally, Jack leans back in his chair, points with one hand to the number on his arm and says to my father, "I had it worse than you."

The sobbing relents a little. I look down at the floor and smile. That's

what Dad used to say to us. And everyone else, for that matter. Within ten minutes of meeting anyone—a stranger at the magazine stand or a parent at one of our soccer games—Dad started to tell his Auschwitz story. How the SS men yanked him out of bed at three a.m. Only him, one out of six brothers and one sister, his twin. He the youngest, sixteen. His father long since dead, his mother's only money from the cows whose milk she sold in town. Carried it in metal cans hoisted over her back. After the seventh grade, his mother needed him on the farm. He did not finish school. He had no occupation. He was a loiterer, a threat, a useless member of society.

Hitler came in the middle of the night and took him away. That's how he told it to us. For a long time, I was confused. Hitler? Himself? How could Hitler round up everyone single-handedly? But then one day, I understood. Hitler, Hitler's men. The same.

Dad always demonstrated exactly how the SS men had stomped their boots, lifted their knees high. Spit flew as he talked and marched.

The stranger would shoot a glance at my mother or me. I'd stand behind Dad so that he couldn't see me roll my eyes.

"*Ja, ja,*" Dad would say. And he'd look confused for a moment, lost in his own story. He would run his hand through his dark hair. Even the night before his stroke—by the back door, on my way out of the house after I'd picked up my laundry—my mother's bribe—Dad told me, retold me, the story of his dog, the one they shot in the barnyard. Told it to me even as I backed away from him. His eyebrows were pulled together, his forehead furrowed, trying to figure out why he had to keep taking little steps. Wondering why he found himself in the driveway all of a sudden, next to my car.

Dad wheels right up close to Jack, who fiddles with his hearing aid. While he talks, he taps on it intermittently, tugs on the wire that snakes down to the little box in his robe pocket. Their knees are practically touching. It is as if Dad can't get close enough to him. Dad once told me that when he was a boy, there weren't enough beds in his house. He slept in the same bed as his older brother Tomek, their feet touching for warmth.

Jack says he's been here for three days. Only yesterday did he feel strong enough to leave his room. He talks to me, but occasionally looks over at Dad. Smiles a little. It's hard for him too, knowing how to talk to someone who can't talk back.

Dad looks at me intently while Jack and I talk. I avoid his eyes, and look at Jack instead.

Jack says his wife has Alzheimer's. "Is she here at the nursing home?" I ask. No, she is at a different home. They didn't have room for her here. Charlotte. She wanted to be a doctor, but then there was the war. A son, Marvin, a lawyer in Palo Alto. A daughter, Ella, a kindergarten teacher in

Queens.

Jack says he has no appetite. "My wife. I miss her."

Mom has been telling me about the little Russian man on this floor, Misha—the one who wouldn't eat, the one who's wife came every day at lunch, crying, pleading with him, bringing him special dishes she'd cooked that morning. He died last week.

I tell Jack about the biotech company I work for, the catalogue entries I write in my cubicle all day. I tell him about my brother Mac, my sisters, Mirka and Jadzia. "Mirka is the one with the children," I say. "You might have seen them running around here."

Dad looks from me to Jack, and back to me. He presses his lips together, frowns. He tugs at his lap belt as if he wants to try and stand up. He can't stand up without me. I ignore him.

Roberta comes to wheel away the bird lady, curled up in fetal position in her chair-bed, her bony knees and shins poking out from under the white sheets. Her small head lolls to the side, she can't keep it up straight. Her eyes are almost always closed, even when her daughter comes to feed her—small spoonfuls of pudding, applesauce, mashed strawberries.

Jack breaks off his sentence to me and barks "Miss!" at Roberta. I look over. Jack says nothing, but I see that he is looking at the little brown fuzzy booty crumpled on the boards of the dining room floor where the bird lady's chair-bed has been parked. One of her gnarled, white feet pokes out from beneath the sheet. Roberta pauses, gives him a sullen, tight-lipped look, then stoops to pick it up.

That's when Dad starts whacking me with his good arm. Rapid, solid clap-claps against the right side of my body, closest to him. My upper arm, my forearm, my chest. I scoot my chair back, out of reach, as the speech therapist does when Dad starts hitting her.

"What's wrong," Jack asks me. "What does he want?"

"I don't know," I say. "Sometimes he just gets in these moods."

I arrive at the home later than usual the next night. I've been behind on the catalogue deadline and I had to catch up on all the cloning kit entries. I wonder if Dad got enough to eat. I buy a 7-UP—his favourite—at the vending machine in the downstairs lobby and then I take the elevator to the second floor. I find him in the TV room already, parked perpendicular to the TV. I flip the brake levers on the wheels and swivel him around so that he can actually see the screen. *Hollywood Squares* is on and no one else is in here.

Dad stares at the upper left corner of the wall, where the spider plant hangs from a hook. I see a thread hanging from one of the leaves. I say, "Hi, Dad, how are you feeling today?" and he does not turn his head. Just stares at the wall, stone-faced.

I put the cold can in his good hand. I get a plastic cup from the nurses' cart. When I return, he is rolling the can over and over in his hand. "That's great exercise for you," I say. I pull one of the vinyl-covered chairs up so I am sitting next to him in front of the TV. If he could use his hands like he used to, he could open the tab himself. I ask him if he wants me to pour the 7-UP out for him, and he uncurls his palm. The can thumps the blue-grey carpeting, rolls forward, and bumps the lower edge of the wooden TV console.

I flip through the channels, looking for a nature or history program. He always called sitcoms "trash." He told us to turn them off, disgusted. Told us to go read Polish. We were forgetting our Polish.

On Sundays, he made me read ten pages of *Polska Historja* aloud to him. He interrupted when I mispronounced a word. "Do you know what that means?" he'd ask. I wouldn't meet his eyes. "Yes," I'd lie. Every time he started to explain what something meant it invariably led to a story, a story I'd already heard.

"Someday you'll thank me for what you're learning," he said. "A language is a gift you have all your life."

Now he wants what I won't give him. I look out the window, at the cars passing in the street below. Some of the cars' headlights blink on as they approach the building. It is that time of day—when you must decide if it's gotten dark enough to turn your headlights on.

Jack Silverstein shuffles past the TV room, pulling his green metal tank behind him on a little dolly. Dad jerks and inches toward the door. I wish I'd remembered to put the brakes on. I follow him.

At the doorway, he looks down the hall at Jack's back, at the long maroon bathrobe.

"Grrrgghrrrr. Grggggrrrr."

I put my hand on Dad's shoulder. "Dad," I say. "Mr. Silverstein can't hear very well. He won't hear you."

Dad jerks from beneath my hand and continues inching up the hall. The garbled, throaty noises continue.

Jack has stopped, leaned down to adjust one of the dials on his tank, and now Dad inches faster and faster, his whole torso leaning into the momentum of it. I should push him, I should get him there faster. I should call out to Mr. Silverstein.

But it is Mr. Silverstein who calls out to Dad. "Eh," he says. "You move very fast." He straightens from turning the dial, presses one hand to his back, holds his other hand out to Dad. Dad takes it and won't let go.

I am hoping that Dad will be content with just holding his hand and staring—he's already begun to cry. But no. He tries to speak. Shakes his head. Starts again. I wonder if it sounds the same to him as it does to us. Or if he sees his meaning in his head but doesn't hear the sound.

I scrunch my eyes shut, wrap my arms around my chest. But Jack is asking me something. "What is he saying? What does he want?"

"Dad," I say. "Let Mr. Silverstein go to his room. Maybe he's tired." I lean over Dad's chair and bend down to look him in the eye. He bats at me with his free hand. It is the weaker one though, and only brushes my chin. I back up anyway.

"What? What is it?" Jack asks.

I want to run up the hall, get in the elevator, get in my car, turn the music up loud, sing along. Everyone should be able to say what they need to say. A drink of water, please. Leave my tray. Listen to my story.

"Dad wants me to tell you his story, Mr. Silverstein. How he ended up in Auschwitz, how he survived. He thinks you'll understand."

Jack shakes his head, pats Dad's hand with his own wrinkly one. "Come into my room."

Jack sits on the edge of his bed, the plastic side-bars lowered. I push Dad up so that he sits facing Jack, and I drag a chair up beside him. Silvery Get Well balloons bump the ceiling tiles. A bouquet of daisies stands on the night table. Another bouquet—pink carnations and baby's breath—stands on top of the TV.

Jack takes Dad's hand in both of his. "So you want me to know your story. I know without you telling me. It is a story of pain, like mine. It is enough to have lived it once. I do not like to talk about the past too much, to hear about it too much. Especially our past. Better to forget. Try to forget." He pushes up his sleeve, holds his arm out. "I can't forget, but you can. Time does everything. Be patient." He pats Dad's hand again, and now Dad just stares at him. "When I remember, I can't sleep," Jack says. "I have nightmares. Maybe you tell me someday. But not tonight."

I expect Dad to try again, that gurgling, those words like vague dark shapes in the night. You can almost see them, can almost make them out, but not quite.

Dad stares. He doesn't even cry.

I pull his chair out of the room. He drags his feet.

"Sorry to have bothered you, Mr. Silverstein," I call as we back through the doorway. "I hope you sleep well. Goodnight."

When I was in the eighth grade, a Polish physics professor stayed at our house for a week. He was from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, and he was attending a conference on superconductors at Stanford. He was a friend of some uncle in Poland. On his first night at our house, Dad told him the story, everything, acted it all out in the middle of the kitchen. The yanking from the bed, the marching, the beatings, the escape. The long night in the forest, under the boughs of the fir tree, the long walk back to his mother's farm. Dad kept the professor up past midnight. The professor

yawned, stretched, said what a long day he'd had, but Dad kept going. This story and then this one and the next one.

At the breakfast table, after Dad had already left for work, the physics professor looked into his coffee cup and then at my mother. "My wife's father was in Auschwitz, too, until the liberation. But he's never mentioned it once. Not to anyone. He came back and never said a word. He won't tell you if you ask."

"Everyone is different," Mom said.

"Yes," the physics professor agreed. "Some people give you their burden to carry for them, and some people ask to carry yours."

The next day, when I arrive at the home after work, the elevator is broken and I have to take the stairs. They are at the side of the building, and when I get up to the second floor, I must pass Jack's room to reach the TV room and the dining room. Jack's name is no longer in the little plastic pouch on the door, and I stop. I knock. No answer. I push open the door. The bed has been stripped. The flowers and balloons are gone. I walk to the nurses' station.

"Carla, what room did Mr. Silverstein move to?"

"He's gone," she says. Gone can mean a lot of things in this place. Mr. Carver, in the room next door to Dad's, died last week. Mom, who sits with Dad until dinner time, said she heard Mr. Carver coughing for a half hour, calling, "Carla, Carla." Finally, Mom went to look for her, and then brought her back. But the coughing had stopped.

"Gone where?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says. "I came on at noon and his room was already empty." I could ask her to check the books, but I don't. Maybe his wife's place found a room for him.

Dad's in the TV room again.

"Let's see what's going on in the world today, Dad." I turn on CNN. He used to watch the news and read the paper every night at home.

But he won't look at the TV screen. He looks at the wall. Only his face isn't stony today, and when I take his hand, he holds it tightly. I close my eyes.

Then I smell something.

"Dad, I'm going to get Roberta." He doesn't want to let go of my hand but I pry it out anyway. That's something else I can't bear—Dad soaked in his own urine.

They'd been digging ditches somewhere, and on the long march back to the barracks, they walked two-by-two. They hadn't eaten in days, most of them were barefoot. It was November. One of the men saw a dry stump of a cabbage, probably frozen through, in the stubble of a field they passed.

He dove for it, was gunned down before his hands even touched it. His body crumpled, a heap of filthy, striped fabric. The SS men stopped the march. Lined the twenty-some men up in two rows, the tall ones behind, the shorter ones in front, as if arranging them for a photograph.

Who else wants to die today?

Nobody spoke. My father, sixteen, tried to sniff back the mucus running from his nose.

The SS man heard him. You? You? He pointed the gun in his face, inches away from my father's nose.

My father shook his head. His life depended on not making a sound, on not crying. There was an unmistakable odour, a wet stain spreading down the front of his pants. Dark on the black and white stripes.

Roberta wheels Dad to his room to change the diaper, and then wheels him back. I watch CNN until he reappears in the doorway. "Thanks, Roberta." She nods, and I pull his chair the rest of the way into the room.

"Dad," I say, "Do you want me to ask Mr. Silverstein if maybe he'd like to listen today? He was tired yesterday. We could ask him again."

Dad nods.

"You wait here. I'll go ask."

I walk up the hall and into Mr. Silverstein's room. I sit on the stripped bed. Count the second hand on my watch. Sixty ticks. I walk back out, down the hall, past the cheap, plastic-framed prints of beach scenes—sunsets or sunrises, up to you.

"Dad, I think Mr. Silverstein was transferred to his wife's nursing home today. Carla said it happened so fast, he didn't have time to say goodbye to you, but he told her to tell you he'd like to hear the story some day. He was sorry yesterday was a bad night for him."

Now he cries, the way he did that first time he saw Mr. Silverstein in the dining room two nights ago. I rub his hand. I rub his shoulders. I bring him a cup of orange juice. I bring him a cup of water. I flip the channels of the TV until I find a documentary about Jacques Cousteau, something about the mysteries of the deep.

Mr. Williams rolls by in the lobby, peers in through the window. Backs up and pokes his head in. "He okay?"

"Yes, he will be."

I hear Barbara cry out in the hallway. "Aaaaadam. Aaaadam. When are you coming for me?"

I shut the door that separates the TV room from the rest of the floor. Roberta passes the windows, pushing the laundry bin. She looks in. I smile.

I look out the window on the other side. It is already dark, and all the cars have their headlights on. When the light turns green at the intersection, the cars flow past. I turn off the TV.

I reach into my purse, pull out *Pan Tadeusz*. I turn to page two, move my finger down the page, past *how precious till I lost thee*. I let the tip of my finger rest beneath the next sentence. I look up.

This isn't what he wants to hear. But I must say something. I can't just watch this old man stare out the darkened window of a nursing home—a window that no longer shows the world he can't go out into, but only his own body in the wheelchair, his own silent face, his close-cropped hair.

Finally, I fold the corner of the page and reach over to run my fingertips through his hair. He always liked me to do that for him in the evenings. He'd call me over after dinner. He'd tell me how in barber school he learned how to shave a man, give a head massage, dip combs and shears in jars of antiseptic.

I tell him that—what I remember of his barber school stories.

There is the tiniest twist to his mouth. I can't tell if it's a smile.

Then I remember sitting in the pink and orange-flowered swivel chair, in the middle of the kitchen, wearing the pinstripe barber's smock, toilet paper wound tight around my throat so the clippings won't slip down my shirt. Squinting, clenching the arms of the chair, holding my breath as Dad snips my bangs and tells my mother to walk like a normal person, feet straight, not like some cripple from the countryside, even though he knew that's all she was anyway.

I want to say: I can't tell your story, Dad. I can only tell mine, and you may not like it. But your story is a part of my story and maybe I can't tell Mr. Silverstein—I'm sorry, I'm sorry—but I will tell the people it really matters to tell. I will tell my children and their children and I will tell you.

But I can't say this. We don't talk like this, my father and I. We never have, and we're not going to start now.

I tuck *Pan Tadeusz* back in the purse at my feet. "Dad," I say, straightening up in my chair. "Dad, I remember those haircuts. I remember everything."

David Zieroth

First Thought

Of all my thoughts, one thought
is the first—it came to me
when I was a child and lives in me still
But which thought, and how
to find again one tiny stick
amid the many limbs of the forest
verdant and grey, dry and budding
boughs that make a Y
for the nest of the secretive jay
who later flies out to scream
Pick through the twiggy composition
under the eggs, those warm globes
the future breaks free from at last
to pinpoint the original stalk
upon which all others balance
cunningly intertwined, stuck and
holding against night and wind and
violent squabbling in the air

Each day the thoughts erect a wall
and tell me not to look
back into the tangled garden
where someone like me
once lived, it was me, yes, me
though I would have placed the chairs
differently, not so near the pond
and so many cups of suddenly spilled tea
can only mean the guests have gone

Had I Stayed on the Farm

for Leona Gom

I married the skinny girl
and our kids ran free as chickens
one of them, the second boy
moving along the ditches for days
trapping muskrat and living on
chokecherries and bulrushes
sleeping by a little fire of sticks
wrapped in his jacket, and we hardly noticed
he was gone until he returned
as someone else, burnt and smoky
his sisters silenced by the strides he took
to reach the pump, the way he drank
from the barn well, his hands
a mesh of little nicks and cuts
where the cries of the animals
had entered him

I planted, and prayed
for the market to hold, and when
it failed I stopped praying
and never began again
found a fount of colourful
language when the truck broke
at harvest—and when the green straw plugged
the combine, I was the fool
who crawled in, it was my mackinaw
the fly wheel caught and drove hard
into the iron guts of the machine
it was the mangled me my son
found, his mother he ran to
but even before he reached her
with the news she ever after
kept hearing, kept hearing

all the black suits of my neighbours
began twitching on their hangers
at the backs of the closets
thirsting for sun and wind

I knew little of books
nothing of rhyme
though the rhythm
of spring, summer, fall
I replayed in winter
every day a time
for breaking down and
making each moment all
I needed, the snow filling up
space I might have stuffed otherwise
with words or lies or worse
falling until all was smooth
and white, virgin
cold
beauty I eventually forgot
to see, seeing instead
lives I might have lived
had I left, had I taken the train
not taken, riding with those
who later returned with ironic gleams
to look at me in wonder, the one
who stayed, as if only one were needed
to rate themselves against
measuring me as their fathers measured
fields of chaff and shrivelled grain

Tom Wayman

Inguinal

Three men held me and cut me.
Their little knife was a silver fish
so sharp it sliced open the edges
of a paper I signed.

May snow
knocked at the door.

When they were done
agonized colours
spread across my waist where they cut me
and lower, down the tops of my legs:
feverish yellows
and ominous blues, bleak tints
of the skies of Hell.

Snow
was bandaging the day. The blood here
was mine and not mine: fish blood, dark blood, bat blood
seeping, ay!, where they cut me.

At night
every abandoned pain returned:
behind my ribs at the spine, buried in one shoulder.
My throat issued mottled flames, black smoke.
For the first time, in a dream I was bored:
waiting for a figure to
cease speaking, for someone to exert himself.
The men who cut me
dreamed of new golf shoes whose cleats
penetrated human skin.

My skin,
in May, in the silver snow.

Take My Word For

A change
A spin
An alternate route to where you're going
A friend you haven't seen in years
What it's worth
Better or for worse
All you can
Fast relief of symptoms
Twenty-four-hour protection
A security deposit
Peace of mind
Authorized use only
Gospel
A sign

K. V. Skene

Nothing Arrives But Weather

And we listen to winter and learn the winter sky long before its cold rain surfs our dead-serious streets, softens their suburban edge and smothers every windowpane with a fine needle spray that falls and falls (this wettest of all rains) from all directions. It rains inside our clothes. It rains under our skin. It rains up and out of stairwells and gutters. Once there was an alfresco table for two with an awning to laugh off the sun and a solicitous sparrow to pick over each dry conversational crumb—all gone. All gone to glory-holes to outrage the rain (this coldest of all rains) that floods the stones, the bones of the city and kisses us softly. Softly and suddenly and snug under its heavyweight overcoat, a somnolent sun burns through the louring sky like a careless cigarette, pearls the overlooked rigging wiring us together, bejewels our double-glazed boxes and an urban rainbow arcs up, over, into our eyes and you see me across the rain. Even November can be beautiful if you need it to be.

Elana Wolff

Potentilla

For the nth time this month I walk you
through the garden
by the berms:

This is the euonymus I moved from the back of the house;
this the spiraea, this—weigela.
Periwinkle is *vinca*.

Here it's not a stretch to lavish love:
Look at Cupid's darts, the bleeding hearts.

You gave me what you needed: hearth and earth.
No wonder now I want to show you growth;
naming is part of the proof.

That is why I'm troubled not to know what the bush
by the thuja is; why I smile to hear you call the potentilla
shrubby cinquefoil.

Silhouettes

The voice of geese, elastic twang, at night on Oakbank Pond
where trees turn into topiary
foliage on the water:
rippled moonlit silhouettes of dog, and pig, and hippo.

You handed me your knifing hand; I handed you
my writer.
We might have wanted to be lovers,
but we were husband and wife.

We stood in the willow shadows
side by side defining shapes—careful to concur,
mindful not to make the same mistakes.

Dariush Alavi

The Edge of Happiness

When he arrived at the mountain cottage, he sighed and realized he was just a few footsteps away from yet more happiness. Happiness had been with him in the driver's seat of his car, during the two hour drive from the city, and in the moment when his wife had reached over and run her hand across his thigh. Happiness had also been with him when he and his wife were packing a small suitcase each and he'd decided to make her laugh by prancing around their house in his boxer shorts doing an impression of their next door neighbour. That was the problem.

He glanced in the direction of the sun plunging below the line created by the pines. Lit from behind, the trees looked like a fence of sharp mountains lining the car's path to the cottage. He remembered the scene beyond the trees: a stretch of grass leading to the edge of the sheer drop, the bottom of which he had dreamed about since he was five years old.

He eased the car to a halt on its patch before the front door. For a moment, he had a vision of himself speeding up along the path, hitting the brakes at the last minute and screeching the car to a standstill, leaving a deep tire trail behind him. He remembered a time when he had made just such an entrance and had caused a picnic hamper to topple and throw its sticky contents all over the back seat.

He looked across at his wife sitting on his left. He leaned over and kissed her on her cheek. He suddenly wanted to take his mouth lower, to kiss her neck, undo the first few buttons of her blouse and run his tongue across the space between her breasts. She smiled at him. He pulled his body back and wondered what her face would look like tomorrow, if she had to face up to the fact that they would never again go to the cottage together.

He took a deep breath, opened the car door, and set foot on the grass that covered the ground around the cottage. He opened the passenger door behind him, pulled out a brown suitcase, and started walking towards the front door. He knew that by the time he reached the entrance, she would be looking in an easterly direction, trying to catch a glimpse of a weeping willow that towered up for two or three storeys and then bent its branches almost all the way down to the ground. Sure enough, when he looked at her, she was doing exactly that.

She saw him watching her and smiled.

"Still there?" he asked.

She waited until she was sure she could see the tree before nodding.

He chuckled, picked up her bag, and walked towards the front door. He looked up for a moment and saw the one white roof tile amongst the red. When he was ten, he had jumped from the white tile onto a trampoline, bounced off, landed a few feet away from the trampoline, grazed half a leg, and stood up with a grinning face.

Suddenly he remembered the cliff edge again, the way the rocks became larger and darker the closer they got to the ground, until all that could be seen was a single hard surface. He remembered the piercing scent of the air as it rushed into his nose when he had jumped off the roof.

His wife found some keys in her handbag, unlocked the latch, and they walked inside together. He saw her step from one room to the next, turning on lights and heaters, checking for towels in the bathroom. They hadn't been there for almost four months, but the people paid to maintain the cottage hadn't neglected their duties. He was almost convinced he could smell a cup of coffee waiting for them.

"I'll just phone the boys," his wife said and walked past him into the kitchen.

He thought of his sons—the younger halfway through university, the older two years into a job that took him around Europe—and wondered how a parent would go about saying goodbye to their children—a final Goodbye—if they were aware that the time had come to do so.

He stepped into the kitchen, where his younger son's voice was already coming through the speakerphone. "Am I there yet?" the voice asked.

His wife laughed quietly. "Hang on." She reached inside her bag and pulled out two fridge magnets and two photographs, each one of a smiling young man talking into a telephone. Moments later, the pictures were stuck on the doors of the fridge. "Okay, you're here now."

Laughter crackled into the room. "Cool, cool," the voice said.

A short while later, when the only sound in the kitchen came from the water boiling in the kettle, he walked up behind his wife and placed his hands on her shoulders. In silence, they looked at the photographs of their sons. He knew she would be thinking about how many different pictures they'd brought here over the years. The faces in the photos were always recognizable, but lately the look of neediness in their eyes had almost vanished.

He kissed the top of his wife's head and massaged her shoulders. She placed her right hand on his and ran her fingers across his knuckles. "Tea?" she said.

"Hmm."

A few hours later, he was lying on the settee and she was nestled on top

of him, his arms free to roam around her body. His mouth was still full of the lingering taste of bread and olive oil and coffee. He ran his hands up from her legs to her breasts and then down again.

"Ready for bed, I think," she whispered. He didn't need to open his eyes to see the smile on her face. He hummed in agreement. His hands moved up towards her temples and rubbed her head in small circles. Her voice was less audible than her sigh. "That's nice," she said and snuggled deeper into him, but when he felt her shoulder blades rub against his chest, he remembered the cliff edge again.

When they made love later that night, the only sounds came at the end. She clutched his head between her legs and turned his name into a gasp. When she licked his ear and squeezed his flesh, he couldn't delay the moment any longer and pumped moans out of his lungs. "Lie on top of me," came out of her in one hot breath and his body fell onto hers. When their hearts recovered, they lay side by side and she wrapped her left leg around him. She kissed him and whispered, "Goodnight." But although he was sleepy too, he wanted to lift her out of the bed, walk her across to the open window, face the moonlight tumbling through the parted curtains, and then feel her take him inside her mouth and hear himself yell out a noise that would echo through the pines, to the cliff edge and all the way to the bottom of the drop. But he knew she was tired and he was tired too, so he kissed her forehead, ran his hand along her back down to her buttocks, and fell asleep.

As always, he woke up before her, when the sun was still a glow on the horizon. Without disturbing her, he got out of bed and put on some clothes. Before leaving the cottage, he walked past the wicker display cabinet and looked at the photos inside. Then he took a deep breath and marched straight out. His twig-crunching steps caused the birds to fall silent. He pushed his way through the pines and, within about ten minutes, reached the edge of the cliff.

Slowing his footsteps down, he walked towards the end and lowered his head so he could see the drop below him. The bottom was still in darkness, the sun not being high enough to push aside the shadow. He thought he could hear the sound of a wind leaping in the depths.

And then he did what he had done since he was a child. He started looking around behind him for a suitable object. Within a few moments, he found one: a dirty glass bottle lying on the turf. He picked it up and brushed as much dirt off it as he could. He then walked back to the edge, remembering the many objects he had found over the years: a steering wheel, several spoons, a deflated football. He held the bottle by the neck over the drop for a few seconds, took a deep breath, and then let go.

The distance to the ground below was so great that the bottle looked as

though it was hanging on an invisible string for several moments. It fell without spinning or turning. He stared at it and smiled. It was easy to pretend the bottle wasn't falling forward. He told himself it was glued to the air, hanging. For a split second, the bottle caught some stray beam from the sun and came to life in a searing flash, like a tiny bolt of lightning. He closed his eyes.

After several moments, he thought he heard the sound of breaking, but he wasn't sure. He squeezed his eyes tighter and tried to keep in his mind for a few more seconds the image of the bottle: still, suspended, full of the sun's fire. But then he opened his eyes and realised that somewhere in the depths below him was a scattering of broken glass. Was there any chance at all, he wondered, that the bottle was still intact?

He looked up. The sun was becoming more visible. He turned around and started heading back towards the cottage. Before too long, he was back inside the bedroom.

His wife was still asleep, the thin blanket covering her legs and waist. Her breathing caused her body to rise and fall. He walked towards the bed until he was close enough to bend over and kiss her cheeks. He touched her skin with his lips and warmth eased into him. She didn't stir. He looked at her for two, maybe three seconds, then walked out of the cottage again. She would be asleep for at least another half hour. He still had some time.

When he reached the edge again, the lower rim of the sun's disc was several inches off the horizon. The shadow at the bottom of the drop was lifting and he thought he could just about see the dazzle of a thin stream of water.

He stepped closer towards the edge. He shut his eyes and thought of his wife. He heard the way she had called out his name during the night. He felt the tremor that passed from her body to his when she asked him to carry on massaging her head.

Another tiny step forward. He took a deep breath to help him keep his eyes shut. He remembered his boys and their voices on the telephone last night, the "Love you" at the end.

He took one more fraction of a step forward, just enough to feel the lack of ground beneath his toes. He raised his arms out by his sides. Even as he stood there, and the sun inflamed his forehead and his cheeks, his mind was filled with an image of an event he knew would take place in just a few minutes: him and his wife having breakfast. But alongside this vision, he tried to imagine his body lying at the bottom of the drop, surrounded by the mountains, just on the verge of being illuminated.

Terrance Cox

Heck of a Parade

"Grape & Wine," our fall
festival lets us fest,
go Dionysiac
by timid plastic glassfuls:

ten days frenzy under
license & rental tents
in Montebello Park, frantic
to Walter Ostanek's polka

Second Saturday happens
famous heck of a parade:

bands of regimental brass
kilts & pipes & motorbike
cops in helmets of gold

barrels & vine arbour
floats on flat-bed trucks,
sash-&-gown decked beauties
up on green shag, waving

every fat girl, baton-
twirler from Akron

& always, second last, some
minor or has-been
celebrity figure,
posing as Grand Marshall

for instance: Commander Tom
of Channel 7, Buffalo,
a kid-show space cadet—

once from Houston, an
Apollo astronaut, a
moonwalker who met Christ
in lunar gravity

Capt James T. Kirk
beamed down for our
bacchanal, one year

to baldly go
backseat of Cadillac convertible—

latest in long line of pale
substitutes for wine-god,
simulacrum foisted on us

Modest ecstacy there is,
dwindle of Septembers'
festive hereabouts,

when stand-ins for absent
god passes by & after

saunter down Ontario, around
corner up St Paul, along
come harmless drunks

children & childlike who throng,
antic cavort to a muse:

At pageant's close,
in majesty wheels by
steam-age Calliope,

her horses & her
pipe-whistled song

Jay Dolmage

Hey! Funtown

There's this person I know named Judy. And let's say she is actually a pretty interesting person besides the fact that she is a top-notch friend of mine and we are tight. And let's also say while we're at it that she has more than average intelligence and good looks even if she's not freaking twenty anymore. You may have seen her out where she works at Hey! Funtown. Or you might see her driving a Humvee. And if you see her doing that, don't just assume she's a widow because she isn't. She never had a husband that died over there, or even a husband that died over here, or even a husband. Not that she couldn't have.

The Humvee was her mom's that she got as compensation for Judy's dad who *did* die over there. And Judy's mom won't drive it because she's been broken by him dying. But Judy isn't broken by him dying, she wasn't a big fan of him. She figured he actually always wanted to die over there. Because of that, now all four of her brothers want to die over there too. One of them even recruits teenagers from the malls to come die with him. Judy is just happy to drive the Humvee, because it would have been hard to buy a car if it hadn't been free. She likes it, even though other people say all the widow Humvees are defective and they have the same defects as the Abrams, and that they'll break down on you just as easy on the interstate as over in the desert.

Judy tells me she likes working at Hey! Funtown, which is owned by Lance Wilkerson. She says the way to explain Lance Wilkerson would be to say he's a Positive Dreamer. Which is rare for people who've been over there four times, starting way back in Desert Storm. Sometimes, those wars seem to hang on Lance like a bad poncho. Except, you know what? Judy thinks Lance will be okay in the end. Because instead of thinking how screwed he is in terms of all his memories being ones of wars, and how he's probably headed over there again, she tries to remember special moments she had with Lance. For example, there was this special moment:

Lance was out back with her because they were burning a pile of garbage. He looked at her but not in like a romantic way. Not that it couldn't have been necessarily romantic. Because she is a fine looking woman! Anyways, he looked at her in this way and he said how glad he was that she works for him at Hey! Funtown. And he said how she is his friend, too.

And he said how friends stick together. Which was something he learned from Marines. Except most of those buddies are dead. Or they're over there. Or now that they're back here he doesn't like them anymore. So that makes new friends, like Judy, even more important. And Judy nodded and knew in her head this Lance was her kind of people—a Positive Dreamer—and the kind of friend you really want to stick together with.

As far as describing Hey! Funtown, where Judy works, you can probably guess it's an Amusement Park. Which means it gets the subsidy from the Greater American government for re-tasking copters and Humvees and tanks and jets. But Hey! Funtown is better than most of those other scrapyards with firing ranges out off the interstate. Funtown also has PuttPutt, a batting cage, and kids' birthday celebrations, nearly two a week. These celebrations are based on Funtown's star, Big Bill. He's a machine that actually works. He's a giant duck. Who's based on a cartoon that used to be in a movie. For birthday parties, they act like Big Bill's the leader of a band of gnomes, which are set up around him with little guitars and synthesizers made of plywood. The kids listen to the band and they get worked up and sometimes even stop smashing other kids for half a second and dance or sing along to Hits of the Eighties. Big Bill plugs in. He has a guitar and his duck mouth flaps. As if he's the singer. Certain Veterans have said Big Bill looks ridiculous. They come to Funtown to use the batting cages and buy beers and then come and wreck a whole birthday by not keeping a trap clapped when they're sitting at the bar. But guess what? The kids have been known to dig Bill. And who's concerned with the negative comments of someone who has nothing better than to throw stones? And is actually not realizing how much glass their home is made of? Not that my house isn't. Just saying.

Lance bought Big Bill from a water park in Orlando. When he went down there to visit his aunt. And came back with a duck in his truck and a whole bunch of ideas for how Hey! Funtown could be improved. Even to this day he still has a bad case of Orlando. Like pinkeye, except it's Orlando in his eye, making it all red and goopy. Judy tells me she figures Orlando is in his head as the opposite of Iraq, like set in there over the top of Iraq as a Positive Dream.

The gnomes don't have official names like Big Bill but Judy has names for them—Chuck, Alouicious, and Monty. She told me that she named them that because that's what she'd name her kids if they were boys. Not like she has any kids or is planning to. Just that those are good names. The idea of them being a band works when you put them all close enough together and don't have the lights so close to the stage and turn the boombox behind them up to eight or nine so that the kids get rowdy enough. The

moms like that it's Hits of the Eighties on the boombox, because that's when they were born.

Judy says sometimes the kids will be completely wrecking the whole Party Zone. And you'll think: Goddamn why are you doing that? You'll have a hard time not yelling at the moms. But then you'll realize supervision is a foreigner to some parents. So you'll need to be on top of it. You'll also want to stay on top of making sure the gnomes are all standing up straight. And haven't fallen over and chipped. And that the kids aren't throwing Nuggets at Big Bill. And that they've got pop coming.

So she'll be on top of that. That'll be Judy on top of all that and on top of generally being responsible. Not that Lance isn't. Just that there are days when you're not sure where he is, and other days when he's abiding multiple alcoholic beverages. In the big picture, it's all up to Judy. And most of the time, she can handle it.

Of course Lance is the boss. Don't get our friend Judy wrong. It's his money and know-how and vision. And for Judy it's just her being the one who does the books and cleaning and cooking and organizing and answering the phone. And taking kids out to tour the Amusements and sit in cockpits and say stuff about "Towelheads" they learned from their dads. Judy is glad to take on extra responsibility. Because, let's be honest, she's solid as a rock in those categories and would never let Lance down. She wouldn't let him down because mainly she sees a done-wrong quality in Lance that makes her care. And that's combined with her respect for bosses. Him being the one she's had since let's not even bother going back so far in history. She's not some spring chicken admittedly. But still she's in for the long haul at Hey! Funtown. Which, let's face it, doesn't have to not be a fun haul.

The point is, I want you to know about Judy. So that I can tell the story of how the other day, as Judy was leaving work at about ten to midnight after cleaning up from some kids who thought it was hilarious to stomp a million ketchup packets to make them squirt all over, Lance was sitting in a fighter jet there just smack in the middle of the parking lot, taking over nearly the whole parking lot, which was where the big flatbed had dumped it off after Lance bought it off another Amusement Park two towns over. And Lance goes: It's a Navy F/A 18.

And Judy goes: Yeah.

And seeing Lance in another jet never fails to make Judy hyperventilate. Jets are big-ass. It was all leaning over so that it was tilted in the sky, so that Lance looked like he'd take off back there. And he said: Yeah, she's a beauty, isn't she?

And Judy didn't say: No, she's not a beauty. She's just taking up the whole parking lot, and what the hell are you going to do with another one

of these? You already have one sitting out back rusting. The kids can't sit in it because you couldn't promise me it wouldn't eject one of them, which would not be funny by the way.

And she didn't say that it was not funny to see him in a jet, because it's not funny to pretend about war. She didn't ask about why all these boys are pretending about a war that's bound to jam its foot in their own personal ass soon enough.

She didn't say any of that because Lance is the boss and he has a vision. Plus he has some business know-how and a little pension and a boatload of bad memories (and, again, he's the boss) which are all good reasons why Judy didn't mention what Judy was really thinking. She just looked at him in that jet. And for a second she thought of herself going over. She thought of them finally sending her the letter. She stared at Lance and he stared back and she made herself smile.

And then she pointed out how she couldn't get her Humvee out of its spot on account of it being blocked right in by the jet. So Lance offered to give her a ride home in the Hey! Funtown van.

On the ride home, he talked the whole way, saying how he was going to put the two F/As together so they could start a kind of Jet Carousel. And how he would put them up on truck wheels and run them around in a circle, powered off field generators. Judy just listened. And Lance sounded kind of nervous, which is how he gets sometimes, she's noticed. She did a little bit of nodding but wouldn't say she thought it was a good idea because—hey guess what?—it was a stupid idea! But Lance isn't stupid. And she can't blame him for a little Positive Dreaming even when it turns into a lot, or all dreaming and not much waking-up-and-drinking-the-coffee of some real responsibilities around Hey! Funtown. Eventually, he let her off at her building and Judy said: Take care of yourself, Lance.

Because she really meant it. She says it every time she says goodbye to him because he needs to actually do that—to take care of himself. Or start looking for someone who's gonna be able to do it for him. Because the clock's ticking and the next thing you know, you're old and alone. Judy knows that okay? Judy knows about clocks ticking.

As she was opening the door to her apartment, Judy realized how Lance had smelt. He smelt like—guess what?—a lot of booze.

He forgot to pick her up the next morning, so Judy took the city bus out and then hooked a ride all the way into Hey! Funtown with Rita Schell, who was on her way back from dropping the kids off at Elementary in the school bus. It was a quiet ride and Judy just looked out the window at all the trees that had lost their leaves already, even though fall was a long way off. She thought to herself how sad that was, and how the leaves had real ambition, or how they were sick with a mysterious disease. And that some-

times it was the same thing—ambition and disease. Like Lance and the Orlando in his eye, the Orlando folded over Iraq. I know she thought that because she told me. Because we're good friends.

When Judy walked into the Hey! Funtown parking lot, Lance was asleep right there on top of her Humvee. So Judy tried not to wake him up and she walked the long way around the big-ass jet and made her way inside the Main Chalet and just started getting ready by washing the golf balls from the PuttPutt course.

The kids who come for Birthday Bashes in the Party Zone get to hit balls in the batting cages and play PuttPutt too. When they're doing the Amusements, the moms usually smoke or read a sort of novel or have a couple drinks from the bar. The bar is Judy's least favourite idea in the whole place and has been a money sinkhole. She should know—she does the books. The only people who actually pay for drinks are the Veterans who come hit balls in the batting cages. And they never have a nice thing to say, and she imagines they always move on to strip clubs to spend their serious booze money. But about the worst thing that Judy hates about this job is when Lance comes into the bar on birthday party nights and begins joking around and chatting up the moms, because then you know the money sinkhole is being dredged out by the free drinks he's giving them. It's not that Judy herself is jealous of the fact that Lance is giving attention to these women and generally neglecting his responsibilities around Funtown. No, because there's nothing new there, and Judy knows that a good way to make a fool of yourself is to put your feelings in the wrong compartment of the two personal and professional compartments. Judy just thinks about the carousel idea and the four busted Abrams full of bullet holes and the entire stack of truck tires and the mechanical bull and the Velcro wall and the thing you hit with a big mallet and the paddleboats and the hueys and so on. All that they've got out back? Or in the other lot? Probably the biggest collection of second-hand crap from Iraq and Orlando that doesn't work in the whole world. And she sure hopes Lance doesn't get it into his head to try acquiring a woman and her several children and then leaving them in a place like that lot, or out back, so to speak. Which you can't do with a real responsibility like a family! She thinks about telling him this sometimes, but doesn't. His business is his business. Her business is keeping Funtown fun.

She's thought about quitting her job and learning computers at colleges. Because she's smart with them, right? But she could never really do that. For starters, they'd draft her then for sure. Not that they won't anyways, what with her not having any kids, and not having a husband. Just that they draft community college kids first. And if you know computers, you

can bomb things. In a perfect world, she'd teach kids computers at Funtown all day and then she'd never have to abandon Lance. And maybe some of those kids would get smart enough to go to universities and make enough money to never have to go over there.

And, truth is, Judy loves Hey! Funtown. She tries to work for the Positive Dreams of Lance, the dream of an Orlando right here. And also she works for the moments when a kid isn't swearing and it's his or her birthday and he or she is really actually getting down with Big Bill and The Birthday Band and there's a look on his or her face that says: I'm digging this.

And that's a moment that makes a lot of things (even though maybe not all of them all of the time) actually worth it. Computers don't make those moments, hearts do.

Just so you don't think Judy is some kind of protective pit bull dog, you should know that Judy isn't Lance's keeper. She knows that Lance deserves the flaming spark in his existence of a romantic life. We all do. Deserve that. And Judy would date more, for sure, if she wasn't so busy. But you shouldn't think Judy is obsessed with Lance either, like some crazy lady. Of course, she would admit that if she were dating someone, Lance wouldn't be a horrible choice. Lance is her kind of people. Except for always making crummy decisions to buy jets. And of course all the booze Lance drinks isn't what her kind of people do either. Neither is Lance hitting so many balls in the batting cage, like eighteen buckets of them when he's mad at something, most of the time himself, and most of the balls he doesn't even swing at, he just stands there looking off into some netherworld far beyond the horizon while the balls crash into the fence and crash into the fence one after the other. Most of that time he could have been doing a little cleaning up around Hey! Funtown to make things just a little bit easier on his employee. Right?

Judy's kind of people, I should say, are like Lance a lot of times, because they are the kind of people who will go and sit with a kid in the male restroom when he's puking because he took a dare of eating too many onion rings. And Lance has been there, and even wiped that kid's face off on his shirt. Judy's kind of people is also showing a kid how to hold a putter or a bat when he's getting a razz from other kids for holding it like a loser. And also her kind of people know how to shut up that kid giving a razz. And shut him up good. Her kind of people has been known to take Judy to a bar for her birthday and not have a single drink that night but instead sing karaoke. Her kind of people would be known to have sung an Aretha Franklin song. And a Tom Jones one. And that night, later on, her kind of people would tell Judy how much they are appreciated, and touch

her on the arm. Her kind of people is the kind of people that Lance kind of is most of the time and especially is some of the time.

Her kind of people also get a job done. Which Lance does do sometimes and quite well. That day when he got his hungover butt up and out of the Humvee, he did start painting the jet there in the lot, with a huge Greater American flag. Painting jets is something he knows how to do, and do well with spray cans and duct tape. Lance spent the whole early afternoon out there painting, just working away like a goddamn maniac on it, and Judy was getting things in order in the Party Zone. There was a party coming up the next day, a Wednesday. Weekday parties are usually the best parties because kids come from school remembering some of the strict rules they had all day. As opposed to on the weekends when they're coming from home, where they were hitting other kids or lighting firecrackers all day. And when Lance came in from painting, Judy could tell he was pretty impressed with how shiny Big Bill was and all, and he asked Judy: How is Big Bill running?

And she said: Spic and span.

Which was true because it takes more than a few kids jamming him up and hanging off him and hitting him with chairs for him to malfunction. And this makes Judy respect him as a good constructed machine. That was one of Lance's best investments, which provides steady flows of kids coming in and their parents paying up to fifty bucks for a party. And Big Bill is sure the engineer of the small money train that might visit this place once or twice a week!

There was a general good mood going around then. Judy was thinking about all the possible customers and having a sort of Positive Dream. She was imagining like:

So, you're coming to Hey! Funtown because you saw the billboard off the highway and you see that there is a shining Jet Carousel well-painted and in the right colours of actual jets in the parking lot even if it doesn't work and I think you are impressed? And just wait until you start in on PuttPutt and hitting dingers in the cages. And then it's Party time.

And Judy was feeling pretty proud of that, and she told Lance that, and he said he'd drink to that, which is not what Judy wanted him to say.

But it didn't turn out half as bad as usual, which is usually one beer turns into two turns into making a big drink from a bunch of bottles in a pint glass. Where he's going around and it seems like there's a little bit from every bottle in there and the colour of the thing is what you might call gruesome and he makes a name up for it like President Terminator. And comes around and says you should have a swig of the Terminator. And Judy says no, even when Lance keeps bothering her. But that day

Lance actually only has one beer, not a Terminator, and then goes back out to the parking lot and in some kind of holy miracle he paints that jet and then finally finishes painting the big Hey! Funtown sign he's been talking about and in another holy miracle nails it onto the roof of the Chalet. He calls Judy out there to see it and admittedly it is something special, which you can see clear from a hundred feet. And that gets Lance into the mood for doing even more work so, in what has to be the most productive day in the history of Hey! Funtown, he takes the Hey! Funtown van and drives out to the highway and gives the highway billboard a fresh new paintjob and then comes back and even does another big sign on the back of an old door which he bolts to the top of the batting cages. And this is the best sign of all of them because he broke a mirror up to make the Hey! in Hey! Funtown. This one you can see clear from two hundred feet. It sparkles like the middle of the ocean. By the end of the day, when Lance does make something alcoholic again (which he calls The Eye of the Hawk) and walks around drinking it and turns the boombox on and turns Big Bill on even though there's no birthday and he keeps saying how it's a fine piece of machinery, Judy herself feels like this time he deserves to be enjoying himself. Even in ways that are damaging to the body and mind, which is different than how she feels usually. Because it's not just the booze, it's the booze plus the pills he has to take for Syndrome. Not that she grudges him letting loose. And doing how he damn well pleases around a place that he owns. Don't get her wrong. She's just concerned. But you'd even feel like laughing way later on when Lance pretends he's being hit with a shot or even a Best Shot, singing along to the song "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" from the Eighties tape. And he keeps doing that and standing on one of the tables and yelling: Hey, Judy!

And he's pretending he wants Judy to come dance with him even if Judy's wondering when it will be time to go home. And if there's any way she's going to be able to drive because the Humvee is still as jammed in and stuck behind the jet and not going nowhere as it was yesterday. And as far as getting a lift with the boss over there, there's no way Lance is getting behind the wheel of even the Air Force videogame. So for now, if you're Judy, you just heat up some Nuggets and take them over to Lance where he's lying on the table and you make sure he eats something because sometimes he skips it.

So you might have guessed already but might as well know for sure: Judy ended up walking home. Which is a long way but not so horribly long a way. And in the morning she hooked on the school bus with Rita again. She thought of how Rita had to deal with kids in this bus all morning, the same kids who came into Funtown and tried to rip soap dispensers off the wall and use them as squirt guns yelling, MK-19! MK-19! That

made Judy sad for Rita. But then she realized Rita seemed happy enough, and she realized that it wasn't her job to feel sorry for Rita, to feel sorry for other people all the time. She borrowed a pen and paper from Rita and wrote that down, to remind herself. But then later she lost the paper somewhere, or left it on the bus, and she hasn't seen it since then. But still she remembered the lesson. She noticed again how all of the leaves were off the trees along the road and the trees all looked like worms that couldn't get back to their holes when the sun came out. All stiff and skinny. When they arrived at Hey! Funtown, Rita saw Lance's work and said: Whoa, nice signs.

And Judy said: Yeah, I know.

When she gets inside the Chalet, Lance is just right exactly where Judy left him asleep on a table. When Lance wakes up he tries to tell Judy this: Today is a holiday.

She says: No it's not.

He says: It's a mandatory day off.

This is nothing he hasn't tried saying before and she just ignores him because Judy knows tonight's a birthday night and she just walks away. She gets right to oiling Bill when she realizes Bill is plugged in. And on. But not exactly at all moving. And that Bill has probably been on all night. And this is a very bad thing that she has to check and double-check up to eight whole times. She feels it is unbelievable as anything. Like waking up with your asshole in the wrong place. Except more like waking up with a broken duck, the very same duck that was the only thing that ever seemed to actually work. She can't bring herself to come around to telling Lance for an hour or so. When she does tell him, he stares up at the ceiling and his eyes get watery and he breathes out and she can smell the dark parts of his guts. Then he finally gets up off the table and—big surprise—he goes and hits maybe eighty thousand buckets of balls and doesn't come back in until he's very very sweaty and still wearing the jeans that have paint all over them from yesterday and now also have a stripe of sweat down the butt and, come to think of it, how familiar are these clothes here, Lance? Pretty familiar. Pretty familiar from you wearing them every day, Lance.

As you might guess, Judy is pretty frustrated about the death of Big Bill. And it is hard to look at Lance who is walking around like a sweaty zombie, a sweaty zombie ogre that might either cry or pass out. So Judy goes into the old walk-in fridge to blow off some steam and takes a soft-serve ice cream with her. Of course she knows this is one of her bad habits of eating when she's worried but who wants to hear it? As she's sitting there, she hears her clock ticking. It isn't just the sound of the fridge. She gets a panic. One that reminds her that if she doesn't get married soon or have a kid she'll get drafted. She finishes her soft-serve and thinks about

her brothers and her dad and her broken mom. And she imagines a Chuck and an Alouicious and a Monty. And then she imagines a Lance. And some more Lance.

Surprise. Judy comes out a half hour later and Lance is passed out on the table again snoring. And tonight's a birthday night!

Judy gets him the hell up and moving around. He has a huge sleep in his eye that looks like a glazed doughnut hole. He goes out to sit in the gravel for a bit, underneath his jet. Judy is wanting to punch someone's head. Which she can admit is a bad thing to want to do.

But then, in some sort of a miracle, Lance gets cracking to doing more stuff, just like yesterday, including attaching seven strings of Christmas lights together, or maybe ten or twenty strings along the roof of the Chalet, and stapling them in with the staple gun. All Judy hears is staples being shot into the ceiling all through the middle of the day. Which puts Judy in a good mood. The kind of good mood which hardly even let her think of how much it was going to cost for electricity to actually light up all the Christmas lights when Lance was done with them, or to worry overly about the birthday party in countdown two hours and the Big Bill that was way malfunctioning to the point of being dead. But Lance seemed to have a solution for it all by waving Judy off and smiling in a solid-as-a-rock way every time he started to take a small break in the late afternoon, coming down from the roof and attaching a bunch of extension cords and wires and also pounding a beer.

Judy had a short me-time in the fridge again, this time with a Coke instead of a soft-serve. She did the dream where she and Lance were driving down to Orlando. Florida looked exactly like the license plates, all orange and green. They drove right into Orlando, the capital of all of Greater America. They got out of the car and walked down some beach. Judy and Lance were holding hands.

Not that you would want to understand that Judy wasn't real scared about the birthday party not going off. But just that she had a feeling that Lance was going to come through on this one this time. And she is a Positive Dreamer, too, just like Lance. So when she was done in the fridge, she waited for Lance to come up with something. And waited. As she was stuffing Party Surprise Bags full of every candy they had left, she kept looking at the dead Big Bill and then her watch and worrying a bit, then more. She even went and got a phone book to call a clown. None of them were home. And then she wondered about what those guys and ladies did when they weren't dressed up and making jokes. They probably had serious jobs the rest of the time. With suits. The kinds of jobs that mean you don't have to go over there. And mean you can joke about stuff in your free time. Probably they do banking. And that made her think of her bank

and her debts. Which made her worry. And she thought of what would happen if the birthday parties stopped—Funtown would end. She'd be out of a job. That made her almost panic, because she knew what that meant in terms of Welcome to the Country of Jordan and whatnot. So she tried to think of how to run a party without a Birthday Band. She tried to remember all the songs she knew when she was a kid, in case she had to do a sing-along. There was one about a rabbit and field mice. She wondered if she should take the van and go and buy a skipping rope or something. But she also kept looking over at the door and expecting the kids, but also expecting Lance was going to not forget about what had happened and remember about what was going to happen. Thinking Lance would come through that door and have a plan.

Which he did! By coming in with countdown five minutes to go and pulling on one of the Hey! Funtown T-shirts over his own sweaty one and yelling: It's time to rock!

And pushing over Big Bill, which cracked the floorboard and chipped him badly, and then rolling Big Bill behind the stage and taking Big Bill's place and doing a dance move. And Lance kept yelling: It's time to rock!

Right up until the kids came in, when he began to rock in a real way. It was a Positive Dream turned real.

Well Judy tells me it was actually the best birthday party yet. And because the lead singer Big Bill was actually Lance, he could keep kids off the stage with his feet. The kids were also majorly digging him. He gave them all low-fives and they tried to dance like him. Like he was a rock star, except one they could touch and throw things at. The kids still wrestled on other small kids but not with punching. The Party Surprise Bags were a hit and the mothers even got into it because, let's admit it, despite the ten or fifteen years booze puts on your face, Lance is a quite handsome man. Maybe even Dad material. Plus there was the food Judy made, like the onion rings and the Nuggets. Plus Judy's skills of keeping pitchers of pop coming, which starts out revving kids through the roof but by the end is knocking them out and giving a wide range of stomach aches that does the trick of sending them packing. When the light was right, it looked like the gnomes were smiling—Chuck, Alouicious, and Monty—and Pat Benatar even sounded good because she was coming out of Lance. It was the Best Shot ever, the very Best Shot of all time to be Hit With as far as Judy's concerned.

That night after the party and after everyone left, Lance did have many drinks and did keep the music playing and tried to stay in character as Big Bill, which was funny. And Lance did try to get Judy to dance with him on the table and did try and get her to have swigs of things and did sit down

later on and tell a story about Falluja that wasn't supposed to be funny and did get up for a final round of dancing on the table. And Lance did pass out again on that table that hadn't been wiped yet. Right there in barbecue sauce. But it didn't make anything bad or change how good the day and night had been.

Judy tells me she knew she had to walk home and Judy had the feeling that she would have liked to have stayed with Lance and got him glasses of water and rubbed his head and whatever but instead she made sure everything was turned off inside Hey! Funtown before she left. And she made sure Lance had a jacket over him and his Eye of the Hawk was poured out and that he was snoring not choking. And she looked at him asleep there. She hoped to herself that he didn't have Syndrome dreams too much anymore. And she tells me she also thought he was the most messed up hero she ever knew, which made her want to cry. Which she did, but only later.

Before she left, she went over and sat in the Humvee for just a minute with the keys in the ignition. And she imagined she was driving it down the highway, not at night with all the other widows out there drifting from one side of the town to the other with their possum eyes, but during the middle of the day. She turned on the radio to hear the stereo, all four speakers, and she leaned back and closed her eyes. The wind was tossing her hair and she was shifting into fifth and pounding the pedal. Someone was giving her a checkered flag. She was passing cars with other drivers in them so fast that they all choked on an exhaust cloud and looked very sad. Because they were slower, not because they were broken. But still, there was something wrong. There was no one in the passenger seat. She looked behind her and in her imagination there were three baby seats in the back, like one each for Chuck, Alouicious, and Monty. But they were actually empty. And then, the seats were actually not there at all. That made for a shitty dream, so she stopped imagining. And she wanted to be happy, because tonight had really been a happy night. So she made herself remember Lance, dancing. That made her laugh out loud. She wiped the dust off the dash with her sleeve and took the keys out and locked the doors. And she walked home and didn't even notice that what was lighting up the night when she walked away was the Christmas lights on the roof of the Main Chalet and not all the Positive Dreaming from that place.

When she got back in the morning, the Humvee was there in the parking lot. And now with Lance on top of it. He'd moved out there in the night. And had somehow lost two shirts. He was asleep and not noticing freaking at all what had happened. And the painted jet was there in the lot. And the mirrors on the new Hey! Funtown sign on the cages were glim-

mering. And the cages themselves were fine. But there was no Chalet. Nothing. It was burnt right down to the ground. No Party Zone. No Big Bill. No soft-serve, no PuttPutt, no walk-in fridge, no bar, no video games, no concession stand, no deep fryers, no nothing. Judy says to say it was a weird thing to see. Because it was this dead thing. This hole that made a bigger hole, in the way she might have told me she saw her life that moment. And behind it, all you could see was all the broken Amusements out back and the skinny trees. I'm just guessing that Judy tried closing one eye, then the other. She maybe tried turning her back to it and then turning around again to see if the Chalet was still not there. And she had to maybe sit down there in the parking lot by the Humvee and under the jet that was tilted way up in the air. And Judy told me secretly that she has never felt ever as strange. All her thoughts were sad but huge as anything, so they made her throat hurt. She knew when Lance woke up it would be a holiday and a mandatory day off. For good. And his hangover would be big-ass and dark as his Syndrome dreams.

After a bit, Judy began picking up stones and throwing them at the Humvee. They were pieces of gravel from the lot as big and hard as old Nuggets. They landed on the Humvee and bounced off the crap armour. Or they thunked off of Lance's head and didn't even wake him up. Off the Humvee. Off the head. The Humvee, the head. And Judy says she wondered: Are these the sounds a rock hitting what I love? Not that she knew what that would sound like. And not like she didn't.

A while later—it could have been a minute or an hour—she walked over to the Humvee and got on top with Lance.

This next part should be a secret the size of all Greater America. You can't tell anyone about it, because Judy trusted me with it, and in the end it was the best thing for everyone. It's important, especially, that no one tells Lance. Judy told me he'll never remember.

Judy sat up on top of Lance, sort of, and he was almost ready for what she needed, even though he was asleep. And then he was ready. She tried to hardly move on him at all. Even though she wanted to fix his hair, she didn't reach out and part it. When it was over, he had a peaceful look in his eye, snoring a bit. She lay there nearly touching Lance and felt how warm his arm was just up beside her arm.

Daniel Scott Tysdal

Zombies: A Catalogue of Their Return

for vance comeau

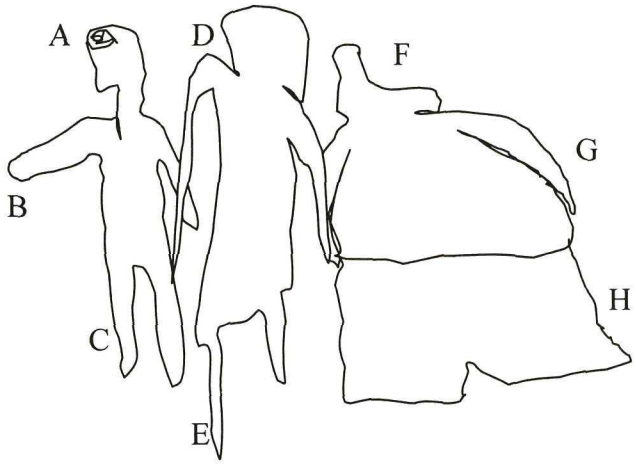
[A] The zombies arrive neither to represent the flow of capital nor to join cyborgs and man-eating sharks on the postage stamps recently released to commemorate only the bearable terrors projected across the last one hundred years.

[B] The zombies return. Rising up, experts suspect, against moribund comparisons to minds stalled blandly before electronics and flickering screens (with looks that barely aspire to the condition of the living dead). Local shop owners anticipate the promotion of a new clothing line. Senior citizens are thankful for a respite, however pungent, from game shows and Reality TV.

[C] After recess, school children are given special assignments and eventually join everyone from army man "A" to zealot "Z" on the now darkening sidewalk with makeshift flags and kazoos through which to breathe an anthem.

[D] Managing to navigate a world of only distances—no dawn, really, no day or night—the zombies make their first appearance at the base of the street. A pastor swears that the mouth of hell is overflowing while other rumours ripple from face to face. "Nancy told me some foreigners put a hex on us." "Don't spread lies, Sweetie." "Sorry." "They're only hungry."

[E] A theatre owner lights his marquee with a famous zombie aphorism, "The web will fail before the spider," while an ol' zombie slogan advances unevenly through the crowd: "We are the opposable thumb on the hand of the world thrown from being into the backseat with been!"



[F] And so the zombies dance—leaving everything else to offer up music. Their fissured gaits, the marvellous and decrepit rhythms breaking out around their jawlines, are hooks upon which a voice is perfectly mangled.

[G] Even those who showed up just to watch without pitchforks or torches, even those not dispersed strategically with rifles and well-oiled artillery, realize soon enough that what they have been circled by is their own limit and so circle themselves. The festivities end with a feast.

[H] Rumours once abounded in select archeological societies about the accidental destruction of a set of zombie bones. Discovered in the Arctic around nineteen-eighty, they predated all originary inhalations. When the ice in which they were preserved thawed, the bones dissolved in a flourish of laughter and moths. Only the dyspepsia of a collapsed star was believed to have been as frail.

Dave Hickey

Amusement Park Dragons

Pulled off the tracks,
two rows of amusement

park dragons rest
in the October grass.

For months they carried
the ohhs & ahhs

of children, the metal
bar on their backs

a prehistoric wing
holding passengers safe

in the sky: each glide
a metamorphosis of mining

carts, a precipitation
of pennies, of nickels and

dimes. A mechanic
polishes a season's worth

of sweaty prints,
each smudge of warm

evening air giving
up its leathery

grip as the moon
punches its own pass

through the dusk,
riding high above a circus

of lights. Before
he locks up, the mechanic

will tug them towards
a plywood cave,

and the dragons,
wheels sparking along

the pavement, will
huff out the last bit of summer

before settling
their wings to rust.

Airways

Boys have bird-souls.

—Don McKay

Which might explain why
we perched there, shirts off

in summer, looking
out at the miles-away river,

the hay loft doors swung
wide to nowhere but

down. Why we felt the need to
leap from such heights,

casting ourselves to poorly
stacked bails spread

in the yard below. Why
it was a brief flight, a denial

of parachutes, a c'mon
to the crows. Why

the fall sometimes knocked
the wind out of you,

woke some small bird
perched between your ribs,

swallowing and
coughing up stone.

Franklin Fisher

The Painter

That night, he acknowledged he had been hasty and set up his easel again under the bonneted bulb that hung from the ceiling. He looked through the rolls of used canvases he had stripped from their stretchers until he found the one of the girl playing the guitar at one end of a blue couch. He unrolled it on the floor and placed books at its four corners to keep it from curling back up while he sorted through his bundles of stretchers and found four that would do. He fitted their grooves together, shimmed them with a few wedges that had survived all the moving and dismantling, and proceeded to restretch the canvas over its new rectangle. He stood on the bed to do this so that the impact of his staple gun would not reverberate through the floor and cause the tenants downstairs to pound on their ceiling with a broom handle. The canvas had a satisfying springy tautness under his thumb when he had finished, so he stepped down and set it on his easel and opened his paint case. He had not slept last night, and today he had gone around bumping into things at the office, so he would paint only for a little while. His vision was too grainy to be reliable and he had a thumping headache over his right eye, but he would stop soon. Many of his tubes had hardened, he discovered, and were unsqueezable, but he found a handful that still felt plump. The viridian emeraud was still good, so he squeezed a goodly portion of that onto his hospital tray. The cerulean was in excellent shape, and so was the burnt umber, though there wasn't much of that left. He left a half-ring of dollops of different sizes along three edges of his tray, poured turpentine into his tuna can, found a brush that he liked among the dozen whose hairs were still pliant, and planted a daub of pale orange in the upper left quadrant of the canvas, directly on top of the haze that had been the fireplace, and only then noticed that he had put the canvas on the easel upside down.

An hour later, there were no traces of her and he stood blinking at a very odd thing. He had begun daubing with no clear idea to what end; he had merely wanted to see paint moving under his hand again, a harmless itch. He was curious and old habits died hard. Where the old surface had been dark, he had spread light; where it had shaded into lighter hues with high saturations, he had socked in earth colours and deep blues. On a whim, he had taken contours as he found them and painted their opposites: a sharp edge where he had found a furry one, a swoop where there had

been an angle, a solid where an absence had gaped. He had idly supposed he was daubing out an antithesis of the painting he had rejected, but no. What rested in front of him on his spindly easel had no visible reference to the thing it covered.

It was a large room and vague shapes were frozen in motion at several points in it—along the floor, which seemed to exist on two different levels, on the walls, inches below the ceiling—and splotches of brightly-coloured lights from no visible source floated between and among them, and occasionally caught one of the figures in broad illumination, revealing a head, say, as two fingers, and a knuckle of a third belonging to the upside-down guitar player he had failed to cover completely. Highlights left over from an imperfect closure of the overcoating he had just finished seemed to bounce off a cluster of brass instruments at the point of a dark focal node on the upper right-hand side of the canvas, around which the spots of lights seemed to hover in greater profusion.

It was murky and crude, but he had to admit, stepping back and squinting at it, that it had a whimsical charm to it. He would not like it in the morning. He knew as well as anyone that a single two hundred watt bulb with a blue shade was not an honest source of light to see by or paint by and that his grainy eyes could be cooperative in discovering nuances that were not there, and that his sense of sheer abandonment was at least in part a ruse to trick himself into doing something brilliant precisely because he did not expect to. Still, allowing for all that, he did not half mind the outcome of his daubing. He glanced at the dark window at his back and imagined a knot of people gathered on the street looking up at his lighted window and seeing him at work and supposing he knew what he was doing. He had long ago gotten used to the idea that the young couple in the apartment across the way sat on their balcony in the dark to watch what he did. He turned the easel to face their direction while he cleaned out his brushes and prepared for bed, and imagined their disappointment when his window suddenly went dark before they had satisfied themselves with the picture they were looking at.

He did not like it as well in the morning, but he had expected that. It seemed blotchy and synthetic in the cold wash of daylight, more like an anxiety to cover what was already there than to evolve a composition on its own terms. The patches of swimming lights, he now saw, were wild flailings of a man with a loaded brush in his hand and no place to put it. The murky figures dancing in the nearly black air more clearly disclosed themselves as hit-and-miss leftovers from the underpainting. Still, there was a flick of yellow coming off the bell of the trombone that he rather admired. He could remember the tactile sensation of putting it there and feeling the crust of the underpaint feeding up the length of his hand and wrist and forearm. And a flat green that glowed from one of the floors

appealed to him as well. It seemed to bind together surfaces that otherwise were spectral and, in doing so, embodied a spatial contradiction that he liked.

He left for the office intending not to think about it during the day, and for the most part succeeded, but at lunch he acknowledged he had been deceiving himself; the picture on his easel, once he'd filtered out the prankish glitters, was of a dark leather couch with a long attenuated nude painted on it, her torso creased where it left the back and continued across the cushions, her legs creased where they dropped to the ruffle. He went home without saying goodnight to anyone, feeling pushy as he left the freeway exchange, and found his own dim street. As soon as he walked in the door, he turned his painting to the wall without looking at it. He sat and sulked most of the evening, not much caring whether the couple next door watched him or not, and after he went to bed he conjured a fantasy of the woman in the next cubicle at work coming into his cubicle and curling around his body.

A few days later, he turned the canvas on its side and brushed a heavy blanket of grey over everything he didn't like, and found he also didn't like the tall angular creature he had defined within the glittering debris he had left exposed. It resembled a Jerusalem cricket in cloak and mask, an insect he had always found repellant ever since he had encountered one sprawled on its back in his backyard as a child, waving its fleshy legs. He scraped away some of the grey while it was still wet and, a day or two later, saw that he had created a gaping mouth filled with bright flitting insects and a uvula hanging deep in the background about to drop like a ripe peach. He took the canvas back off its stretcher, rolled it up, and tied the clothesline rope around his paint case again and stashed everything back under his table, pleased that he had learned wisdom at last.

In the morning, he acknowledged he had been hasty.

Contributors

Dariush Alavi was born in England to a Polish mother and an Iranian father. He was raised in his parents' countries as well as in Dubai. His short story, "A Gesture of Support, "was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2003. He is currently living in England where he works as a teacher. For further information visit www.dariushalavi.com.

Tammy Armstrong is an award-winning writer whose work has appeared in journals in Canada, the US, the UK, and Europe. She currently lives in Fredericton where she is completing a new poetry collection and a novel.

Terrance Cox is a writer of poems and nonfiction and a "general practitioner" in the Humanities at Brock University, St Catharines, Ontario. His published collections include a "spoken word with music" CD, *Local Scores* (2000); the prize-winning book, *Radio & Other Miracles* (2001); and a second CD, *Simultaneous Translation* (2005).

Jay Dolmage is currently a PhD student in English and Disability Studies, and he's nearly finished his dissertation. His fiction has previously appeared in PRISM 41:2 and other places. Thanks and admiration to Jim Dolmage, Mike Dunwoody, and Heather Stuart. He'd love to receive email: jaydolmage@aol.com.

Halina Duraj received an MA in Creative Writing from the University of California, Davis, and is currently working on a PhD in fiction at the University of Utah.

Franklin Fisher is a musician and writer in Salt Lake City and a professor emeritus of English at the University of Utah. He has published fiction in a number of literary magazines including: *Event, New Letters, Missouri Review, Iowa Review, Gettysburg Review, Confrontation* and *Alaska Quarterly Review.* A story published in the *Missouri Review* won the William Peden Prize. He has published one novel, *BONES,* and has recently completed another. He also plays classical and jazz guitar and is the instrumental half of a musical duo called The Cat and the Canary.

Jason Guriel's poetry has appeared in *Exile, The Dalhousie Review* and *Taddle Creek.* More poems are forthcoming in *Descant, The Fiddlehead, Arc,* and *The Antigonish Review.* He lives in Toronto.

David Hickey, originally from Mermaid, PEI, now lives in Fredericton where he keeps himself busy painting houses and building telescopes.

Sander Sarioglu is a graduate of the Alberta College of Art and Design's Visual Communications program. Her passions include film, music, painting, painting, and more painting. She can be found at www.sanderprime.com.

K.V. Skene has appeared in numerous international publications. *Only a Dragon* (2002) and *A Calendar of Rain* (2004) won the Shaunt Basmajian Chapbook Award. *Edith* (a sequence of poems on Nurse Edith Cavell) was recently published by Flarestack Publishing (UK). A long-term expat Canadian, K.V. Skene lives in Oxford, England. She has appeared in PRISM 32:2 and 34:4.

Daniel Scott Tysdal's poetry has appeared in a number of Canadian literary journals. He received honourable mention in the poetry category at the 2003 National Magazine Awards and was a national finalist in the CBC's 2005 NPFO. His first collection of poetry, winner of the John V. Hicks Award, is forthcoming from Coteau Books.

Tom Wayman's most recent collection is *My Father's Cup* (Harbour, 2002). Other poems of his are forthcoming in *Ontario Review*, *Event*, *Grain*, and *The Malahat Review*; a short story is also forthcoming in *Grain*. He has taught widely in both alternative and mainstream post-secondary writing programs throughout his career. Currently, he teaches at the University of Calgary. Wayman's home base remains "Appledore," his estate in the southern Selkirk Mountains near Nelson, BC.

Martin West spends his spare time wandering the Alberta Badlands. He has previously published in *Grain* and *Filling Station* and is currently finishing a novel.

Elana Wolff's poems have appeared in *Event, Canadian Literature, Grain, The New Quarterly, The Antigonish Review,* and *The Fiddlehead.* She has published two collections of poetry with Guernica; a third, *You Speak to Me in Trees*, is forthcoming.

David Zieroth's sixth book of poems is *Crows Do Not Have Retirement* (Harbour, 2001). Recent poems have appeared in *The Fiddlehead, The Antigonish Review* and *Grain,* and online in *Facets* and *Nthposition.* Harbour will publish *The Village of Sliding Time* in 2006. He last appeared in PRISM 22:1.

Laisha Rosnau: Writer

UBC MFA: 2000
Thesis: *The Sudden Weight of snow*, a novel, published by McClelland & Stewart in 2002.
A book of poetry, *Notes on Leaving*, was recently published by Nightwood Editions.
What's Next: a second novel set in the Yukon is in progress.

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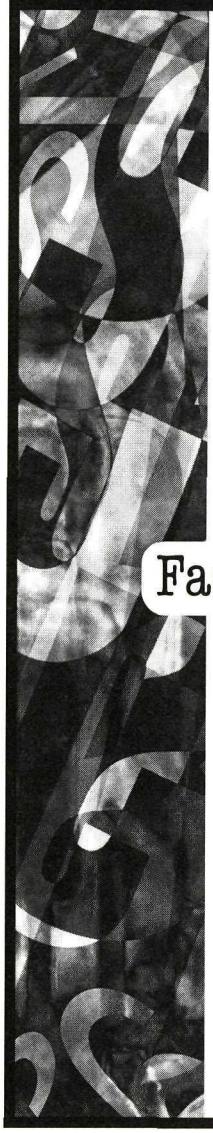

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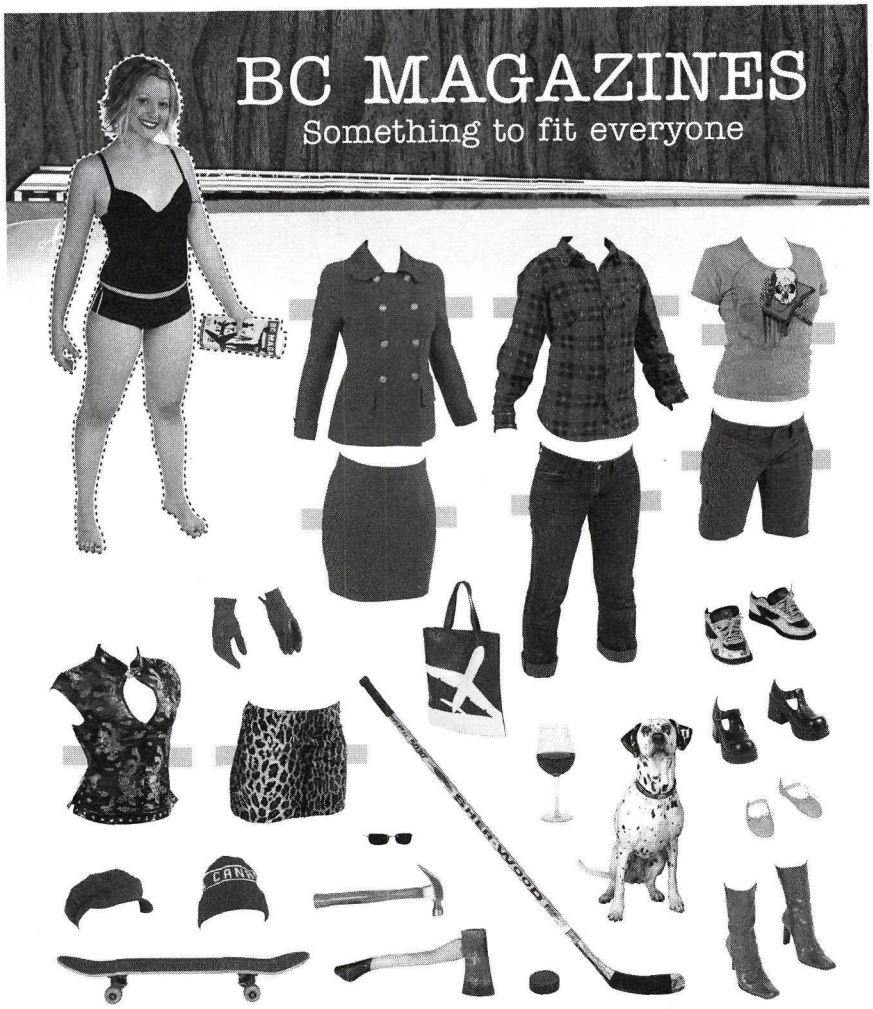

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44:1

She even went and got a phone book to call a clown. None of them were home. And then she wondered about what those guys and ladies did when they weren't dressed up and making jokes. They probably had serious jobs the rest of the time. With suits. The kinds of jobs that mean you don't have to go over there. And mean you can joke about stuff in your free time. Probably they do banking.

—**"Hey! Funtown" by Jay Dolmage,** Page 62

Dariush Alavi
Tammy Armstrong
Terrance Cox
Jay Dolmage
Halina Duraj
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