PRISM international

46:4 Summer 2008

Contemporary Writing from Canada and Around the World

PRISM international

PRISM Short Fiction Contest

Grand Prize – $2,000

Patricia Brieschke
The Taste of Persimmons

Runners-up – $200 each

Amanda Leduc
Evolution

Nadine McInnis
Persephone Without Maps

Diana Fitzgerlad Bryden
Hide & Sleep

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Elizabeth Bachinsky

The Hottest Summer In Recorded History

after Charlotte Bronte's Villette

Lisa Snowe was staying in her dear friend Jonny's rented apartment
in Montreal, an apartment belonging to Leonard Cohen. This was after
Cohen lived in California and became a Buddhist and carried on
with that young model (I forget her name) and after he'd lost
his millions to his corrupt manager and now, supposedly, owned
only shitty, yet charming, if run down, flats in the Plateau just off
St. Denis. Miss Snowe was reading Jonathan Ames and eating
alone in the evenings since her husband was committed to working
summers and could not join her in what was supposed to be Canada's
most romantic city, or at least Canada's most licentious city,
and everywhere it seemed there were beautiful young women walking
with their men and it occurred to Miss Snowe that she, being plain,
was not one of them.

Jonny was off in Russia and had recently written to complain
that his girlfriend, a young law student, was visiting her mother in
Albania and that Russian women were impeccably dressed, forlorn,
and terribly attractive. What was he to do but return to his bug-
infested hotel room for an equally forlorn "tug" as he was
so fond of naming the act of self abuse. So Snowe was feeling
feverish and thinking about the handsome lesbian couple
with whom she had spent the previous evening in conversation
about poetry. The butch of the two, like a good gentleman,
walked Snowe home. They walked slow or, rather, she walked
slow as he walked slow and they spoke of adultery; had Miss Snowe
committed it, would she commit it, and Snowe had to say no.
No, she had not and would not,

not in nine years of cohabitation though, on occasion, she had
been tempted. There was the tall red-lipped girl at Yaddo
with whom she'd shared a moment in the rock garden and also
the tow-headed boy with whom she had treasured the tea roses;
both of them met on a trip supposed to allow her the luxury
of sitting and thinking and writing, but most certainly not
fucking, and she thought how sad! How completely sad.
Jonathan Ames, you dig so deep. Only days before, she'd given
a performance at an outdoor festival in Toronto. That night, it had rained
but, by the time Miss Snowe stepped onstage, the stars had come
out and so had the fireflies. She heard her first cicadas
sizzling like a power station.

In Toronto, Miss Snowe stayed at a B&B on St. George Street,
not far from the University. The poet R. was there and also
a well-known botanist from New York. R. let Snowe
join him for breakfast on the balcon. A thunderstorm flashed around them
and he spoke of the holocaust museum in Berlin. He made gestural
movements over his croissant and she felt she must truly go
to Berlin. The botanist was not as she expected. Only a few years
older than she, he did his best to align their life experience, though
Miss Snowe still envied his Harvard education, his exotic
childhood in North Dakota, his lawyer father, and his mother
who only ever needed a high-school education. He had the kind
of body that looked as though he spent many hours at a gym
in Brooklyn. She did not

find the botanist handsome, but she did find him delightful,
especially when, once, late at night, drunk, he called her Ma'am.
Yes, Ma'am, he said. That night, they shared a cab and made
their way back to the B&B. It was very late and Miss Snowe wanted
to sleep. But, when she went to her room, the power went out.
She sat in the dark. It was humid. She was alone. Why did she knock
on that scientist's door? Surely he would not answer, but he did.
And when he did he was nude to the waist, and so neatly made.
She thought she would like to kiss him. But, of course, she couldn't.
What he must think of me, she thought. This awkward woman
waking him to tell him the power has gone. So she stomped away
to find a breaker and, as she passed him, said What does it matter?
All I need to see is the back of my eyes.

And, earlier that summer, she'd fallen for a novelist from Detroit
whose wife was three months pregnant and ran a sausage shop
in Boston. He was an ugly man, but Snowe had a love of ugly men.
All the ephemeral friends had left the party and they were alone.
He'd been a soldier in Iraq and now he was writing about the war.
Snowe ordered him to lace her boots, which he did, and he stayed,
and she wished him luck with his baby. Yes, he said, and held
his hands about a football's length apart. They're about this big, he said,
and then he left and she thought: ridiculous. What is this? Life is pitiful,
yet somehow still worthwhile. Miss Snowe wanted to thank him,
to thank him! But for what? She could think anything. And now, here
she was in Montreal, away from home and before her stood little
Sophie, nineteen. Little Sophie

with her long legs and her longer brown hair and her amputee boyfriend
who'd lost all the fingers on his right hand though,
fortunately, not the thumb. What a sight to see, him rolling
cigarettes out front of the Copa with his stump and his thumb
and Miss Snowe standing there, married. Married like her dear
Jonny had been married. Jonny who couldn't live with his wife
because he couldn't stop fucking other people. I was married
nine-and-a-half years, he wrote from Russia. But I fucked this person
and then I fucked this other person just after my daughter was born.
It's pretty common…and Snowe knew it to be true. She had no daughter.
At home, in Vancouver, it was thirty nine degrees. The hottest summer
in recorded history.

Shannon Stewart

Man Jailed After Sucking the Toes of Three Unsuspecting Women

He loves how they bloom on the ends of
peduncular legs, pink flowers exuding
sweet ecstasy. They bunch together,
like bees in a swarm. Wriggle and
flare when dismissed from shoes,

plunder stalks of grass, hot beds
of sand. He loves their shapes;
hammered, square, tapered, lean.
The pale line of webbing in be-
tween. Loves their fat pads,

the lack of fingerly pretension. How
they clench in fear, get stepped on,
stub themselves and hop about.
They're his sweetmeats; his
Turkish Delight. Powdered

and coloured, ready to bite. At parties
he crouches on the floor, watches their
rise and fall over oceans of carpet
in open-toed rafts. Imagines
a storm, five varnished

swimmers overboard, flailing. It turns him
on. There's nothing to do but wait until
madness siezes him and he accosts
barefoot women in the park. For
now he dreams quintuplets,

plays This Little Piggy, with himself, in the dark.

Aliens Coming Back Home–to Earth!

Rows of melonic craniums
descend from the spaceship.
We try to communicate
but those smooth pates
keep staring, black eyes
oppressive as an insect's hum.
We take them to our finest
museums and galleries. We
play music, sing arias, read
from our greatest works
of literature. Their hands flop
by their sides, slender chests
squeeze out a xylophone
of bone with every breath.
We walk them through the halls
of our best architecture, bring
them to the ballet, prepare
culinary delights. Green tongues
burrow into lobster shells
and roll peach pits about their
silent mouths. We wait for some
note of admiration, a telepathic
wink of interest. Nothing. We kiss
their hollow cheeks, tuck them
into beds beside our children.
Our pets curl up at their feet,
purr and ruff-ruff in dreams
of predation. The aliens
do not sleep. What can it
mean? If not displeasure,
then discontent. The next
day we try a different tack.
We take them on roller coasters,

dangle them off the face
of a mountain, wrap bungee
cords around their ankles, push
them off bridges. They tilt
their heads to one side, float
a bare inch off the ground.
We buy them french fries and DQs.
At night we roast marshmallows
and write our names with sparklers.
They huddle together, lobe to lobe,
eyes opalescent lakes. Again,
they do not sleep. We give them
warm milk, say a prayer, sing lullabies.
By the third day we are exhausted.
We rush about, short-tempered and rough.
We call each other idiots, drink too much.
We push our visitors from outer space
onto buses, hand them maps and some
spare change. Go see for yourself,
we say. Have a good time.
We don't hear from them for years,
how's that for gratitude? But one
night we catch a show on TV
and there they are—they've opened
a space camp for kids. A pod of children
zipped up in silver suits squabble
over the control panel of a UFO.
Our old friends look on, unblinking,
while a little girl tries to squirt them
with tubes of space food. They're
charging twenty grand a week,
for this chance of a lifetime, a voyage
through the stars. Parents camp out
on the pavement for days to sign
their kids up. We get a tour of one
guy's pup tent, nestled beside a mailbox.
He's number 321, hoping his boy
will get a turn before he's twelve.
The kid's in there, too, reciting
the names of stars from memory.

We turn off the TV and sit in the dark,
remembering those frail bodies
that came to us, pale sexless soldiers
out of the blue beyond. How hard
we tried to make them happy.
We floss our teeth, say goodnight.
Our dreams vast black holes
of missed opportunity.

Rebecca Schwarz

Havana I

The López Serrano
Thirteenth and L,
El Vedado.
Built 1932,
art deco manner,
North American pattern.
Remarkable stylistic coherence:
elegant lobby, bust of José Martí,
ornamental nickel-plated panel.

Pieces of broken seashells
embedded in the terrazzo—

Get a local to show you.

Havana II

Fruit and vegetable market
outskirts of El Barrio Chino:
truck after truck, a tricked-up
military convoy, loaded

with the same. Green tomatoes
spotted with red, ropy onions,
moulting cabbages.

And me without a bag
cradling a wan head
in my hands.

"It's on its last legs," I say
to no one I know.

Patrick M. Pilarski

The Lizards Hold Court at Delos

The lizards hold court at Delos.
Smug lizards, contemporary Delians,
scales scraping on sun-scorched rocks.

The lizards don't care much for theatre.
It bores them. Apollo tumbles
for their pleasure as they absently
pluck insects from drooping sway-grass.

This is their temple, their house of broken tiles.

Smashed pillars for flicking tails and thorny crests.
Cistern-lined stoas a place for quick tongues.
Headless white god-trunks
a good place for pooping.

Eyeskin membranes blink from a patchwork wall:
look up past the hill shrines,
the tumble-down agoras,
to a blazing, inhuman sun.

Chen Kehua
translated from the Taiwanese by Hsiang Hsu

Libra and Pisces

He went to the bookstore to look up Pisces.

He was a Libra.

Books on astrology filled a good number of shelves in the bookstore. There had originally been only a few combinations and variations, but now publishers were quick on the draw, adding in variables of gender, so that even just the Libra and Pisces combination bore an increasing array of possibilities. The subject of astrology is forever inexhaustible in any case, and as long as there are those who read and buy it, books can forever be published—everyone has a birth sign, in addition to blood type, sex, moon and ascendant signs, so these books can be put out to no end.

But he really wanted to get a grip on Pisces.

A Pisces in love, what is its score of compatibility with a Libra?

He carefully opened the book. Sixty-one points.

He was a bit let down, but eagerly read on.

Pisceans are smart, sharp, and, like Geminis, have twice the brains of an average person.

Pisces is a love sign, for the always encircling Pisces represents the soul's deep desire and fantasy for romance, the waves of turbulence in the centre of the maelstrom of love. A kind of indulgence ever oblivious to exhaustion, like that of a fish in water.

He was helplessly flummoxed—Piscean women have love as their centre of gravity?

But…he also saw: Characteristic of the flux of both the fish and the water

in the Piscean personality, Pisces is a sign that cannot settle or be stable in love. Drowning in their excessive pursuits, Pisceans often sink into profuse emotional strife and disorientation....

He remembered how she began "warming up" to him. It was then six months until her wedding.

They were colleagues. He was a few years her senior in the company—she had just transferred from another unit. It wasn't that he hadn't heard rumours about this woman being ambitious and careful to hide her smarts too. Yet on their first meeting his only thought was that this woman was rather homely and low-key, and she simply worked during work time, without any thought of inappropriateness.

His training of her went smoothly as well—she did not seem especially smart, or especially stupid, not especially active, or especially dodgy or shirking. Purely in terms of work performance, she was an impeccable colleague.

The only thing he felt uncomfortable about was her impeccability.

Even in terms of sex, she never flaunted her womanliness, unlike those other women in the office. Swarming around the centre of power like flies and mosquitoes, they sprayed their female pheromones like free perfume over the piles of men, making them gnash their teeth in frustration, as they no longer wore the pants, and had no skirts to put on either.

Eileen Chang said it well: power is an aphrodisiac.

Women who do not duke it out with the males on the playing fields of power using their "raw talents" must have sufficient self-awareness and restraint. But in matters of instinct, sometimes, is it up to women to decide?

He suspected her. At the same time he suspected his own insecurity.

Until one day. She was bringing a document to him in the midst of work. She leaned over. He was just about to get up. But he was sure. He did not get up more. He just stopped. He was sure he did not move any more. He did not try to get fresh with her.

He was sure at that moment she propped herself against him using her braless tits.

He wanted to recoil.

But then he immediately stilled himself.

The tits lingered on his body for about a few seconds, and then left.

He could not explain the reason for his reaction at the moment. He acted woodenly as if nothing had happened.

The image of her backside when she left seemed to impart no particular expression either.

He was stumped first—a woman who was about to get married in a couple of months....

And he did not understand himself—he could have kept moving while acting oblivious to it or retracted, pretending it was an error in movement, his own fault. But he held still, clearly indicating to her that he had received her signal. And the significance of her tits not having left right away, when she was certain that he knew, had the air of aggressive assertion.

Asserting to whom? Asserting what?

He was not her boss. He did not have the power she wanted—if that was what she wanted.

But the lingering warmth where the tits had propped against him remained undissipated in the nerves and senses of his body for a long while—even after work there seemed to be a mouth suckling tightly on that piece of skin.

In the next several days, he and she kept busy by themselves like nothing had happened—on the surface with him returning to his professionalism, and her maintaining her impeccability, when in fact he was still in a state of mental shock induced by the propping of that set of tits of hers against him.

He did not believe in his attractiveness to the opposite sex.

He was clear he did not have in his hands "the aphrodisiac of power."

He was subtly sensing how messed up all this was, and it made him even

more confused—

So after work he actually crammed himself into a corner of a bookstore garrisoned by Gen-Y'ers, and picked up the kaleidoscopic book, obviously for scamming little high-school girls, *The Astrological Guide to Friendship*—Chapter Libra *vs.* Pisces.

Libra is a sign that is naturally lacking in passion.

Librans are not frigid in love, however, only their emotional fluctuations are naturally low. In the face of absolute commitment and embrace, instead of returning the sentiment, Librans handle it with their usual detachment and cool indifference. Even when the other party feels unfairly treated, Librans feel completely blameless.

He thought, while reading—was he really such an annoying Libra?

But soon his doubts disappeared.

She was shortly promoted to his boss' position, still maintaining her usual "unspecialness." After the promotion she kept to the note of still being not especially womanly, and not especially unwomanly.

Only then did he realize his directions were completely mixed up. Only the air of threat in the tits when they propped against him was correct.

"Boss...," he would call out at work during the day, while the only thing going through his mind was the braless tits beneath her blouse that could prop themselves up against people.

He did not toss out that zodiac book that now seemed stupid to the extreme. He continued to peruse it after work—the picture of the Pisces sign swimming, the joy of a fish in water, smart, romantic, infidel....

Librans seem apathetic to love, when in reality they tend to over-romanticize and over-fantasize. He had a sudden rude awakening, as the book went on to depict the Libra losing its balance amidst the Pisces swimming back and forth....

What the Libra can never understand is that the fish swims purely for itself, amusing itself—everyone, have a look at the picture of Pisces. Within the reciprocal pursuit between the one fish's head and the other fish's tail, there is no centre or heart....

He slowly closed this bullshit *Astrological Guide to Friendship*. He contemplated the prospect of an astrology book like this—made from coarse recycled paper and imprinted with the head of a young pretty Japanese girl—containing such profound and accurate truths: human nature cannot oppose the stars, haha....

He walked home and couldn't help asking his wife, with whom he had spent every day and night throughout the years, "What month were you born?" Then he bought a second book.

* The translator has received permission from the author to vary this translation slightly from the original.

Maleea Acker

The Completed Object

"The completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect its depths and leave nothing hidden."

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Nothing with name
can be completely unveiled.
Ciscu and I in the orchard. The simple, sounded nouns
of apple and rose, the approaching thundercloud
of translation.
Nimbus blue like St. Eulalia's walls,
colour rising in reconstruction like a flood.

Behind the kitchen in his one room
wood and stone house lies the double marriage bed
separated by white curtain with red poppies. Something's passing
from his lips I'll never find
in earth, his rows of trees, the flamboyant cherry,
three varieties of quince grafted to the heart.
He says, all the year's wait
for so little fruit.
In the orchard—
something floats away down the greening valley.

I'm savage too in another language,
untethered, clear only on beauty or Latinate name.
As I also mine philosophy for the words resonance or wonder,
he'll be what I understand him, he'll be
very little in the end.

Pixel

The best formulation of the reduction is probably that given by Eugen Fink, Husserl's assistant, when he spoke of "wonder" in the face of the world.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Flying in snow and sun after the storm,
joy in my mouth like a peppered bird.
I am heading up the mountain
to paste squares of colour in the white
pixeled beauty of the slope, except I have moved
from protected village—smart villagers—to the windward side,
where sleds and skiers know to congregate
for most blown powder, most procession-heavy beat of wind.
And the squares loosen from my grip, swirl like petals up the slope.
A faint transparency of blue, with green, beige, indigo—
the painter, with camera at the balcony, signaling with her red sweater,
I'm chasing pure colour up the mountain,
and the blue of sky smacks down on me
like a palm, while the stick trees draw one another.
I'm faster than the snowboarders, who must trudge;
I weigh nothing, I am free;
nothing touches me but cool sun
and the sound of breathing. I catch them and pin them
with snowtacks, circle, watch for the signal again.
The stick trees lean in.
I'm made of nothing in this picture—
square of sand, square of sea, squares of sky aligned,
and a girl facing sunward,
no reason no proof
no outcome known.

Huertas de Marçal

Anna, the bells are sounding and the light
is light, rather than just what we see.
How can I feel at home?
They are your bells, Anna, and the cuckoo is sounding,
the mountains clear, the swallows returned. It's so blue
I feel something inessential caving my head.
The church window liquid, the door of my house red, and those far horses
your neighbours, your sheep just back from the fields.
I see something just now that plucks me.
Ciscu's pine sap of coal and dark smoke
like amber, like liquid that rises to the touch.
I've inserted the cutting, Anna,
into the wild rose's stem. Quitaba las espinas,
tied it with sisal, spooned the dark wax. The sky is too large
for this, what, this wing? A matchstick swallow
lights itself. The sun gone. Josep leaves, Ciscu will leave.
I am falling into your valleys, Anna.
Tan earth pelts the slate cliffs of Burg. Something's
trying to take off but can't endure the weight.
Wild cherry knotted into quince, the cutting
now higher than its stock.
He's smiling at me. We could
remake the world like this, these tiny insertions
of green, in wind, Goliara, record player bird,
playing, blackbird, playing, your bells,
Anna, their throats like flames.

PRISM SHORT FICTION CONTEST

Interview with Chris Labonte

Shortly after guest judge Chris Labonte chose a winner, PRISM *sat down to talk with him.*

Steven Spielberg, Stephen King and How to Pick a Winner

I didn't start out with any set criteria. As with any fiction that I read and consider for acquisition, I'm just trying to find something that strikes me—something with a sense of voice, something that I believe in, something that surprises me. Voice directly comes from character, and for me, character drives fiction. The winning story, "A Taste of Persimmons," had a distinct voice, and it rang true—this was a story that I believed, that I was interested in. I felt for the protagonist, although she certainly wasn't a perfect human being, but I understood her dilemma. The point where I was really hooked is in the first paragraph where the protagonist says, "When he didn't die by the end of his first year, as the docs had predicted, I drew a tiny grim reaper in a birthday hat in the margin of my diary." That kind of juxtaposition of good news with the grim reaper was very telling, very compelling.

It also knew the proper place to end. I remember Steven Spielberg talking about the screenwriter for *Schindler's List* (Steven Zaillian) and he said that with all the material and all the places Zaillian could have gone, he showed amazing restraint, and that was a great testament to the ability of the writer.

I love the invention of "Evolution" (First Runner-up) and the author definitely treads that fine line between Stephen King and literature—not to take too much away from Stephen King—but here you have a character that believes he is sprouting angel wings and you come away never knowing fully if those wings are there or not. It's kind of like *The Life of Pi*—you get to choose what you want to believe. To pull that off is really difficult.

First Place Today, Book Deal Tomorrow

It's tough for emerging writers to find book deals. One of the ways writers break into the market is to first publish through the literary journals.

The contests are particularly useful because if you win a contest, that's worth two stars on a resume, while publication in a lit journal is worth one.

A good example is Rick Maddocks, who is a graduate of UBC's Creative Writing program. He had won a number of prizes through literary journals, including the *Prairie Fire* long fiction contest, and made sure this was reflected in the cover letter he sent out with a few sample stories to a number of publishers. The letter and stories ended up on the desk of an editor at Knopf and, even though he didn't have an agent, his submission rose to the top of the pile because of his proven track record. He got a book deal and became part of their New Face of Fiction program with his collection *Sputnik Diner.*

For me, winning the Pagitica Fiction Contest in 2001 meant that I could pay for my cat's operation. The day after I heard that I won the contest, she swallowed four feet of string—a $2200 operation. Apart from that, winning helped me get a Canada Council grant, and helped me get three stories in *Coming Attractions.* Winning also boosts your confidence. The flip side, however, is when you lose contests, or you don't even place—which I've done—then you need to be able to just step back and not take it to heart, just get back to what is most important—writing.

Slashed is Even Better Than Cut

I remember being in a fiction class in undergrad and our professor asked us at the end of term if everybody could bring in a list of their ten favourite stories so we could exchange them. One of the students said, "Oh, do we have to? I don't even read stories." This was a short story class.

If you are writing short stories or novels, you have to make sure that you're reading those forms at least, and it doesn't hurt to read more widely. Read some poetry, because that will impact your ability to write telling detail, fresh detail and to write compressed sentences. Read screenplays and see movies to learn dramatic structure and what you can do with narrative. You have to be a lifelong reader and you need to find the time to write. Allen Ginsberg said that you'll find your voice roughly around the point where you've written a million words. If you wrote a thousand words a day, it would still take you about three years to find your voice.

In terms of a last piece of advice—use strong verbs. You really notice it when you read good fiction that the author is not scared to use verbs that actually say more than the perfunctory. To use the word *slashed* is even better than using *cut*, for instance. Verbs often do more work than nouns.

Shaping the Fiction Program at Douglas & McIntyre

In terms of having a publishing program, it's really important first to have a strong vision and then to try to find the sorts of authors and books that reflect that program. If you can create a program that people recognize and authors want to be part of, then the program does a good deal of work for you. We really want to find emerging writers—fresh voices, daring, adventuresome.

I often use US writers as examples of who I am looking for because the US has a much larger body of alternative writers—because it's nurtured—writers such as Jonathan Lethem, Amy Hempel, Lorrie Moore, David Foster Wallace and Miranda July. Increasingly I find that many writers and readers in Canada aren't reading Canadians; they're reading writers from the US and UK. Obviously, I think there's a market here for Canadians to be writing the kind of books that Canadians want to read. We certainly want to read Ondaatje and Atwood, but we also need to have other voices. Sometimes there's a degree of gravitas in Canadian fiction—lots of highly lyrical authors producing very melancholy works. I don't know if it's because we're a northern nation and we have this propensity for existential thought. But we're also really funny and inventive, and I'm hoping to find more of that kind of writing.

Where in Nonfiction Can You Write About Unicorns?

I just had a conversation with an author that we've recently signed to a nonfiction book. My email signature displays my two titles: Acquiring Editor, Fiction, and Assistant to the Publisher. Usually I will delete one of the titles depending on who I'm sending the email to, but for this author I forgot to delete Acquiring Editor, Fiction. He left me a voice message saying, "I thought that I was doing something a little bit more than just fiction."

When I called him back, and obviously I was mostly joking with him, I said, "You have to understand that from my point of view, fiction is the only thing that matters."

Fiction is dismissed by some readers, and by those that don't read at all, because they argue it's really not offering anything useful in life. It's not a how-to book, it doesn't have any historical information, it doesn't give you recipes. Often you get that argument from men—why read fiction when there's just nothing true in it? And yet, well-written fiction is all about truth. We can learn as much about how to live our lives from a work of fiction as we do a work of nonfiction.

It's very difficult to be a humanist if you can't understand how other people feel, and there are few things that let us understand others better

than fiction. We don't know each other, any of us, as well as we know great characters of literature. Fiction lets us get under a character's skin, get past all the surface things that prevent us from knowing each other, and allows us to have sympathy.

Nonfiction can do a lot of what fiction does. *Angela's Ashes* and many other nonfiction books read like novels. They benefit in the market from the "ring of truth" or "based on a true story" because this carries currency for a lot of readers. But there are some constraints for nonfiction. Can nonfiction really write about unicorns? Where in nonfiction can you properly write something like *1984*?

Fiction, if done well, steps back. It's not jamming its message down your throat. Instead it poses questions and theories about how humans will operate and allows you to make your own decisions.

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Patricia Brieschke

The Taste of Persimmons

I always knew it would come. The stalker, heedless and indifferent, waiting around corners to snatch my child. My boy could be carried away by perverts, swept into the lake, eaten by cannibals. I'd been rehearsing Beck's death every day of his life. On an ordinary spring day in Chicago, driving to work under the Magikiss billboard, sobbing for no reason. At the Biograph, weeping silently. In the A&P, reaching for a can of Chef Boyardee, overcome by an image of my dead boy lowered into the ground. When he didn't die by the end of his first year, as the docs had predicted, I drew a tiny grim reaper in a birthday hat in the margin of my diary. I kept him alive, and he learned to whistle, snap his fingers and blow bubble gum.

Full circle. The child who couldn't be protected—Ma came at me with the iron skillet, the cat-o-nine tails, the back of her hand—now the adult who can't protect her child. Beck might slip away now, taking my heart with him. I'd tracked him like a hound to keep him from disappearing. Even at twenty-four and 6'2", living with the girlfriend, Melody, in Bucktown, he can't escape me. He's mine to love no matter where he goes or what he does. I can't say goodbye to my boy and continue to live. What had Danny and I been thinking, bringing a child into a cold, viperous world?

I'd kept my gaze on his creatinine and prayed to his ailing kidneys. Over the years, I'd lugged brown plastic jugs of pee to the clinic, watching Beck's creatinine number climb toward the double digits. Protein flooding his blood with nowhere to go. Ten was the number on the executioner's door. Beck was now seven-point-nine and climbing. Maybe we should have listened to that urologist in the stiff white shirt and tie with geometric splotches. When Beck was sixteen, the doc plunked down a rubber model of a penis on his desk. "Your ureter's waterlogged as an overcooked noodle. I want you to learn how to catheterize yourself, young man. Every few hours, at regular intervals, completely empty that bladder." He handed Beck a Number 14 French catheter. "Now, let's feel for your urethral opening."

"You're kidding, right?" Beck's acne reddened. He twirled the bandanna holding back his long dark curls. "I'm not shoving a tube up my dick."

"Then you're on borrowed time, son."
"Fuck you, man."

"You do what you can do," Danny used to say. When Beck was born, I'd dropped out of high school, was working in a fertilizer factory and going to night school, where I'd met Danny, a dreamy Irish boy, bone-skinny and delicate. He'd been dismissed from his religious order at age twenty for chugging brandy in the Christian Brothers winery. He wrote me poems, I gave him sex. The poems held me tight, and I clung to them the way Danny clung to me. He didn't mind my Polish thighs.

I didn't intend to get knocked up, but Danny did the right thing. Two rings from Woolworth's, 99 cents each. When the Cook County Magistrate pronounced us man and wife, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. A week later, Danny got the telegram from his mother: IF YOU MARRY THAT POLISH GIRL WE NEVER WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN. When I met his mom up close, first thing she said to me was, "Now you're excommunicated. You didn't get married in the Church."

Giving birth was like my first accordion lesson. When they put the bellowy instrument in my lap, I didn't know where to put my hands, how to hold it. I had no idea how to have a baby, so I lay on the kitchen table with my belly heaving in our third-floor flat on Ainslie Avenue. Two little legs dangled out of me. I heard Beck crying inside. He didn't want to be born.

"Maybe we should've read a book." Danny cleared empty beer cans from the table until my tiny, damaged boy came out, a little blob of protoplasm, shiny and translucent. My first wonder of the world.

The doc says Beck's eligible for a transplant now. *Uprooted tissue* from a donor, he calls it. The kids from Cabrini Green will be looking for him—Beck's their favourite librarian. He has to take some days off so the surgeon can install a shunt for dialysis until a donor comes along. Cut a vein and an artery, splice them together, and insert a plastic tube so the equipment can be hooked up. Six weeks or more for the wound to heal before dialysis can begin.

Hospitals. They turn me rubbery. I lose judgment. Like when Beck went for his first surgery. Only three weeks old. The docs poked and probed, talking while he whimpered, as if my baby were a specimen for dissection. When he cried too loud, they moved to the hall. Beck screamed long after the docs left. I gave him gin to help him sleep. If it silenced my husband, it might soothe my baby. But he threw it up. I could have killed him. I wanted to kill him. A tiny, quivering, imperfect baby who I couldn't protect.

That first surgery took place just before Christmas. The snow was

heavy. Danny and I argued all the way to the hospital. Borrowing money from his parents had put him in a bad mood. "Couldn't they offer up ten dollars for their grandson?" We'd get more mileage out of ten dollars than a hundred Hail Mary's. They reminded him that he wouldn't have these problems if he hadn't married the Polish girl.

My parents offered a Mass for Beck's soul. I'd damned him by not baptizing him. "Punishment," Ma said. "The baby pays because his mother's a heathen. And his father can't keep a job." No concern of hers if I don't believe, and Danny lost the job at the restaurant. He'd started telemarketing storm windows for a small company on Wabash. While Beck slept we'd talk about how to keep people from hanging up on him when he cold-called to ask, "Is your house drafty? Are your storm windows letting in too much air?" He worried about Vietnam, but the Army wouldn't take Danny. The blood in his veins had been replaced with a concentrated solution of Guinness Stout. Like a sponge left too long in the sink, his body was breaking down.

Danny came to every visiting hour, hovering at the steel crib where Beck lay like a small snail. He drank from a brown paper bag until he hunched in a stupor and couldn't walk to the elevator. His friend, Colin, would come to drive him home. Colin couldn't look at Beck. "Shit, man, the poor thing. Breaks me up." He'd scoop up Danny and scurry out of the hospital as fast as his cowboy boots could run him.

One evening, when shifts changed and I was nursing Beck, who was burning up with a 105-degree fever, Danny fell down in front of me in a grand mal seizure, right there on the hospital floor. I was reading the dictionary—I never felt smart enough for Danny—and had come across the word *ullage*, the amount of liquid by which a container falls short of being full. I dropped the dictionary, and almost dropped Beck, when Danny's bones started knocking against the tiled floor, tongue hanging from his mouth like a sick dog's, foam dribbling into his beard. I screamed for the nurse, then did nothing, in part because there was nothing to do, and in part because I was on a distant shore, pondering the ullage, the amount of love by which my heart fell short of being full. The word stuck to me like a barnacle: *Ullage*, the amount of milk that kept my breast from hardening—the gray area by which my life fell short of its goals, my desire fell short of its mark. *Ullage*, the missing; *ullage*, the mystery; *ullage*, the disappointment.

In spite of the doc's predictions, Beck thrived. "These things are unpredictable. Your boy surprised us." Then he warned that Beck wouldn't make it to his teenage years, but I stopped listening. "One atrophied kidney and 30 percent function of the other. No kidney with that damage can withstand the raging hormones and systemic changes of adoles-

cence." But from then on I pretended the glass was half full. Together we'd look for the rest of the nectar.

Things should have gotten better. Sometimes when Beck went to the toilet, he left a bowl full of blood. I'd rush him back to Children's Memorial and think, *This is it.* "Just an infection," the doc said. "But next time, who knows." Danny was a rock of equilibrium with Beck, patiently waiting out his tantrums, but a rock that crumbled a little more each day. A pall hung over our family, like an ozone alert. "Beck's kidney isn't enough, now your epilepsy too? You're killing yourself. Six or eight quarts a day."

"It's only beer." Danny stopped his medication and went through a plate glass window during a seizure. Then switched to straight Guinness.

"A glass of beer is the same as a shot. Two dozen shots a day. And now fits."

"I don't drink during the day." He didn't start drinking until five o'clock, but then he didn't stop. And didn't eat.

"I can stop any time I want. An alcoholic can't, but I can." Five o'clock came and went, then six o'clock, seven, eight, and he drank nothing. Paced from the living room to the front door, sat down, paced some more, broke into a sweat, blasted the stereo at unbearable pitch, paced some more, ate a hot dog and went to bed. The next day, at five o'clock, he opened a quart and poured it into his cold pewter mug. "I told you I can stop, so stop bitching." Every time I heard an ambulance, I'd smell roasted barley. *Is he lying in a slimy river of drool and pee?*

On the day I told Danny about Colin, Beck shoved a ball of foil from a Hershey's Kiss up his nose. After trying to get it out with tweezers, and losing it still further up his nostrils, we went to the emergency room. Nestled in orange plastic chairs under a TV blasting *One Life to Live.* I cleared my throat. "There's something I gotta tell you." Never a calm time to talk. I was pushed to the edge as we sat there in the emergency room with Beck digging his finger in his nose. The ball of silver might go higher, get lodged in his brain, and he'd need brain surgery. Become a vegetable. I'd be at his bedside forever and never have another chance to bring up the subject.

"I've been sleeping with Colin." I talked like lightning, not wanting him to respond.

He shuddered and looked blank. Then chilled. As if I'd slipped a leaky ice cream down his back. The way I was feeling when Colin wrapped his arms around me that first time, like a warm towel, and took away the chills.

The slow exodus of cardboard boxes lasted all week. Danny stripped

the apartment clean of everything that was his, like sucking the scraps of meat from a bone. He wouldn't tell me where he was going or where he was calling from when he spewed his tirade: "You're no good, a deceitful fool. Not only that, you're a double-crosser. A liar. I never want to see you again."

I didn't want to get divorced. Danny and I were flesh become one. *Vinculum matrimonii,* he used to say. Marriage was a state of the soul. An indelible mark. Danny said I should have thought of that before I slept with Colin. "Maybe we could get buddy apartments," I said. "Like Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera." Beck trundling back and forth across a footbridge.

The spring before Beck turned six, we became a broken family—damaged, no longer expected to succeed. I tore open the envelope after work, leaving Beck trailing behind me with a bag full of groceries as tall as he was. Judge Charles I. Fleck had signed the decree. The devil's imprimatur. *It is therefore ordered, adjudged and decreed: That the bonds of matrimony existing between Daniel and Josephine, the plaintiff and the defendant, are hereby dissolved.* Seven years of marriage scraped clean, like the removal of dead tissue. I grabbed the grocery bag from Beck just as the Spaghetti-Os dropped on his foot. *Divorcée.* I spat out the word like a mouthful of tobacco. The State of Illinois had declared me used, a failure, needled with complications and scars. I felt like a dog kicked over the side of a cliff, complicit in the plunge.

Danny showed up less and less on weekends. Misery in the air, like drizzle, saturated down to the bone. I decided to turn the page and begin a new season of as ifs—as if we were whole and Beck had a perfect body, as if I had not slept with Colin, as if I had not awakened with my fingers digging into flesh, dreaming that I was strangling Danny.

The last time we heard from Danny, before the accident, he'd said he was coming at eleven. It was one-thirty. Beck sat on the couch with his blue jacket zipped, waiting. We'd already watched cartoons and reruns of *Lassie* and *The Lone Ranger.*

"That's him." Beck jumped when a car backfired.

"Beck, someone's tuning his Volkswagen. Take off your jacket. He's not coming."

"No! He told me he's coming." He tightened the string on his hood. "Daddy just went to the store. He wanted to buy candy for me, but a dragon ate his car, and now he has to wait for the bus, so it's taking a long time." He opened *Horton Hears A Who* and pretended to read.

"He doesn't show up when he says, he hasn't paid a penny of child support." *Not that I deserve it.* I unzipped Beck. "You're sweating in there."

"Daddy's just late."

"Beck, listen. He's not coming."

"Yes, he is. But he won't come when you're here. You scared him away."

"We're a family of two now."

"I want Daddy." Beck pushed his fists deeper into his pockets.

"He's not coming." I saw Danny's green eyes, white milk skin, and dark Irish hair in Beck and wanted to kiss him all over, then swat him.

Beck went to bed with his hood zipped snug around his face. "He's coming. He told me he's coming."

At midnight, Danny called. "The car broke down." Speech slurred. Glasses clinked in the bar where he was calling from.

"If you do this to him again, I'll kill you."

I worried about my mooncalf. A daydreamer who hoarded things, stashed foil-wrapped chocolate bunnies and Santas behind his collections of coins and bottle caps, and played by himself. Beck spent long hours with his war cards, memorizing dates of battles. School wasn't going well. His first-grade teacher shouted at me, "Shapes! I told the children to draw shapes, but your son doesn't follow the rules." Other children's drawings were tacked on the bulletin board, a raucous display of colored circles, squares and triangles. "Your son didn't draw shapes."

"He knows about parallelograms and trapezoids," I said defensively.

"No, your son doesn't even know what a shape is." She dangled construction paper from a folder in front of me. Beck had drawn a knife, fork, and spoon. "I said shapes, not utensils." She smoothed the edges of the paper. "I suppose we can cut him a little slack. Children from broken homes...."

"There's nothing broken about my family."

I went to a fortune teller when Beck was small. An Indian woman named Durga in a beaded dress who cooked curry on a hot plate under a Hindu figure with three eyes. She told me stories and said I had miracles stored in my body. Not that I believe that stuff, but you never know. I paid her five dollars and blinked to hold in the secrets. "Your son is ill," she said.

My breath skipped. *How long does he have?*

"Maybe he will outgrow it. Everything takes time. I will tell you a story about going to the supermarket when I came to the United States." She accented her words so that I half expected an apparition. *What will become of Beck?*

"I wanted fruit so bad, and so I went to the fruit market. But I didn't have money for even one piece of fruit. And so I flirted with the man and told him he looked like my cousin Bhaskara. He gave me a bag of fruit." She smoothed her dark braid and chattered like a queen, with vowels left

over from another life. "I took the fruit home and bit into a piece, and it was so astringent I wanted to die."

Will he live to be a man?

"I went back to the man and asked why he'd given me such sour fruit. He said, 'These are persimmons, you have to wait and eat them when they're ripe.' So I waited, and when I ate the next one, it was so sweet. I knew that this was a wonderful country, full of surprises. The world has tossed you a sour fruit. Eat a persimmon, and you'll never be the same."

Beck turned into a daffy cartoon character with a noisy brain and big feet. On the threshold of adolescence, he'd beat the odds. One million glomeruli still at work. I let out a hush of air, stored for a dozen years. But the doc's words burned in me: *He won't live to be a teenager.*

The day he turned thirteen, I'd worked late and hurried home to find Beck asleep on the porch under a blanket. The *Guinness Book of World Records*, stuffed with index cards and hand-scrawled notes, on his lap. He looked peaceful, my little pupa glowing in the light of the moon, as if with spinnerets he had wrapped himself in a sticky, silky thread, pulled in his feet, and would hang in wait until his skin split open.

"I'm not a kid anymore," he said when I worried about him hanging out with the wrong bunch. But he liked work. One summer he joined the Mayor's Summer Youth Program. Every morning at four a.m., he bicycled in the dark to St. Joseph's Hospital to assist the baker in the kitchen. I was frantic about the drunks and bums on Diversey Avenue. Predators in shadowy doorways, danger lurking. But mostly I worried about Cake Man. What was he teaching my boy, up to their elbows in dough and batter as they prepared desserts for unsuspecting sick people? Beck cleaned pans, scrubbed bowls and counters, and followed orders. At home, he read Hunter Thompson and talked about the Hell's Angels. Cake Man had told him about Freak Power and Gonzo journalism. I imagined him in dawn tutorials, secluded in a stainless steel kitchen, a cult room where cynical discussions took place, shot through with profanity and misanthropy.

Instead of playing Dungeons & Dragons and helping me plant impatiens, Beck was steeped in *Naked Lunch.* Jack Kerouac was in the bathroom next to the toilet. No good could come of it. When someone stole his bicycle, he got up even earlier and walked to work. He gave me his wages to pay bills and treated me to hot dogs, proud and defiant, the way I'd been when I turned over money from my first job to Ma to buy freedom.

He grew, and I let him. I hovered one car behind when he took the El Train for the first time. He got off at the Merchandise Mart, bought

fruit from a vendor, threw a banana peel in the Chicago River, and got back on the train. My tiny boy with the failing kidney had become a teen monster, gangly, crude and clueless. Half boy, half rutting goat, with a fat head jammed with stardust and lazy gait like a big-footed puppy. I'd hatched a baby adult, with the appetite of a pagan, the judgment of a larva and the invincibility of an abominable snowman. He'd stepped out of the egg like a creature who doesn't know to swim or fly or even to call for help.

For high school, Beck chose St. Ignatius Prep on Roosevelt Road. He called it an elitist, yuppie place, and wanted it clear where he stood—on the outside looking in. "But it's where the smart kids go," he said. I suspected his going there had something to do with Danny and his Christian Brothers, but Beck didn't take to direct questions. We didn't mention Danny's name.

He volunteered in the Thomas of Canterbury Soup Kitchen in Uptown, befriending the transients, derelicts, bag ladies and druggies. Inspired by his religion teacher, he went on prayer fasts against Sanocista thugs in Nicaragua and distributed petitions urging that President Reagan be tried for war crimes against humanity and the Sandanista government. Like a teenager in the Middle Ages, in the spirit of Ignatius of Loyola, swept up in the immediacy of Good and Evil, looking for buried civilizations, pondering questions of humanism and social change. Beck had this outward reserve and went on frequent mind-trips, like a little boy in theatre class, rehearsing a chaotic script. Sometimes he fell to earth with a thud, blasting Michael Jackson's *Thriller* on the porch, or settling in for an episode of *M.A.S.H.*, cigarette hanging from his mouth.

The teenage years went okay for a while, until one day there came a knock on the door. Two guys with guns at their waists. "FBI. Open up."

I cracked the door an inch. "Wrong apartment."

"Beck Ryan live here?" *A divorcée in a broken home with an absentee father. A statistic. They've finally come for us.* "Do you mind if we search, ma'am?"

I waited in the kitchen. The men charged out of Beck's room with fistfuls of orange, blue, yellow and green money. "Is there any more of this, ma'am?"

"Some red ones under Beck's pillow. It dyed my laundry."

"What do you know about the counterfeiting?"

"What counterfeiting?" I'd seen candy-coloured play money scattered around the apartment, but hadn't given it a second thought. Beck worked nights at the copy shop on Lincoln Avenue, cleaning the machines, straightening bins. When there were no customers, he played with the dyes on the copy machine, making Monopoly money. He'd gotten so good at five-, ten-, and twenty-dollar bills that he gave the fake

greens to friends, strangers, even a homeless guy who bought a bottle in the liquor store on Halsted. Fake money all over the north side of Chicago.

When Beck came home, the agents questioned him until midnight, making him account for every piece of paper. "Counterfeiting's a federal offense, son."

"It doesn't even *look* real." I threw up my hands. "At least sit down and have some poppyseed cake." Beck had gotten older, but I'd stayed in the same place, still wanting to protect him. He'd fallen beyond the reach of my arms.

At the beginning of senior year, Beck was on a roll. A semi-finalist for the National Merit Scholarship. He threw away the congratulatory letter. I learned about it glancing at a list of names in the *Tribune.* The Illinois State Scholarship Commission named him a State Scholar, with the promise of financial aid to a college in Illinois, which made me glad because I didn't know how I was going to pay. He threw that letter away too. "I'm not going to college."

"What do you mean, not going to college? How can you be safe without an education? You have to know things. Look where no college got me, minimum wage up the gazoo."

"I want to take a motorcycle cross country." He'd been reading that Pirsig book.

"You don't know how to drive."

"Maybe I'll join the Peace Corps."

"You'd need a degree."

"But I want to *do* things. I don't need a piece of paper. I need the *real* world."

He'd been going to the south side every weekend, coming home at one, two in the morning. He wanted an apartment in Hyde Park. I reminded him that he had no money, and the kids who hung out there went to the university.

"I'm sick of school. You don't understand. I *need* Hyde Park. The only quality thing in my life."

The next weekend, I stayed up waiting for him, flipping through college catalogs. *One way or another, I'll get him an education.* At midnight, sleet accumulated on the window. Would he have enough sense to come home before the weather got worse? *He could go to University of Illinois, take the bus, I'd pack his lunches.*

Three a.m. *No jacket?* He stood at the door, as if not knowing where to go or what to do. Broken skin on his lip, bruises on his face, blood near his ear. "My god, what happened!" Kicked to the ground on the El platform and left in the snow. The attackers took his wallet, keys, jacket, scarf

and gloves. I held him close and felt gall pumping through his body. Six gangly feet now. My baby. Helpless and raw again. *Please, let his kidney be okay.*

Beck recovered. I put college brochures under his pillow, left catalogs in the bathroom, stuffed invitations to visit campuses in his backpack. He protested. "I'm not ready for college." I wanted him safe, tucked into a little niche where he could be happy.

"You *love* history. The study of man and his motivations—all he's done, all he's capable of doing." *My son the historian.* A perfect fit.

"I can't organize myself. I hate school."

"How about an artist?"

"I have no talent."

"Of course you do. What about that drawing class you took at the Art Institute?"

"I was a dud."

"You're not a dud. You can be any kind of artist you want."

"Mom, I'm a failure. Don't you get it?"

"But you're in a percentile." I wasn't sure what it was, but Beck was smart.

"It's all fake." He held the Receipt for Contraband from the United States Secret Service, Treasury Department, detailing denominations and serial numbers of his magic money. They'd let him go without a punishment. *I have to get him an education. Danny will never forgive me.*

I'd found a brochure about a small college in the middle of the desert, an experiment in democratic living where students raised cows and chickens, built irrigation ditches and solar panels, and attended lectures on global peace from professors who came from all over the world. Deep Springs College. Perfect for Beck.

He looked at the material. "Twenty-four students? All boys?"

"You'll be working. *Real* world."

"I'd never get in." The application required eleven long essays.

"We can do it. You talk. I'll type."

On a cold Saturday morning, we sat down at the table to tackle the Deep Springs application. Describing himself: "I was born. This is the only irrefutable fact of my existence." I typed. He began again. "I was thrust into the world long before I was ready, due to my mother's overzealousness." *He hated preschool.* Then he blanked. "I don't know what I believe."

"I'm typing that."

"I don't believe that morality is relative. I uphold the Constitution, but have no framework to hang it all on. I'm groping in the dark. The only thing I know is that everyone is responsible. But for himself, each other? I'm changing all the time, impressionable. At times I believe one thing

and at other times something else. A constant state of flux. Sometimes I hold two opposing opinions in the same day, even the same hour."

I typed as he talked, every word. Tap-tap-tap-tap. Eight hours later, still at it. And the next day. He ran out of things to say. "What about your prize in the granola-making contest?"

"Elementary school was bleak. I'm antisocial. School is a source of constant turmoil."

"Say something positive."

"I look forward to the real life of a ranch, with natural deadlines that can't be ignored because they involve animals and people and existence and eating." By the third day, he'd talked himself through all eleven essays. Fifty pages. On the information page, he filled in mother's name and profile. Across the other side of the page, he put an X. Address of father: unknown.

The day the phone call came I woke up thinking about Chernobyl, imagining radioactivity wafting over Lincoln Park, poisoning us all. The FBI was in the alley going through our garbage, still monitoring the possibility of more magic money. Beck was at Drivers Ed. He'd stayed up the night before talking about moving to Nicaragua and opposing aid to the Contras through acts of civil disobedience. "I really think I should go to prison. Thoreau went to jail." He'd stared at Reagan's face on the late-night news. "I can't tell if he's lying. Maybe I should go."

"Beck, it's less than three months before graduation. Be sensible."

"For what? Do you think *he's* sensible?" What he really had on his mind: *Danny*. "Do you think he misses us?" A pebble in the water to stir the ripples. "Should I find him, invite him to graduation?" Before stomping out the door he grabbed stale toast and said, "Forget him. He doesn't deserve to come." Then again, "What if he doesn't *want* to come." Back and forth.

When the call came, I had no one to tell that Danny was dead. His head bashed in. Accident, the police said. Foul play, the doctor said. Waiting for Beck before pulling the plug.

Beck didn't come home until dusk. He'd gone to the revolutionary bookstore in Pilsen. Practicing to be a Marxist-Leninist. On the way to the hospital, he said, "Now I can't invite him to graduation even if I wanted to. I'll never know if he would've come."

The parking lot cost a dollar and a half for the first half-hour. I looked for a space on the street. "You can't even spend a buck fifty on him." His face convulsed. "I can't remember a single time you were within one hundred feet of each other that you didn't argue."

Danny's sister ushered us in. "He doesn't look like himself." Tubes everywhere. Mouth frozen. Heart vibrating with a mechanical pump. Reverent before him, Beck swallowed tears and smoothed the turban

that cradled Danny's crushed brain.

The nurse patted Beck. "Talk to him, honey. Who knows what the almost dead can hear."

"Hi, we're here." His words came out runny.

I stood before his broken body and sniffed for that familiar sharp, lactic flavour on his breath. Danny, whom I'd loved with a stingy heart. So small now. Wilted under the sheet. If I touched him, a barnacle might break off in my hand. A lousy tally: thirty-eight years, a few poems.

The doc zapped his bandaged head with microvolts to confirm that he no longer existed, then pronounced him dead. *How could you do this?* I'd wished that he'd be run over by a truck, flattened into the earth like a fossil. *Had I behaved, Beck might still have a father.*

The elevator doors rattled closed, sealing in the memory and smell of Danny. Beck stood off by himself, face to the floor. "Why did God take him?" He demanded an answer.

"What makes you think God took him?"

"Because God's the only one who can make these decisions."

I pushed my fingers through a hole in my pocket. "Why do you believe that crap?"

"Mom, can't you *pretend* that you do, just for today? For *his* sake."

We left for Deep Springs at the end of June, stopping in a casino for lunch in Carson City on Highway 395, where Beck lost all his nickels in a razzle-dazzle machine with cherries that wouldn't match up. The barren Sierra Nevada spread out around us, its dangerous brown cliffs plunging to cavernous valleys. Six hours later, past four-thousand-year-old bristlecone pines that grew an inch every hundred years, we approached Deep Springs Valley. A small blur of green, surrounded by cold mountain rock on all sides. "Awesome," Beck said. *This is where I'm to leave my baby?*

Down the winding road, the blur in the valley became a ranch, velvety green. Irrigated by underground wells, lush alfalfa fields fanned out over the oasis. Stone buildings surrounded a centre yard full of dazzling flowers. Beck settled in his bunk, unpacking workshirts, boots and winter clothes from the broken suitcase with one wheel. He met his roommate, received his assignment as dairyman, and was instructed to get up at three-thirty a.m. to milk the cows.

I played with the laying hens while Beck claimed his books for the first term: Marx, Engels, Plato, Cicero, a volume of Greek philosophers, some contemporary essays, novels by Hemingway, Faulkner and Vonnegut. All to be completed in six weeks while milking cows every twelve hours. The stone houses contained fireplaces, a grand piano, solid furniture and deteriorating plumbing, which the boy assigned to general

maintenance had to address immediately. A sign on the wall: *Labour goes on despite rain, hail, sleet, snow, frog plagues and vacations.*

Boys weeded crops, baled hay, dug postholes. Roosters dashed across the yard, pecking at goats and sheep. The boy in charge of gardening the previous term had planted all decorative and ornamental plants, so one of the parents was helping put in a garden of cabbages, onions, peppers, beans, tomatoes and garlic. The feed man was writing free verse on the glories of cowshit. A boy, who was moving an irrigation line in the wet field under the desert sun, called, "Do you know anything about pipes?" Air smelled of testosterone. *They need mothers here.*

In the night we listened to moaning. Twenty-seven calves separated from the herd that day. Then I separated from Beck, leaving him with seven professors and a couple dozen boys in the middle of the desert, surrounded by the mountains of the Inyo-White range, thirty miles from the nearest town where there was nothing but a small highway maintenance station. If he tried to escape to Lida Junction, he'd come to an outdoor telephone booth, a bus stop, and Beverly Harrels World Famous Bordello. Miles of sand to protect him the way my arms could not.

Beck's letters from Deep Springs went from confident to ambivalent to downright urgent. *I like being a dairyman, but you can keep critical theory and semiotics. Useless crap.* I wrote back, *Give it a chance. Don't quit before you've begun.* Then, *I like labour and books, but education sucks. School's not where it's at.* I insisted he be patient. *The homesickness will go away. Take care of your health.* Then, *Get me away from here. I hate it. I want to come home.*

I visited him in my dreams, trying to convince him that I knew what was right for him.

Don't you understand, I put you in the middle of the desert to protect you? Joshua trees, cows lowing at dawn as you stumble in the pink dark to the barn for milking. Chickens brooding and scratching out eggs for you to gather from the sawdust for breakfast. Tomatoes warm on their vines, brought to ripeness by water from irrigation pipes you've laid with your own sweat. Long quiet hours sitting in the classroom under a window with nothing but sand as far as you can see. Playing with ideas on clean white pages that can't hurt you. Sheltered by a starry sky that blankets you in safety. Tucked in at night with a book as companion. Don't you see, it's perfect.

Beck came home on a brief break, discontent in his frayed jeans and red flannel shirt, curly hair flattened under a bandanna. "I'm miserable. If I stay there, I'll kill myself." He scraped dirt from under his fingernails. I took him to see *Hoosiers* and returned him to California.

As I put together a care package to send to Beck, his final letter arrived. *Dear Mom, Please listen to me. You must know by now that I don't care about academics. I thought of leaving at the conclusion of this term to go to Los*

Angeles and work in a factory. Or to San Francisco to work in the Mission District. I've chosen, after careful consideration, to enlist in the Army. I don't ask your blessing. It's time for me to be a man. Your son, Beck.

On the day of Beck's army physical, I baked a pound cake with extra raisins. After they rejected him, we'd focus on a sensible goal, like enrolling at University of Illinois. He returned from recruitment with an envelope full of documents. "Done. I report to Fort Dix in two weeks."

"Not possible. Didn't they ask about your medical history?" Powdered sugar billowed over the counter, settling fine white dust on Beck's head.

"Sure. But everything's cleared up now."

"Since when? You have partial function of one kidney. They didn't see your scars?"

"Yeah. But it's cool now. Don't worry about me."

"It's *not* cool."

The day Beck left for basic training, I ate a pound of licorice, a half gallon of ice cream and seven chocolate doughnuts. Nothing could blunt the horror of it. Beck in the Army. "You'll be kicked in the kidney and they'll make you carry a gun. *Nobody's* child should be trained to fight."

"Somebody has to defend the country, Mom."

"Why? They want to take us over and call us Russian, let them do it. We'll still be alive."

"Drinking vodka. Mom, maybe it'll be good for me. This is what I want."

"Over my dead body."

At the recruitment center I demanded my son back. "You have no right to him. His kidney is sick. He can't do sit-ups. You'd know that if you did a proper physical."

A young man in perfect uniform escorted me to the door. "Ma'am, you have no business here."

Several days later, a letter came from Captain John Barrecchia, Commander for C Company, first Battalion, 26th Infantry, addressed to *Dear Family Member. Your soldier has been assigned to my company.* Enclosed was a list of Beck's basic training subjects: Rifle Marksmanship; Nuclear, Biological, Chemical Training; US Weapons; Day and Night Defensive Firing; Civil Disturbance Training. The list got worse. I could do nothing now to make him safe.

I called Senator Simon, then Senator Dixon, leaving thirteen messages at the Senate Office Building in Washington, until a message came from an officer at Fort Dix. *Your soldier should not be in the Army. He'll be sent home immediately on a medical discharge.*

Unable to sleep now, Beck spends hours on the Internet, reading horror stories of dialysis disasters. Creatinine's climbed another point. Three

days before the doc was to put in the shunt, Beck adopted a dog. No matter that he already has the live-in girlfriend and four cats. Trouble strikes, get another pet. It's a jittery creature. Part Yorkie, part overweight rat. Scheduled to die by lethal injection. The clerk at the pound said, "Take any other dog. If the *owner* requests it be put down, you know it's a *bad* dog." Beck persisted, as if begging for his own life.

His name is Chance. "You'd want someone to give you a break." Beck gave the dog homemade organic treats. "Maybe he's misunderstood. They say he only speaks Spanish. *Bien, perrito.*" The beast attacked Beck savagely on the arm.

I didn't expect Beck to do the rational thing, return the dog to the shelter. Or take him out to Du Page County and leave him in the woods with fifty pounds of dog chow. "You wouldn't abandon a child *you* adopted." He tried submission training. Down on the floor in his overalls, slipping the dog tiny bits of food through his muzzle.

"Shoot him! Put him out of his rabid misery. Your life's at stake, Beck." These days he doesn't listen to me much. It's all about Melody.

"Your mother's downright inhumane." Melody protected Chance, as if I were a dog murderer. *I'm not going to make a good mother-in-law.*

The bite festered, turning red, purple and black. It oozed and swelled. The vascular surgeon tried vein mapping and ultrasound but finally told Beck, "It's impossible. I can't make a fistula in a mangled arm." Creatinine climbed another point.

They're still trying to find an access site to start dialysis. The surgeon recommended a catheter through the neck, but Beck refuses hospitalization. No access site, no dialysis.

I'm beside myself. "Now what? Where are you on the transplant list?"

He picks at his chin fuzz. "I can't get on the list until I'm on dialysis. Weird policy."

"You're not even on the list!" Once his name's in the computer, the average wait in our state is seven years. Not enough willing cadavers. "What're we going to do?"

Beck still goes to work, even with the nausea, dragging from the El train to reference desk like a man washed ashore, resting against buildings along the way. Nights he shivers under blankets on his laptop, searching: The Nephron Information Center. Renal World. Brazilian Kidney Transplant Registry. Support groups. He scours online auction sites and classified ads. Bidding for one kidney rose to almost six million dollars. A hoax. The government made it a crime to sell organs. Bones are okay. For educational purposes. Creatinine climbed another half point.

We'll go foreign. Surely someone will sell us a kidney in Pakistan. I'll

raise money by selling other body parts. I checked the list. Blood? Possibility. Danny got fifteen dollars for a pint of plasma before his blood turned to alcohol. Hair? Too short, no time to grow. Eggs? Too old. Breast milk? Even if I figured out a way to get it pumping, still only 25 cents an ounce. Not much adds up. Why couldn't Danny have waited to die? They took his vital organs and loads of skeletal, muscular, cardiac and skin tissue. He could have saved *something* for Beck.

In three weeks Beck shrunk thirty pounds. Pale and brittle now, his feet all swollen. His body mashy with fluid. No urine output. Blood pressure dips and skyrockets, chills rattle his bones. His ailing kidney, in a feverish but futile effort to cleanse, just gave up. The surgeon removed the dead kidney. "I'm going to install a chest catheter, dialyze him immediately." The tube stuck out near the right side of his neck. Blood spilled from him like paint. No matter what they did, he wouldn't stop bleeding. They draped bleached white towels over the red river.

At his bedside, Melody offered sips of water from a plastic cup, monitoring the catheter, massaging his feet. "Can I get you anything, honey, fluff your pillow, read to you?" We took turns so she could go to the bathroom to weep, then all over again. "Is the sun in your eyes, honey? Would you like a square of chocolate?" I held his hand, focusing. *As long as I have anything to say about it, you will not die.* I'd keep him alive by brute force.

Beck left the hospital, weak and drab-skinned but alive, to begin dialysis at the outpatient clinic. While Melody got the car, I waited in the lobby, remembering when Danny died. His mother had hugged me, as if I weren't Polish anymore. I couldn't remember why I hadn't kept in touch, why she didn't like me. We were all older, better, less ethnic.

At night I dreamed of Danny. "We could've had both your kidneys. Backup."

"I'm sorry. You know if I were here, I'd hold nothing back."

"Dead too soon. Even though I couldn't wait to kill you."

"Nothing to show for my life but Beck. And a few poems."

"I'm so sorry about Colin. I was afraid, didn't know where to turn."

"It's okay, Josi. You do what you can do. I was a slug next to you. Even now, you get to give him the gift, and I'm dead."

"I'll tell him it's from both of us."

A plump, brown-skinned woman in pastel pink scrubs squirted Aquasonic gel on my abdomen. Sucking a LifeSaver, she moved the transducer back and forth, exuding sweetness. I listened for the high-frequency sound waves from the ultrasound machine reflecting off my kidney. A bean-shaped organ the size of my fist, hovering in the back of my abdomen. Only five ounces, four or five inches long. Like a small

fetus, reddish brown head bowed on its body.

"Relax, honey, you're not going to die."

How do you know? A million filtering glomeruli, housed in nephrons, would leave my body with the kidney, along with a 16-inch ureter. Would they leave the adrenal gland?

"A miracle, these kidneys. Imagine, honey, filtering four hundred and twenty-five gallons of blood a day."

Will I only be able to circulate, say, 212 now? What about the balance of salt and water, the regulation of blood pressure? I was about to lose a piece of me. Would I feel pings and throbs where the kidney used to be? Back up with waste? *From now on, no one can hug me. Fingers might break through the skin and plunge into the dark hole where my kidney once lived.*

I stopped thinking for fear the technician would hear my thoughts. The bioethics committee wouldn't allow someone to give up a kidney if she felt possessive about it. I'd present myself as a tidy being, not an emotion out of place.

I passed the chest X-ray, 24-hour urine, glucose tolerance, EKG, IVP, MRI. A benign cyst in my left kidney, but everything okay. Melody wanted to give Beck a kidney, too. "We're starting our life together. This'll be my wedding present." But she wasn't a match. Beck and I weren't a perfect fit, either, but we'd always been a little out of sync. Blood types compatible. Tissue types 50-50. We tallied on four out of six antigens. Cross-matching was a go.

In preparation for the day of surgery, I cleaned the insides of cabinets, vacuumed the rugs, changed the sheets on the bed. Old magazines to recycling, old shoes to Goodwill. I organized my drawers and considered whether to give Beck the scrapbook I'd made for him. Danny and me on the first page, holding him—Melody and Beck on the last. Ma called. "I'll pray for you, Josi. I'll pray all night. Aunt Mary'll pray all day. Keep you covered." *Now I'll die for sure.*

Days before surgery, I began to eat. As if storing for a long trip. A twelve-egger cake, dense and heavy. Double Whopper with cheese. A pound of red licorice. Spaghetti. The surgeon said Beck and I could eat until midnight. When the clock struck twelve, I put down my fork and felt a seiche of emotion that had been building my whole life. As if someone had removed the mute from a tuba. I stayed up and repotted the dracaena, spindly and yellow. Danny had bought it off the sale rack at Woolworth's the day Beck came home from the hospital for the first time.

Too antsy to sleep, I read the dictionary, immersed in the "Os": *oafo, obambulation, obnubilate, oubliette.* I folded dishtowels under the fluorescent light in the kitchen, then tiptoed to the tiny bedroom, where Beck and Melody were staying, and watched my boy sleep, wrapped in

Melody's arms on the green futon, until the sky became soft and pink. If I didn't have you, I'd have to make the people of the world my children. I'd have to go to Africa and love the starving babies, kiss and embrace lepers, feed drug addicts in a shelter. I'd have to love somebody or die.

Packing for the hospital, I included the rock that Beck had found at Fullerton Beach when he was seven. The size of my palm, smooth and curved like a kidney in profile. "Look," I'd said as waves washed over my feet, "a kidney bean."

He bounded out of the water and turned it sideways. "No, a heart."

The day of surgery. I walk with Beck and Melody to the Transplant Center on Ohio Street, scraping licorice from my teeth. Past a crowded bagel shop, newsstand, cleaners and hardware store. Morning traffic hums. At the greengrocer, an abundance of spring bouquets spills onto the sidewalk. For a moment, I believe that a great force hovers in the universe that can part rivers, grant favours, spare the suffering of human beings.

To Billing first. Dozens of people in plastic chairs, awaiting direction. Desks laden with files. Computers spitting out forms. A frazzled clerk tells a woman in a feathered hat that they don't take her insurance. "But I need my goldbladder out. The stones are getting bigger." Suddenly I want prayers and well wishes. Not a ceremony of shuffling papers, forgetting of names, with no toasts or offertory cups. I stomp my foot in front of the clerk. "Is there nothing sacred about the transfer of a human organ from one body to another?"

We end up in plaid gowns side-by-side on steel gurneys. Beck calculates how many steps between his surgical suite and mine. "Which surgeon will work faster?" I pin a note to my gown for the doc: Take one kidney only. Leave everything else alone. They move Beck down the hall. I keep my eye on him. His legs, hairy and mannish, trail over the side of the padded table, the way they dangled out of me on the day of his birth. I remember what Danny said when we first met, that my glass was half empty. I'd spent years pondering the ullage, the amount by which my love fell short. Now my cup is full of hope.

I lay on the gurney forever. What if he doesn't take care of it, if he stops his immunosuppressive drugs or kills himself another way, with alcohol like Danny? Let go! Can't hold on to a body part that'll be someone else's to do with as he wishes. I see him standing in the doorway, five years old, trying to muster the courage to run across the living room to my bedroom. What if I don't wake up? Is it enough to have had a life, slipshod and struggling? To have loved so imperfectly?

On the operating table, waiting for the magic dust to swallow me, I feel my belly. My empty womb remembers sheltering Beck. The way he nuzzled me, fed off me, swelled me. He moved his tiny fist inside me,

the wonder of that touch following me down all my days. Beck, my boy, soon to be bound to me now by a million nephrons. Cut me open, scoop out the floating kidney bean, and pass it on to my boy so he can swim a while longer.

The surgeon makes the first incision. I'm pulled along on a wave. I ride it with grace, surrender to its beauty and momentum. The sounds are garbled, a fugue of shaman incantations. I'm going under, ready to drown. I hear Danny's voice, *Do what you can do.* I bite down and taste the rush of ripe persimmon, bits of sweetness everywhere, scattered in the cresting wave, and I'm cresting with them, floating in a sea of miracles.

Amanda Leduc

Evolution

Sunday

The truck crumples your cat like paper, but when you touch her, something surges through your hands and suddenly she's no longer dead. Ignore the shouts of the terrified boy and cradle her body, unable to believe the impossible even though your hands are the ones that brought her back from…wherever. One moment she's broken on the side of the road, the next moment whole and blinking at you through a mass of matted fur.

"It's fine," you say. You avoid the driver—a youngish mother, her eyes huge with guilt—and speak directly to the boy, your hands around Chickenhead, your fingers throbbing with alien power. Your wings ache in the chill of the early evening air. "We didn't think so, but she's fine."

"I saw the blood," he says. He has stubborn hair. He might grow up to argue with you one day in your class, if you're still teaching.

"It was a mistake." You can't think of any other way to say it. "I thought so too—but look." And you let Chickenhead go, and clench your hands to stop the shaking. She drops lightly to the ground and saunters over to the boy, each step luxuriant, sleek. Wallowing in movement. You can hear her purr from five feet away.

"She's okay," says the boy. He doesn't quite believe it. He holds out a hand and the cat rubs against it, good little whore that she is. "What's her name?"

"Chickenhead," you say. The mother laughs. Although it might be time for something new, now—a name to mark the occasion. Jezebel, your born-again cat.

"Chickenhead?" the boy repeats. If he can see the wings, he's not letting on. "What kind of a name is that?"

"I don't know," you say, perfectly honest. "I was high when I named her. It was funny, at the time." You watch out of the corner of your eye as his mother rolls her eyes.

"Aidan," she says. "We should go."

The boy nods, but he doesn't get up. "What're those rips in your shirt for?"

"These?" You shrug and point a lazy hand, careful not to touch the

wings. There's your answer, right there. "It's just an old shirt."

"Aidan," the mother says again. "You're going to be late."

You are tempted to ask what he'll be late for, just to keep the two of them there and talking. Instead, you whistle, and Chickenhead jumps out of the boy's arms and saunters back over to you. You scoop her up and stand, then nod to the boy and his mother as they climb into their SUV. Off they go—piano lessons, karate, a photo shoot, whatever. Ten seconds to the end of the street, and then the truck turns and they're gone.

You stand on the sidewalk until you can't hear their retreat anymore, Chickenhead purring low against your ribs. There is blood on the asphalt. Blood, and a few clumps of dark fur. The wind flaps against the holes in the back of your shirt.

"Well," you say, to no one in particular. "What happens now?"

Chickenhead, bathed in light, keeps on purring. She turns on her back and stretches her legs so that her claws catch your wings, which are white now, the feathers long and hard. Unfurl them as you stand at the end of your driveway—they are six feet across, maybe more. Flex your shoulders and the wings flap hard against air. You rock slowly on the balls of your feet, but it's not enough. Not yet. Look up at the empty sky and then down. Cloudy. Almost nighttime. The air is cold, and the only light on the street comes from you.

Saturday

The day before the accident, give in (finally) and cut holes in all of your shirts. Chickenhead watches from the bed as you run your scissors through the blue plaid sweater from Julie, the pink silk shirt (how they laughed, all your friends—but pink is in, and who's laughing now?) that you bought at the ridiculous suit store on Robson. The rugby shirts and the V-neck sweaters that you had some of your students buy for you earlier in the year, your finger no longer quite on the "it" pulse of the world. A system that suited you all—your cash, their bemused fashion expertise. Wasted, now, with every pull of your scissors.

Stop when you get to the linen shirt that would have seen you through the wedding. High time for coffee. Maybe even a morning stroll.

No one uses the garden this early on a Saturday morning—take Chickenhead out with you and watch as she stalks bugs in the grass. The wings are almost long enough to touch the ground today. They bounce softly in the air with each step of your slippered feet. As you walk around the pond, flex your shoulders and watch your wings unfurl in the water. A gift, said the priest. A gift, and it's not even Christmas.

When you get back inside, call Julie, even though you know it's a bad idea. You're not even drunk. Move to hang up when a man answers the phone, but then you cough and your anonymity is gone.

"Rob," he says.

"Derek. Can I talk to Julie?"

"It's pretty early," he says, as though you don't know. "She's still sleeping. I can give her a message, if you want."

"Sure." You stop for a moment, and think. "Tell her the church still smells the same."

"Okay." If he finds this strange, he doesn't say anything. "You have a good day, Rob." And then he hangs up the phone.

You're supposed to hang up the phone. You, in point of fact, are supposed to be the one sleeping beside Julie. Instead you listen to the dial tone for a moment more and then click the phone off. Chickenhead, who has happily adjusted to the tuna juice—you are now the only person in this household losing weight—glares at you from where she sits, concentrated over her food.

"I am *trying,"* you tell her. Shake the phone at her for emphasis. But threats from you are laughable at best—she is impassive, bored, infinitely superior. She licks a paw as you watch her and her eyes say *pussy,* as plain as day.

Friday

End the day at school with a one-on-one conference, you on one side of the desk, Emma on the other.

"You're not going to tell anybody?" is the first thing she says.

"There's nothing to tell. No one will believe me." Pause. "Are *you* going to tell anybody?"

This makes her laugh. "What makes you think anyone will believe me if they're not going to believe you?" Then she stops, and she picks at the peeling wood on your desk. There's a new deference in her face that you don't like. "Are you going to leave?"

"I'm thinking about it," you say. "Maybe I'll go on a road trip." The idea is strangely appealing. You and Chickenhead and your ridiculous, souped-up Jetta. Provided, of course, that the wings don't block your rearview mirror. "A pilgrimage."

"Where would you go?"

"I have no idea." The word *pilgrimage* makes you think of two things: Mecca and Memphis. Hot sun and fervour and praying five times a day, and then Elvis. Except that you don't have the cash for Saudi Arabia, and you're not really a Graceland kind of guy. And a road trip along the

Sunshine Coast with your cat doesn't exactly reek of spiritual wisdom. Taking God's gift for a spin, that's all that would be.

"I have something for you," Emma says. She reaches into her bag and pulls out what looks at first to be a bunch of connected paper clips, but on closer inspection proves to be one continuous loop of twisted metal. There's a circle of string around one end. "It's an infinity puzzle," she says. "You're supposed to get the string off."

"Thank you." Your hands go automatically to the string and start working it through. "Is this supposed to drive me completely over the edge?"

She laughs. "I was hoping it would save you, actually."

"I'm not sure." Your tone is light even though the words are not. "I don't think I have that much farther to go."

Thursday

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.

It's like riding a bike, the old cliché. The church feels the same, which shouldn't surprise you—it's been two years, only that, and yet somehow you feel as though you've been gone forever. Worn wooden floors and the same threadbare cushions in every pew. And yet, not the same, because Father Jim isn't here. They have someone new now—a small, dark-haired man who introduces himself as Father Mario. His voice is equally as small—you have to still yourself completely to hear him, which is probably the point.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," you repeat. Though you're not here to confess and you don't believe in sin anyway. But this is how you start.

"How long has it been since your last confession?" His accent is soft and unobtrusive. Filipino, you think—a roly-poly young boy who grew up with the light of God in his eyes.

"I don't know." Because you didn't come to confession even before. Shift in your pew—you have eschewed the anonymity of the confession booth for the chance that Father Mario might pull an Emma, but so far he hasn't noticed. "I'm not a fan of confession. Actually."

He smiles. "Most people aren't."

"I'm—" feeling reckless now, "—not here to confess, actually. I want advice?"

He smiles again. "Most people do."

Think of Father Jim, who would have taken you back into the rectory at this point and offered you a glass of scotch. Father Jim, who goes way back. He taught catechism until you moved schools and was famous in

the diocese for going sober at Lent. Once upon a time, he was going to marry you—right in this church, with your best friend Bryan there to act as best man and Julie's mother ready to outdo the town florist on dahlias.

Today, there is just you and Father Mario, alone in a pew before the altar. He raises a hand and pats the cross at his neck. "What do you need?"

"I'm afraid," you say.

"Afraid of what?"

What, indeed. "I think I'm…changing."

"Change is a good thing," he says instantly. "It draws us out of ourselves. Without change, there is no growth."

Snicker before you can help it. "I don't know how natural this growth is."

"Some growth is more natural than others," he says. "It is natural, for example, for a man to doubt. The growth to believing is what is so hard."

Find yourself wishing for Father Jim and the Scotch. Advice? You could hear this anywhere. Julie probably doles crap like this out to her patients. Ruffle the wings and then stand and offer Father Mario an apologetic smile even though you're not sorry. "Thank you. I'll try and remember." You happen to have a bottle of Scotch at home—that will help a great deal with the remembering.

He stands with you. And then, before you exit the pew, he reaches a hand out and pats a wing, the right one. There is down on his fingers as he draws his hand away.

"No one can know what His gifts are for," he says. And then he grins, suddenly boyish in the dark light of the church. "I am a man of God," he says. "Nothing surprises me anymore."

Wednesday

Skip school again and drive to Julie's studio. Park the Jetta in the old spot, the corner by the rhododendron bush, and walk into the studio with a mat rolled under your arm as disguise. When you walk through the door, smile at your luck—the receptionist is new, someone you haven't met. She thinks the smile is meant for her and blushes before you've said anything. Ask for Julie. More luck—the receptionist ushers you right into her office.

"She's just finishing a class," the receptionist says. "Shouldn't be long."

Julie, in fact, is a little over twenty minutes. You don't mind. Walk

through her office and look at the pictures on her desk—Julie and Derek at Capilano Bridge, Julie in her gear, doing yoga on the beach. The dogs. The big, slobbering German Shepherd—*Max,* how original—and Yorkie, the tiny, slobbering Shih Tsu. They have to be leashed all of the time, or God knows what would happen. *Chickenhead* has no trouble walking alongside you, leash or not—silly things, these cat halters, but they do indeed exist.

"Rob."

Look up and put the picture down in one fluid motion. Julie pulls the office door closed and comes to stand on the other side of the desk. She has pit stains, which annoy you, and a sheen of sweat on her forehead, which does not. Her hair is darker than you remember and the ends curl against her neck. "Should I be surprised?"

"I suppose so," you say. "I didn't make an appointment."

"I have another class in five minutes."

"I won't stay long."

"Fine," she says, and she moves around to your side of the desk. You retreat to the client's chair. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"I wanted to ask you something."

She sweeps an arm out and then back. *I have all the time in the world,* the gesture says.

"Do you still go to the church?"

This, she doesn't expect. She blinks, and then shakes her head. "No."

"Just that church? Or any others?"

"I haven't been," she says, and she flushes, so you know she hasn't said anything to her mother. "Derek and I are taking a Buddhism class."

"I didn't know they had classes for that type of thing."

This makes her angry. "They have catechism—why not this?"

Shrug. The wings ruffle. "I just wondered. I was thinking about Father Jim today. Thought I might go and see him, and I wondered if you knew whether he was still at the church. That's all."

"Oh." She shakes her head. "No. I don't know. I could ask my mother, if you want."

"Don't bother." You could ask your mother, too, but that might get her excited. Not as excited as she might be to find out that her son is sprouting the wings of seraphim, of course, but there are plenty of things your mother doesn't need to know.

"Is that really all?" she asks. There is an edge to her voice, and you refrain from telling her if anyone has a right to be edgy here, it's you.

"Yup." Pick up your mat and ignore the rolling of the eyes that this gets you. "Thanks for letting me stop by."

"No problem," she says. Her voice is dry and hesitant at the same

time. "Any time." Oh, Julie. She doesn't say anything else until you're halfway through the door. "Rob."

"Hmm?" Turn and look back at her. Ignore the sudden thumping of your heart, the clammy slick of your hands. *Rocks,* said Bryan. And still, here you are, hoping for her confession, the terrible mistake.

"If you see Father Jim, tell him I said hello."

Tuesday

Call in sick to school and go to the doctor. Take Chickenhead with you because she hasn't been eating—you can stop at the vet on your way home, make this *a family affair.* Leave her in the Jetta for the first stop, which pisses her off. Try not to laugh as she glares at you from the passenger seat.

In the doctor's office, sit quiet in a corner and leaf through trashy magazines. The wings lie over each side of your chair—no one can see them, but people avoid the chairs beside you all the same. Send up a brief prayer of thanks—to no one, because you don't believe—when the doctor calls your name.

The examination room is purple. Or not so much purple as violet, the kind of colour that your mother wears to church and family get-togethers. The doctor, when she comes in, has a yellow blouse and brown hair. You're feeling greyer by the day.

"Hello, Mr. Cooper," she says. Her voice, if it had a colour, would be yellow too. "What can we help you with today?"

"I…have a growth," you tell her. "It's hard to explain."

"All right," she says. "Where is it?"

"On my back." Already, you know this is useless. Your wingspan measures five feet today. If she hasn't already noticed, there's not really much more you can say.

She pauses, and then asks you to remove your shirt. You have been practicing—the shirt is off just as quick were there no wings at all and now here you are, in front of a pretty doctor in all of your soft, greyish glory. Turn your back to her eye and stifle a shout when her hand touches your skin. Her fingers press *through* the wing and lie against your flesh—strange moment in a multitude of strange days.

"These scars have healed well," she says. Scars? "Who was your doctor?"

"Out of town," you say, making it up as you go along. "Doctor…Marriner?"

"Ah." Her hands prod your flesh. "Sometimes," she says, "traumatic wounds like these take a long time to heal. It's not unusual for patients to

develop odd sensations around extensive stitching." More prodding, and then you can almost hear her shake her head. "I can't see or feel anything here, Mr. Cooper. But let's book you for an x-ray, just in case."

On the x-ray table, lie still under your protective blanket and think about Chickenhead, probably napping in your car. Julie and Chickenhead never got along—maybe that was the clue that you missed. Julie is a dog person. Apparently there's something about animals that can't clean themselves. Appeals to her sense of charity, maybe. You've given up trying to figure it out.

Given the choice, you'd much rather have Chickenhead. *She* doesn't slobber. And as long as you're on top of the kitty litter, no nasty smell. She probably outdoes those dogs in manners too. She is placid and calm and detached during her veterinary examination. The vet and his assistant (who don't notice your wings either, but this is now old news) love her fur and laugh when she shakes herself after her exam. That haughty air you know so well doesn't leave her face at all—if anything, she looks more disgusted with you when you leave the office. But that could just be because she rang in at seventeen pounds. Chickenhead. The fact that she's not eating (*try tuna juice,* says the vet) might be a good thing.

Monday

The next morning, the wings are still there, and there is a fine layer of down on your sheets. None of your shirts will fit—they bunch over the wings and make you look like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. Settle, finally, on your old university sweatshirt, the grey one that you don't mind destroying. Cut two long swaths in the back and ease yourself into it so that the wings poke out of the holes.

Look in the mirror and wish, not for the first time, that Julie still lived in your apartment. Your face is as grey as the sweatshirt and there are bags under your eyes. A glamour touch-up would do you so well right now. Just a smidge of *the wife's* cover-up, a touch of blush to bring you back from the edge of the dead. Leave for school looking like…Death. How *ironic.* Brace yourself for all manner of questions.

But when you get there, no one says anything. Dave, who teaches in the mathematics department, pours you coffee in the staff room and then, seeing your face, gives you an extra shot of espresso.

"Rough night?" he asks, and his pat on your back is briefly sympathetic.

"Rough weekend." You leave it at that. Don't trust yourself to say anything more.

In class, you are quiet, distracted, just this side of short. Angle your

desk so that your back faces the wall. Avoid the chalkboard and make your students choose their roles for Macbeth instead of standing up front and reading sections like you usually do. During lunch, hide away in your classroom and mark essays.

Halfway through the day acknowledge the impossible—no one can see you. Or, rather, no one can see this new incarnation of you. Weak, blessed human eyes. Somehow, these four foot (they are longer than this morning—you measure at lunch) monstrosities are invisible. It's almost enough to make you…believe?

Your last class of the day is Modern English—Philip Roth and Martin Amis and Vladimir Nabokov, just because you love your Lolita. You throw in enough Alice Munro and Doris Lessing to keep your female students from revolting. To date, you haven't had any truants. This might say something about you, or it might not—the literature is that good.

Your favourite student in this class is Emma, the petite redhead with journalistic aspirations. You do not say this, of course. But you seek out her opinion in class discussions and look forward to her essays and you like the sway of her hips. If you were a different person, if Julie was still living with you, you might have considered an affair. Emma has a lovely laugh.

But today, she isn't laughing. She walks into class and takes one look at you, desperately nonchalant at your desk. You watch her face go puzzled and then white—she stumbles mid-chat to a friend, then continues and sits as far back in the room as space will allow.

Interesting.

When class is finished, stack papers at your desk and watch Emma lag behind her friends. She waits until there are no students left and then comes to your desk.

"Hi," she says. She has straight hair today. Normally she has the semi-wave going on, like Julie used to have.

"Hi," you say. Swallow—your throat is very dry.

"Is this an early Halloween?" and she half laughs, half points to the wings. You feel them arch over your head—two inches since lunchtime, it wouldn't surprise you.

"Not exactly," you say.

"Oh." She nods, as though this explains everything. "I see."

"I don't." Your voice is sharper than you intend. Wince. "Sorry."

Her face falls into a new shade of white. "They're real?"

"Yes."

Then, unexpectedly, a quirk of her mouth. "You don't strike me as a particularly religious man."

"I'm not." In fact, you are a retroactive atheist. You used to be Catholic, just like you used to believe in the Tooth Fairy. Your mother still says

prayers for you, not that they're helping.

"Maybe you should be," Emma says softly, and this is surprising because you wouldn't have pegged her for a religious person either.

"I'll think about it." You toss a hand back to the wings and try a crooked smile, your first of the day. "Might try to get through the week, first."

"Okay." Emma gives you a tentative smile in return and then leaves. You don't realize until later that you didn't ask her to keep it a secret.

Maybe you should be. Tomorrow, the Tooth Fairy will show up at your door with a bag of old teeth, dressed in rags and asking for change.

Sunday

Wake up in the morning with a stiff back, that's all, and see the wings poking out from your shoulders when you look in the mirror. Do the customary double take. Greyish knobs of skin that half-unfurl from your shoulder blades and hang to just above your waist. Wings.

Wings.

Reach one arm around—you're hallucinating, it's only that—and grasp as though expecting air; yelp in surprise when your fingers touch soft fuzzy down. Beneath, a hint of cartilage.

Chickenhead hears your cry and patters into the bathroom, then hops on the toilet and watches you with her head tilted to the side. Her eyes go wide and then normal. She lifts a paw and licks it, as though half-wings are no big deal.

"This isn't funny," you tell her, almost shouting. Reach around again and pull. Be unprepared for the pain.

Call Bryan—it's the only thing you can think of. You stumbled into your apartment alone last night, but he's the craftiest jokester you know, and he's half a block away. When he answers the phone, he sounds like a man at the bottom of the sea.

"Muh?"

"Very funny. *Ha ha.*"

"What?"

"I have down on my bedsheets. Extra points for getting in and getting it all done without waking me up. Now how do I get the damn things off?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The wings, Bryan. Is it Super Glue?"

Pause. "I'm coming over."

"Don't bother. Just—"

"Five minutes." And click.

Bryan arrives in flannel pajamas and slippers, and pounds on your door like you've just called 911. When you open the door, he takes one look at you and grasps your shoulders, then pulls you in for a brisk, hard hug.

"Man," he says, when he pulls away, "I thought that was it."

"What?" *What?*

"You sounded like you'd lost it on the phone, Rob. I thought—all this stuff with the broad has finally pushed him over the edge." His hair is in matted brown disarray and there are bags under his eyes. You're both too old for these wild nights, now.

Take one breath, and then another. "I called because of…these." Gesture wildly behind your back as the half-wings flutter up and down. "See?"

His broad face is kindly, gently puzzled. "What?"

What. "Can't you," waving wildly, "*see* them?"

Now he looks nervous. "See what, Rob?"

Pause for a very long moment. Look back over your shoulder, which is silly, because the very act of doing so twists your back and moves the fledgling wings just out of sight. But they're there. It's like getting used to two new, quasi-useless arms. "You don't see anything? Anything…out of the ordinary?"

He snorts. "Aside from you being obviously still hung over? Nope."

Feel dizzy. "Oh. Okay." Slump in relief. The wings bend against your wall with a sound like crumpling tissue, but you're not surprised when Bryan doesn't hear it. Close your eyes.

"Dude. You need to forget this chick. Look what it's doing to you."

"She's not just *some chick*, Bryan."

He kicks off his slippers and pads into your kitchen. You don't move. You hear him grab the bag of instant coffee that always sits on your counter—your turn to pick up the tab, it seems. Then he shuffles back to you. When you open your eyes, he is bent over his slippers, coffee in hand.

"I'm telling you, Rob. It's over. She's granite. You're humping a fucking rock."

"I think the expression is 'beating a dead horse.'"

"Whatever." He is, you realize, still slightly drunk. "Time to move on, sweetcheeks. A rock is a rock is a rock."

"Maybe." You can't think about Julie now. You need to get Bryan out of the house.

"Want coffee, when I make this?"

Shake your head. "No. Thanks for stopping by—I think I'll go back to bed."

"Suit yourself." He claps you on the shoulder one last time—his hands almost touch one wing, and you fight to keep from screaming. "See you later in the week?"

"Sure." You close the door behind him as soon as it's polite. Run to your bathroom and lie prone on your floor. Recite your timetables until the hyperventilating subsides.

After a long moment, drag yourself up to a sit and blink at Chickenhead, who hasn't moved from her perch on the toilet.

"I think I'm going crazy," you tell her. Something in your voice must move her, because she jumps down and crawls into your lap. Her purr is robust and warm against your stomach. Run your hands through her fur and stop just short of praying. This is you, with wings, and your Chickenhead. Her eyes are amber slits in the soft light of your bathroom. If she could talk, give you some of her nine lives' wisdom, she might say: this is just the beginning.

Marilyn Potter

A Short List for K.: Things I Cannot Get Rid Of

1. The fraying, leftover pieces from a plaid woolen throw the first gift you ever gave me. I spurned it, wanting a sweater like the one my Chicago boyfriend had given me.

2. The antiquated bell you strung on a brown shoelace, admonishing me to wear it around my neck for chasing bears, whenever I walked in the woods. I spurned that, too. Now I ring it to hear your voice.

3. The red plastic change pouch you wore around your neck whenever you rode your bike 10K to the Jewish deli to fetch rye bread the bread I spurned because the crusts were too chewy.

4. The sheet music for the Steinway piano you bought from the desperate Chilean lawyer. The piano would not fit through the doorway.

5. Your worn-out wallet, cracked brown leather, with its list of doctors' numbers you consulted with regularity for your hypochondria, and that other list of help-line numbers which you never called.

6. A broken sliver from a bar of Eau de Sauvage soap. I can still smell you.

Sam Cheuk

Zhou Xuan

Unfortunate you were dubbed Gum Hau, or,
"Golden Throat." And were the inflection
a little off, as radio announcers then
were prone to do, most audiences would have
had a chuckle at "Very Monkey." Unfortunate too
to be a beautiful songstress in 40's Shanghai,
to bare your countryside heart by the novelty
piano, among the nouveau riche, socialites,
scholars returned from the west, who wanted
nothing more than the sliver of your thigh,
chiaroscuro in the smoky light. To the north
the rape of Nanking. Elsewhere, the communists
hid in the mountains like snakes. Then, there
in the harbour city, in the misty romance
of the open sea, by need of a crumbling empire
you were elected their eidolon, and you broke.
Of broken heart, they say. Suicide, they say.
It is late. Even now, on the oldies station, they play
your song. The kei po you wore the night at the club
was green, silk embroidery cupped your figure
like a cut-out against the infinite black
backdrop of my forgetfulness. How lonely
the familiar perdendo of your voice.

Sheri Benning

Gone

Blood wells in your brain and loosens the seams of time: memory is like those worn patches of cloth you quilted to keep your babies warm. Ninety-three, you fell outside your apartment door. Now Carol, your youngest, is the baby you brought home from St. Elizabeth's hospital to die. And smiling, you scold my dad who's thirteen again, drunk on dandelion wine, singing old Catholic hymns in Plattdeusch, playing that accordion you ordered from Eaton's.

You were born in the side of a hill. Carmel, Saskatchewan named for Our Lady by the Benedictine monks who arrived just before. Hollowed out and covered with sod, that first winter your mother cried—no place to hang the lace curtains. Kerosene and cold dirt, the sleeping breath of wild onion. She cried for the one who didn't make it across. For the stone splash of her unbaptized body as it slipped into the sea. Agnes forever rootless and now the rest of you buried in a strange soil like weeds.

My mother had a dream before your fall—my sister and I took you back to the farm. You wept at the kitchen table. "You held her," Mom said, "and promised to take her home. There was the smell of burning poplar, you girls were making bread."

I watch Dad; he holds your hands. His face loosens, scars come undone. It's not so implausible—thirteen. He's scared to become an orphan. The strings in his chest so tight, the one relief is the keen they make in the wind so he sings you an old Marian hymn. I recognize the words, but they're not a rich earth where I can stake claim—I've left so many times, nothing makes sense. The farm, sold, and the blue spruce, their sleek shadows all we knew of water on skin during those years of drought, are dying too.

When I was born you made me a quilt—red paisley from a Christmas tablecloth, purple vetch patterned on a thin house-dress yellowed from decades of your body's salt. And at nineteen, when I left for good, you made me another. Kept warm in all those foreign countries by the stitches of your hands, I didn't know that I'd never be able to return, or that when I did, I'd feel more lost than when I was away. That dispossession would be all that I'd have to carry with me.

You want to feel the sun on your face; we wrap your legs in a hospital blanket, tuck you into a wheelchair. Light through the first green flush of aspen leaves is the colour of your husband's eyes. When you die you'll be buried alongside him in a graveyard lined by evergreens. Like that copse of spruce he planted in the farmyard after he left the priesthood and you married. Maybe the spruce reminded him of the dark forests in the Germany of his youth. But they don't belong on the dry prairie; you had to water them every day, coax them to take root.

I wish I could return you to that hill of your birth, to the shaggy pelt of an unharrowed pasture—only prickly rose, brome, brown-eyed susans, buffalo beans, and the note of a western meadowlark to sing your burying.

The door of a woodstove cracked open, spring wind blasts us—the smell of birch sap, dirt knived open for seed. When Dad leans over to see if you're okay, you whisper a poem to him about wind bending the branches of evergreens. He smiles at me, but I remember Mom's dream. You were already in that kitchen where Dad sang his songs, where you brought Carol back to life, where from the window you could watch night gathering beneath grandpa's spruce. But still you wept as your mother wept. For the room in the hill. For the lace curtains. For what's torn apart at the seams. Our roots here too thin, promises we couldn't keep. Umbilicus ripped, we're drifting unbaptized in a place we poured our lives into and where we fell short of learning how to be.

Emily Nilsen

dusk 1

He takes me to the creek
and as he whittles a fallen cottonwood branch,
I wash his shirt. He heads into the forest
and drapes the shirt over his back.
Still heavy with water
it drips like a dark fish
into the soil.

I leave you and follow.

dusk 2

You're behind me now
in the kitchen, while I pack a slow suitcase full
of wares: wooden spoons, knives wrapped
in newspaper, a cast iron, the threadbare
dish cloth from Bulgaria.

At the sink, while turning
on the tap, I catch his reflection
in the window. And through him, you:

an overturned canoe, a lake simmering under
the evening sun, a pile of half-stacked wood
bitten yellow with wolf lichen,
laundry on the line.

dusk 3

Alone in the alpine meadow beneath a ridge with a moon
that has risen bent like the curved rib of a deer. Stars begin
to peck at the sky, cleaning and drying the bones
that made up the day.

The mountains here pull you
skyward, a strange inversion that makes descending
seemingly impossible. With each evening, you sink
deeper than the one before.

Alone in the alpine meadow
I wake. Night so thick in itself
I can no longer breathe.

Contributors

Maleea Acker is a writer, typographer, publisher (of La Mano Izquierda/Left Hand Press), translator and English instructor. Her first full length collection of poetry, *The Reflecting Pool*, will appear with Pedlar Press in the Spring of 2009. In 2007, she spent four months in Spain working on a new manuscript.

Elizabeth Bachinsky lives in Vancouver. She maintains, at all times, a modicum of decorum.

Sheri Benning has published two collections of poetry, *Thin Moon Psalm* (Brick Books, 2007), and *Earth After Rain* (Thistledown Press, 2001). A doctoral candidate at the University of Alberta, Benning is currently living in Glasgow, UK.

Patricia Brieschke's work has appeared in *Rainbow Curve*, *Appalachee Review*, *Karamu*, *PMS: poem, memoir, story*, *The Rambler Magazine*, *Sou'wester*, *MacGuffin*, *New Millennium Writings* and other literary magazines. She was a finalist in the Pirates' Alley William Faulkner Creative Writing Competition, and first place winner in the New Millennium Writings Award for nonfiction 2007. Her work will also be included in the second edition of *The Best Creative Nonfiction for 2008*. She has a PhD in Public Policy.

Michael Byers is an illustrator living near beautiful Guelph, Ontario. He loves to draw. With organic line-work and graphic colours and elements, Michael creates fun, whimsical images that make the viewer either laugh or question his sanity. Michael is an award winning illustrator with images on the Society of Illustrators of LA's website, and in the upcoming annual *American Illustration 27*.

Sam Cheuk is a Hong Kong-born Canadian poet. He has an MFA in creative writing from New York University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Fiddlehead*, *QWERTY* and *Exile and Dim Sum*. He currently lives in Toronto.

Rebecca Dolen and **Brandy Fedoruk** are proprietors of a gift store called The Regional Assembly of Text, located at 3934 Main Street in Vancouver. Focusing on text as a theme, the store features handmade gift items designed and built by the two former Emily Carr Fine Arts graduates. The store, also houses "the lowercase reading room," a collection of zines and self-published books. Rebecca and Brandy have made many little books over the years which have become part of this extensive collection. A few titles of their books include: *Perhaps Facts* and *One Shrew Too Few* by Rebecca Dolen and *172 Things To Do* and *Nothing Really* by Brandy Fedoruk. They would also like to make it known that neither of them likes cantaloupe, even in the least.

Hsiang Hsu is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at the Europäische Universität für Interdisziplinäre Studien (EGS), and has published in *Symposium*, *Angelaki*, *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, *International Journal for Baudrillard Studies* and *New York Studies in Media Philosophy*. His translations also appear in *Words Without Borders* and *Turntable + Blue Light*.

Chen Kehua was born in Hualien, Taiwan, in 1961. An ophthalmologist at the National Taiwan Medical School, Chen began writing poetry in the 1970s, and made his debut in 1981 with a collection of poetry entitled *Qi Jing Shao Nian* [*Whale-Riding Boy*]. A highly acclaimed writer, Chen's more recent works include *Qian Kan Tou Shi* [*Head-Hunting Poems*, 1995], *Hua Yu Lei Yu He Liu* [*Flowers and Tears and Rivers*, 2001] and *Wo Lu Tu Zhong De Nan Ren. Men* [*The Man/Men in My Journey*, forthcoming]. He has also written film criticism and song lyrics, as well as produced art and photography exhibits.

Chris Labonte's bio can be found on page 28.

Amanda Leduc grew up in Ontario and graduated from the University of Victoria's Creative Writing program. She has published in *Prairie Fire* and *Museums Roundup*, as well as various magazines in the UK. Currently, she lives in Scotland, where she is completing a Masters degree in Creative Writing at the University of St. Andrews.

Emily Nilsen was born in Vancouver, BC. Although content on the west coast, she now lives in the Kootenays where she writes, works and explores the nearby mountains. Her nonfiction has been published in various magazines and newspapers.

Patrick M. Pilarski lives in Edmonton, where he is pursuing a PhD in computer engineering at the University of Alberta. His poetry has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Other Voices*, *Frogpond*, *Contemporary Haibun Online* and on CBC Radio One. He is the co-editor of *DailyHaiku*, an international journal of contemporary English-language haiku.

Marilyn Potter was the 2007 Toronto Art Bar Discovery Night winner. Her poetry is included in two chapbook collections edited by Patrick Lane, *Crossing Sleepers* and *All That Uneasy Spring*. Her haiku was chosen Best Canadian Poem in the 2008 Haiku Invitational Contest. Marilyn currently lives in Toronto.

Rebecca Schwarz is a graduate of the Humber School for Writers, Toronto. Her poetry and prose have been shortlisted for a number of awards, including *Arc Magazine*'s Poem of the Year Contest. She has published several books for children, and is currently completing a collection of poetry, *No Sherpa Support*, and a novel, *Sanhattan*. She lives in Montreal.

Shannon Stewart's second collection of poetry, *Penny Dreadful*, will appear in Fall 2008 with Vehicule Press, Montreal. Her first collection, *The Canadian Girl*, (Nightwood Editions, 1998), was shortlisted for the Gerald Lampert Award and the Milton Acorn People's Poetry Award.

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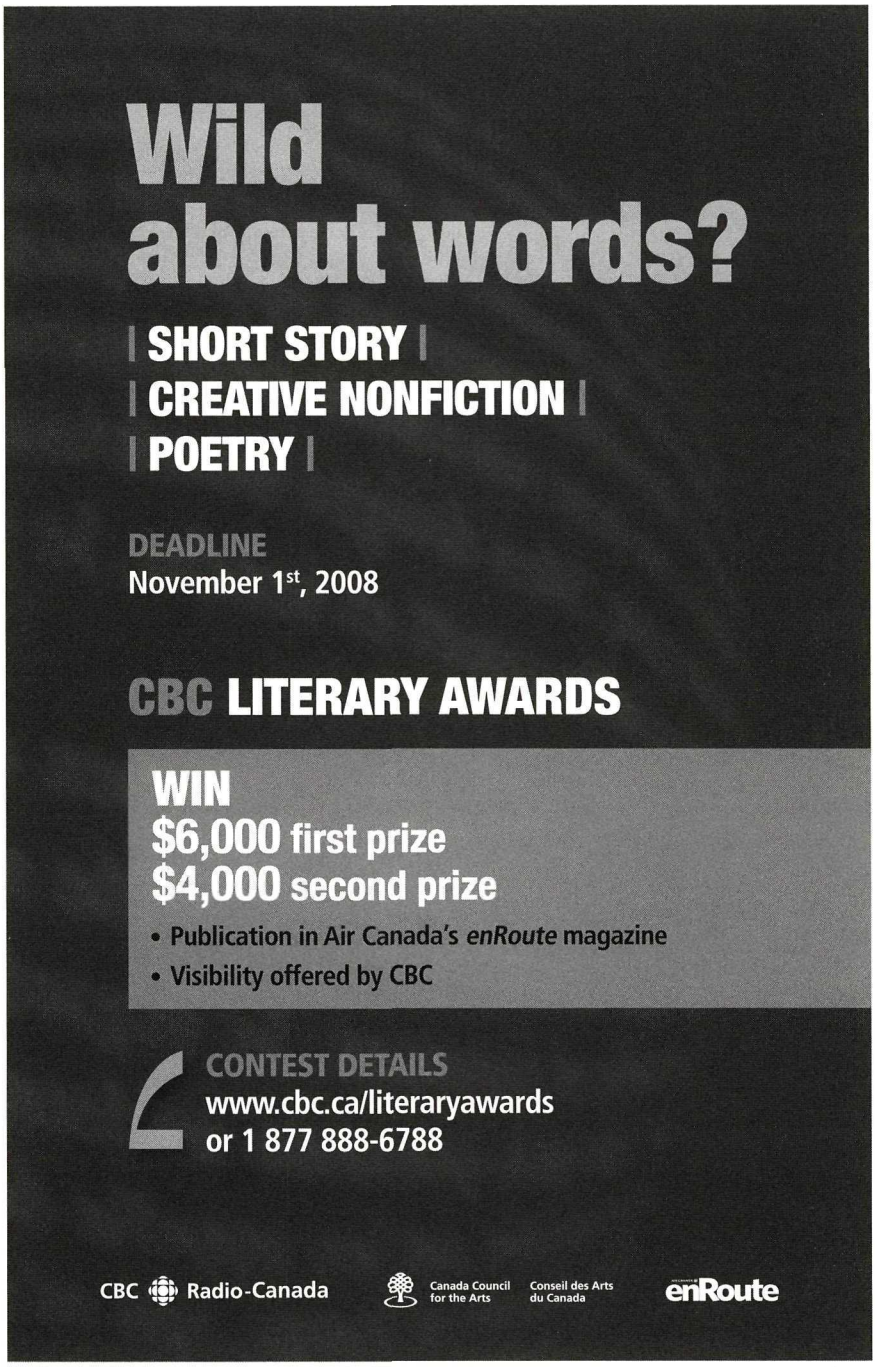
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