

PRISM international

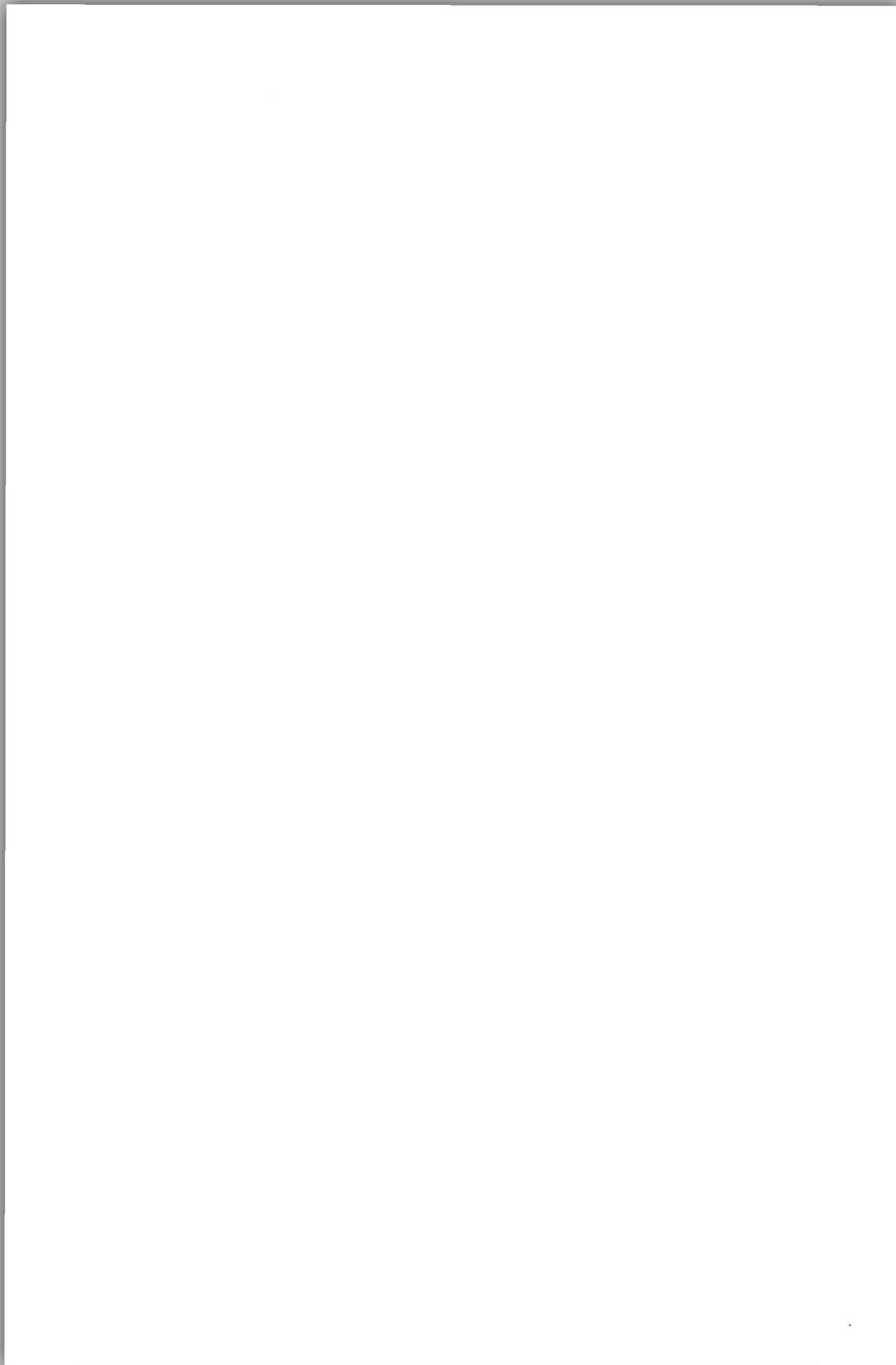
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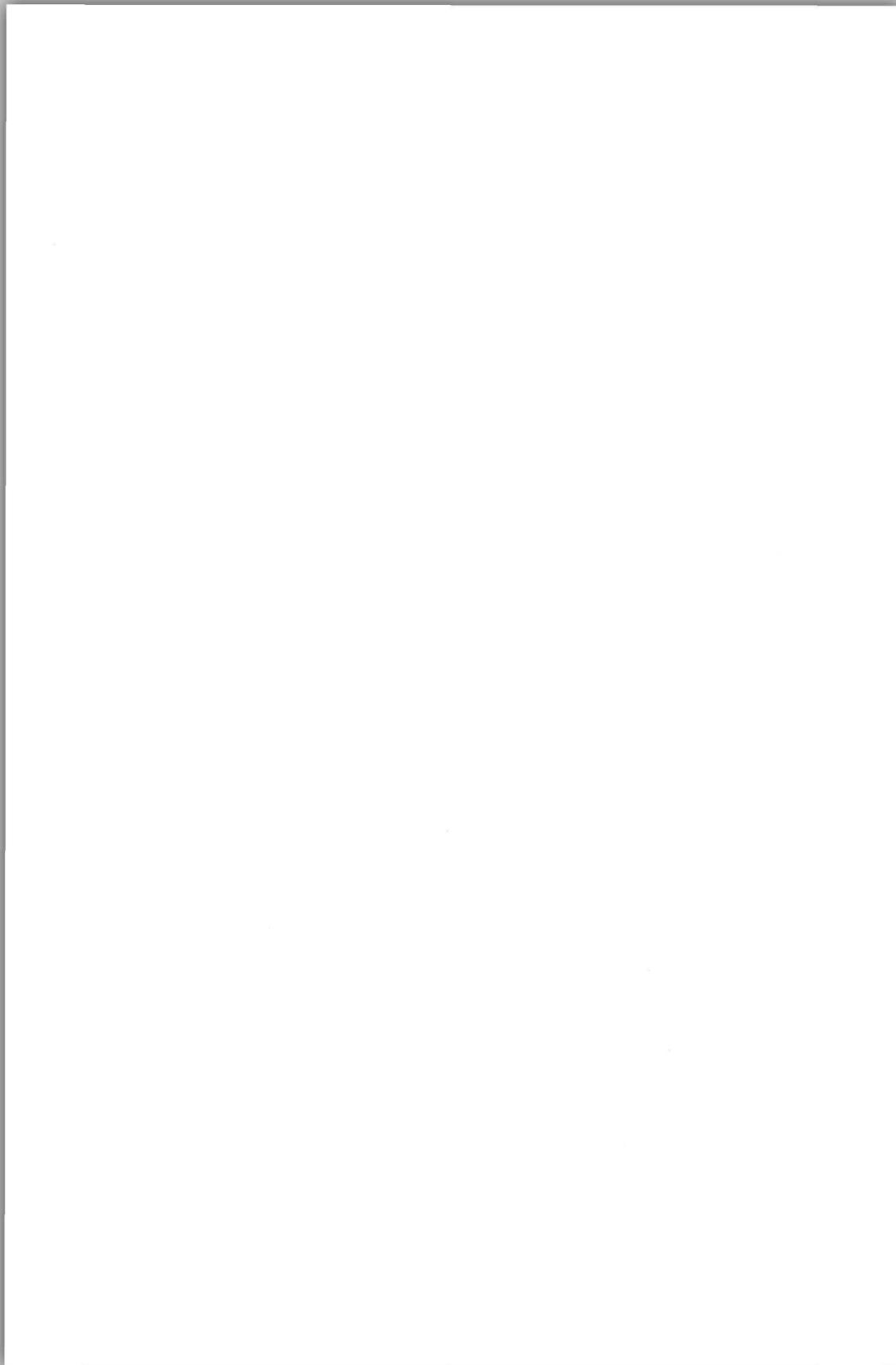
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Contemporary Writing from Canada and around the World





PRISM international



PRISM international

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Carmen Rodríguez

I Believe in Reincarnation: On Issues of Translation and Bilingual Writing

While the act of writing *per se* involves encoding a set of meanings, the act of translating entails “reincarnating” the soul of a piece (set of meanings) in a body made of different codes. It attempts to recreate the *world* that lies within those words and in between them; it endeavors to flesh out what has been said and that which is invisible: the sounds as well as the silences. In that sense, the act of translating is an act of reconstruction and restoration; the frame remains intact (meaning), but new windows and doors are cut in and a fresh coat of paint is put on, so that the reader can understand both, the words *and* the world(s) contained in those words.

For about 10 years now I have been a “bilingual writer.” In my everyday life, I move between Spanish and English speaking worlds. In my writing life, I move between the two languages. A lot of the time, I complete my work in Spanish and then rework it into English. Part of the time, it happens the other way around. But most of the time I write by travelling between the two languages. I begin with Spanish, but soon after I seem to wander over the border into English and that triggers a process of going back and forth, until I feel satisfied with both versions of the piece.

While involved in this process, my writing self seems to be very aware of the two worlds that I live in. In the case of the poem “Ambush in Chinatown,” the intention was to communicate the ephemeral, but powerful memories of my childhood in Chile, as prompted by my everyday life in Vancouver. Both versions ended up being close literal translations of each other. In some cases I chose to use words with slightly divergent meanings or to place them in a different sequence, mainly for the sake of rhythm and cadence. Such was the case with the first line of the last verse, for example, where the Spanish word “zapatones” (lumpy shoes/big shoes) became “boots” and the four words chosen to create the image of a young girl at school were placed in a different order in each language. When I write in this fashion, using what I have come to call my “teeter-totter”

methodology, my final aim is to bear two bodies that share the same soul.

In the foreword to my collection of short stories *and a body to remember with*, I explained that this process of bilingual, bicultural creation was slow in coming. However, it has become an integral part of my work and it mirrors very closely my hyphenated existence as a Chilean-Canadian writer.

Ambush in Chinatown

Naked ducks hang golden
tongues poke out of bivalves
surprised silence

blue day
homes soaked in sun
windows dressed as brides

centenary bricks neighbourhood school
from the rustle in the yard covered with autumn
jumps sudden ambush

notebooks ribbons smocks boots
broken images gallop
glisten and hide again
in the crevices of my body

Emboscada en Chinatown

Patos desplumados cuelgan dorados
picorocos asoman lenguas
silencio sorprendido

día azul
casitas cara al sol
ventadas vestidas de novia

centenarios ladrillos escuela de barrio
crujidera en el patio cubierto de otoño
me tienden súbita emboscada

zapatones delanteros cuernos cintas
imágenes quebradas galopan
brillan se esconden de nuevo
entre las grietas de mi cuerpo

Chris Hutchinson

Disclosure

My friend, always the artist, shows me pictures
of his wife—erotic portraits,
he calls them, claims he wants me
to understand the other side
of his married life, the endless
contorting shapes of a desire free
from orthodox modesty. In his eyes
I catch a glint of pride, the roguish
flouting of convention, the smirk
of the saboteur at having infiltrated
the system in order to disrupt it
from within. But there is also a look
of sadness, the underlying grief
of one whose triumphs have come
and gone without praise.

I inspect each photograph
carefully, affect detachment, knowing
that what I hold between us is clearly more
than what either of us will admit. I see his wife
is beautiful, limbs poised as you would expect
of a woman proffering herself to the idea
of undiluted lasciviousness. Only her smile
betrays the mood, her tentative mouth
which holds the beginning
of a question, like the uncertainty
that occurs after desire but before
contentment begins. With the last
picture in my hands, I pause,
just long enough to see
who will be the first to laugh
or blush. But no one does.

How I love my friend! In his sadness
I recognise the silence common
to us both, the quietly entrenched
resignation, a kind of defeat
I'm sick of not talking about. Because now
I'm craving full disclosure, for the moment
to move beyond taboo. I'm waiting
to see if he'll admit bewilderment
at the day he arrived unprepared
for the end of youth's recklessness
and the beginning of an ache
he couldn't explain, admit
the vulnerability all men conceal
behind displays of experience, our need
for affection carried like a secret shame.
Now I'm waiting for someone to let it all
hang out, to confess aloud. For once,
I'd like to hear it said.

The Idea of Forever

After last call at three a.m. the sun
on the horizon like a giant lodestar
would guild us over uneven boardwalks and dirt roads
toward the George Black ferry, across
the mud-fed Yukon river to where our hidden world
of tents lay inside a maze of birch,
where branches knocked and clacked in the wind
like the restless bones of ghosts,
where someone always screamed blue-murder back
at the land-locked sled dogs as they cried
and howled at the lingering season
and stunning lack of darkness
inside the night. This was Dawson City
where we'd all come from something
vague: a town, a girl, a life.
Most had simply drifted into the ever-
widening space of summer's north, hoping
to find work, hoping absence,
hard drinking and perpetual light could
wipe the slate clean: It seemed we were all young
enough to trust in the liberty of forgetfulness—
the days blurring without nights, drinking
sour-toes with the tourists then
over-proof whiskey at the Midnight Sun then
black-outs and waking beside the river
if not delighted, at least surprised
to be alive, soaked and numb.
Had it been a dream, strange-throated ravens
gargling in the trees like drowning men,
or just some lone person
weeping?

In the morning, no one could be sure.
Although I confess, one night
the first star appeared, an unsightly blemish
in the milky sky like a pinprick in the idea
of forever: Fall was coming and I was afraid
to travel south, to move alone again,
and further towards the slowly diminishing
light.

Shari Goldhagen

History of Flight

Your father:
The day your father took you up in the Piper Saratoga was the day everything changed. You were seven years old, and he drove out to Meigs Field to rent the plane—the exact model JFK, Jr. would crash into the Atlantic 17 years later.

“You’re going to love this, Ollie,” your father said, as he took your hand and led you to the hanger. “It’s the greatest feeling in the world.”

And for him it probably was. A pilot for United, your father was one of the few happy people in the world who had decided early on what they want to do in life, and actually went on to do it. For your own part, it would be 10 years before you met Clovis Fisher, ran your fingers down the inside of her thighs, and realized what the greatest feeling in the world really was.

“Are you excited?” your father asked, strapping you into the co-pilot seat.

You weren’t excited—you’d flown in planes with your mother and sister to visit aunts in the east and to Disney World, and you hadn’t liked those either—but you knew the answer to your father’s question was ‘yes.’ Your mother hadn’t been diagnosed with cancer yet, but your father had given up on her and your older sister years before because they didn’t love the blue of the sky the way he did. So you smiled against the whirling of the engine as your plane began its furious race on the runway, but you dug fingernails into the flesh of your palms, leaving half-moon indentations in your lifelines.

“This is it,” your father said with finality, as the plane broke through low clouds of thinly stretched cotton.

Trying to hide your fear, you nodded. It was important, it was what your parents fought about on nights when your father was in town and you heard words like “faithful” and “family time” through the wall that separated your bedroom from theirs—the nights when you put your hand against the plaster and wished you were brothers with Braden Washington and not just best friends.

“Come, on, Son.” Your father offered you the controls as if he were giving you a great privilege. “Give it a whirl.”

And you tentatively took the yoke—a strange W-shaped steering wheel that felt far too cheap and plastic to have any real consequence to your

defiance of gravity. Always a smart kid, you knew your father probably wasn't giving you a grave responsibility—seven-year-olds were rarely placed in positions of grave responsibility. You figured it must be like the old-fashioned cars you'd ridden with Braden and his family the summer before at Great America—there had been a steering wheel that could turn, but the cars were on a track, their course determined without your actions. Still, the moment you took the yoke, you thought the plane began to plummet. Screaming, you threw your hands into the air like a girl—like your sister. Your father easily took the controls back into his own hands.

"I'm sorry," you said, eyes at your lap.

"Don't worry about it," he said, but after that, he looked at you differently.

He wouldn't call you "Son" again for 10 years—not until your appendix ruptured and Clovis Fisher had to take you to Northwestern Memorial Hospital because your mother was dead, your sister was married in Arizona, and your father was in Sydney, Australia and hadn't thought to leave any contact numbers. Clovis had to call the airline just to track him down. And when he finally got back to Chicago, he hovered over your hospital bed, guilt wrinkling his forehead.

"Don't worry about it," you said—words thick with morphine. And you thought you meant it, that you didn't care about your father's opinions anymore—not with Clovis (who had stayed at the hospital for the whole 26 hours it took your father to fly back) down the hall, waiting until he left to come back in.

But the truth was, you did still care, because six years after your appendectomy, when you were a graduate student at the University of Chicago getting a Ph.D. in history, you heard about that little girl, Jessica Dubroff, who wanted to break the records and be the youngest person to fly across the United States. You were sitting on the beige leather sofa (the same sofa where your mother had waited to die) in your father's house, trying to file your taxes in time for the deadline at the end of the week, while your stepmother, Laura, folded laundry on the floor, her thin shoulder resting against your calf in a way that made you uncomfortable even though nothing sexual had happened yet. Laura had the news on, but you weren't listening until you heard the phrase "child pilot."

"Would you look at that," Laura said to the TV. "She can't be more than eight."

Mid-calculation, you turned to stone, eyes locked on the TV screen. The solar-powered calculator dimmed to black, but you didn't notice; you needed to see what a child pilot was supposed to look like.

There she was, that golden-haired girl in her Lilliputian bomber jacket and baseball cap with "Woman Fly" printed across the top.

One of the reporters asked if she was scared of crashing.

"Nothing is going to happen," Jessica said, smiling into the camera. "It's simply an airplane."

And you hated her as you hadn't hated anyone since you tried to drown Braden Washington in the community pool when you were a junior at Evanston Township High School.

"No, no, no," you said, forgetting about Laura, who looked up at you, concerned.

For the next two days, you devoured any media snippet you could find about Jessica and her impending flight—you got on the Web and did a search for newspapers in her hometown and were glued to CNN, even though they played the same clip over and over. When Jessica's plane crashed into a driveway somewhere near Cheyenne, Wyoming, you were relieved. You felt you had gained a greater understanding of the world—it was as if her crash confirmed a hypothesis you'd developed a long time ago. By then you'd graduated Summa Cum Laude from Columbia, but the plane crash was one of the few times you ever really felt smart. It was the first time in years you actually wanted to talk to your father. You wanted to call him in whatever corner of the world he was temporarily located in and say, "I told you."

Your mother:

Your mother found the Neiman Marcus Catalogs under your bed, when you were 13—a year before she surrendered to cancer but 16 months after the diagnosis when she began lying around waiting to die.

"Honey," she called to you from the beige couches in the living room when you came home from school. "Do you need some new clothes?"

You were in a hurry. The Washingtons were taking you and Braden to a night game at Wrigley, and you wanted to change, dump off your books, and go back to Braden's house for dinner where his mother, Alicia, smelled like heaven—garlic and lilacs—when she served you pasta primavera or Chicken Kiev.

"New clothes?" you asked, walking through the hallway to the living room—the *Days of Our Lives* theme weeping in the background. "No, I don't think."

And you stopped, because on the couch your mother—not really fat, but bunched in the hips and thighs, the way suburban housewives often are—was reading *Cosmopolitan* and wearing your old little league cap. She must have noticed the blank horror on your face.

"Is it okay that I'm wearing this?" she asked, touching the hat, having been worn specifically to fit only you, awkward on her bald head.

"Sure," you said. The hat did look fine, better than the dull hair she'd had before the chemo. But it wasn't really okay; you were pretty sure the hat had been under your bed along with the Neiman Marcus Catalogs—the

catalogs where Alicia Washington modelled fur and lingerie. And on nights when you couldn't sleep, you'd jerk off to the pictures of Braden's mom. "It looks better on you anyway."

"Thank you." Your mother sat up a little. "I found these flyers under your bed, and I was just wondering if you needed school clothes."

There they were—the skinny regal font of the department store's name—right on the wood coffee table in the pile of women's magazines and self-help books your sister kept bringing your mother.

You felt your face turn as red as your hair, and a ball of something painful and tight exploded in your lungs.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

You didn't say anything because you never had the kind of relationship where you discussed things with your mother.

It's not that you didn't love her, you just don't think about her on those Hallmark-card moments like Christmas and graduation—the times when your sister gets flubbery, holds your arm, whispers she wishes Mom were still around. Instead your mother's image came to you when you were 18 and driving cross-country from Chicago to Los Angeles to help Clovis Fisher move into a studio apartment in a not-so-great neighbourhood South of Wilshire Boulevard so she could try to make it as an actress. On the way, in one of those beautiful Western states that just looks like a coloured box on the map, you stopped for dinner at a Cracker-Barrel-knock-off. You slid into a red vinyl booth (on the same side as Clovis because you were that kind of couple) and examined the gravy-stained menu. "Food just like Mom used to make," it said.

"I think I want pancakes," Clovis said, her thigh—bare in short shorts—pressed against yours. "What are you thinking, Baby?"

Your mother's memory washed over you then, the smell of Chinese take-out and frozen pizza burning in the oven—scents that filled your house when you were growing up.

Your older sister:

Over greasy pizza in the food court at Old Orchard Mall, your sister, Karen, said that you could tell her anything. In a bed at Northwestern Memorial Hospital down the road, your mother was reading magazines and waiting to die, and your father was somewhere in the sky.

"And I do mean anything." Karen patted your hand across the table. She looked like your mother, only she was pretty, but that might have just been a combination of youth and Jazzercise. "Sex, drugs, whatever you want to talk about. I just want you to know I'm here for you."

It was enough, you felt, that you had let Karen take you shopping for jeans. You were 14, and for the first 13 years of your life, Karen—four years older—had tried to avoid you. But, since your mother got sick, she wanted

it to be like you had always been the best of friends.

"Okay," you said, picking at a piece of pepperoni, orange oil pooling in its center. Never in a thousand years did you contemplate telling her about Alicia Washington, about the catalogs you'd put back under your bed and still used some nights.

Karen looked at you, flat brown eyes so wide and sincere, you felt guilty.

"I've been wondering about condoms," you finally said, even though that wasn't true. Braden had found some of his father's Trojans in the bathroom, and the two of you had practiced putting them on even though you hadn't even kissed a girl and wouldn't meet Clovis Fisher for another three years.

Lips curling into a knowing smile, Karen nodded, leaned even closer, the ends of her long, red hair brushing your paper plate, said she'd wondered all about those things when she was your age.

"Mark and I waited to make love until I was 15, but I was really nervous about how the condom was going to work." Karen said. It was the start of what she would divulge about her sex life for the next 10 years. When your sister left for college in Arizona the next August, you'd get long letters about every blow job with every new Mark or Ron or Bob and finally Bill whom she married three days after her graduation.

You listened to Karen's stories, sometimes with mild interest, but never told her anything—not about Braden kissing you after you tried to drown him at the Y.M.C.A. the summer when you were 15, not about Clovis Fisher blowing raspberries on your stomach, certainly not about screwing your stepmother.

But Karen kept asking those kinds of questions; she liked to analyze things. Though she'd wanted to be a psychiatrist, she'd only made it to social worker.

The day before your father married Laura, Karen, who'd left her 18-month-old baby girl with her husband in Scottsdale and flown in the day before, met you at the gate at O'Hare. When she pressed her body against you for a hug, you could feel her stomach starting to inflate with Baby #2.

"You look green," she said, as the two of you ambled through the terminal to baggage claim.

You explained that sometime during the past year, since you'd left for college, you'd developed violent air sickness and spent the duration of your flights from New York to Chicago puking your guts into the shallow metal toilet in the lavatory, or, should the captain insist on keeping the "fasten seat belt sign" lit, into the air-sick bag with its pinking-sheared edge.

"It's a rejection of Dad," Karen said, nodding to herself. "It makes total sense, really."

You shrugged; it seemed as good an explanation as any.

"And there are plenty of reasons to reject him," she continued. "This girl he's marrying, Laura, is young enough to be our sister."

You nodded again, even though your father had told you Laura was only 10 years his junior. At 38 she was twice your age at that time.

"She's really pale," Karen said. "It's like she's an albino or something."

The luggage carousel hadn't yet jerked to life, and Karen asked what classes you were taking. When you got your scholarship to Columbia the year before, she told you to be pre-med, go on and be the doctor she never became.

"I think I've decided on history," you said, even though it had never really been a question.

"That's great. It's just so great that you're going to do what you want to do and not let anyone else make decisions for you." She spoke knowingly, as if you were aware of circumstances that kept her from doing what she really wanted.

"So that girl still hasn't called you back yet?" Karen asked of Clovis.

You shook your head. "How are Bill and the baby?" you asked, bending over the rotating belt to pick up your blue roller suitcase.

"Oh, you know," she said.

You nodded, but you really didn't know what she meant, and decided you were okay with not knowing.

Your best friend:

Braden Washington had been your best friend since you were five years old, but by sophomore year of high school, the muscles in his chest had swollen, and you hated him and his dimples and the Big Ten recruiters who had already contacted him about college football.

"Do I look any different?" he asked, as the two of you stood in line for the high dive at the community pool. It was the summer between sophomore and junior year (when your mother had finished her dying and your sister had started college in Arizona), and he looked the same as always—beautiful, with his mother's high cheekbones and mahogany hair.

"Why would you look any different?" But even before the words were out of your mouth, you knew what he was going to say, and your lower body seemed to liquefy.

A hundred feet away, Braden's girlfriend—the quintessence of high school, blonde with blue eyes, a member of student council and the tennis team—tanned with her friends in a bikini of strings and triangles. "You guys did it, didn't you?"

Braden flashed his 'aww shucks' grin, and a white-hot poker stabbed you between your eyes—it would be a year before you met Clovis Fisher and got beyond first base. But you must have said something that a normal

person who didn't hate his best friend would have said, because the conversation continued, even though all you could think about were the Neiman Marcus catalogs you still had under your bed.

Behind you, some skinny wet 10-year-olds screamed that the two of you were holding up the line, so Braden started up the plastic ladder.

"What should I do?" he asked.

You told him to do a backflip because you knew he couldn't do it, that you could do it better, and you needed to prove you were better than him at something.

Clenching your hands into fists so tight your knuckles turned to white knobs, you held your breath and prayed that Braden wouldn't be able to complete the dive. Still you were truly amazed when he flipped awkwardly around and crashed, almost completely prone, into the water. You were even more surprised when he didn't come up for air.

The lifeguard—a senior at your high school who ran track with you and Braden—stared on from his chair in disbelief, paralyzed by what to do in the face of an actual emergency. So it was you who dove in. Just as you reached out for him, Braden's head bobbed up and broke the surface of the water. Gasping and thrashing, he looked at you, and then went under again. You grabbed his shoulders, broader and more filled out than yours. Instead of pulling him up, you held him under. In your hands his body twisted, and you felt a rush of excitement that you were actually drowning him—you were actually doing it. For a good 20 seconds, you held him down. Chlorine filled your nose, your mouth, your ears. The pool was on an approach pattern to O'Hare, and a plane flew overhead—a stiff white bird in the blue, blue sky.

The lifeguard finally jumped in, and something was broken. So you yanked Braden up and swam with his body to the side. With the help of the crowd that had gathered, you pulled him out of the water. Bracing his weight on your back, you took him to the locker room where he sank into one of the toilet stalls and threw up pool water and nachos from the snack bar.

"You okay?" you asked, kneeling next to him.

"Sure, thanks, Ollie, I owe you."

"Anytime," you said, feeling sick from the smell of the chlorine and the puke and the question of whether or not you would have gone through with it if there hadn't been other people around. If there was a Hell, you were pretty sure you were going there. And you were pretty sure it was that moment right before take-off, where the plane picks up speed.

Nodding, Braden looked at you for a long time. And then you felt his mouth on your own—lips soft and warmer than you would have expected.

"What?" you asked, pushing him away.

But he shook his head, and both of you just sat there, hands between

your knees, until the locker room door swung open and three boys—towels flung over their shoulders like capes—came in complaining about adult swim.

The two of you never talked about it again, which made you hate him even more. But then, in the fall of your senior year, you met Clovis Fisher and all of those things didn't seem to matter much anymore. You just felt sort of sorry for Braden and for what the two of you used to have when you were kids.

Braden played football for a few years at Michigan, but injured his knee junior year in a pick-up game of basketball. As soon as Alicia Washington called you from the hospital, you flew in from New York, even though you had finals the next week.

"All these girls and his teammates, they all wanted to come, but you were the only one he wanted," Alicia said, taking you in her arms in the waiting area while surgeons tried to put Braden back together again. Even though she hadn't been in any catalogs for quite some time and her hair was probably only still mahogany from dye, she was still so achingly beautiful, still smelled so good—the mother you'd wanted. "He's just so lucky to have you, Oliver."

Remembering the slippery wet feel of Braden's head when you had tried to drown him, you just nodded.

That whole first week after the surgery, when Braden wandered around the snow-covered Ann Arbor campus on his crutches, you stayed with him. A part of you thought that he would just break down and something important would happen.

As the two of you were bringing groceries up to his fifth story apartment four days after his operation, Braden lost his grip on the bag he had balanced on his right crutch. The plastic sack expanded open as it tumbled down the steps, and Braden's crutch slipped out from under his armpit, falling into the railing with a resonating clang. As he jumped forward trying to maintain his balance, a jar of marinara cracked against the wall.

Red sauce oozed out, and you felt it, all of it—your obsession with Alicia, all the jealousy in high school, the undiscussed kiss—pooling somewhere in your chest.

"I'm so sorry," you said.

"Don't worry about it, it's spaghetti sauce." Braden shrugged and hopped a few steps to retrieve his crutch.

Shaking your head, you said that wasn't what you meant. Braden blinked and nodded.

"No it's okay, I was having a bad season—I probably wasn't gonna go pro anyway." He shook his head. "It's probably good, it can be the thing that I blame everything else on. I can blame my whole life on this knee."

That wasn't what you meant either, but you didn't say anything else.

Two days later, you went back to school, took your make-up exams, and got A's, like always. Braden somehow went on being Braden even though he had a slight limp and no cartilage in his right knee.

Your stepmother:

You knew it was going to happen with your stepmother, Laura, 18 months before it actually happened. A senior at Columbia, you were home for Christmas vacation, playing house with your three-year-old half-sister, Holly, in her new kitchen set where everything was made of plastic.

Behind the two of you, Laura collected crumpled red and gold foil paper from the living room carpet, and menacingly shoved it into a draw-string garbage bag.

"Laura?" You caught her watery blue eyes, and she looked away.

"It's not even noon yet," she said. Though clearly not an albino as your sister had complained, Laura did look as if she were painted in watercolour in a world of oil-based artwork. Everything about her seemed almost translucent, from her flaxen hair to her blue eyes, so light they almost appeared to have no colour at all. "And Christmas day, Christmas day. I just can't believe he had to leave."

It had been a long time since you cared about where your father was, but you understood. Still in its box under the 10-foot tree was a model airplane that Holly had chosen to ignore. You'd held your breath when she had unwrapped the gift in the morning, remembering a similar present you got as a child in the time before the Piper Saratoga—the time when your father used to take you to Navy Pier and Super Dog on his days off.

Laura looked so despondent, you set down the doll Holly had put you in charge of feeding, and went to touch Laura's slender shoulder.

"I know all about that," you said, not really knowing what you meant or why you were saying it.

"You're so good with Holly." Laura put her hand on your shoulder.

And you knew what was going to happen, even before she let her hand fall to the small of your back—even before you got the acceptance letter to the University of Chicago's graduate program in history, and Laura and your father suggested you live at home. And you thought it would be the thing that secured your place in Hell, but you didn't care because you never really believed in Hell, not even when you were a kid and your mother had made you go to Mass. You didn't care because Clovis Fisher still haunted your dreams, even though you hadn't talked to her in close to four years.

It actually didn't happen with Laura for a year and a half, and not until you moved back into your father's house and spent a bunch of nights on the couches in the living room watching *The Late Show* and jotting notes for your dissertation on the history of flight while Laura folded laundry on

the floor. It didn't happen until you started bringing Giordano's pizza home for dinner and picking Holly up from the sitter's house on days when Laura had to close the branch of the public library where she volunteered.

Even on the night it actually happened, it wasn't until after you went to the Cubs season opener with Braden Washington, who'd graduated from Michigan and gotten a schmoozy consulting job downtown and a condo next to a Starbucks in Bucktown. It didn't happen until after you chugged nine Styrofoam cups of Old Style because you could hardly find anything to talk about with Braden, and you remembered how he used to be the closest thing you had to a family. It didn't happen until after you stumbled in from the game and found Laura, translucent and sad, reading an Alice Munro story collection.

"There's some Leona's leftovers in the fridge if you're hungry." She marked her place in the book with a torn paper napkin.

You told her you'd had a hot dog at the game, but you would take some wine. Her book fell off the edge of the table when she got up to get you a glass. Both of you bent down to get it. With the back of your hand, you brushed her breast; she clasped your hand and held it there. That was how it finally happened—on the hardwood floor of the kitchen.

It wasn't particularly good or bad, but you fucked like people who needed to. Pressing yourself into her was the same feeling you had eight years before when you'd almost drowned Braden—surprised you were actually doing something so dark and sticky, so tangibly wrong, you had to question if you were like other people in the world.

Afterward, she kissed the top of your head, and you were close enough to see the blue veins running through her see-through skin. Before your mother died, she had a road map of lines crossing her body from the operations where they cut into her and took out the parts that defined her as a woman. At 42 Laura was older than your mother ever got to be.

You thought it was going to be a one-time thing, but you weren't surprised when Laura knocked on your door a few nights later. You let her in, and you kept letting her in. Though you never told anyone about it, you could almost hear your sister's thoughts, "Ollie," she'd say, "you must realize this is about Dad. That you need to be close to him so much that you'd do this." But you didn't really care until two months later when you were sitting at the kitchen table eating pancakes with Laura and Holly. Under the table, Laura bumped her knee to yours—the way Clovis Fisher used to.

"We should take Holly to see the fireworks, tonight," she said.

You said Holly was too young to like fireworks, and it would be too crowded to try to drive into the city.

"Nonsense, my father took me to see the fireworks when I was half

Holly's age." Laura put her hand on your thigh under the table. "We can take the train."

Holly was concentrating on eating only the chips out of her chocolate chip pancakes, but it still made you uncomfortable to have Laura display affection like that in front of her. The year before, Laura had redone the wallpaper in the kitchen, and the pale blue flowers of the paper were the same washed-out shade as her eyes. The weight of her small hand became oppressive on your thigh, and you felt trapped by the faded blue all around you. You wanted to tell Laura that you were not Holly's father and had no desire to be.

"Is Dad going to be home tonight?" you asked, brushing her hand away.

Laura sighed the most defeated sigh, and you looked out the window to avoid her eyes and the wallpaper.

"I think he's going to be in Hong Kong until Thursday," she said.

Your first love:

Clovis Fisher was your chemistry lab partner senior year of high school. She broke a lot of test tubes, got a 39 percent on the molarity test, and asked you to tutor her. Because her lips looked like burgundy satin, you agreed, and for weeks sat with her in the cafeteria during lunch trying to explain how to balance an equation. Though she looked at you intently, blue/black eyes wide, it became apparent she would never master atomic weights and solutions, so you wrote big on the tests and let her look across the table at your answers.

You still had lunch with her and went to see her play Maggie in the school's production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and one day during lunch, she leaned across her molded plastic tray of wilted salad to graze her lips against yours.

"I just wanted to do that," she said, melting into rich throaty laughter.

"I wanted you to do that, too," you said, with so much confidence you were amazed.

She took you to her father's house, and laid you on your back under yards of white lace on the canopy over her bed. In one smooth motion, she pulled her baby doll dress over her head. Lowering herself on top of you, she guided your swollen cock between her thighs. It went okay until you heard the rumble of an airplane overhead—your father, the Piper Saratoga when you were seven—and you went limp before you even entered her.

"It's okay, Baby," she said, kissing your shoulder and stroking your red hair. "It'll be better next time."

It was. Afterward, she put her mouth on your stomach and blew out air so her lips vibrated against your skin.

And the two of you were happy ordering stuffed crusts and watching

movies, curled into each other on the beige couches in the living room. Happy taking walks along the Lake and eating sausage and cheese fries at Super Dog.

You were happy until the third week of May—two weeks before you graduated third in your class—when your stomach started bothering you.

“What’s wrong?” Clovis asked, when you shuddered in pain on the couch, your arms and legs tangled with hers.

“Nothing,” you said.

You knew you should see a doctor, but you weren’t about to see a doctor because that was how it started with you mother—first her stomach was bothering her, then she was on the couches, waiting to die.

You didn’t die, but the next day you did crumple over in the Nordstrom’s at Old Orchard Mall while Clovis was trying on bikinis. She took you down the road to Northwestern Memorial (your mother’s hospital), where a pretty blonde surgeon sawed into your abdomen and suctioned out the remains of your ruptured appendix.

Clovis never left the hospital. Not when Braden showed up with magazines—*Rolling Stone* and *Playboy*, no Neiman Marcus catalogs. Not even when your father—jetlagged, pale and doughy with guilt—arrived from Sydney 26 hours later.

After he left, Clovis climbed into your elevated bed and squeezed your shoulder. For the first time it really hit you she was leaving and you were leaving. Feeling the tingle in your nose and eyes, you turned away, because you didn’t want her to see you cry, because you never cried, not even at your mother’s funeral.

“Are you okay?” she asked, nervously. “Do you want me to get that doctor for more pain stuff?”

The only thing you could say was, “Don’t go to L.A. after graduation.”

She laughed, deep throaty laughter, which would have seemed a lot funnier if you hadn’t been so crazy in love with her that something in your chest caved in every time you caught sight of the back of her head in the hall between classes.

“Oh, Baby,” she moaned, as if she were Janis Joplin. Moving her hand from your shoulder to your thigh, the warmth of her palm seeping through the thin fabric of the white sheets. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.”

And you believed her. So you helped her pack little dresses and movie posters into her Toyota Camry, and the two of you drove her car across the country. College didn’t start for you until mid-August, so you played house for a couple of weeks, sleeping in a narrow single bed (the only one that would fit in her tiny apartment). The afternoons were filled by riding around the 405 so Clovis could learn the city. You went to the Chinese Theater and drove into the hills with a star map you bought from a street

vendor—other than a few blondes who may have been models, you didn't see any celebrities.

Like the commercials for Big Red Gum, Clovis cried and clung to you long after the flight attendant at L.A.X. announced it was time for your row to board when you had to go back.

"I love you, Oliver." She mumbled into the fabric of your T-shirt.

"Clovis." You started to say you loved her too, but stopped. For months, you'd been telling her that, and you needed to say more. "I want to write your name in the sky."

"Like the Tom Petty song?" She smiled, mascara streaks on the apples of her cheeks.

"Sure," you said. But that hadn't really been what you were thinking, it had just seemed the most relevant thing to say. For a solid hour on your flight home, you threw up into the toilet of the plane's lavatory, until the stewardess knocked on the door to make sure you were okay and not trying to dismantle the smoke alarm.

Your first few months at Columbia, you talked to Clovis every night, while your roommate would gather his books and dramatically slam the door on his way to the library. Clovis rattled on about auditions her low-budget modelling agency sent her to and all the almost-famous people she met at parties. You told her about the history class you liked and your new friend, Chris, who was nice but made you miss Braden.

One day, without warning, you found something hard in her voice when she called you.

"People here are so different than people in Chicago," she said over the phone.

"Yeah," you agreed, "people in New York are different, too."

"My mom lived in Manhattan when I was a kid, it's not the same." It wasn't what she said, but how she said it. When she told you she loved you at the end of the conversation, it didn't have the conviction you'd heard at the airport three months before.

And then Clovis' calls dwindled to twice a week, to once a month, to never. You called and left messages, but she never returned them. Then you stopped leaving messages and called simply to hear her voice on the machine. During the week of your mid-term exams, her number was disconnected.

"It will be better in the long run," your new friend, Chris, told you over beers you bought with your fake ids.

"It will be better in the long run," Braden told you when you both came home for Christmas break.

"I never liked that girl much anyway," Karen told you on the phone. "I know you don't want to hear this, but it will be better in the long run."

But they were all wrong, nothing about it was better—not the ache you

felt in your lungs every day you came home and your roommate smirked and told you, "No, Clovis hasn't called"; not the nagging feeling you should have been over her; not the girls you dated at Columbia. Not fucking your stepmother.

Years, later, when you didn't consciously think about being over her but occasionally remembered you didn't think about her every day, Clovis Fisher magically reappeared. The Wednesday before Thanksgiving you'd gone out to some of the trendy bars in Lincoln Park with Braden, because your sister was in town with her kids and her husband, and your father was actually home, and you no longer felt quite right being there when he and Laura were both around. It was four in the morning, and you were eating runny eggs at the Melrose Diner with Braden and the woman he was dating, when you noticed Clovis two booths over with some girl you didn't recognize. Her black hair was cropped close to her ears, and she was thinner than you remembered, but she was most definitely Clovis. And because you were 26 and not 17, you went over to her table and tapped her shoulder.

"Hey, Clo," you said, as if you hadn't spent the past seven years obsessing about her. "Long time no see."

The truly amazing thing was just how happy Clovis Fisher was to see you. On her urging you slid into the booth beside her, and the two of you talked until her friend across the table looked bored and shards of orange light started to streak the sky. You talked until Braden, his woman, and Clovis' friend paid their checks at the register and split a cab to their various homes, until your waitress stopped coming by to ask if you needed more coffee.

Finally, Clovis drove you back to her father's house and took you upstairs to her old bedroom where you talked some more in her gauzy white room that looked the same as it had in high school. She told you about the commercial she did for a used-car dealership in Silicon Valley, and you told her about your dissertation and the introductory courses they let graduate students teach at U.C. Then neither one of you said anything for a long time.

"I don't know what to say, Ollie," she said, when you tried to kiss her. "Something happened, and after a while I thought you would hate me."

"Shhhh." You shook your head, traced her collarbone with your fingers. "Things happen. I could never hate you."

Making love to Clovis after so many years of wanting to make love to her—all her body parts alien and familiar—everything seemed important and in slow motion. Afterward she fell asleep, her bare, tanned back against your chest. The white lace of the canopy like non-threatening clouds.

And you were happy until the next morning when she lit a cigarette and told you she was only going to be in town for a few days, because things

were really starting to click for her out West.

"You can come with me," she said, melting into more velvety laughter. "You've got to be tired of the fucking snow and that gray Chicago sky."

When you finally got back to your house, it was after two on Thanksgiving day and everyone was in the dining room. Laura and Karen were bringing the holiday dishes (dishes that had been your mother's, even though she never used them) to the table.

"Nice of you to join us," your father said, which was so ironic, you forgot to feel guilty about Laura.

"Hot date?" Karen asked, setting down a plate of sliced meat and licking spilled turkey gravy from her thumb. "I only ask because your shirt is on inside out and backwards."

The tag was under your chin, and from the kitchen you felt Laura's pale eyes on you.

A week later, when you still hadn't talked to Laura about it, you were in your bedroom trying to grade student papers, when you saw the outline of her slippers through the slit of light under your door.

"Ollie?" Laura whispered. "You awake?"

It occurred to you that you didn't want to deal with avoiding Laura anymore. That you didn't care about da Vinci and the Wright Brothers and the birth of aviation anymore. That you didn't want to go to sports bars and not talk about things with Braden anymore. All you wanted to do was go to California and feel Clovis shudder when you touched her stomach.

Holding your breath until Laura was gone, you threw a random assortment of jeans and T-shirts into a duffel bag and called a cab to take you to the airport, where you bought a ticket on the first flight to L.A.X. (United of course—even though you didn't tell them who you were, didn't get the free stand-by tickets available to airline employees and their relatives).

You didn't call Clovis, because it was four in the morning her time. And you didn't call Clovis, because you were pretty sure she'd been joking when she suggested you go to California, and because you knew, in that part of you that knew things, that it was the wrong thing to do—to abandon your responsibilities to your students, to not talk to Laura, to go after the girl who'd already broken your heart once. It was the kind of thing that people did in movies, and you'd never thought of your own life in those terms.

Like an accordion, the jetway extended when your plane came in from Philadelphia. People filed out; other than one guy in an Eagles sweatshirt, they could have been people going anywhere from anywhere.

When the stewardess called your row, you boarded and buckled your belt (even though you knew in a crash it would offer almost no help). Pulling the headphones out of the seat back in front of you, you plugged them into the armrest console and tuned to channel nine—the frequency

where pilots talk to air traffic control. You knew your father wasn't piloting your flight; he hadn't flown domestic in years. But you thought that the voice sounded like his—confident—as it followed the ground control to the runway and confirmed the plane's position in line for take off. Maybe it was him, filling in for someone—fitting that he should be in charge of things for you again. Your hands began to tremble, and heat flooded your face. Reaching to adjust the flow of the air overhead, you felt the familiar churn in your stomach, thought about getting off the plane. But then you stopped, gripped the side of your armrest with all the authority you didn't have with the yoke in the Piper Saratoga when you were seven.

“Not this time,” you said to no one in particular. “Not this time.”

Jennica Harper

The Octopus

Right now, the Voyager shuttles 1 and 2 are pushing deeper into known space. They will, like so many great American homeruns, go far beyond the fence, across the street and through a window. They will never be recovered.

In a laboratory in Pasadena, at tables cluttered with cold cups of coffee and dot-matrix printouts, men interpret what Voyager sees: the spotty volcanic surface of Io, the irregular shape of Amalthea.

Voyager carries greetings from Earth. Simple diagrams of how our genes spool. Of the body of a man. Of where we can be found, like the map in the mall: We Are Here (note how the third dot in line is given more emphasis, stationed slightly above the other eight).

Also presented are rows of numbers, the elements of us:

hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen
and phosphorus

the modest recipe of our shared life.

I wish the world's memories well.
I have my own secrets—shoeboxes
and albums full of scribblings,
tokens from misplaced
friends and lovers.
Everything I keep is paper,
already disintegrating.

But while I'm here
I'll think of you, imagine
you with your newest love
who looks so much like you.

The two of you get steamed up like clamshells—
half-moon arcs on the sea bed.
When you are both concave
you come together, disappear from view;
when one is concave, one convex,
you form a perfect circle.

*

It is amazing what thoughts
we let slip in and out like mosquitoes
through the window.

Along with the math of us, Voyager lugs

gold-plated albums etched with our essences:
photographs, sounds heard on earth—in nature
and on highways and in the womb. Greetings
in fifty-four languages, and enough music
for some all-night cosmic dance-a-thon.

*

Our lives orbit discretely these days, seldom intersect.

Now we trade thoughts on paper—
long distance chess,
one move at a time.

You tell me you can't condone the reckless hope
of finding some other life out there.
Can't fathom the waste.

But think, just think,
 what it says about us
that we are even looking.
 That we can build
symbols of ourselves,
 will willingly become
stick-figures
 in an effort to describe
ourselves to others.

That we can admit we're not the only subject
and can sometimes be the searcher, the verb.

*

We have always discussed what we believe.
You do this with truths, I do it with fictions.
For you, it is Bakunin, Connolly,
that curmudgeon Adorno,
everyone's forgotten great-uncle.
For me, it's Purdy and Nowlan
and others who liked to put it plain.

Well, think of it like this:

a man in a lab coat
is a man in uniform.

*

How slow is slow? Our messages are out there,
are on their way, but they are taking so long that
the transmission of the television show you are
watching right now will pass them within the hour.

*

What is it about a lack of love
that weakens us to love the next time?

Simple economics, supply and demand.
We desire what we do not have
and will do anything.

You can't believe that Sagan and his cronies really want to find new life. They're looking for the Star Trek alien: the gorgeous woman who is human, but with painted green skin. They want to find life like us, with only small differences—larger ears, a pronounced brow. They want to be the gods of everywhere.

(So unfair!)

*

I hold that it is noble, in a crazy way, to dream of someone on a galactic beach opening our package like a birthday present. Who knows what they will do with it, if they will understand the instructions to play the records. If they will interpret a photograph the way we do.

I admit that for me, it is always a little girl on that beach. A child without a face tearing at our boxes stuffed with records, photos, junk.

You are studying the octopus: its alienness,
its total lack of likeness to our own bodies.
A cephalopod, or 'head-foot'—its brain and nerves
go all the way through. It moves all parts
independently: the small brain delegating
movement, the tentacles themselves
deciding where to go. Democracy
at its finest.

The octopus can pour itself through
any hole larger than its eye.
Cousteau said they can
recognize some humans.
But we do not
recognize them.

*

Our messages won't even have left our solar system for 20,000 years.

*

We pay to know
that our memories are safe.

The records will last one billion years.
There is so little erosion in space:
just cosmic rays, slow-moving dust.

Ours was quicker:
what was a joy
became a chore.

*

Imagine a small West African tribe watching a film for the first time. It is a documentary film about them. After, they are asked what parts they enjoyed most. Each member of the tribe mentions the same thing: the moment when the chicken flew. There had been a shot in which a chicken had accidentally flown through the frame. The tribe members did not know what happened in the rest of the film, because their eyes are unaccustomed to following such fast light. For them, the film is about a chicken.

*

Carl Sagan conceived the Voyager missions.
When, on the street, he would be asked
about his search

(turning to answer the anonymous soul
like Houdini to his executioner,
not a second to prepare)

he would say we sent them because
it is important to try.

But how could they change our world? you ask.

(In the unlikely event our objects are found,
the sun will have put itself out long ago.)

*

This has always been our way—
a chair is never just a chair.
Love is never just love.

I wonder what things meant
to you, how my actions and words
were organized into a basic
theory of me.

Will we find anything?
I think it's gonna be a long, long time.

It is hard to imagine a thing in space.
In photos, Vostok I is a glass bauble,
a flammable beehive. Yuri spent
his 108 minutes of fame there,
not much more than
a glint in the eye.

Buran, for the Russian *snowstorm*,
was launched once, and is now
a restaurant.

Mir, like the termination of an idea
tested and failed, love cooled,
falling back to earth so
predictably.

*

Objects don't float through the universe like desire. They are both pushing
and pulled as they follow possible trails, trace invisible spines in the dark.

*

Voyager is a spy
sent to find new enemies.

There were middles of nights
when we weren't sure
where to go next,
only that we had to go somewhere.
You would rest your head on my chest,
sink into it, I let your hand wander
under the covers, so familiar
it was like it was my own.

Something we could not let go:
 all the time spent, the conversations
 run and rerun, we didn't think we would
have the strength to have them
 with another person.
We would wake, dizzy,
reeling from the heat of an accidental night
 spent together, the inertia
of being one unit,
no energy left to pull
 ourselves apart.

*

Think of the biggest, smallest
thing you know: the whale's tough hide,
kelp clearing a path. That blue giant
from so far down it's as if it was spawned
from the core of the earth; too frightening
to imagine anything bigger—
its parents, or its creator.

Surely the movement of the earth
from far away is like a piano underwater,
pianissimo, water talking to itself.

All of this talk is just talk.
The truth is, we will never know
our own future, not even
our own past.

*

If Sagan and his crew really wanted an alien,
you say, they would look to the octopus!
With its tangle of fingers, its mysterious
upside-down underworld,
like something you'd see
in a movie.

*

The girl on the beach
wants to know where
we will be in ten years.

Will we believe in God then,
or in something bigger than
God, like American currency

or a cure for loneliness?

A sigh.

You tell me I'm afraid all this probing
will have been a waste.
That we are walking with a flashlight
down empty halls.

*

What about the girl!
Our memories may be scrap
to the girl on the beach,
but is it a waste
that I got to dream her?

I know: in your dream,
the girl wades into the water
in search of something unspecified,
something to please her.

Kathryn Mockler

A Young Boy on Whose Father a Tree had Fallen

Everything's different now, even the rain. It's cold and Jim's used to the warmth of summer rain. He's never lived in the city, but he knows the air will taste like metal. He also knows the house he and Vye bought is on a street with houses as close to each other as the length of his body.

The hinges on the barn door are about to give way. He opens it carefully; he doesn't want to have to fix it before Thursday. Jim has come to see Boxer before church. His once warm body lies in the middle of the barn floor. Jim doesn't get too close. He half-expects the dog to jump up as always and lick his face. He wants so badly to say *Boxer the cows*, to see the tail go and the dog nip at the heels of the Holsteins.

Is he dead? Vye meets Jim by the drive house. She likes the Pontiac warmed up. Jim smokes a Du Maurier while Vye climbs in the passenger side. *Boxer was such a good dog. It's a shame the Reeves didn't take him.*

At church Jim mouths the words to the hymns. He watches the others and takes in a breath when they do, turns the page when they do. Vye's in the choir. She stands at the back, to the right. Jim wonders if she ever watches, if she knows he doesn't sing.

Jim hasn't talked all morning, and he feels that if he opened his mouth, he'd never be able to speak again. He imagines this is the way someone's throat would feel had they done nothing but talk all day. Sometimes he'll go days barely uttering a word. It's not like Vye has to ask what he wants in his coffee or for breakfast. She knows. They carry on like two people moving through the dark in a house they've lived in all their lives. Where they know the rooms better than the sight of their own faces and there's no need to bother with lights.

When the minister says, *Our Father*, Jim can't help but picture his own father dressed for church in a white shirt with suspenders. Jim was only 14 years old when the tree fell and broke his father's neck. He was home for the holidays. The first snow had come and gone, and the bare ground had

reminded Jim more of an early spring than of Christmas. They were in the woods, just the two of them, sawing a Maple for firewood to sell in town. The money was to be put away to help Jim through school. He had wanted to be a vet.

They cut down the first tree. Jim, heeding instructions from his father, managed the saw like a pro. They watched the next tree fall and tangle itself in another tree. The moment unfolded briefly, precisely, with an undeniable fate. This was the way things were going to happen, and no matter how badly anyone wanted to change them, *nothing on God's green earth*, Jim would hear his mother say years after the incident, *could change the way that damn tree landed*. When the heavy branch got Jim's father under the chin, Jim held his breath. His father was silent, eyes shut as peacefully as if he were sleeping. A bird sound hung above him in the trees. Jim was afraid to move, but he knew he had to. As he crept toward the scene, a twig under Jim's foot broke in two, and as if on cue, Jim's father opened his eyes and barked for Jim to fetch Clive Reeves, the man who owned the farm next to theirs. Jim froze, and it was a moment before he could even get the courage to run. But when his father shouted Clive Reeves for the second time, with what sounded like his last breath, Jim ran. He never looked back. He ran with the force and determination of a sprinter, of someone being chased, of a young boy on whose father a tree had fallen.

Clive Reeves and his hired boy slid a wood board under the limp but conscious man and carried him through the dense woods to the clearing where the horse cart was waiting. The three months that followed are clearer than any other time he can think of. It wasn't the fact that his father was paralyzed from the neck down, or that he was barely conscious, or the burning fevers, or even the daily visits from friends and neighbours. It was seeing the small, black leather bag peak around the top of the stairs that first night, and a low voice whisper to his mother in the hall, *Comfort him as best you can*, that made Jim realize, for his father, it was only a matter of time.

After the service, the minister announces that there will be a gathering, a goodbye party in honour of Jim and Vye's move to the city. Everyone claps. Jim looks down, away from the stares and smiling faces. Vye has belonged to this church all her life. She will miss it.

Lorne Johnston, a wealthy farmer who sits two pews back, pats Jim's shoulder in a way that would suggest they were friends. Although Vye doesn't like Jim to hate anyone, Jim has despised Lorne Johnston ever since he set foot in this township. He was born and raised in the city and runs his farm like a factory. It's men like him, Jim has been known to say after a few shots of whiskey, that run the real farmers, the farmers that were born and raised on the land, out of the country with their tail between their

legs. Little did Jim know that he would be talking about himself, or maybe he did know and resented the Lorne Johnstons of the world all the more for it.

The choir, with the help of Mrs. Owen's Sunday school class has made a papier-mâché piñata in the shape of a hammer. Though they've told everyone they're buying the store, the owner doesn't want to sell for a year or so, and working there, Jim and Vye have decided, would be a good way for Jim to learn the business. *It's not lying*, Vye said. *It's just not revealing all the truths at once.*

Jim and Vye are blindfolded and both turned around. Vye takes a crack at the hammer and misses. *You have a go now, Jim*, Vye says.

Perhaps it's beginners' luck or the instinct, usually reserved for the blind, of knowing the location of an object without seeing it. Or maybe under the darkness of the blindfold it's Lorne Johnston's face he imagines when he takes hold of the stick. But whatever the force behind him, whatever the luck or unluck depending on the way one chooses to see it, Jim takes one swing at the glorious papier-mâché hammer and brings it down intact.

Jim removes his blindfold and looks at the piñata on the floor. Everyone stands around grim-faced. Jim feels like the spoilt child who has thrown a tantrum at his own birthday party. In the moment before anyone has a chance to speak, Jim sees a young boy, the Keller boy, not much older than five or six, standing beside him. He hands the stick to the child, who bashes the hammer with all his might, at which point all laughter and gaiety is resumed, leaving Jim officially off the hook.

The goodbye party is in full swing. They've even broken out some of Gillespie Keller's homemade beer for the occasion. Someone's put the phonograph on and everyone is dancing to Guy Lombardo and remembering. Even Jim is dancing, despite himself. Vye smells the same as she did 25 years ago. She smells of Lily-of-the-Valley talc: *her luxury*, as she calls it. A small luxury that sits on the back of the toilet in a round pink tub that she has used after her bath all these years. For a brief moment, Jim can't help but feel young.

When the song ends everyone changes partners except Jim, who slips over to a corner table and watches. There's something about the dog that he can't get out of his mind. As he was leaving the barn this morning, he swears he saw Boxer's tail twitch. If he mentions it to Vye she will say he is crazy. She will say it's his eyes playing tricks on him or wishful thinking. And she will be right. He knows that as well as he knows anything else.

The day before last, before the vet came to put Boxer down, Vye said Boxer placed his paws on her shoulders and looked into her eyes as if to

say *save me, save me*. When Jim brought the shovel around the back of the house, Boxer followed. What bothered Jim as he dug the hole that would eventually be the dog's grave was that Boxer probably thought he had done something wrong, that somehow he were to blame for the events that were about to unfold. The dog's eyes didn't plead with Jim the way they had with Vye. But the guilt ate at him all the same. They couldn't take Boxer to the city. If the cars didn't kill him, the confinement would be something close to suffocation. He couldn't have done that to this dog. And if no one wanted him then a quick, painless death was the next best thing.

For the last three hours Vye's been keeping an eye on Jim. He's moved from his corner only once since they danced and that was to use the toilet. Jim can't help it if she's social and he's not. Usually he leaves right after church and someone from the choir drives Vye home. He's staying today because it's special, because they're leaving. In some ways it might have been better for Vye, more fun, if he had just gone on home as usual. He knows it would have been better for him. He feels bad that she feels she has to watch him. On the ride home she won't say anything about it and neither will he.

As they drive down the gravel lane toward the farm, Jim feels a calm and quietness that has never been there before. He stops the car in front of the house to let Vye out. She is annoyed with him for the way he behaved at church. Jim parks in the drive house. He turns the ignition off and sits for a moment holding the steering wheel for dear life. He shuts his eyes, and all he can think of is the barn and having to carry his dog to the hole that he dug and covered with tarp.

If Jim could change everything, he would. He would stay by his father's side as he lay dying on the cold, damp ground. He would wait for someone to come because the help that did come didn't make a difference in the long run. How he would have loved to hold his father's hand and hear his last words. If Jim could change everything, he would keep the farm or at least save his dog. Events have a way of spinning out of control like contract you can't get out of no matter how hard you try. There is no such thing as chance, Jim decides, no such thing as chance at all.

Jim hears what he thinks is a low growl coming from under the car. It's a sound he's heard before, in the woods, the sound of a wolf gone mad. Jim opens and shuts the car door and waits. Whatever was under there is gone. He walks out of the drive house and lights a cigarette.

Noticing the barn door open halfway, Jim walks over to it. When he steps inside and looks for Boxer on the floor and sees only the empty space where the dog had lain, for a moment, the thrill of a second chance over-

comes him. He decides right then and there he will do whatever it takes to keep Boxer alive; if he can't get the dog a good home then Boxer will come with them to the city.

As Jim runs toward the house to tell Vye, he hears the growl again. He turns and finds Boxer, teeth bared, foaming at the mouth, and ready to attack. Vye appears at the screen door. She cups her hand over her mouth while Jim speaks softly to the dog. *Boxer, it's me. Where's my good boy? Where's my dog? Boxer.*

If the dog recognizes Jim, he doesn't show it.

Vye heads to the Reeves for a gun. There is no time to get the vet. Jim stands still, holding his breath, barely keeping the dog at bay.

When Vye returns with the gun she passes it to Jim, and the dog doesn't seem to notice. Jim holds the rifle the way a surgeon holds a knife before he cuts. His hands are steadier than they've been all afternoon. And dry, it surprises him that his hands are dry. He points the gun at the head of the frothing and mad animal before him. He touches the trigger. The metal is cold and smooth. He can hear everything and nothing at once. A bird drops a twig on the rear of the car, and to Jim it's as loud as a branch falling from a tree. But Boxer's growl, which he knows is loud, sounds to him as muffled and soft as breathing. He shuts his eyes and stands for a moment, unmoving.

Then, Jim puts the gun down. Whatever fire Boxer has left, Jim cannot be the one to smother it. Without looking at her husband, Vye gently removes the rifle from Jim's hand. She raises it slowly, methodically, and then aims at the dog. She's a good shot. She's been shooting at tin cans ever since Jim can remember. As he walks toward the farmhouse, he hears the bullets leave the gun and break the dog's flesh like stones.

Jim is sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for everyone to leave the yard. Reade Reeves is shoveling the last of the dirt over Boxer's grave. Jim can see this from the window, and he knows this will be one of those moments he will remember for a long time. He will remember the bed squeaking when he leaned toward the window to watch his neighbour burying his dog. And how the quilt felt as he clutched the side of the bed. He will remember wanting to crawl under the covers, wanting to shut his eyes and forget his whole life, but not wanting to muss the bedding that Vye washed and ironed and made up only this morning.

The news of Vye shooting Boxer because he couldn't has spread through the entire Reeves clan so that now Reade's daughter is standing on the grass beside her father, watching. Watching, if Jim can believe his eyes, with a finger up her nose. He thinks she's the one who wets the bed every time she stays over the night. So much so that Vye's taken to laying down green garbage bags underneath the sheets.

Though he should be relieved that this will be the last time he will see her, he is not. He's as resentful of her standing by the barn, picking her nose over Boxer's grave as he would be were she sitting here pissing on Vye's clean sheets. Jim puts his hand over his face. He can't watch this. He can't wait for them to leave. It will be a whole new life, he tries to console himself. It will be a whole new life when they move to the city.

Vye comes out of the house with lemonade and small bowl of sugar cubes. Reade, who has just finished with the grave, wipes his brow and accepts the drink thankfully. Later, Vye will say, *Wasn't that nice of Reade to bury Boxer?* But what she will mean is he should have done it himself. He would have if everyone had left the yard. Jim had wanted to bury Boxer, but Reade just took over. The same way Reade's father, Clive, took over all those years ago. Though he knows it shouldn't, it burns Jim that the Reeves are so good. Is Jim good? Vye would say that he was, but Jim doesn't know. He doesn't think so.

It's been almost an hour since Vye shot Boxer, and Jim realizes this will be how he measures time from now on. As it was when his father died, so it will be again—one chapter closes, another opens, not necessarily better than what came before.

Ghost Maps

Dragon's Teeth

German Border—February 1945

Vivian sends him boot-liners
so tight-knit he feels
the ache of her fingers
when he pulls them on.
He wants to write,
but what can he tell her—
the pillbox where concussion
left the dead sitting
like men in a wagon.
They've made the Siegfried Line
and the papers are full
of victory. He kicks
through shattered concrete.
Gravel arcs and catches
in the churned earth
like teeth, white and grinning.

No History

The new house has no history—
no stiff frame that sighs
and settles into evening,
no sleepless cellar
where onions stir in slatted bins,
no big crabapple
to make its speech on wind.
He wishes he could leave his body
that easily. Vivian curls
round and naked
in a square of moonlight.
He touches her belly:
scar-slick stretch marks
blooming like photographs
in a bath of silver.

Linger

One morning he woke and found
her body cooling. He tried to lift her
but she was heavy—and that was wrong:
surely there was less here, surely
what he'd lost was solid
as furniture.

The coroner came,
the girls and their husbands.
Someone made the bed.
The chenille like snowfall
softened the hollow curve
she'd left. *Slipped away*,
the coroner said, and that was all
he caught. He thought of how
she would let go his hand,
lingering: lifting their arms
between them, her thumb lifting,
her palm's curve rising to his fingertips,
her fingertips brushing his fingertips,
the first inch of her absence
so delicate
he hardly noticed.

Alison Pick

Something About Sacrifice

At Karen's funeral they cry. Her mother especially, who couldn't be bothered when Karen was alive, bawls onto the doctor's stout shoulder. Karen watches from a tree. It is strange to see her own body being lowered into the ground, the shiny oak casket covered with pink and white flowers as it often is at the funeral of someone who died too young.

Marinda sniffs and paws at the ground as if preparing for some ceremony of her own. Peter is there too, at the back of the crowd. He's dared to bring the peroxide blonde, who is clearly, Karen thinks, uncomfortable. Poor Peter. He only wants to show that Karen's death was not his fault, that he hadn't even been dating her at the time. He'd been together with his *girlfriend*, see here, this buxom blonde named Beth.

Karen dangles her legs over the branch. She is far out from the trunk, among the smaller branches bristling with new spring leaves. Each one is webbed with veins, the same as her own hand in front of her. And when the breeze comes up, Karen hears that each leaf has its own clear voice, and that together they form a high, tinkling music; that the tree is vibrantly, harshly alive. Mary is beside her. They lock eyes and smile, and Karen feels very far away indeed from her sobbing mother, from the television reporters below. She has not been this happy in as long as she can remember. She leans back into the wind, balancing on the heft of her new wings.

At the Bargain Bin she'd gone straight for the jewelry, her very alive heart pounding in her chest. It was laid out on tables, chunky pink and green clip-on earrings, a steal at \$2.99, glass beaded necklaces, \$5.65, that you could wind around your neck three times. Flower rings that, when an admirer bent for a peak, delivered them a long squirt in the face. She opened her shopping bag discretely, hiding it under the flap of her long coat. The necklaces slithered in a mass of plastic down into her bag.

Next came the CDs: 'Reckless,' 'She's So Unusual,' several *Tears for Fears* albums. Karen buttoned her coat, heading toward the front of the store as if she owned every last inch of the place, from the stereos right down to the candy display. Purpose: that was the ticket. A spin through the turnstiles, a cloud of smoke, and then she was gone.

The first time, at Woolworth's, she hadn't acted purposefully. She'd let her eyes scuttle in every direction, a pair of lobsters in the bottom of a

kitchen sink. When the man had pulled her aside and asked her to empty her pockets, Karen's mother had been called down to the station. She came in fuming, brandishing her car-keys like a weapon. "What am I supposed to tell my bridge group?" she shouted, shaking the keys dangerously close to Karen's face. "That I have some kind of klepto for a daughter?"

Her mother's name was Jan. The officer, fiddling with his hearing aid, had to repeat the name back and forth with her (Jen? Jan. Jean? *Jan*) like some kind of policing parrot. This exercise snapped Jan into the why stage. She'd gone on about it for quite some time: couldn't Karen just explain *why* she'd done it; her mother might forgive her if only she understood *why*. Karen struggled, biting down on her lip and shrugging her shoulders, which only made Jan angrier. "Smarten up, you ungrateful child!" she hissed at her daughter. But the voice that had instructed Karen to steal was not to be shared. It was calm and loving, filling her heart with light. The voice belonged to Mary, the Mother of God.

At the hospital Karen shared a room with a redhead named Marinda, who would only undress behind a curtain. She also refused to shower, something to do with a camera she assured Karen was hidden behind the towel rack in the bathroom. Marinda jabbed her thick finger at the spot on the tiles, but all Karen could see was a blob of white caulking coming loose. She imagined pulling it off and popping it in her mouth, the cracking sound it would make between her molars, like bubblegum.

The room began to smell. First like a load of wet laundry forgotten in the machine; later like a deer hit by an 18-wheeler, its carcass rotting on the gravel shoulder. At night Karen heard the flies circling low over Marinda's bed. Sometimes she even woke to the velvety flap of vulture-wings, but this might have been one of the side effects they'd warned her about: blood-in-the-ears, diarrhea, anxiety, exhaustion. Check, check, check, check. Karen had lined the drugs up according to colour, first the red ones, then green, then blue, as in a rainbow, but at night this worried her and she reordered them according to size before going to sleep. Tranquilizers first, then the smaller anti-depressants, then finally the tiny pellets—she could never remember what those ones were for.

Marinda had a glass of apple juice on her dresser, which she guarded with a fiery passion. "Blessed, blessed," she murmured over the cup, and once Karen thought she heard something about a sacrifice, but this may have been blood-in-the-ears again. The juice grew a thick skin of blue and white mold, and looked, not to mention smelled, remarkably like urine. Perhaps it *was* urine, Karen thought, and the doctor seemed to agree. He strode in like a high-school teacher, tapping his pencil against his attendance clipboard, accounting for each diseased body. Marinda? Here. Karen? Here. Then he turned on the nurse who was filing her nails in the corner.

"Give that woman a bath. And get rid of that disgusting juice while you're at it," he fired, and made for the door, the stiff white sail of his coat billowing behind him.

Easier said than done. The nurse tried reasoning with Marinda; she threatened to extend Marinda's confinement until Marinda pointed out that she *liked* it in the hospital; it was home that made her crazy in the first place, at least according to the goddamned psychotherapist. "The animal will need juice when the time comes," Marinda intoned, glassy-eyed.

The nurse came tiptoeing into their room in the dead of the night. Karen watched through partly closed eyes, the trickle of light from the hall that followed illuminating the nurse's uniform so she looked like a bandaged mummy. Step, *creak*, step, *creak*, and for a moment Karen thought she'd get away with it; but just as her fingers were closing around the plastic cup Marinda threw herself up from the sleeping position and let out a noise like Karen had never heard before. Not a grizzly exactly, but close enough. Yes, close enough.

The nurse screamed, a high, fluttering ribbon of a scream that echoed down the hall and brought the doctor running. "What's going on here?" he asked, beefy sides heaving, his bald pate damp with perspiration. The nurse, hand over heart, whimpered in the direction of her shoes, "Nothing, doctor, just a little scare." Doc rolled his eyes at her and shook his head back and forth. Then he sprinted back out the door. Karen felt sorry for the nurse. Her nerves were so *nervy*: you could almost see them, live wires laid taut beneath the shimmering surface of her skin, daring each other to jump.

Snarling and baring her teeth, Marinda backed into the hall, juice held tightly to her chest. Seeing that Karen was up, the nurse settled herself on the edge of the bed. Her stringy blonde hair stuck out from her nurses' cap and she had the tight, stretched skin of the chronically stressed. Still breathing hard, she began to talk about her daughter. "Sally gots an apple on the window sill," she said, winding a string around her knuckle until her finger turned white. "It started to go moldy so I says honey, I'm gonna throw this out. But she wouldn't let me. She's saving it for her Daddy..." The nurse sniffed and her eyes began to spout like the fountain on the hospital lawn.

Karen knew this type: a woman who was a magnet for disaster. An abandonment to match every gaudy pair of plastic earrings. The nurse wiped her cheeks with the back of her sleeve and gave Karen a look of understanding, as if they had survived a harrowing storm together. "Call me Lydie," she said, and held out a French-manicured hand. Then she took an O'Henry from a trick pocket in her coat and began eating it up and down, like a cob of corn. "Nothin' a bit of candy won't fix." She smiled nervously, nibbling off nuts and chocolate until all that was left was a long

goopy piece of beige toffee, which she tossed in the garbage. "You want one?" she asked, even though she knew that Karen was restricted to the hospital diet. But Karen shook her head no. Chocolate, she thought, was what had gotten her into the asylum in the first place.

The policeman had been wearing plain clothes. That's what didn't seem fair—corduroy pants, a brown suede jacket, the kind of sunglasses that are really just a set of dark lenses clipped onto regular frames. If they'd been down, she would have known immediately—anyone wearing dark glasses indoors must certainly be a law enforcement agent. But the glasses were up. So when, after emptying a carton of Mars Bars into her duffel bag, Karen looked over and saw him watching her, she didn't put them back, or run away, or pretended she was an employee restocking the shelves. Instead she moved on to the Big Turks. She was stuffing her pockets when the leather-jacket man walked over and pulled out a badge. "Sargent Snowball," he said, and Karen could not help but giggle. A strange buzz rose up the back of her neck. "Unit 207, Provincial Police. I just happened to look over here, and. Well. Could you please open your bag for me, Ma'am?"

Sargent Snowball had to have 16 stitches. 10 above his right eyebrow where Karen hit him with the makeover mirror, and six more in various places including his right forearm which she'd bitten right through to the bone. She could not for the life of her explain what had come over her. All she remembered was a tingling sensation like before sneezing, a fuzz that danced the line between excruciating pleasure and pain. Jan arrived at the station with her hair in curlers. "I'm in the *middle* of my *make-over*," she yelled, "and they call me on my cell to say you've been caught stealing *chocolate bars*. For God sake, Karen. What do you expect me to tell the neighbours?"

After Lydie left, Karen couldn't get back to sleep. She lay on her back with the night pressing in like her father's dark beard. He used to nuzzle it against her face until she squealed for him to stop. She remembered his plaid flannel shirts that smelt of sweet smoke and the pipes he kept lined up in a rack. When she was younger she liked to arrange them from longest to shortest. Sometimes she pretended they were tiny doll tubas, blowing into them and expelling clouds of dark ash around Barbie. Her father thought this was funny. He thought everything Karen did was funny. He showed her how to stuff the bowls with loose tobacco and once, when Jan was out, he let her take a puff.

He'd been killed on June 14th, 1990, at the corner of King and Main. A blue Ford hit him from behind, pushing him into a stream of oncoming traffic. A tourist—an *Oriental*, Jan was quick to point out—happened to be videotaping the intersection. Later, watching the tape, the police said it

looked like the Ford had been aiming directly for Karen's dad. He died instantly. The obituary said he'd been a lawyer, although his bank balance revealed far more money than he could properly account for.

The night after, Karen's father came to her room. His body was a little light that hummed and buzzed like a firefly. She was scared at first, but closed her eyes and heard his voice as if it was coming through headphones directly into her ears. He said the usual things: he loved her, he'd watch over her from heaven.

The following night, he asked her to go down to the basement and delete the files off his hard drive. Karen thought this strange: asking her to make amends with an estranged relative would be understandable, but remove the contents of a computer that nobody ever used? The day after, he wanted her to deliver an envelope. Her father's voice changed pitch over time, becoming higher than it had been in real life, dispensing directions in a calm yet authoritative fashion. Karen always obeyed. It never occurred to her not to.

The night Karen realized, she was watching old home-movies. This was something she'd taken to doing whenever Jan was out, pretending she had a sister on the couch beside her, and a mother, maybe, knitting in an armchair. It was something she imagined that other families did. She'd even made herself a bowl of popcorn, which she accidentally sprinkled with sugar instead of salt. She picked at it delicately, jealous of her three-year-old self who toddled across the screen without the least idea of what the future had in store. Then her father's face ballooned into view, and Karen's candy-coated fingers curled into fists in her lap. His voice came like a kindly gym coach to whoever had been filming: "Press *here* to zoom," he instructed, and the television filled up with his scritch-scratchy face.

But the voices did not match. The one that came at night and gave her instructions was no longer anything like her father's voice. It was gentler, more confident. The name came like a *déjà vu*, like something she'd always known but had temporarily forgotten: Mary! The following night Mary told her to look in a shoebox behind the furnace. There, nestled in a blue velvet cloth, was the gun.

Lydie's voice was high and lilting, with a veer toward a lisp that changed its mind just in time. "Can I get you anything, honey?" she asked, poking her head around the corner. Karen shook her head no. She'd barely slept, and her energy was seeping from her body like toxic gas. It tinted the air a dull yellow, so that everything looked distant, as in photographs taken before she was born.

Lydie came over and crouched down beside Karen's bed. She smelled like smoke, watermelon Bubblicious, and hair gel. "Brought 'cha a

surprise," she said, and popped a CD into the portable player on the desk. She cracked her gum and winked at Karen. "To cheer you up. You can have it for a while."

'*There's been lovin' in your eyes all the wa-ay,*' crooned Boy George. Lydie straightened, put two uncharacteristic victory fists in the air above her head, and thrust her bony pelvis back and forth.

"Nurses' meeting immediately," growled Doc over the intercom. Lydie patted Karen on the head and gyrated away, down the hall.

The corpulent doctor liked words. *Paranoid delusions, schizophrenia, bipolar depression*. Bla bla bla, thought Karen. She knew that Mary was real. The way she talked about furniture, for example: lazy-boy chairs for hours of reclining enjoyment, a blue and yellow braided rug, a shower curtain in swirly purple tones. A miracle futon: bed by night, couch by day. 'Go get 'em, girl!' Mary whispered. Karen's heart picked up the pace.

Doc would probably have approved. Two of his favourite words were *activity* and *participation*; he threw them up like fistfuls of confetti that fluttered into helpless pink heaps on the floor. But how to proceed? There was the matter of the sign that said "Mood Disorder Unit: Keep Door Locked at All Times." Also the hospital bracelet they had somehow managed to weld to Karen's wrist while she wasn't looking. Mary became more insistent, murmuring about ottomans while Karen sat down to pick at her dinner in front of the nature show. The tiny blind bunny who got eaten by its mother: *that* Karen could relate to. The darkness gnawed at her, organ by organ. She thought longingly of what she'd stashed, at the bottom of the toy-box in pediatrics.

While Karen was finishing her limp tuna-melt, *Biography* came on. A famous writer (although nobody Karen recognized) began talking about what she called her creative process. "The characters tell me their names," the author said enthusiastically, waving her hands in the air above her head. "Always normal names, like Jennifer or Karen. If it were up to me, I'd make them unusual! Breena, Wylde, Chrysanthemum." Karen was insulted at being lumped together with *Jennifer*. Her name was far less common, she thought. Only later, lying in bed and taking account for each ceiling tile, did she realize that the author was talking directly to *her*. "Those voices in your head," she'd said, pointing her index finger at her temple, "they're there for a reason. You have one job: to listen."

Karen had tried desperately to be normal. At school she identified the most regular-looking boy of the lot and set herself the task of winning him over. Like most 17-year-olds, he responded to concert tickets, a little bit of leg, the promise of more. As predictably as if she'd pushed the play button, Peter whirred to life, offering to take Karen to the premiere screening of *The Matrix* and for a double-dip cone at the Dairy Queen. He wore blue

jeans, a fleece vest, and a Nike baseball cap with the rim pointed forward.

But she didn't know what to do with him. The urges other teenagers had—the musty, lusty needs—didn't seem to apply. All Karen really cared about was that she was able to count the bedroom ceiling tiles while Peter lay on top of her, trying to muffle his moaning so the mother of the house wouldn't hear. Peter, too, was *sans pere*, his having run off with his secretary. Really, how much more normal could you get?

Most nights they went to Karen's place. The pro was that Jan didn't care if they were in the bedroom with the door closed. The con was that Peter had to leave by midnight. Jan would stand outside in the hallway, coughing loudly until he emerged, rumpled and bashful. Jan needed a good sleep, after all. She had to be up early for work.

The sounds were the same every morning: the maniacal beeping of Jan's alarm clock, the creak of the bed as she heaved her body out of it, the *thwack, thwack* of her bedroom slippers on the hardwood floor. A loud fart, the hot hiss of urine, and the whoosh of the shower. Several minutes later the bathroom turned silent and Karen knew, without looking, that her mother was in front of the mirror plucking eyebrows, prodding pores, adding just a little more blush. It was ridiculous, really, the length of time Jan spent in the bathroom, as if it were she—and not Karen—who was going to spend the rest of the day at Parkview Collegiate. She kept her cosmetics lined up on the bureau like soldiers ready for war. All she needed was a dictator, someone to tell her lipsticks which way to march.

Things were bad, getting worse. "He's gone for good," Lydie told Karen, wringing her tired fingers in her lap. "Came back last night trying to take my stuff. I think he's going crazy, he had the nerve to bring *her* with him, waiting in the car. But he couldn't muster up enough balls to go in and tell Sally goodbye..." At this Lydie's voice broke and she began to cry, quiet rivulets of tears cascading down her cheeks.

Karen wanted to get up off her bed and put her arms around Lydie. In fact, she was working up the strength to do just that when the intercom clicked on and Doc's voice boomed into the room: "Lydie, to the nurses' station. Now!" Lydie got up in a hurry. She wiped her nose on the back of her sleeve and smiled apologetically at Karen before rushing out of the room. Five minutes later, through a grey haze of lethargy, Karen noticed that Lydie had left her clipboard on the chair. And there was something else there, too: a little pile of shimmering silver. Lydie had forgotten her keys.

Once she was out of the unit the rest was fine. The elevator's sultry plunge, the long walk across the front foyer: purpose, purpose, my love. Karen's tagged wrist was tucked neatly into the sleeve of her turtleneck, and her track pants bagged at the knees.

The street was another thing altogether. Emerging into the darkness, she felt a gritty panic, the dirty city pressing at her lungs. She wanted to run back into the hospital and gulp in the antiseptic air. Instead, she breathed. In and out, in and out, instructed Mary, like some kind of track coach. Her voice a paper bag over Karen's mouth.

Luckily, the furniture store was close to the hospital. Unluckily, it was filled with life-sized furniture, the kind that goes in a real house and is far too large to stuff into her backpack. She fought off the urge to lay down on one of the perfect, king-sized beds, bury her head in the mountain of lacy throw-cushions, and bawl. What was Mary *thinking*?

"Can I help you?" The brown-haired, wire-spectacled man behind the counter let his eyes slide down Karen's body, over her dirty clothes and raccoonish eyes. In and out, whispered Mary, like some kind of idiot.

"Uh, yes. I mean no. I'm just looking." Karen held her breath and demanded that Mary give more information.

"For anything in particular?"

Fear rose in Karen's throat. She imagined that some voice she no longer recognized as her own, but as the voice of Lucifer himself, might cry out, "Help me, I'm sick, I need help." She bit her lip to keep it down, focusing on the pain. And then it came: a beam of light piercing a cloud, the unmistakable trill of violins. "For a chaise-long!" said Karen, lungs opening out in relief. "I'm looking for a chaise-long."

The man gave her a wary look. "I don't know," he said. "We don't have any in stock. We could probably order one in. Just let me check in the back."

Suddenly it all seemed too easy. The man headed for the storeroom and Karen almost laughed when her eyes settled on the stack of gift certificates behind the counter. She leaned over, feet lifting slightly off the ground, and grabbed a fistful, as many as she could hold. Then she turned her back and walked—you know how—out of the store. The certificates were blank and she filled them in in the back alley, writing *one thousand dollars* in careful script along each open line. There were 17 in all.

The clothing store was just two blocks over. Here, thankfully, Mary knew exactly what she wanted. Three crinkle-skirts: one turquoise, one fuschia, one in a loud paisley print. The sparkly halter-tops were folded on a display table; Karen grabbed four, along with several bulky sweaters, two pairs of slacks, and all the accessories she could get her hands on. In the change room she deftly stuffed half of the clothes into her bag, adding a pair of leather sandals and a handbag to match. "Anything you like?" asked the clerk when she came out, a mountain of clothes draped over her arm. "Not today." Karen smiled and then added, on a whim, "But I'll be back." She made for the door, backpack bulging.

Back at the hospital Karen spread herself out on the clean white sheet,

willing her body to fuse into it, this length of inanimate fabric with all the corners tucked in. Her tiredness was deeper, and growing. She didn't move a muscle when Marinda stalked into the room. Calm as a lake on a hot day, warm smile, "Oh, I was wondering where you got to," Marinda said, and two seconds later she was muttering, "Elephant Man! Come in Elephant Man!" into an invisible walkie-talkie.

It was because of her father. That's what Doc had said when Jan first brought Karen to the hospital, and Karen couldn't help but overhear it when she pressed her ear to his office door. His voice, after all, was nearly as big as his behind. "A period of unpredictable, sometimes violent behaviour often occurs in teens who have lost a parent at an early age," Doc told Jan. *Woh, woh, woh*, like Charlie Brown's teacher. He added that a short stay at the hospital was probably best for everyone, at least until Sargent Snowball decided whether or not to press charges. The voices behind the door dropped and Karen could only hear her mother sniffle occasionally, and the low, murmured words of the doctor. And then a creaky, rhythmic moaning.

There were stacks of women's magazines on the table in the lobby. 'You go girl!' Mary told Karen, who began stuffing them in her backpack. They were all quite thick, *Cosmopolitan* and *Vanity Fair* and double summer issues of *People*, and Karen had to shove to fit them all in. She was only halfway through when Jan came out of the office, clutching her little handbag to her chest and straightening the pleats on her skirt. "Let's go Karen," she said, "We're going home to pack you a bag and then bringing you back to the hospital." But Mary had instructed Karen not to leave until she'd gotten all the magazines.

Jan did not even get mad. She did not threaten to lock Karen in the front closet as she'd done before, with the umbrellas and rubber boots, waiting for the rain to start to fall. She only giggled, covering her mouth as if sharing a private joke with herself. "Okay dear, whenever you're ready. I'll be waiting for you in the car," she said to Karen, and flounced out the door like Miss Piggy.

There, on the other side of the hospital window: the sky and all its pain. Evening, spreading its blue bruise through her heart. And then the sun, just as brazen with its show-offy light, the way it flashed its legs like a chorus girl. Karen pulled a pillow over her head. She was becoming, she knew, more confused.

The problems were many and varied. First—speech. With Doc, she had given up trying. He lumbered into the room, bellowing "Howze the lovely ladies in Room 201?" and Karen could not even muster the strength to lift her middle finger, let alone get the words out; they were stuck in her like a cork in a bottle. Hot water helped. She took to bathing twice a day, once

for herself and once for Marinda, whose skin was starting to emit the same vinegary reek as her apple juice. Karen sat for hours on the floor of the shower, letting the spray pelt against her back until it turned horror-movie pink and Lydie began knocking on the door.

Lydie was the next problem. She'd begun working more hours, double and triple shifts. "I gotta put food on the table," she said, sitting down with a bag of chips on her break. She only ate junk food, getting skinnier and skinnier with each cheezie. But instead of jealousy, Karen felt sadness for Lydie—a relentless, debilitating sadness. "My girl Sally has been asking for a Furbie since last September," Lydie said. "She stands at the window watching the other kids play with theirs on the lawn and it damned near breaks my heart." Karen closed her eyes and asked for help, and Mary, smugly, refused.

Problem three (Karen imagined the problems like a set of intersecting lines on Doc's clipboard): Mary was getting cocky. Her demands were skyrocketing. A percolator, a bread-maker, two different sets of cutlery: Karen had had to make several trip to Sears just to steal it all. She could not even bare to *think* about the difficulty she'd had smuggling the chopping knives back into the ward. She was beginning to wonder about Mary—her Light, her Love—maybe Mary was the crazy one. Nutso. Cuckoo. Completely off her rocker. Along with various appliances, Karen had been instructed to bring back stuffed bunnies, skipping ropes, and roller-blades.

Karen assumed, though there was no way to be sure, that the toys would be camouflage for the other items stored in the box. Gift certificates and CDs hidden beneath threadbare teddies and GI Joes with multiple injuries. The children in the unit were all far too sick to play; still, she put a padlock on it, just to be safe.

She went there in the middle of the night with her bounty. Crusty-eyed, she dragged her butt out of bed and took the elevator three floors down. Karen had by now perfected her purposefulness to the point that the occasional night-nurse who saw her in pajamas, carrying a wok and a spice-rack into pediatrics, didn't say boo.

Mary the Virgin Martyr. The words had seemed to shimmer, near-translucent behind Karen's eyes, while Peter had groped at her breasts. His interest was genuine, that was clear, but he didn't seem to have any idea what to do with them, treating them as some kind of small fruit, squeezing them tightly in his palm as if testing for ripeness. *Forbidden* fruit, Karen thought to herself, and this pleased her, that is until he began to take little nips at them, sinking his teeth in as if he expected juice to squirt out. Peter was painfully unaware of Karen's nipples.

It got harder as time went on to reconcile these two things: the virgin that Mary was, and therefore that Karen must be, and Peter trying at first

discretely, and later not at all discretely, to rub his swollen crotch against her leg. His appetite for this only increased.

Karen wasn't sure what she expected from Peter after telling him that "their needs were incompatible." Tears, maybe. A real crying fit, with fists punched through plaster and a vase of scarlet roses smashed into shards against the wall. Instead, a nasty look came over Peter's face. "Forget it," he said, as if he hadn't just heard Karen say the exact same thing. Karen took this to be part of his normal teenage angst. She'd read in her sociology book that teenagers, boys especially, were susceptible to bouts of rage as a result of socialization coupled with some hormone leaking like sewage from their brains. "No hard feelings?" Karen asked, reaching to touch for his shoulder, but Peter jerked away like her fingers were covered in feces.

Three days later she passed him in the hall between fourth and fifth period. She raised her hand to greet him but he kept walking. He was with a girl, bleach blonde, spilling out of an acid-wash shirt. Now *that* was fruit, Karen thought. After they'd passed, once Karen's heart was slowing down a little, she heard Peter's voice over the din of the hallway. "Crazy bitch!" he yelled. Karen resisted the urge to yell something back about his nostril hair or the speed at which he'd ejaculated in his pants. She kept walking, chin up, shoulders squared. Martyr indeed, she reassured herself, fighting back the tears.

Karen intuited the center of the hurricane, aimed her quivering exhaustion for that point of rest. But sleep was elusive. When night fell she counted: ceiling tiles, floor tiles, inches of mold on Marinda's apple juice. None brought relief. Only Mary's soothing voice, her cool hand on Karen's forehead. "*The river Jordan is chilly and wide,*" Mary sang, "*Allelu-ua.*" Karen felt her mind beginning to drift, the first inches into the howling funnel. "*Milk and honey on the other side.*" Mary's voice was low and soulful, almost like Karen's father's again.

Just before sleep lowered its blanket, Karen thought she could see her eternal mother, bathed in a pool of liquid light. The light approached, approached, and then, at the last possible moment, retreated with great speed down a tunnel. She jerked awake in the hospital room, craning her neck, but she was alone with Marinda, who was snorting in her slumber, pawing at the air just above her bed.

Poor Lydie cried and cried and cried. She came in the next morning, her face shiny pink, saying, "He took everything. He took it all. And I got no insurance. Came in the night with moving men and a *knife*, sweet Jesus. He cleared out the whole bloody house." At the foot of Karen's bed, head in her hands, hair stuck to her wet face, Lydie sobbed.

"All nurses to the station!" barked Doc over the intercom, but not even

this could stop her. Karen's legs were very weak when she got up from her bed, knees knobby under the hospital gown. She held Lydie, stroking her hair, wiping the tears gently off her cheeks. "Come with me, love," Karen said, a slow smile spreading over her face.

The lobby of pediatrics was empty. Karen opened the box and began removing the items one by one, placing them in a pile at Lydie's feet. Lydie's eyes widened and she began to cry again, helplessly, unable to stop. A stereo, a stack of 80's CDs, a new wardrobe. Plastic fluorescent earrings, ten shades of nail-polish. Knives, forks, spoons, plates, bowls. Seventeen thousand dollars worth of furniture coupons. Coffee-table magazines. Two full crates of chocolate bars. A Furbie.

"Lydie," Karen said slowly, "These are for you. They are a gift from Mary, the Mother of God. She does not want you to suffer." Karen felt sure of herself, speaking calmly, the tiredness lifting and a clean, grief-stricken clarity flooding through her body.

"You can have everything except this," she said, coming to the last item, staring down at the gun in the bottom of the toy box. "This one is mine."

At Karen's funeral they hold hands: Jan and Deadweight Doc, Peter and Breasty Beth. Marinda is holding something too, behind her back. She breaks free from the crowd and rushes up to the casket just as it's being lowered into the ground, raising the cup of vinegary juice high above her head and dumping it ceremoniously over the open hole. "Praise Karen the Bear!" she shrieks, and an attendant comes forward to remove her. Lydie cries the hardest of all of them, deep wracking sobs of the newly delivered, sobs of grief and relief. She holds on tightly to her daughter's little shoulders. Sally's braids are tied with blue ribbons and she is missing all but one of her front teeth.

The branch Karen sits on, with Mary beside her, is the highest one in the tree. 'Look up,' Karen wills Sally, and to her surprise and delight, Sally does, squinting her blue eyes against the glare. She begins tugging on Lydie's sleeve. "Mommy, there's someone up..." Karen puts her index finger in front of her lips. Sally considers for a moment, and then follows suit, the finger coming over her mouth with great seriousness. Karen gives her the thumbs-up and smiles.

Through the thick leafy cover Karen feels the sun, heat and shadow dappling across her skin in equal measure. The crying below seems very distant, like a small fly buzzing behind a windowpane. Karen breathes deeply, letting the tree's music flow through her limbs. She stretches her arms above her head, touching the silky leaves, and finds she can balance perfectly. There is no need to fear that slow-motion fall back to earth. Karen swings her legs over the edge, kicking them back and forth like a kid out of school.

matt robinson

notes towards an apartment story

it could begin, this sketch of
our basement building, with how

we—*in medias res*, my father
and i—emerge, day's-end ghosted with sprinklings

of plaster, scaling the back
stairs' green-carpeted well, my allergic dust-cough

hacking out the backdoor's failing, dusk-screened evening
light like a confused dog's

announcement of morning. or
with the decision—we'll say it took place at

the dining room table (the bills, scattered shingles of mail, all
shovelled aside and coffee

cup-pyloned)—with the graph
paper pact to build the thing, to frame that space, at

all. or maybe with no words, as such: simply the felt
penned diagrams—the rasp shuffle

of paper; a father's near-silent geometry? or,
perhaps, all things considered, it *should* begin after the fact;

start with the pine shelf, all
six feet by three feet by ten inches, varnished and still

there, these four years since i've moved from
the province, my brother's snapshots now tacked to its sides.

but here's a thought: to begin—an appendix:
a catalogue of excisions, the things

we left others to do: like the plumbing
and wiring—the real guts of the chore, knowing full

well that was not our forte. knowing
too well that most things we do, whether we wish them or

not, become in the end a mere list of deferrals, a counting
of spaces. like left-over linoleum:

the spilt-shuffled tile puzzle of what's
been, been left, been left out: to stand, or to sit in a place.

error

*As an understanding of a hand
In a pocket was an understanding
Of wind chill without digits centigrade or fahrenheit.*

—from “New Northern Insurance” by Douglas Burnet Smith

and we do that all
the time, don't we—didn't we—dad? there's something to be said
for the effort of it, though: the taking of the thing to mean
another; or: the context, the precedent only, and but; the metaphors'
metastisizing. and so on. it's a familial semaphore, this—a kind of
clumsy speed-reading of the tendon's twitch of an after-supper, holiday
knee, or a parsing of one or the other's steering wheel grip (the knuckles
do serve to punctuate the forehead's lines); it's the queasy certainty
of how it's *surely* not just a mole, not just a vacation or *only* some time
off. the kind of thing, i'm sure, resulting from decades bathroom-shared.
yet ours is an imprecise blood exegesis—if only there was some
fractal, some constant (an agreed and pre-determined number or figure
we could, the both of us, rely on for translation of these, our jagged
outlines, the approximated coastlines, of our meanings. there is
none. none, because no matter what notes we've compiled towards
a theory for the mathematics of misunderstanding, its derivatives, we know
this much, somehow: that such a coefficient would be indeterminate:
only another sort of lie—collusion—even if we mimed our belief in it.

Brenda Hasiuk

The Tim Man

The summer before, Connie said to me: "You have to upgrade yourself. I'm not supporting some almost-been."

She thought that was really funny. Whenever she started bugging me she'd have to get smart-alecky, just to let me know I wasn't fooling anybody. Her eyelids would droop half way down, kind of lazy-squinting to see through me. But usually, I just sat back and let her babbling bounce off.

"I'm serious, Timmy. Sometimes I think you took one punch too many. You have to quit dreaming of bullshit glory days and get a real job. Because I'm telling you, just thinking about it won't pay for your stupid spaghetios."

She would just keep at it, her eyes almost bulging, like if she closed her mouth her head might explode. If you could've seen her, gripping the kitchen table like a loony preacher.

So I dropped on my knees, really dramatic, and slammed my hands over my chest. "Ah Lord, ah Lord, you have moved me. Oh, guide me, guide me, show me the right path."

She stared at me with little black chunks of mascara under her eyes. Her mouth was twitching, wanted to smile so bad. "Sometimes I really hate you."

I know she wanted it to sound like a hiss, but instead, this half-assed little whisper came out. She brought her fist up over her head, like she was winding up for a girl-punch, the kind where it looks like they're either going to scratch their back or hit you. She just turned away, though, walked straight over to the sink, and started squirting dish soap.

Back then the hot water tap didn't work properly, spitting out the water in gags, like it was sick to its stomach. I remember those yellow sweats she was wearing sagged in the ass, making her look smaller than usual. Then she spun around and pointed her finger, looking even more like one of those crooked TV preachers, kind of pleading and threatening at the same time. "And I've had it with you making fun of the church like that."

That's when I knew she wasn't really mad at me anymore.

I guess you could say I thought I had Connie all figured out. For instance, I knew for a fact she wasn't all that deep down happy I quit boxing.

Pretty much the minute she arrived at my door holding all her clothes

in that orange garbage bag and wearing those old jean cut-offs that looked like they might stop the circulation to her legs, she wouldn't shut up. She said she couldn't stand watching me get hit and wanted us to be a regular couple with regular jobs and it was all for the best and I had to face reality.

But the first time I met her I had on this sleeveless gray T-shirt with "No Pain, No Gain" in big red letters, and she couldn't keep her eyes off my arms. I felt almost stupid, working out in my friend's basement and there's his little sister looking like she'd give anything to towel me off. After, I'd be finishing off my second set of push-ups, just working up a good sweat, when she'd come and sit on my ass, legs on either side. "Keep going," she'd say. I'd pull off a few, but then she'd lean over, her wet shampoo-smell hair hanging in my face, and start licking my salty ear. And after a fight, she did this thing when we were lying in bed. With the very tips of her fingers, kind of light and feathery, she would draw all over my legs or back or chest. Just a smooth tickle, the whole time whispering what it was: a snail, a piano—she could come up with some really stupid things. It was nice though, not a turn-on, but relaxing.

But the point is, the big reason Connie kept on my case after I quit, that whole time I slouched on the couch all day watching the talk shows, was because she was worried shitless I would get flabby. I know I wasn't pulling my weight. I know it wasn't really fair. I'm just saying that there was more to it than that.

For maybe four months, I mostly just sat there, watching nothing on TV and remembering things, like how just after I started school my dad replaced my blow-up punching bag with a real one. He hung it in the laundry room of our apartment block, and later, when I finally started working out in a gym, I always thought there was something missing. So I think to myself, maybe it was that steamy smell of dryers spinning around.

I also thought about how it was my dad who started calling me "The Tim Man," because I'm hard, can take almost anything, but a little slow, a little stiff like the tin man in that movie. He thought he was funny, too. He liked to say I needed more of that dancing scarecrow, skipping around the yellow brick road.

You don't want to know how long I worked to fix that lagging left. I guess until Connie wouldn't shut up and I didn't even care anymore.

One day, I was watching one of the shows and they had this thing on paintings. It was mostly about this crazy artist who splotched paint all over boards with a turkey baster, and how one of them sold for six million. It got me thinking I could do that—I could actually see myself doing it, throwing the colours, watching them make some sort of pattern. So when Connie came home I grabbed one of the grocery bags and started telling her about the insane amounts of money you could get just making stuff, and she looked at me like I'd finally lost it.

"You can't draw worth shit," she said. Which was true, but she didn't even give me a chance to explain. She put her arms around me from behind, starting massaging my chest, and I knew she was going to say something that would piss me off. "Hey, listen. Last night Joanne told me about some continuing education thing downtown. She said they even have some kind of deal if you're unemployed."

"Joanne's nuts," I said. The night before, she'd come over, her face all splotchy and puffy from crying, looking like hell. She was a cleaning lady at a big department store, but she'd met this guy at a wedding and told him she actually worked in the store, like as a sales clerk. For a month and a half she'd been wearing a dress and heels just in case he came in to see her. I guess she planned on dropping the vacuum and saying "can I help you?" as soon as he showed up. Anyway, they told Joanne that if she didn't start wearing her uniform again, she'd be out the door.

"Don't change the subject," Connie said.

After that, all she talked about was computers, about all the ads in the paper for network technicians and systems support people. She said I was good at fixing the toaster, and that if I could just catch up with the times and learn computers I'd probably really like it and we'd be laughing. I guess it was her tone, part serious, part joking, that finally got to me. "Hey, excuse me," I said, "but I'm not going to take any goddamn career advice from someone who puts lipstick on dead people all day."

Connie held her cheek like I'd just slapped her across the face. She really loved her job at the funeral home and everybody thought that was very weird. Sometimes this got her upset and she couldn't sleep. I'd have to try to keep my eyes open, maybe nod now and then. "It's not like an emergency room, all that suffering and blood," she'd say. "They're all just kind of peaceful and quiet."

This time, she said, "Don't talk about my job, okay, Tim? Don't you dare."

"Whatever," I said, "whatever."

I went over and put her hair behind her ears, and her head sort of tilted into my hand. I said: "I'm going go, okay? I'm going to go and check it out tomorrow."

I always really hated those places. Whenever I went to the job-find building I came home with a stomach ache. And as soon as I walked into that continuing education office I had three homely women staring me down, like I was disturbing them.

I walked over to the first one, who'd already started typing again.

"Yeah, I'd like to sign up for a computer class so my girlfriend will get off my back."

I thought that might loosen things up. I can have a big mouth when I'm feeling sort of uptight. She shoved a little booklet at me and pointed to an

orange vinyl chair like she was too disgusted to speak. I sat down and start flipping through the book, filled with pages and pages of computer upgrading courses. But sour-face was still looking at me, like she wanted to stare into space but I was in the way. "All the computer courses are already filled for the fall session, except Java and Intermediate Photoshop."

"Oh," I said, still flipping because she was still staring. It was so quiet in there, except for the clack-clack-clack of the keyboards, and it was really starting to get to me. So I got up and pointed to the first thing I saw that wasn't about computers: "Is this one full?"

She clacked away a bit and then gave me a form. "There's space available. But book club and creative writing courses are not eligible for any training benefits."

"Whatever," I said.

I didn't really plan on going, but I had to tell Connie something at supper. "It's only Tuesday afternoons," I said. "And if I find something that means I have to work on Tuesdays, I can move to another evening class. That's what the lady said."

She just sat there, piercing peas with her fork. "You don't even read."

So I pretended to be offended. "You think I can't read?"

She started mashing peas into the plate. "I know you can read. I mean you don't read."

That's when I knew something was different. She was all quiet, and she wouldn't look at me. I knelt down by her chair, starting playing with the tie that kept her housecoat closed. "It'll be great. I can read you poems. You know, Romeo and Juliet and stuff."

"They like die, don't they?"

"Come on, Con," I said. She still wouldn't look at me.

"You're going to go, though. Right? No bullshit. You're going to do this."

"No bullshit," I said.

She started scraping plates, still not looking. "Poetry," she said, "unbelievable," but I was still holding the tie of her housecoat and she didn't pull it away.

So I had to go. And the thing is, there was no way either one of us could have known what was going to happen. It was like everything after that was beyond my control, like I didn't have a choice.

I had to walk into a roomful of women, and before I could turn around, Estelle, the teacher had to say "Ah, here is our male perspective." She had to wave me in with those jangly bracelets she always wore, and I had to slide into a little desk, second row from the back. She had to make everyone introduce themselves, and I had to say "my name is Tim and I don't have a hot clue why I'm here," and this time, those stay-home moms and senior citizens had to think I was fucking hilarious. They all had to laugh,

especially Becca, who actually clapped her hands like a little girl.

I had to notice her because all the other women's hair was combed and perfect in the back, but hers was sticking up, like she just got out of bed, and when she turned to say her name, there was a tiny, tiny diamond in her nose.

"I'm Becca Ward," she said. "I'm home from university because my mom's ill. I'm hoping this will be some respite for me."

She had to talk in that strange, low voice, saying "ill" instead of "sick," even though she looked like a teenager and clapped her hands like a little girl. She had to swing around in her seat when Estelle handed out the big, fat Russian books and look right at me. "This is why you're here," she said, holding it over her head like a trophy.

Then it was like no matter what, I had to go back.

The problem was, every time I seemed to really get into reading, when the TV was off once and for all and I was really focusing, Connie would come home from work and stand there, rocking on her red pumps. "Working hard there, Shakespeare?" One time, she came back in her satiny gold robe and threw her bare feet on my lap, asked what was happening. So I tried to tell her about it, how a guy axes two old women and then feels guilty for 400 pages. Finally, she cut in. "You mean you know who the murderer is from the very beginning?"

I didn't really finish the whole thing. I tried, but I was still at it when we moved onto short stories. One thing I learned was that those Russians books are so thick because the names take up half the page. I still went to class, though, and everybody talked except for me and Becca. She just sat really straight, not like a real cat, but one of those tall china ones you see in girls' bedrooms. The only sign of life was her foot bouncing up and down. I was watching it, sort of hypnotized by the big army-like boot hanging off her skinny leg, when I heard my name.

"So Timothy, why do you think Raskolnikov decided to murder those women?"

My mouth went dry, and I was suddenly so pissed off at Connie I almost swore out loud. It just seemed like her fault that I was there, and I didn't know the answer.

"I guess he just couldn't stand it any more," I said. My voice sounded loud in my head, like there was an echo between my ears. "A little cash would solve all his problems..."

"Exactly," Becca said. "And he believed he had a right to that money, to that chance. In his mind, he believed it was more sinful to waste a great man than to kill a spiteful old woman. Afterwards, he never really doubted that theory. Only doubted that he was in fact a great man."

Estelle jangled her bracelets. "So, you're proposing that he was essentially innocent because in his own mind, he did what was ethical and

right?"

"Exactly," Becca said. "In his own mind. The work is a psychological study."

I guess it was then, after she rescued me, that I started thinking about her tongue. Maybe it was something about how she said "psychological study," the way she curled it slow behind her teeth. I thought about it tickling small and soft in my mouth. I thought about her standing naked in front of the mirror and licking herself like a cat. I wondered what it would be like to be on top of that breakable girl with those big words. I really started to lose it.

One morning, after a possible job at the packing plant went bust, I was lying there watching Connie get ready for work. I used to like doing that, watching her roll on her nylons, reach around to fasten her bra, covering up so other people could look at her. She always dressed nice to talk to all the families, just out of respect. I noticed that the layer of fat on her back made her look kind of soft and insulated, and then I thought that Becca's back would be hard, each little bone sticking out in a long line.

"Do you ever think that it's ever all right to kill someone?" I said. "I mean, do you ever think about it, that line between innocent and guilty or anything?"

Connie was bent over with her hair flying everywhere, spraying it like she wanted to fumigate me out of the room. "What?"

"Well, I mean, do you ever just think about what's sort of right and wrong?"

"I'm running out of time to eat my toast" she said, still bent over. "Couldn't you at least look like you're going to get up and do something?"

"You're not even listening to me," I said. "And don't make it sound like I'm not trying, okay?"

"Okay," she said, sort of muffled, dabbing her mouth with a tissue. "You're trying."

"Okay," I said, "so answer my question. Do you ever?"

I waited for her to say "ever what," but she stopped in the doorway and put her hands on either side like she was holding it up. "If you hurt someone on purpose, it's wrong. So you try not to. Anything you do, you have to answer for. Are you happy?"

"Forget it," I said. "I was just thinking." But she was already gone, and I just listened to the click-click of her shoes down the hall.

For weeks, I let Connie go off to slave over a bunch of dead people all day, while I hung out in that chalky-smelling classroom, skimming stories where nothing really happens, and dreaming of fucking someone else. I could hear my dad's voice sometimes. "You got to focus, Timmy, right here, look where you're aiming. You can't just punch blindly, pick a spot,

attack the spot.” But I couldn’t even stay focused long enough to get through a goddamn 10-page story.

I couldn’t get over how the tiny diamond twitched when Becca would say “I prefer the ambiguous reading,” or “in magical realism, the real and imaginary collide and co-exist.” And in class, it’s like I’d be there and I wouldn’t. In my ears, I could hear the women’s voices and Estelle’s jangly bracelets, but in my mind, I’d be on top of Becca, her long skirt hiked up to her neck and my hands gripping her bony shoulders, just giving it to her until she almost broke in half.

When we got to the poems, things didn’t get any better. Estelle said it was time for us to stop reading and get writing. “Let yourself go,” she said. “Choose any style you like.”

I made my usual crack. “What kind’s the shortest?” and everybody laughed. Becca spun around and looked at me again. “You should do a Haiku,” she said. “They often have seasonal themes and follow a syllabic pattern. Their simplicity is what makes them so tough.” The whole time she was saying this, though, all I could think about was that her hair was the colour of wet sand, and then we were running through the rain, the spiky strands sticking to her forehead and her baggy white shirt clinging to her flat chest, and then I was bending over and licking her ear and whispering, “You make me want to haiku.”

She read her poem aloud the next class. I still have it. Her voice was low and steady as ever, almost like one of those toys that needs re-winding.

*We move together
pushing back in time
reaching into the ripening garden
so wet and new, promising
the perfection of undying bliss
I feel the power
wrapping my arms around
embracing the appleseed of paradise
stretching to spread the sin
of my unborn son’s sons
Until
you fall away, always fall away
exposing the beautiful lie*

And when she was done, all the women started babbling about Adam and Eve, but I didn’t really hear any of it because as far as I could figure, that poem was just about fucking. It’s about these two people going at it, and sometimes it’s just so amazing that you almost have to believe there’s a God. Right then, there’s no question about it. So I sat there staring at the

back of Becca's head, like if I stared hard enough she would turn around. "I get it," I wanted to yell. "Fucking look at me. I get it." But she didn't and I just sat there, sweating a bit, looking at the little hairs on the back of her neck, and at the knot of her leather necklace, wishing I were anywhere else than that stuffy goddamn classroom.

I felt like I was going crazy, like I didn't know anything anymore. That night, when Connie was slowly taking off her satiny robe, I remembered how sometimes when I was inside her, I felt like nothing could touch me. So I went over and unhooked her bra, rubbed those little dents left on her back.

"That was Joanne on the phone," she said. "They transferred her and she says there's an opening in the press rooms where she works."

"Tell me, Con," I said. "Tell me this. Why do you have to ruin everything?"

She pulled her robe together. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, there's other stuff in life besides work. And I know you're working hard and everything but there's other stuff to talk about, important stuff like God and sex and..."

Her eyes got really wide, like she couldn't believe what I was saying. "What the hell are you talking about? I live with you but I love you and you need me, so that's two commandments right there." Connie had this strange do-it-yourself thing with church, like if she missed mass on Sunday, the next week she just had to kneel behind the knee rest and say 18 Hail Marys or something before going up for communion.

"I know, Con," I said, "but I mean, do you ever think about stuff like, like fucking or something, do you ever just think about it?"

She let her arms drop by her side, like they were suddenly too heavy. "You don't think about sex. You do it."

"Okay," I said, "whatever. Forget it."

That's when she sank down into a little ball, and started crying like I'd never seen before. Her whole body was shaking, and she was sort of hitting herself in the head. "You know what, Tim, I don't what the hell you're talking about anymore. I really, really, really don't. Okay? I just want to be able to do stuff and I just want it to be nice and I just want a blue house with a carpet that's really cushy, so like it shows your footprints and maybe one of those fireplaces you can just turn on..."

For a minute, I left her there, blubbing at my feet. "Christ, I didn't say I wasn't going to go," I said. "I'm going to go."

"I'm just so tired," she said. She sounded strange, kind of talking into her knees.

Then I helped her up and she curled up on the bed, like she didn't want to take up too much room. I reached over and rubbed some of the black from under her eyes.

"It's okay," I said, "I'll check it out."

She curled up even smaller. "I'm just so tired."

After she was asleep, I went and started working on my poem. I was pretty tired though, and mostly just sat there, eating crackers and thinking about Becca lying naked except for army boots in a bunch of orange flowers. They were the kind my grandma used to grow on her balcony.

Even a haiku, which is just a few words, turned out to be harder than I thought. For two days I sat there counting the syllables in words like "tobogganing" or "snowmobiling" on my fingers, and Connie would walk by and look at me like I was playing with myself. In the end, I gave up on the seasons, though. Estelle told us to write what we know, and there was only one thing I knew more about than those women.

I was the last to read in the last class. Right before, I said, "I'm such a dink, my hands are sweating," and everybody laughed. I wasn't just making my usual uptight crack, though. They really were.

*I felt the power
of a fist, hitting, falling
pounding in my head*

When I was done, Estelle said that it was unusual, and that I did a very nice job of using Haiku to depict action. The women talked about how terrible it would be to get knocked out, and how the work effectively portrayed the instant and disjointed effect. And I actually felt sort of disappointed that they didn't really get it.

"Yeah," I said. "But I guess I was thinking about the guy punching."

Because the thing is, I know Connie thought I quit boxing because she finally wore me down and I had to face reality. But that wasn't the only thing. Have you ever hit someone as hard as you can before? It's like you pound someone and it sort of rebounds right up your arm, kind of jamming your elbow and shoulder. But my jaw would slam shut too, making my ears go weird, and kind of muffled. And for about three seconds after, there was this goddamn terrible ringing. Every single time.

Becca spun around and wrinkled her nose so that the diamond almost disappeared. "How awful it must be to find yourself in a place where you are expected to just pound away at someone until they fall to the ground. I mean, how awful."

"Right," I said, "that's the thing." But if you could've seen the way she looked at me. "I guess it's sort of the competition of it, though."

She just kept staring, and I don't know what came over me. I wanted to pick her up by her little neck and shake her, shake her until her big boots fell off, until her lips turned blue, until her eyes fell out and she couldn't look anymore. I could actually feel her soft skin giving way in my hands,

the leather necklace getting tangled in my fingers. Never in my life, not even when Connie did her preacher act, not even in the ring, did I ever want to strangle someone so bad.

Finally, she looked away. Estelle started thanking everyone for teaching her a thing or two. Becca was out the door before she even finished. She stretched her arm back behind her, waving like a little kid. "Thank you all so much," she said. "It's been enlightening."

I stayed where I was, pretending to look for something in my pockets. My legs felt a little shaky, like I'd just done thirty minutes with the jump rope. I sat there for as long as I could, just trying to steady myself, get my bearings. I sat there until Estelle noticed and I had to get up.

Later, I saw her again, sitting in a bus shack. I was on my way home from work and it was foggy out, the weird kind you only get in March.

My feet started moving kind of sideways, shuffling over like I might bang on the dirty glass, give her a little wave, ask how her sick mom was. I really wanted to, just to see her skinny neck jolt away from the book, see if the little diamond was still there. To check if she was real.

I really wanted to.

But I kept going, just kept walking in that fog. It sort of reminded me of the big poof in one of those disappearing acts.

Estelle would've loved that one. A goddamn poof of smoke.

Contributors

Rafi Aaron has received grants from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Canada, and the Tel Aviv Foundation. His book of poetry, *A Seed In The Pocket Of Their Blood* (Amphitheatre Publications, 1997), was acquired by Syracuse University Press in October 2000.

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Jennica Harper is a Vancouver poet and screenwriter. Her poetry has been published widely in Canada, most recently in *Prairie Fire*, *The Malahat Review*, and *Grain*. Jennica received her MFA in Creative Writing from UBC, and is a former editor of *PRISM international*. "The Octopus" is by far her longest poem to date.

Brenda Hasiuk's stories have appeared in several Canadian literary journals, including *Prairie Fire*, *The New Quarterly*, and *The Malahat Review*, as well as *Up All Night*, an anthology of stories for young people. She lives in Winnipeg and is currently working on a novel.

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Erin Noteboom's poems in this issue are an excerpt from the long sequence *Ghost Maps: Poems for Carl Hruska*, which recently won the CBC Literary Award for Poetry. The book *Ghost Maps* is forthcoming from Wolsak and Wynn. Erin lives in Kitchener, Ontario with her husband, James Bow.

Alison Pick is the winner of the 2002 Bronwen Wallace Award for Poetry, and the Writer's Federation of New Brunswick's Alfred Bailey Manuscript Prize. She and her partner Degan Davis are moving to St. John's, Newfoundland, where they will live in a yellow house and revel in the extra long winters.

matt robinson's second book, *how we play at it: a list* (ECW Press), appeared in Fall 2002. His first, *A Ruckus of Awkward Stacking* (Insomniac, 2000), was shortlisted for the Gerald Lampert and ReLit Poetry Awards. An editor at *The Fiddlehead* and *Kaleidoscope*, he is The League of Canadian Poets' NB/PEI Rep. His work previously appeared in PRISM *international* issues 39:1, 39:2, and 40:1.

Chilean-born, **Carmen Rodríguez** came to Canada as a political exile following the Pinochet military coup of 1973. She is the author of *Guerra Prolongada/Protracted War* (Toronto, Women's Press, 1992), a bilingual volume of poetry, and *and a body to remember with* (Vancouver, Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), a collection of short stories. The Spanish version of this collection, *De cuerpo entero*, was published in Chile by Editorial Los Andes in 1997 and won an Honorary Mention of the 1998 City of Santiago Literary Awards. *and a body to remember with* was a finalist for the 1998 Vancouver Book Award.

Carmen Rodríguez nació en Chile y llegó al Canadá como exiliada política a raíz del golpe de estado de Augusto Pinochet en 1973. Es la autora de *Guerra Prolongada/Protracted War* (Toronto, Women's Press, 1992), un volumen bilingüe de poesía y *and a body to remember with* (Vancouver, Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), una colección de cuentos. La versión en español de esta colección, *De cuerpo entero*, fue publicada en Chile por Editorial Los Andes en 1997 y ganó una Mención del Premio Municipal de Literatura de Santiago en 1998. *and a body to remember with* fue finalista del "Vancouver Book Award", también en 1998.

Ben Killen Rosenberg lives in Portland, Oregon, where he works as a freelance illustrator, ceramic artist and art teacher. His illustrations are all monotypes, hand-coloured with watercolour and gouache. His work may be viewed at benrosenberg.com.

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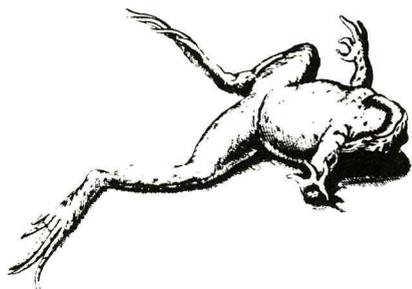


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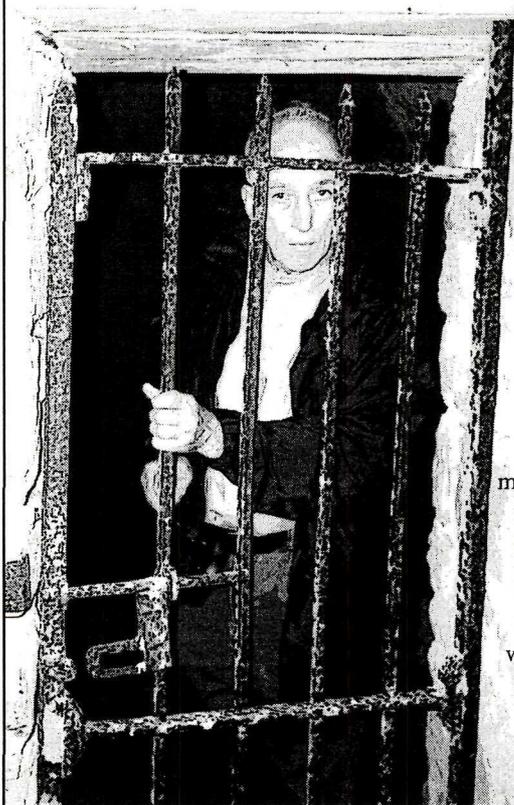
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the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are aged 65 and over has increased from 10.5 million to 13.5 million (13.5% of the population).

There are a number of reasons for this increase. The most important is that the life expectancy of people in the UK has increased. In 1990, the average life expectancy of a male was 74.5 years and of a female 78.5 years. In 2000, the average life expectancy of a male was 76.5 years and of a female 80.5 years.

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There are a number of reasons for this. One reason is that the number of people aged 65 and over who are in poor health has increased. Another reason is that the number of people aged 65 and over who are unable to care for themselves has increased.

The increase in the number of people aged 65 and over who are in care homes has led to a number of changes in the way that care homes are run. For example, more care homes are now providing services that were previously provided by the community.

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41:1

The act of translating is an act of reconstruction and restoration; the frame remains intact (meaning), but new windows and doors are cut in and a fresh coat of paint is put on, so that the reader can understand both, the words and the world(s) contained in those words.

—Carmen Rodríguez, Page 8

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