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Winter 2004 42:2 $7.00

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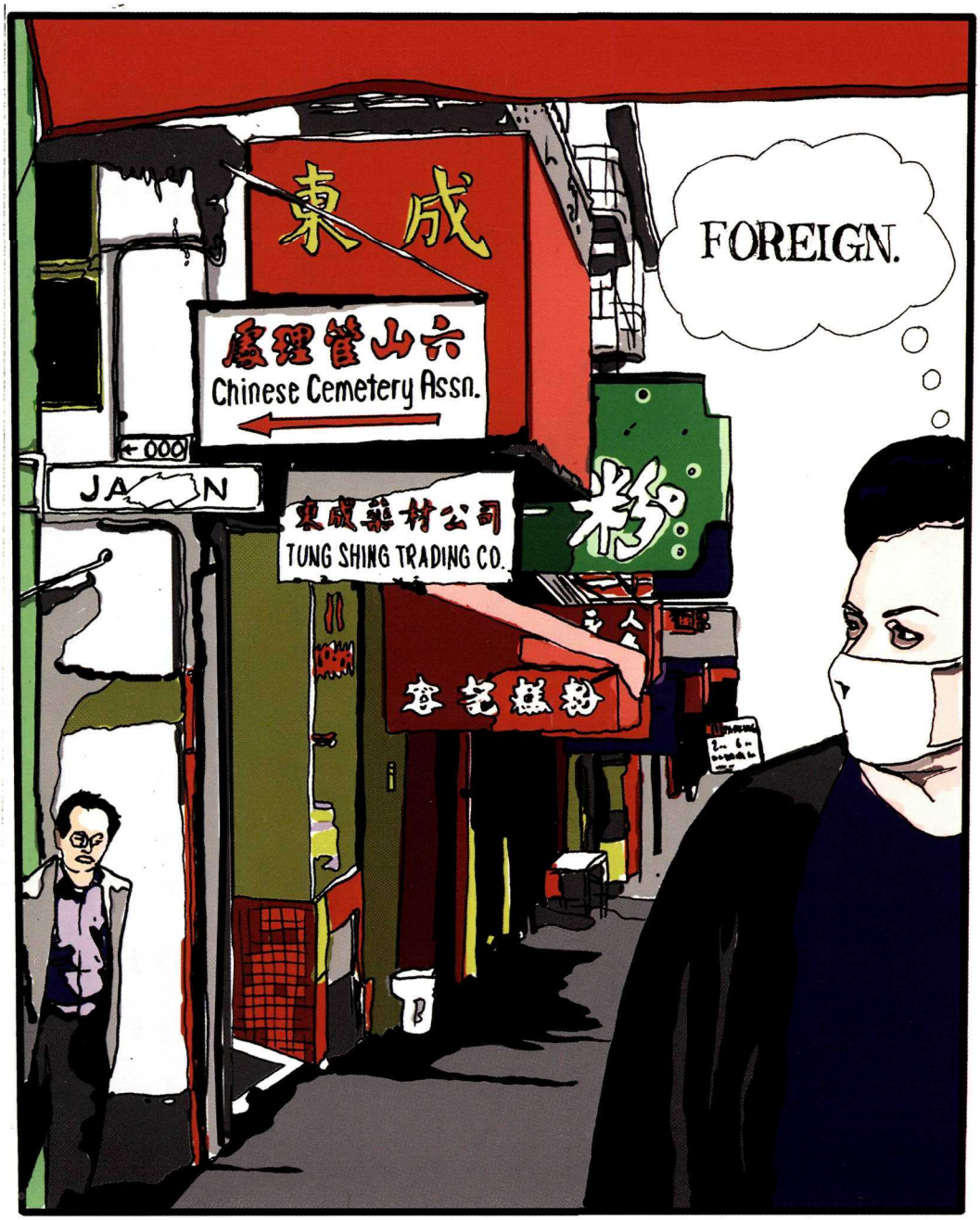

PRISM international

2003 Maclean Hunter Endowment Award For Literary Nonfiction

Grand Prize – $1,500

Russell Wangersky
"Mechanics of Injury"

Runner-up

Jean Hanson
"A Narrow Margin"

Shortlist

Jaime Sisman
"Passage"

Kitty Hoffman
"Threshhold"

Judges

Lynne Bowen
Andreas Schroeder

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Jim Conklin
Sandra Filippelli
Stephen Gauer
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Tessa King
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PRISM *international*, a magazine of contemporary writing, is published four times a year by the Creative Writing Program at the University of British Columbia, Buchanan E-462, 1866 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z1. Microfilm editions are available from University Microfilms Inc., Ann Arbor, MI, and reprints from the Kraus Reprint Corporation, New York, NY. The magazine is listed by the Canadian Literary Periodicals Index.

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Website: prism.arts.ubc.ca

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Cover illustration: *Foreign*, by Laurenn McCubbin.

One-year individual subscriptions $22.00; two-year subscriptions $35.00; library and institution subscriptions $25.00; two-year subscriptions $40.00; sample copy $9.95. Canadians add 7% G.S.T.

All manuscripts should be sent to the editors at the above address. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a self-addressed envelope with **Canadian** stamps or **International Reply Coupons**. Manuscripts with insufficient return postage will be held for six months and then discarded. Translations should be accompanied by a copy of the work(s) in the original language. The advisory editors are not responsible for individual selections, but for the magazine's overall mandate including continuity, quality, and budgetary obligations.

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Our gratitude to Dean Nancy Gallini and the Dean of Arts Office at the University of British Columbia.

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council and the British Columbia Arts Council.

Publications Mail Registration No. 08867. February 2004. ISSN 0032.8790

The Canada Council for the Arts | Le Conseil des Arts du Canada

BRITISH COLUMBIA ARTS COUNCIL
Supported by the Province of British Columbia

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Andreas Schroeder

Firefighter Becomes Writer

Having lived in a fair number of small towns across Canada, I've known a lot of firefighters. They're usually a tight-knit group, as prominent a fixture in their communities as the Legions or the Chambers of Commerce. They tend to be plucky, gung-ho, generous, and often a bit crazy. They're reliable team players, and great raconteurs.

What they're not particularly famous for, is a knack or a penchant for insightful and evocative writing.

That's what made Russell Wangersky's "Mechanics of Injury" such a treat to read. Finally, a beautifully calibrated, finely honed account of a firefighter's experiences in three dimensions. Good raconteurs will give you some of this, but they tend to stick to two-dimensional plots. Good essayists go deeper. "Some things become so complex," says Wangersky, in this essay, "they verge on science."

That's how a firefighter is taught to think about his job—as a physicist, not a writer. In self-defense. To keep his sanity. But in this essay, the firefighter struggles with the writer, and the writer wins. A loss to firefighting, but a gift to readers. It leaves one sad at the end, but grateful. The best essays are often achieved at considerable personal cost.

Russell Wangersky

Mechanics of Injury

I don't fight fires any more. My heart still judders in my chest when I hear the trucks coming, when I look out the windows at the front of the house as the big pumpers rumble by, their sirens tearing the air like cloth ripped into rags. Sometimes the driver looks up at the house, sees me and pulls the horn chain, and the twin air horns—a jagged half-octave apart to jar the ears—rip and echo across the valley with a transient greeting I like to believe is a half salute.

It would be simpler if I had been permanently burned—and I have been burned, in a diesel explosion that cost me my eyebrows and all the hair inside my nose, leaving a ragged red pattern of angry third-degree burns across my forehead. If I had been seriously hurt, there would be a visible reason, a badge that wears like an honourable discharge. But nothing is simple.

In fact, some things become so complex, they verge on science.

You're supposed to think like a physicist when you get to an accident, when a pickup truck and a minivan are joined nose-to-chin at an intersection. You're supposed to think not about the people and the fragments this moment will make out of their lives, but about the mechanics of the accident, about things as esoteric as the angles of incidence and reflection, the complex equations of force drawn on the pavement in tire rubber, the directions of expended energy in the sprayed diamonds of broken safety glass, all in an effort to make sense of what may have happened to the people inside the cars. Where they were seated and where their seat belts webbed across their bodies, where they might be injured inside, far from your eyes or your touch. As if, by some precise attention to physics or mathematics, you can determine everything that happened in an instant, in one explosive equation.

They call it the "mechanics of injury," the way they call putting two pieces of broken bone together, "reducing the fracture." And perhaps terms like that exist to put some distance between you and the injured, the way you're trained to say "casualties," because "victims" makes it sound like they might already be dead.

Sometimes, the mechanics are crucial. Once, after a black Volkswagen Rabbit with a jack-o'-lantern sticker in the back window pitch-poled four times—rolling end over end, not just side to side—down the darkened

straightaway of an empty road in the Newfoundland town of St. Philip's, I watched the paramedics come back after dropping off their cargo, just to take notes for the hospital on how many times the passengers had been flung into the windshield. Eggs thrown around in a crate, a driver and passenger with no seat belts tossed from the car when the driver's door was torn off. Walking along the wet and shining pavement, I was startled to see how much destruction it wore: fifty yards of car parts, fenders, mirrors, broken glass and plastic trim, along with every scrap of detritus that piles up in people's cars. Cassette tapes, an ice scraper, the jack and jack handle, broken beer bottles and, jarringly, a radio-controlled car, a child's toy, torn apart by its own pantomime of the accident that had surrounded it. I felt as if I should pry open its plastic doors to search for more—tiny—passengers.

The equation for the driver was exceedingly complex, with pieces that were almost impossible to concretely outline. Somewhere in the four long flips—each of which had left a clearly defined mark on the road—he had left the car, sailed through the air and struck a concrete culvert with the back of his head. Faced with the human jigsaw, the doctors wanted to know how all the pieces might have shifted apart. But all of it was barely inspired guesswork—knowing only where he had ended up and where the driver's door lay in the road, you could draw several different trajectories for how he had been thrown clear, but never really know how long he had stayed inside the relative safety of the car.

Down in the ditch I had held his legs, listening to the uneven rattling wetness of his breathing. I could look across in the dark and see the shining hollow eyes of another firefighter who was holding the driver's battered head. The ditch was deep enough that it had its own solemn privacy: a breath, a breath, silence. Then a laboured start to that same equation all over again.

Other times the mechanics are inconsequential. On a winding road near the Annapolis Valley town of Wolfville, we searched for half an hour along a ditch, looking for a black motorcycle that the driver of a passing car had seen go off the road at twilight. The ditch was high and brown with fall thistle and the nested canes of blackberry bushes, leaves gently turning red, and behind the ditch, rows of apple trees hunkered down and heavy, Spys and Paula Reds full and bright, pulling the branches almost to the ground. Pastoral and silent, the whole landscape waited, holding its breath, and firefighters walked ahead of the truck, listening.

The captain in Pumper No. 3 found the first variable in the equation, though not where it was expected.

Most of a telephone pole was still hanging upright from the taut wires above, with a two-foot piece gapped out in the middle where the engine of the motorcycle had hit it flush and at high speed. It was just one in a long

line of poles bending around a curve in the road, but the only one missing a section out of its middle. Starlings roiled in their fall flocks, huge numbers turning in the sky as if they were one single rushing entity. When the fire trucks stopped, a flock turned, swooped up and spread itself evenly along the telephone wires, formal black observers stepped precisely apart and chattering.

This time, there were just victims—no need for the distance of "casualties." The arc of the curve, the speed of the motorcycle, the short apostrophe of rubber where he braked too late, and the single sharp addition of the telephone pole itself—it was still possible to read the equation, it just didn't add up to anything anymore.

The motorcycle was on its side, still warm; the driver and passenger were too. It's strange how, almost twenty years later, I can draw that hard tableau from memory but I can't remember the faces of the firefighters who rode the truck with me.

Other things spring out late at night when the wind is working the bottom of the bedroom curtains and the noise of the trees keeps you at the very edge of sleep. A set fire in an empty house, a house slated to be torn down, and in what had been the living room, a forty-gallon diesel drum, open across the top. And even though it was foolish, I didn't have the mask of my breathing gear on yet. There was no real sign of a fire, making it hard to dispel the lingering belief that nothing was going to happen.

Fuel fires are funny things. They sometimes wander and flicker and don't smoke at all, while whatever's actually going to ignite the fuel is looking for the right mixture of diesel and air. Hard to light sometimes, but once started, fuel fires make their own combinations, and the result is astounding in its speed.

I first saw the flames when they were coming out over the top of the barrel like liquid: great, mounded, roiling masses of dark orange and plum-purple flame, boiling up over my gloves and the sleeves of my fire jacket like mist blown in quickly off a cold ocean. The flames licked silently, and I didn't feel them at first.

Strangely, the first thing I noticed was the smell of burning hair, as intense as when the sleeve of a wool sweater gets too close to a candle, a smell that seemed out of place. The second thing I noticed was that it was coming from me.

The shock was something I didn't expect; I remember walking away from the fire and sitting down on the stairs to the second floor. Outside, other firefighters had seen the windows light up with the fuel flashing over, and had heard the familiar hollow, box-filled-with-cotton-wool thump of the explosion. They were shouting at me to come out of the house. I remember being both oddly startled and overwhelmingly tired. After the first flash, the fire went dark quickly, and thick, sooty black smoke ran

across the ceiling, filling the space as evenly as if it had been carpet laid on the floor. It moved down the walls until it got to the door frames, then lipped underneath and rushed up the stairs behind me. Outside, it was a brilliantly sunny day and, looking out through the rectangle of the front door, I remember how the green grass and the bushes stood out bright against the dark inside, like a floor-to-ceiling painting of the outdoors. Then the smoke started flowing out that door too—even then, I remember an incredible lassitude, as if my arms were hugely heavy, as if there was no way I could ever get to my feet. It wasn't until the other firefighters started rushing through the door that I thought it would be possible to move.

Outside, I sat alone on the tailgate of the rescue truck, felt the comforting, familiar rumble of the engine through my back, and watched the crew rush to put out the fire. I touched my forehead gently, feeling the rising row of blisters, looked at the delicate white tissue of burned skin that came away on my fingers, felt the first salty sting of the burns. Most of my eyebrows fluttered down, sooty black strands that broke away into powder between my fingertips. For a few moments, I could feel everything, like my senses were overrun: the incredible brightness of the sun, the depth of the noise around me, the astounding weight of the trees and grass on my eyes. Then, like the lead edge of a wave rolling past, all of that was gone, and as the pain really started, the whole world seemed to redden and dull. Time, which had been moving so slowly, suddenly leapt forward, and minutes, then hours, accordioned in on themselves.

But burns heal. Even if no one—no one—really forgets.

One of the pump operators, Ray, a big man who hardly ever said anything, would sometimes sidle up to me conspiratorially and whisper, with a lopsided grin, "You blowed up good."

Burns heal, but other things linger. Sometimes, they are as simple as a subtle shift in perspective; other times; more jarringly, they are things that warp the way you see.

Going to an autumn fire in White Rock, back when we still could ride on the tailgate of the pumper as it raced along the narrow Nova Scotian back roads, I remember watching the high grass whip by, the siren filling in the air around me, the houses flickering by like slides on a slide projector, without ever knowing what was in front of the truck, without ever knowing what was coming. Hanging on, hearing the air brakes muscle on, feeling the truck tilt down in the front end and your shoulder pressing into the back of the truck, the hose nozzles dangling down and banging the metal plate—you'd never know if the pumper was about to plow into something, like the pictures that crop up in firefighting magazines, pumpers in spectacular wrecks after someone doesn't hear the sirens and horns and backs their car out into the road. Like falling into a hole, propelled blindly forward with hardly a hint of what was coming.

The house in White Rock was burning fast; I could tell from the pillar of dirty, yellow-black smoke I could see when the truck was at the crossroads a mile or so away. A big thumb-smudge of smoke, an exclamation point against the blue of the sky, the kind of smoke that makes one of your hands check all the d-clip fasteners on the front of your fire coat and mentally walk through the steps of putting on breathing apparatus and pulling hose. In my head, my left arm was already through the loops that hang from the end of the hose called the "attack line"—always the first hose off the truck—and my body was bending away at an angle with that first tug that will start the hose sliding. Pulling those loops in my imagination long before the truck stopped, spilling the flat yellow coils across the grass, waiting for the pump operator to pull the lever on the pump panel and fill the line with water, snapping the flat hose round and popping the kinks into curves.

The house was an older two-storey, white with a black-shingled roof that came down over the sides of the second floor, a television antenna half broken-away from the chimney and leaning awkwardly. A fan-trellis on the side of the house with a tangle of climbing clematis and a few late, deep purple flowers. A clothesline, limp with laundry, ran out diagonally from the back corner of the house. There was furniture out on the lawn, the front door wide, windows broken and pouring smoke upstairs. A red car with both doors open on the passenger side, photo albums piled on the seats in the front and back.

The pieces you pick up in your head are scattered and arbitrary, accidental snapshots that wind up fixed in place and then define everything later, after the hose has been loaded again and the trucks driven away. And maybe, just maybe, you don't ever have another call that takes you past that property again.

Inside, the house was like many serious fires. Downstairs, the walls had a reverse tideline of smoke stains, soot-black near the ceiling and getting lighter as the smoke had crept down the walls. The room had a kind of toppled, windswept disorder: things knocked crooked or tipped over, the couch at an awkward angle with its legs bunching the carpet and some light-shadowed spaces on the wall where pictures had briefly blocked the smoke before falling from the heat. On the shelves, the top row of books had burned. Lower down, others sat untouched. Something plastic on the top shelf had turned to soup and then reconstituted itself as a sooty and black-specked blob.

The stairs had a red, patterned runner up the centre. The edges of the steps were white and I could see the yellow of the hose clearly, feel each heavy, wood-denting thump as its mass moved up and the brass coupling between hose lengths struck the wood through the runner. Upstairs, it was oven-hot and steam-wet, so that sweat blossomed on the skin under your

fire jacket. So quickly in a fire, you feel the sweat gathering into a thick runnel and streaming down the hollow of your spine, soaking the back of your shirt and sticking the cloth to your skin. At first, it's a gentle, body-warming heat, but with each upwards step it becomes closer to a claustrophobic baking, a stultifying, strength-sapping heat that makes every step difficult, especially with forty pounds of fire gear and air tanks. On top of that, the awkward struggle to turn the single-minded, water-filled hose in directions it never wants to go, around the corners that it fills from edge to edge, while the couplings catch on newel posts and doorframes and always take an extra, draining tug to move.

By then the fire was in the back two bedrooms, and there were already other firefighters from Aylesford and New Minas working downstairs. Out front, the big, slow water tankers from Kentville and Port Williams were pulling up. Another young firefighter and I moved along the hall and knocked down the fire in the back, sweeping water from the hose across the burning, charcoaled two-by-fours where the wallboard had burned away.

As the fire got darker, so did the room, and the combination of steam and smoke filled in down to the floor, claustrophobic and hot. We moved around by touch, wrapped tight in the dark. In some fire departments, breathing-apparatus training includes the absolutely terrifying experience of having black garbage bags tied over your face and mask. It's one way to find out if you'll be able to stand the closeness of the smoke, the inability to see inches in front of you. Some find it oddly comforting. I felt both isolated and cocooned; it's a strange peace, that, and not to everybody's liking.

Afterwards, the fire out and the smoke lifting to a thin haze, we moved slowly, overhauling the hot spots and salvaging what we could. I looked out through the bubble of my mask with a kind of absent detachment, set apart somehow, as if the fire and the damage couldn't affect me. In a fire, no part of your body, not even your eyes, are in direct contact with anything; your face is inside the mask, a fireproof hood covers your head and ears under your helmet, your fire jacket and bunker pants cover you from your neck to your heavy rubber boots.

It's not your house, so the rooms are strange, but it's more than that. Often, the rooms are completely foreign when the smoke has lifted. Before that, they are set in memory in a sort of shorthand Braille, described by the number of steps or the length of time spent crawling along one wall. The topography changes dramatically once there are visual clues: awkward-shaped parts of rooms become closets crawled into and back out of, and angled, unusual spaces become simple square rooms filled with furniture. Ropes that wind around legs are as simple as soot-stained blankets tugged off mattresses and twisted on the floor.

Walking back down the upstairs hall in the house in White Rock, after

almost all the smoke was gone, I became entranced by the intricate pattern of the carpet; it seemed incredibly involved, a bright pattern of cream and brown. Then the yellow dome of a firefighter's helmet passed right through the pattern, and I realized that I was looking down through a hole in the floor, that the ceiling of the kitchen had burned away entirely, taking some of the hall carpet with it. What had been a different pattern resolved itself into the kitchen floor and part of the cabinets. Except for the distraction of the pattern, I would have stepped through and fallen eight or ten feet straight down. Some things are just in the way you look at them.

Nineteen years after White Rock, I remember seeing the skirt of a lime-green dress, spread out like a pleated fan across the floor of a Newfoundland legion hall and, in the middle of the fan, the mound of an unconscious woman. Perhaps it's best to just call her Rita—some privacy in an otherwise too-public final circumstance. This equation is strangely reduced in my memory to geometry: the curve of her stomach, the triangle of her skirt, the oval of people standing around her, looking down.

She was lying flat on her back, mouth open, staring fixedly at the ceiling. Around her, the crowd of a fiftieth anniversary party was circled at arm's length, leaving her in a small, semi-private pool of parquet flooring.

Maybe seventy years old, maybe a little less, and there were two firefighters doing CPR, one already sweating heavily and leaning hard into her chest by the time my truck arrived and we came in with the gear, the extra gloves and the ventilator. No ambulance yet, still miles away, not even the piercing top notes of its siren notching the heavy summer air in the valley by the hall. The deep July belly of summer, all the legion hall's windows open, the curve-backed chairs all hung with discarded suit coats. Men with slackened neckties, limp shirts losing their pressed definition, standing around and unconsciously pushing up their sleeves as if they had something they were about to start doing. Others sitting, wearing the distracted look of people thinking they had only barely dodged this particular lottery.

The innate obscenity of it; firefighters, their hands on a woman who, if conscious, would have been embarrassed by their rough touch. CPR is so hard that you sometimes feel ribs give and break under your hands. It's the kind of flesh-quietened pop you hear when you're cutting up raw chicken, when you're twisting the joints backwards to separate them. It's a pop you feel as much as hear; it happens so easily that you find yourself absently counting a person's ribs as they give.

The music was still on. All the kitchen staff had come out from the back, gathered together in a tight, white-aproned group with their hands up to their mouths, hairnets still covering their heads. Everyone standing or sitting, unable, as if by unwritten convention, to move.

Except for one man, short and lightly built, wearing grey flannel trou-

sers and narrow suspenders, his face brown and weathered, his feet constantly moving, circling the woman and the firefighters warily, talking all the time like a commentator giving the play-by-play.

"She's alive. Throwing up—gotta be alive to throw up," he said, standing in too close above the working firefighters, unwilling to be pushed away. "Might be breathing now. Might be breathing. Colour's good, real good."

In reality, though, time was running away. No reaction to suggest the light might come back to her eyes, no movement, except for that deep, raspy and frightening stomach-muscle breath that speaks of failing bodies and engines winding down.

There was an air of hopelessness in the room, hanging just above the windows, a palpable sense of resignation. This audience wasn't waiting for Lazarus, not expecting Rita to sit up and cough, or maybe attempt a feeble wave as the stretcher was loaded into the ambulance. These were people too old to trust in miracles, experienced enough to recognize the steps of the dance that has collapsed into the mere practice of rehearsal. The ambulance was near then, coming down the long valley, howling. By the time the stretcher was in the hall, everything was running by rote. Decisions had been made without ever being spoken, steps not taken, and it was as if everything and everyone were just waiting for that thin line of someone else's authority to bring it to a close.

It's a funny thing: if you get close enough to someone who doesn't blink, someone who will never blink again, you will see your own face reflected back at you and distorted slightly in the gentle curve of the iris of their eye.

Sometimes you can't wear enough equipment to stay detached. Trying to find the injuries under the skin, even through latex gloves, you can feel the stubble of an unconscious man's cheek, you can know the fleeting warmth of someone else's skin.

Mechanics of injury, indeed.

I don't ride the trucks any more. Not right now.

John Pass

Parallel Parking

Tricky manoeuvre against the flow
is toughest to master. I'm out of the car at last and watching

you try it alone. Hard right, reverse
turn, pause (nose-out in imagined traffic) like rock in a river.
Hard left and back till straight, aligned. Ahead of you, invisible

in the adolescent, strident light
its pressing occasions amass now, times beyond

these practice sessions, beyond these ribboned
stakes on a rural shoulder, tentative shifts and engagement.
Times coming home to addresses as yet unknown. Sidling in at all hours across

the street from the girlfriend's. Shopping. Once just before dropping
your head on your arms on the steering wheel, the big sobs coming,
oblivious to the billowing maples in the park adjacent, the unshaken sky.
Look around.

Sidewalks all slush and confetti, blown blossom and fallen leaves.
A dark past the dash-lights, stilled wipers. A door
swung open on birdsong. All your eggs
on the tarmac sizzling.

Over the empty seat you'll lean
to unlock for the passenger, a glimpse
of sword-fern, sugar-bush, weedy gravel. Further out

wheat-fields, foreign music, tundra.
White-caps. Condos. Dunes. Heavens!
The blind-spots skill and habit conjure! What a fog-up!
Semis and bright days flashing by. And dust. The whole of that

tutoring, testing your hesitation
at the curb of its gusting, parallel whim.

Stephanie Bolster

North America's Favourite Zoo Animal

Voilà, in our backyard,
the polar bear enclosure. It's hard
to make him out against the snow
this time of year but look
for flecks of black—his eyes.
He sleeps a lot. He'd like to lean for days
over a hole until a movement drew him in
to gorge. He's paced these fences,
gulped squirrels, and once,
when the boy across the fence
waved his arm, lunged with a silence
that made the ice down on the lake
shudder. He knows you're sorry
for him. See, he's smiling a picture-
book smile. The kid? Downed whole,
but he was fine. When he came back
he couldn't get enough of sky,
of everything open.

Where the Bear Was

Is a concrete platform, a snag, the squared entrance
to shelter, a jagged ring around the moat to keep us out
and a sign: Do Not Feed. When I raise my camera,
a couple (retired in yellow windbreakers) approaches,
leaning in. It must be inside, he says. Sleeping, she says.
No sign attests to any plan to revamp, though in a long-tabled room
people must have spoken. Eyesore, they said, rubbing.
Whatever places this bear rubbed have not been rubbed in years.
I know; I used to live here. This was the brown bear's place.
The soon-mahogany flash of Virginia creeper
that winds around the snag on which the bear used to hang,
sleeping, is, unlike the grouping of rhododendrons
up the hill in the seals' old spot, an accident.

EJ Levy

Gravity

When Richard's father announced that he was bringing his mistress to this wedding, Richard decided to attend. In general, Richard avoids such rituals. He's not averse to matrimony, but he dislikes how weddings reveal one's place in the hierarchy of affection—the Best Man, the Bride's Maids. One sees precisely where one stands, and full disclosure in matters of the heart is often, he thinks, unwise. Richard told his lover Brian, that he was going for his mother's sake, to keep her bourbon iced, her hand held. He told himself that he needed a vacation from life with Brian. But now that he is back in Minneapolis for his sister Hannah's second wedding, back in this town he hoped never to return to, Richard struggles to remember why he has come, why he has returned—he who has spent a lifetime leaving this place and these people he loves behind.

When he left the Midwest fifteen years ago, first for college then medical school, Richard vowed never to come back. With the naïve conviction one can nurse only in one's youth, he believed that he was making a clean break. He imagined his family would fade for him as a lighthouse beam fades when a ship pulls out to sea, diminishing to a weak trail across the air, then vanishing. Their lives seemed small to him then, their choices inspired by fear—not the sharp desire he had discovered and traced over the skin of men, desire like a cord deep in his gut that had strengthened, grown taut, pulled him with a jolt into his body, his life. Now that he's back in this, the city of his earliest sorrows, he finds it difficult to account for his time since he left. It seems to him that no time at all has elapsed since he was home for his sister's last wedding, since he last saw his family, that he has always been—may always be—in waiting.

Through the doorway that opens from the synagogue library onto the main hall, Richard can see his sister Hannah come clacking up the temple corridor from the dressing room. She is frantic, looking for things that have not arrived: her bouquet, her mother's pearls, the groom. She moves in a rustle of taffeta and silk, beneath a pearl-beaded cap and a tent of cream lace, like a perambulating cake on a mission from God. That, at least, is how Richard will put it to his lover Brian when he speaks to him later tonight, long distance. It is not a good simile; Richard is aware of that. It is rather overdone and straining for effect, but that, he thinks, is

apposite to the occasion.

This marriage—Hannah's second—has come after a long and strained courtship and there is more than a little triumph and enmity in the proceedings, which Richard imagines must resemble the emotions in a calf-roping ring. Richard likes to think of things being like other things. He does not like to think of things being what they are—in themselves. That, at least, is what Brian told him recently. He had not put it quite that way of course, being Brian, but that is what he meant, Richard thinks, when he said, "You're always loving what you left."

What Richard Has Left is a category, Richard reflects, which now could be said to include Brian, the man he loves and lives with and left two days and some fifteen-hundred miles ago to come to this wedding alone. From the library where he stands looking out onto the foyer, watching the preparations his sister and mother make, Richard can see that Hannah is more nervous this time than the last. She is anxious to get the details right: she double-checks the corsages in their box, she counts them twice; she scrutinizes the commas on the programs; harangues the caterers by cell phone. She makes a show of her guttural "h" when she pronounces *huppah*, as if it would prove her an observant Jew, which she is not. He cannot help but notice how careful they are of ritual this time around, superstitious maybe, or simply aware now of how fragile such vows are.

When Hannah turns toward Richard with a pleading look, he gives a little flutter of his fingers and smiles at the Divine Pastry and, with a relief he would rather not consider too closely, starts toward her.

Halfway across the foyer, Richard's mother intercepts him like a bad pass.

"I need to speak with you," she says, voice low.

Across the foyer, Richard's father has entered with a relative he does not recognize, a large woman in beige.

"Hannah..." Richard begins to say.

"Can wait," his mother says. She bends her mouth into a smile and turns a radiant look on Hannah and the all-but-empty foyer, as if they were her audience. Then she grips Richard's arm above the elbow and starts toward the chapel. But she is too late.

"Hey, kids," Richard's father shouts, crossing the room to them.

His mother stiffens. For as long as Richard can remember, his father has called them kids—his mother, his sister, him—and despite his mother's protestations, the term has stuck. "Kid," he can hear her say, as she said throughout his childhood, "is an inappropriate address for a woman, even a beautifully preserved woman, of—." It's an old argument, Richard thinks, an old wound. But then, they all are. Scar tissue, he often tells Brian, is the *materia prima* of family. ("Which explains," Brian has said, "why there's big bucks in cosmetic surgery.")

Richard knows this must be hard for her: though his parents pretend that nothing has changed and continue to share the house where Richard and Hannah grew up, though they have not yet spoken of divorce and Richard's mother disdains even to mention the mistress scheduled to appear later today, Richard knows the subject cannot be far from her mind.

When Richard's father reaches them, he embraces Richard with that mannish excess of enthusiasm he has taken to employing since Richard left home, an enthusiasm Richard conceives is meant to compensate for his absence in Richard's youth, and to demonstrate an understanding they plainly lack.

"How are you, Son?" he asks. Then, turning to Richard's mother, "Lydia," he says, almost shyly. "You look terrific." He kisses her on the cheek.

Richard's mother runs her tongue over her coral pink lipstick. Impatiently.

"Excuse us for a moment, won't you?" She holds Richard's arm in a vice grip, as if clutching a banister on a precipitous descent.

"Of course," his father says. "I'm sorry. I'll catch up with you later, Rich."

Inside, the chapel is hushed and mahogany. Richard notices the narrow band of indigo blue carpeting with absent-minded approbation. His mother sags into the first pew.

"Wouldn't you know," she says, "the one time your father is early it's with her."

"That's her?" Richard should have known, of course, but he cannot link the word mistress to the bland, beige woman in the hall.

For a moment they share the sepulchral quiet, then Richard takes a seat beside her.

"My god," Richard says.

He is appalled less by the fact of the mistress than by the woman herself. Though he'd never tell his mother this, Richard had been relieved when he learned of his father's affair. When his mother phoned to break the news, speaking with the remarkable equanimity she maintains in the face of crises—*Your father has a mistress. He's asked her to the wedding. Please come home*—Richard had been torn between outrage at his father, grief for his mother, and relief. Here, at last, was desire he recognized and shared. Growing up he had despaired that his parents asked no more of life than the bland false emotion of respectability and dull suburban comfort, which looked to him like loneliness, a joyless match. Their marriage had made him wonder if the passionate life he hoped for was mistaken, more than we could ask. All they appeared to require was the semblance of happiness, which seemed to him no life at all. But here was proof—painful proof—they'd wanted more. The news confirmed for him a long-held suspicion that things are never what they seem. That none of us is.

But he knows that for his mother the revelation has been a shock, and his heart breaks for her. His mother has believed in the image of things—the right fork, the right wine, Julia Child; she's believed that abiding rules will redeem us, that being right is—if not the same as being happy—at least compensation for unhappiness, imagining perhaps (as Richard so often had as a child before he fell in love with men) that happiness is beyond them. But seeing his father in the lobby with the woman who absurdly must have been his lover all these years, Richard thinks perhaps it's not. Perhaps happiness is out there still, waiting for them, in the foyer or the world, like the plump woman in beige.

"How's Hannah taking it?" Richard asks, trying to shift the subject from mistress to bride.

"She doesn't know," his mother says. She picks a bit of fluff off her dress.

"She doesn't know?"

"I didn't want to upset her," she says. "She's been so tense, so sure that something will go wrong."

"She'll be furious, you know," Richard says, "when she finds out."

"She won't find out. Why should she? Your father's very good at keeping secrets."

"She'll have to find out sometime, Mom."

"Sometime," she says. "Not now."

The way she says it makes Richard think that his mother is the one who'd rather not have known this, known sometime, but not now. He takes her hand in his and holds it. It is cool and dry and seems impossibly fragile, and he wonders when her skin grew thin, her veins blue and protruding, vulnerable beneath the surface, a few brown spots here and there.

"I'm not sure I'm going to be able to make it through this," she says softly.

Richard strokes her knuckles gently. "Of course you will," he says.

"Nothing is a matter of course anymore," she says.

Someone opens the chapel door behind them and there is a sudden burst of sound from the foyer—the sound of guests arriving—then a quiet, "Sorry, I didn't know anyone was in here," and the soft sound of the door closing.

"How long have you known?" Richard asks.

She shrugs. "I've known for a while that your father had 'friends.' I didn't know about Her until Hannah announced the engagement. He said he wanted Her at the wedding. It's been six months. I would've told you sooner, but your father made me promise not to. He said he wanted to tell you kids himself." She smiles up at him. "Now you know."

She draws a sharp breath as if she might sob, and Richard pats his pockets for a Kleenex, but she doesn't cry. Instead she tells him what she

knows about the mistress, the woman named Betsy, with whom his father has been involved for years. She is divorced, a former executive secretary for Betty Crocker, a woman his mother remembers meeting once, years ago at a fiftieth birthday party for Richard's father, which Betsy helped coordinate. Richard's mother remembers thinking her sweet, if rather bland.

"I just wish I had a little more time," she says, wistfully, and Richard understands that she means more time with his father, time to make it work between them. He feels suddenly how difficult this must be for her and his throat aches.

"Just an hour," she says, "that's all."

"With Dad?" Richard asks, his voice soft with sympathy.

His mother looks at him with irritation, as if this were an unkind joke. "Without him," she says. "I want your father out of here. That woman can do what she wants. But I want him out. The liquor store at Byerly's called to say the champagne order is ready. Do me a favour, will you? Get him to drive you over and load up the coolers? For me? Please?"

"Of course," Richard says. He stands and walks to the door, then he turns to look back at her, at her tiny fragile figure on the hard wooden pew, as it seems he has always done—turning back to look at her as he is leaving her behind.

"I'm so sorry, Mom," he says, door handle in his hand.

"Don't pity me," she says. "Your father's a prick."

Richard knows that he should be angry with his father, but what he feels is awkwardness, a slight unsociable embarrassment at all that is unsaid between them. Richard and his father don't speak as they cross the temple parking lot under the humid blur of a Minnesota midday sun, and Richard hopes that his father won't try to disburden himself of details, to pass on his secrets to Richard, like family jewels. Richard is curious, it's true, about his father's other life, but it is the faint unsatisfying curiosity that one reserves for the tragedies of strangers. He does not really want to know. It's enough to know that they hold this thing in common: infidelity.

"Some heat we're having," his father says, irrelevantly. He clenches his fingers and a faint beep issues from a car in front of them. Richard feels a flush of irritation, like a heat rash, at his father's feeble attempt at repartée—male bonding—but the feeling passes. Richard's father is a handsome man, the sort of picturesque old gentleman that foreign tourists snap photos of. His father's favourite story from his travels abroad is the one about the cluster of Japanese tourists who surrounded him once in a street in Paris and took his picture as if he were a national monument, thinking him the quintessential Frenchman in his red beret, his handsome face, his pouty frown. He delights, as Richard does, in being mistaken for someone else. As if a false, even a mistaken identity, might be more promising than the

ones they have.

Richard's father is a great believer in family, in the notion of family, a thing Richard thinks may characterize those who are unfaithful—this faith in family they cannot seem to keep. As they drive up Hennepin, heading for Excelsior Boulevard, Richard remembers a night many years ago when his father drove them through a wooded area near their home. The swatch of park was part of a campaign by the city to preserve the last remaining wild lands in their bedroom community, and as they took a curve by the small swampy lake where Richard had first kissed another man (a boy really, lanky and tough, with white blond hair, who tasted of Marlboros and Peppermint Schnapps), a shape had bolted into their headlights and they'd felt the thick dull weight of a body clip the grill of the car before it bounced off the bumper and into the grassy ditch.

It was a scrawny deer, legs skinny as fishing poles, a thing that seemed meant by its delicacy to be broken; its side heaved frantically, smudged with mud and blood. Richard had stroked its coarse brown fur, crying stupidly, pointlessly, over what was already lost. His father had clicked his tongue. "Damn it," he said. "God damn it." Across the road Richard saw a second deer waiting near the trees, watching for this one to clear the road and come, innocent still of loss. For a reason they never discussed, they decided not to tell Richard's mother. As if it had been some sexual indiscretion, a shameful indulgence, this accidental death. "We don't have to mention this," his father had begun. "No," Richard agreed. And they never had.

But Richard thinks of it now, driving with his father once again. He remembers how his father had looked stern and moved and solemn as they drove home, and how he had said—the only mention of it he had ever made—quietly, distractedly, "I never saw it coming." Which is how Richard imagines he feels now, about all of this, all of them, even his own life, though he does not say it. It makes Richard feel tender towards his father and he sets a hand on his dad's thick shoulder and gives it a light squeeze and his father frowns at him, eyebrows raised, wonderingly, and then smiles and says, "I'm glad you could make it, Son."

By two-thirty, the foyer of Temple Beth Elohim is clotted with guests who arrive in large, shiny rented cars, feathered hats, polished shoes, accessorized with leather. Hannah has retired to the dressing room and Richard stands alone by the chapel door, squinting at the blaze of the ozone-depleted summer sun reflected off the asphalt parking lot.

His mother, Mrs. Lydia Klein (née Morris), stands greeting guests as they arrive. She is a formidable woman, even from here, even in the face of adversity. Her authority is apparent and impressive, her casually correct posture elegant and unrigid. The taut skin of her cheeks glows like pol-

ished leather. Tan and toned, she has, he thinks, the resolute bearing of the unhopeful, like a Civil War general leading troops into a losing battle. Her small figure has always seemed towering to him, even after he grew well beyond her five-foot-five height. When she looks up at him, he still feels she is looking down. Even now, especially now, seeing her in a shift of Prussian blue linen, a string of pearls at her neck, the diamond of her wedding ring catching the light so that it glints.

It has fallen to Richard to hand out programs. He stands by the chapel door, trying to soothe the gentiles. He slips the folded program with its inset sheet of Hebrew prayers into the hands of his mother's Methodist kin, knowing there is nothing a Methodist fears more than not being able to comply with the rules. He notices several on his mother's side freeze when they glimpse the unfamiliar Hebrew letters. The idea of having to sit through a communal prayer without being able to hold up their end clearly unnerves them. His Aunt Elizabeth, his mother's elder sister, looks positively stricken, as if she might turn back, until Richard points out the transliteration on the back. Still, once the ceremony is underway, it will be rough going for the gentiles, the Orthodox contingent spitefully upping the tempo until it is difficult for even the Reconstructionists to keep up.

The last time Hannah married, the groom was an Anglo-Catholic and the wedding was held before the family hearth with a Justice of the Peace presiding; a string quartet played Bach in the kitchen and the Methodists—on his mother's side—were right at home. The Jews—his father's New York kin—were grim; they came late, left early, wore yarmulkes through the service, though there wasn't a rabbi for miles. Richard's mother had orchestrated the whole affair. The reception was held at a good French restaurant and involved large quantities of poached salmon, pâté, endive, baby vegetables. There were ice sculptures in the shapes of fish and swans, loaded down with caviar, hard-boiled eggs, and shrimp. The wedding cake was a monument of scalded sugar, built of profiteroles stuffed with cream. It was all very 1980s, Richard thinks now. They had joined the New York family for breakfast and dined with the Minneapolitans at night for cocktails, and the divisions, like the scotch his maternal Aunt Elizabeth drank by the quart that long weekend, were neat. But this time something has shifted and Richard is uneasy; he feels lost, relieved for little things like the card that will be on the linen tablecloth tonight, which will tell him where, if anywhere, in all of this, he belongs.

The Jews arrive like conquering heroes, loud and exuberant, wearing large hats. His Uncle Leonard, his father's elder brother, shows up in an Italian silk suit, a handkerchief in his breast pocket, a skimmer; he slaps Richard on the back as he accepts a program and asks after the bride.

Standing in this crowd of unfamiliar relations, Richard feels disoriented without his props: his desk, his white lab coat and surgical blues, his nurses

and reception, his apartment overstuffed with books and tasteful, costly art; he feels lost without Brian. Though they fight on trips—unflappable Brian annoying in his equanimity while Richard loses his mind—Richard misses him. Brian is a handsome, charming guy and is great at working a crowd. Richard imagines his lover in the foyer and feels a twinge of domestic pride he can rarely feel when they're together.

Brian and Richard were friends for years before they became involved. They met while doing their residencies at the same hospital in New Haven before ending up in the same hospital on the other coast. In the years before they got involved, they'd lunched together occasionally, been fond, if distant, friends. Then, two years ago, they'd drifted into their love affair like flotsam washed up on a beach after a particularly nasty storm. Each having survived a bad breakup, had turned to the other first for comfort, then for love.

Their first few months as lovers, they had been careful with each other, solicitous and gentle, the one way is with the ill. They bought each other flowers tied with ribbon and raffia. They tucked little notes under the windshield wipers of one another's cars, into lab coat pockets, desk drawers, on clipboards among patients' histories. At home and out with friends, they called each other absurd pet names: sugar bean and pumpkin, honey and cupcake. They made a show of their domestic bliss, as if to prove their exes wrong. Their sex was passionate and urgent. It left Richard weak-kneed, given to fits of the giggles. But at some point he cannot yet discern, it changed between them. Settled.

These days their sex is more like flossing, a prophylactic regime, regular and suburban as lawn care; Brian never wants to fuck in the kitchen or on the edge of the tub or among the file cabinets of Medical Records as they once did. He does not like to use words like fuck when talking about sex. Richard's handsome lanky lover wants Doris Day sex. That, in fact, is what they call it, The Doris Day. *Is Doris coming today?* they quip. *Y'know she comes whenever she can.* Richard finds he misses his last lover, a small ugly pug of a man who fucked with a kind of Genet-like brutality. When he dreams of desire, as lately he does often, it is this man—not Brian—who holds him, this man whose force, like gravity, draws him magnificently down.

Across the foyer, in the far corner, by a potted palm, Richard's father is looking uneasy; every so often he turns to scan the crowd, as Richard was doing before catching sight of him. Beside his father is the woman in beige, who appears to be studiously avoiding scanning anything at all. She smiles vapidly up into the rafters, staring not at the high second-story ceiling, not at the crowd, but at some indeterminate place in between.

What appalls Richard about his father's mistress is not what he'd ex-

pect. It is the fact that she is ordinary. The word mistress hangs about her like a tacky boa, an ill-fitting dress. She is short, plump, dressed in a tan suit and skirt with a pearly synthetic cable-knit sweater underneath. Beside her, Richard's mother is a monstrous beauty and Richard thinks that this may be the point. The mistress is no threat. She looks intelligent but not too. Attractive but not too. Like the ugly pug of a man Richard still longs for, a lover who was not too frightening to love, whom he could love because he never feared he could not live without him, as he sometimes fears is true of Brian.

His father sees him and gives a wave and they start over.

Richard's father looks misty-eyed, and Richard wonders if he's regretting having brought her.

"Son, I'd like you to meet Betsy."

Betsy takes Richard's hand in both of hers as if to demonstrate her sincerity. "It's awfully nice to meet you, Richard. Your father has talked about you for—well, all the time. You've made him very proud."

Her hands are soft and powdered. Her hair is salon sculpted, a dull false brown. He is sure she has white couches in her house—worse, a condo—with large floral patterned curtains and glass tabletops.

"And you have made him..." Richard begins—unsure what he'll say, how the sentence will end, in a freefall of verbiage, waiting to hit ground to see what sort of sound or mess he'll make—but he never lands. He's interrupted by someone tugging on his arm.

It's Sasha, his childhood chum. Tugging playfully, as in the old days, when they were kids, and later, in high school, sweethearts.

"We'll see you later, Son," Richard's father says, obviously avoiding introductions where he can.

Richard hands a program to a Methodist wavering in the doorway, then turns to Sasha.

"You look wonderful, Richard," she says. "Running away from home agrees with you. I, on the other hand, am a mess. I gained sixty pounds with Lizzie. I never lost the weight and now—." She shrugs.

Whenever Richard meets his high school friends, people he pretended to know because friends were necessary—like clothes, they made it less embarrassing to go out in public—he feels a twinge of self-consciousness, has an embarrassed moment when he finds himself wondering what they know about his life now. It's not that he's ashamed of the fact that he is gay; on the contrary, he imagines rather fatuously that this preference marks him out, makes him part of a lineage of Baldwin and Wilde, Shakespeare and Socrates, confirms some long-held but vaguely and never quite articulated sense that he was different from the others, born for some remarkable end, which he is only now beginning to suspect he is not.

In the psychology textbooks he had read during his medical training,

he recognized this as a Napoleonic Complex, but nevertheless, the feeling has remained, haunting him, especially now when the first blush of youth has passed and his life is rutted with the emotional potholes that soon become one's path in life, and he can no longer imagine himself as anything other than what he is now—a respectable gay radiologist with a handsome husband, a thirty-year mortgage, and a stable, loving, monogamous relationship from which he sometimes strays.

It is not embarrassment then, but something more like shyness that he feels at the prospect that once again, as throughout his schooling, people might imagine that they know him and are wrong. It's not as if he isn't out to his family. They have absorbed the news like leukocytes massing on a foreign body, surrounding it and making it their own. They have produced from the bourgeois surplus of their lives an excess of enthusiasm for Brian. Holiday cards come addressed to them both, as do invitations to Thanksgiving, a set of knives, his and his bath towels, flannel sheets printed with cartoon barnyard animals.

But even as they embrace what they euphemistically term his "lifestyle," they mistake him. They do not know about his affairs, his secret self, the part he sleeps with, wakes to, that strays. They do not know him and he is not sure that he wants them to. He fears their love; or rather, it's not their love he fears, but the insincerity that love demands: the white lies and the compromises. He doesn't want to hurt anyone, but he wants an honest life, passionate and vital, in which desire, not compromise or convention, is his guide.

Richard smiles at Sasha and wonders what she's heard and from whom and in what form. He recalls that she was once very close to his mother. He had been envious of her then.

"How's Brian?" she asks, answering his unasked question.

"He couldn't come," Richard says, though that is not what she's asked.

She nods. Scans the crowd. Her profile is still flawless, Mediterranean.

"I didn't invite David," she says, referring to the husband he's never met. "Not that he would've come."

Richard feels something in him unknot beneath his rib cage and a warmth take residence there. He'd forgotten how likeable Sasha is. Her frankness. Of course he realizes that she may simply be one-upping him with honesty, sensing in her uncanny way his own dissembling, and to counter that impression and deny her the opportunity for superior candor, he adds, "Brian had a gastrointestinal conference to attend in San Diego."

"Ah," says Sasha.

He wants to ask her if she is disappointed in the way things have turned out, but she would ask him in what way—how *what* has turned out—and he would not be able to explain.

He thinks about their childhood as green—bands of grass and dense

forests of oak and elm, and fronds of wild asparagus. He wants to tell Sasha about the tour he made yesterday of their old haunts, the woods where they smoked dope and the railroad tracks that held a glamour for him then that trains still hold, their old neighbourhood with its greenways and bike paths and warnings to yield. As a kid, he had tried to be careful, which is what the acres of tidy green—those pristine forests stocked with bunnies and does—were intended, he thinks, to convey. The harmlessness of things. They promised what life never could deliver: that if only you stayed in your yard, if only you stayed on the path, you could avoid damage. But his mother has not avoided damage, and from an early age Richard had known better than to believe that life was ever harmless; as soon as he was able, he'd fled those tidy paths, knowing that to avoid pain is to avoid life. But sometimes he misses what those edenic green spaces promised: the childish hope of safety, of life without pain or consequences.

After the ceremony, dinner is held in the basement of the synagogue—a large, dim, beige room in which have been arranged dozens of round tables with white tablecloths. Hannah's father-in-law leans back in his chair, twirling the stem of his wine glass on the table so it makes a neat, indented ring on the cloth.

"Be a sports writer," he tells Richard, evidently confusing him with someone's nephew, a reporter for the local Tribune. "All the truly great writers started out writing about sports."

"I'm a physician," Richard tells him. "I'm Hannah's brother? I don't like sports."

"Boxing," he says. "Now there's a sport."

The immediate family is seated with the bride and groom, except for Richard's father who has defied his place card and sits now beside his mistress a table away. He chats to her, Richard notes, as if she were a distant but delightful cousin. A maiden aunt. He is cautious in the extreme. Hannah, who has begun making the rounds of tables, greeting her guests, appears not to notice this change in seating—or perhaps she is just too preoccupied—or too exhausted—to care.

Richard can hear his Aunt Elizabeth at the next table ranting about indigestible bean sprouts. The first female aeronautical engineer in the country and a one-time consultant to NASA, she had been Richard's favourite relative. He loved her for her excesses in this moderate family: drinking too much, chain-smoking, she could argue any of them under the table. But now she's gone half mad and in her familiar righteous tone is declaiming the vice of vegetarianism. "People think that stuff is good for them," she raves. "There are more toxins in raw broccoli than in a pack of cigarettes. And peanut butter? You might as well eat plastic."

There are raucous toasts, then dinner is served.

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Neil and Hannah tip their heads together and make a show of love throughout the meal, and Richard recalls the morning when he first met Neil fifteen years ago, just after Hannah left her first husband, just before Richard left for college. Hannah was twenty-three then, a few weeks divorced, and you could still see a band of pale skin where her wedding ring used to be. It was a weekday morning in late spring and Richard remembers a thin blue sky through cold glass windows, a chill in the air. Richard had been helping Hannah settle into her third-floor apartment. (A fact that seems significant: everyone he's ever known who's divorced and taken an apartment has chosen rooms on a high floor, as if more at home in mid-air.)

She sat on the blond parquet wood floor, her legs folded to one side, unpacking boxes and chain smoking Dunhills while Richard put dishes away on the cabinet shelves. It was approaching noon when Neil emerged from Hannah's bedroom wrapped in a blue velour robe, wearing moosehead slippers with brown felt antlers. He scuffed sorrowfully across the parquet, his fists dug deep into the pockets of his robe, antlers flopping.

"I overslept," Neil said, looking at the moose. "I have to call work and tell them I'll be late again."

"Poor sweetie," Hannah said.

"You're not going to send me to the home for the motivationally impaired, are you?" Neil asked.

"Oh, sweetie," Hannah said, embracing the man she'd later marry. "This *is* the home for the motivationally impaired." They'd laughed then and for a moment clung to one another amid the litter of boxes, and their image became indissolubly linked with Richard's worst suspicions about his family. Months later, when he packed up for college and left, it was this that he believed he was escaping, leaving behind him forever: doubt and its attendant compromises that pass for love.

That is what Brian has failed to understand these last two years; Brian has taken personally Richard's reluctance to domesticate. He doesn't understand that what Richard is trying to leave behind isn't Brian but the thing his mother and sister settled for. He's spent his whole life trying to get free of these same bonds, to resist the gravitational force of family that demands such compromises, that makes insouciant sex into infidelity, homosexuality into a family embarrassment, all the compromises and scars that come of belonging and wanting to belong. Brian takes it personally, but he's wrong to do so. Richard simply wants a bigger life than this, than what he sees around him here in the basement ballroom of Temple Beth Elohim.

Across the table, Hannah rises from her chair, taking her new husband by the hand. Turning to the klezmer band set up behind her on a platform decorated with crêpe paper and balloons, Hannah blows a kiss to the band

leader, a skinny saxophonist who winks at her and blows a deep note, and the band begins to play the Carpenters' "We've Only Just Begun" in a slightly dissonant, minor key, klezmer-style, played as it might have been sung in a Polish synagogue a century ago—like a hopeless prayer; and, turning to her new husband, Hannah begins to dance.

Richard is not sure how long he watches them, the couples twirling around the room like the carnival rides he watched as a kid, thinking the motion beautiful—synchronized and bright like small bouquets—and wanting to be part of it. But he holds back now as he did then, knowing rides are disappointing once you're on, the dipping and spinning as if the world has come unmoored, knowing that the dancing couples are beautiful only because he is on the outside looking on at the fine patterns they make.

Instead, Richard gets up from the table and crosses to the bar in the corner. The bartender, in his little red vest and black bow tie, behind his little portable winery, looks bored and for a moment Richard is annoyed that he should see this affair as just another gig, another schmaltzy wedding with a lot of boozy guests, instead of Richard's family.

The bartender asks what Richard will have and then, before he turns to get it, holds Richard's gaze a beat too long—a fraction of a second—but it's enough. Richard smiles. The guy is not unattractive. Maybe a little young, twenty-six, twenty-eight. As a rule, Richard prefers his lovers to be older; he prefers to be the younger man. The ingénue. But it will do. Besides, it's just flirtation.

"Always the groomsman, never the groom," the bartender says, with half a smile.

"You don't know the half of it," Richard says. He stuffs a bill into the tip glass, thanks him for the drink.

The bartender sets the bottle of Jim Beam on the bar between them. "Take it," he says. "It's got your name on it."

"Which would be Richard," Richard says.

"Nice to meet you, Richard. I'm Ed."

Richard thanks Ed again and goes to sit down at an empty table. He eases off his shoes and pours himself a drink. Then another. And another, enjoying the soft feeling that comes after several drinks when the walls bend like wax, the room slowly collapsing onto itself.

Every so often, as he looks around, he glances over at the bartender who is almost always looking back at him. Their eyes meet this way several times until Richard realizes he's been staring, and the bartender staring back, for something approaching a minute, each waiting for the other to turn away. He tells himself it's not sex he's after here, but the familiarity of the gesture, the connection made between strangers that defines his other life, which is composed largely of this bravado and self-invention—like

the routine he learned as a resident for taking case histories. "Playing doctor," he still calls it.

He's had to learn this, over time. It is, he thinks, a trick picked up in medical school, where it was necessary *not* to think about the cadaver disembowelled before you as a person who once played golf, played bridge, ate tuna sandwiches, made love just like you. He'd understood then that sometimes it was necessary to turn things into other things in order to go on. And it worked in the world as well. It helped, he found, to imagine himself the hero of some great adventure, his couplings and courtships prelude to some great love affair, to imagine the future as a place in which fulfillment was imminent.

He's skilled at impersonation and knows it. But it has its drawbacks: it makes him wonder what, if anything, is authentic between people. Looking around the room at all these people related to him by blood and genes, he cannot help but wonder what, if anything, they have in common. On the plane, he'd read in *JAMA* about the latest studies on twins, and had thought then, looking at the evidence, how fragile and unpredictable are the things that bind us to each other, how often irrelevant and absurd. Lawn furniture and neighbourhoods, stamp collections and a preference for parting one's hair on the side. What struck him about the studies was what was rarely noted in popular press bowdlerizations of the research: how inconsequential are the bonds between people in the end, how tenuous and insignificant, even for those more genetically alike than most of us will ever be, how—for all the genetic dicta—we share so little of significance.

When Richard decides to go over and speak to the bartender, it's not with any conscious intention of picking him up. It's not premeditated, he tells himself. He's just playing a part. It's just one of many things he will pretend away, make into something else: an excess of *joie de vivre*, a drunken and fantastic absurdity, rather than infidelity. Truth is, he loves Brian, but infidelity has nothing to do with love, he thinks. It's more like stepping out for a smoke, an invigorating break.

As he passes the head table, Richard overhears his Aunt Elizabeth telling his mother about the dark matter in the universe—the powerful, unseen substance that gives galaxies their shape, that mysterious force that holds stars and planets in their orbits with its fierce gravitational pull.

Later, as Richard kneels in the dewy grass outside the temple's classrooms where as a child he'd learned the Hebrew alphabet, with the bartender's cock in his mouth, his tongue circling the smooth lobe of its head, he thinks of Brian with sudden and intense longing, the thought arriving as a weight on his heart. But to his surprise it is not an unpleasant weight but a bright thrilling anticipation that merges in his mind with his arousal and the soft yellow blur of street lights in the distance, the firm satisfying rump

in his hands.

Back inside, in a corridor of the basement, Richard phones Brian's number, but there is no answer. Richard's own voice asks him if he'd like to leave a message after the beep. He hangs up. Plans to call back later.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," Sasha says, when Richard returns to the ballroom. She's standing just inside the door and tugs at his sleeve. "Dance with me."

"Why not?" he smiles.

They step onto the floor, moving among the others, awkwardly. People bump against them giddily, drunk, light as balloons. Across the room, his mother is seated at the table, nursing a bottle of Vermouth, talking to the other mother, Neil's. The two of them sit alone amidst a clutter of dirty dishes, while the others dance. Generals holding their ground. They are always sitting there, it seems to him, the mothers. He's been afraid all these years of getting trapped the way his mother had, the way all the mothers had, her grief a weight he carried with him everywhere, a small but ubiquitous burden, like the nutritious lunches she packed that smelled of peanut butter, overripe apples, jelly doughnuts, a sweet cloying smell that he associates with all her losses, all she's given up for them. All she might have done and didn't. She who would've been a doctor had she not been born a girl. His one clear aim as a boy was to get free and he had. But now he wonders if he really has or will or even wants to.

Dancing with Sasha, his chin leaned against her fragrant hair, Richard feels a sudden tenderness for these people, all of them, for his family moving in circles around the room, the seated moms. It's like seeing them from a very great distance, like terrain glimpsed from a plane, that he can map for miles in every direction. Watching Hannah nuzzle Neil's beard as they dance, Richard can see already how her intense love for him—now that they've married—will mellow in a year, become worn in, smaller, leaving gaps that Hannah will fill with bridge games, a vegetable garden, the children she is already planning to have, an affair. But it doesn't matter. They are here now, in each other's arms, making something lovely that will not last the night.

And, as if his thoughts were an incantation, it begins: the end.

What Richard will remember of the evening after that is a confetti of images, like the colourful piñatas his mother made for him each birthday when he was young, piñatas which they slowly tore apart in the course of the day's festivities, leaving Richard bawling inconsolably—though he should not have been surprised since it happened every year, the same old loss—beside the eviscerated figure of what was once a *papier-mâché* donkey, sun, or deer.

What he'll remember of the evening after that is this:

How his father, courtly and maybe still in love with Richard's mother, rises from the table where his mistress sits and walks over and asks Richard's mother to dance. He bows a little, takes Richard's mother's hand in his, and pulls her up from her chair. She's flushed with some sort of strong emotion, but she lets him draw her into his arms and for the length of a Sinatra song they hold each other. Like old times. Until Uncle Leonard cuts in on the couple and Richard's father returns to the table where his mistress sits, dreamily swaying her head to the klezmer-version of "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes," and drunk, incautious, she clasps his arm and kisses him, and from there the details begin to blur.

Later Richard will wonder what got into him, whether it was Nemesis or one too many drinks. All he knows for sure is that there's a moment when the music, which has buoyed them, abates, and Hannah, shouting into Neil's face, says loud and clear, "Who is that woman with my dad? Is she one of yours?" And Richard, dancing nearby, says, in a moment of uncharacteristic honesty, "That is our father's mistress."

Then a general confusion ensues.

Hannah stands beside the table where Richard's father sits, and screams, "I can't believe you'd do this to me," before running out. Her bouquet dropped to the floor.

At a signal from someone, the band resumes its work and valiantly plays on, though only a few diehards dance. They're mostly getting their coats when Richard hears her. "A toast," Richard's mother screams into the roiling music, "a toast to Hannah and Neil." The dancers don't seem to hear at first, until, like brushing snow from a windshield, Richard's mother sweeps aside the clutter of dishes from the table and steps onto it. The music stops or rather fractures then, like ice falling off a roof—a few pieces crashing, the rest following in a heap, then silence. Richard's mother looms above them, the way the bride and groom should be held aloft on chairs, a kerchief between them like love. But Richard's mother stands alone, holding her glass of vermouth aloft; she weaves, unsupported, in stocking feet. Everyone turns to watch as she struggles to remember what it is she needs to tell them, the thing she wants to remind them of.

Her face folds in confusion as she looks over the crowd, as if she doesn't recognize them, cannot place herself, here among strangers. For a moment, she wavers, towering, as if she can't remember why they're gathered here, and maybe at this moment she does not.

"To..." she says, sadly. Richard wants to help her. He wants to call out "Neil and Hannah," he wants to call out "Love." But he doesn't want to unsteady her, cannot stand to see her fall. So he watches in a dreamlike paralysis as she teeters on the table, saying, over and over, "To. To."

Until Richard's father detaches himself from his mistress and moves

toward his wife with a certitude and fluidity of motion that makes it seem he is floating toward her, inevitably drawn.

"Lydia," he says gently, "Come down, hon." His father has never sounded so gentle, except maybe that one night after they'd struck the deer.

But seeing her husband approach, Richard's mother straightens, grows definitive and bold.

"To," she tells them grandly, lifting her glass. "To—"

And then she falls.

Thank God there was a crowd to catch her, Richard thinks, as they gather their coats, close up the hall. No one was hurt. Embarrassment the only injury. Pride the only casualty of the long and dreadful night. Richard feels the familiar sorrow his family has always inspired; he wishes he could comfort his mother, but he knows better, that like some Newtonian principle, every effort to draw close creates an equal and opposite reaction.

It is surprisingly dark when Richard and his mother step outside into the parking lot, and despite the summer smell of warm tar, the air is already cool, and Richard is unprepared for the familiarity of it. The taste of evenings out of childhood, an indigo thickness that recalls every loneliness he ever felt in the lonely years of youth.

As Richard walks his mother to the car, Ed, the bartender, stops him to ask if Richard will be in town for a while, and momentarily Richard cannot place his face. "I leave tomorrow," he says formally. "Pleasure to have met you," he adds, before guiding his mother to the car. Sasha is nowhere in sight. His father will take a separate car; they don't ask him where he'll spend the night. His mistress, like the bride and groom, called a cab and left alone, in tears.

"Days are getting shorter," Richard's father says, from beside them. Richard helps his mother into the car, then nods to his father. They hold out their hands and shake.

Richard and his mother drive home from the synagogue in silence, his mother quietly weeping. In the car, Richard is solicitous of his mother, as if he is the one who has betrayed her. And maybe he has. He has been, unwittingly, his father's son. His mother goes to bed with a headache, and Richard sits up in the kitchen watching old black and white movies with the sound turned down. Calling out the names of the actors, saying their lines. It is after 2 A.M. when he finally shuts off the lights and starts up the hall to bed. That's when he remembers that he has forgotten to phone Brian, as he'd promised.

It is late even on the West Coast and Richard knows Brian will be sleepy and grumpy, he knows the rumpled vanilla smell of him, the tone of his annoyance (Brian never likes staying up late, never enjoys the night

as Richard does, preferring the clear optimism of morning Richard loathes). It's two hours earlier on the coast and if he calls now, he'll wake Brian at midnight. But he misses him, and wants to tell him about the perambulating cake on a mission from God, so he calls.

"Hell-o," says Brian, jauntily, wide awake.

"Brian?" Richard says. Why the hell is he wide awake?

"Richard?"

There is a sound of music in the background, Miles Davis, loud.

"You were expecting someone else?" Richard asks. He means this to sound like a joke, but it doesn't. "Is someone there with you?"

"No. There is no one here with me," Brian says, repeating each word carefully.

There is a muffled sound, and Richard knows that Brian has covered the receiver. When it clears, the music's lower.

"What's that music?"

"Oh, just the TV."

Richard thinks he hears someone laugh.

Richard does not hear the rest. He hangs up.

It occurs to him that he's just worn out from the wedding, that his own infidelity is what haunts him, not Brian's. He reaches for the phone to call back and apologize (Richard's always the one to apologize, Brian never does), setting his hand on the receiver, when it rings. Before he reads the number in the caller ID box, he knows it is Brian. It's two in the fucking morning, who else would be calling but Brian? When the phone rings a second time, it has the insistent anxious ring of someone caught in deception, someone ready with an excuse and an apology. Someone who's about to leave but is having a hard time saying goodbye. It rings once, rings twice, rings three times. Any minute Richard's mother will wake and answer it. So Richard picks up the phone and depresses the button to disconnect the call, then sets the receiver beside the phone to keep the line engaged, and he prepares to sleep.

His skin feels clammy as he lies in bed; it prickles with the static-electrified feeling of fear. The room cradles, rocking back and forth gently, and Richard feels the lightness of knowing that nothing holds him down now, the sense of having slipped free of gravity. He imagines this is how the astronauts must feel, nostalgic for the pull of something larger than themselves, longing to be drawn into the orbit of a greater force and held there. It is the heart they have to worry about in space, his Aunt Elizabeth told him once. In zero gravity, the heart will grow too large and slack. Without the pull of a greater force, it fails us.

Jon Cone

House Arrest

Writ large your ravished inventories.
I don't even know your weight.
What took place, already forgotten.
You leave, close the door behind you.

In my tower all around me the quaint debris
of my winter campaign, my summer,
under a fine hoary dust.

Anna Akhmatova, you and your death poems.
Everyone saying goodbye, even those who failed
to arrive.

Love is the integer, musk, heat.
I am learning Russian the better to take your pulse.
The better to record it in my blood.

Jacqueline Kolosov

Vago

She wasn't always Garbo.
Standing behind the counter, Greta
Gustafsson sold hats, learned how to slip
pears into handbags, how to steal away
from overeager embraces in snow-
bound sleighs, on trains.
Her face on film rises
and floats—a whisper—lighter
than air. But to achieve Garbo,
Greta had to shed twenty pounds,
and sleep even less. *Vago:*
loveliness always within
reach, yet impossible to grasp.
Is that the secret
behind her Baltic sea-drenched
eyes, like the city sky
rinsed clean by rain, or a stream
of sunlight falling on promises
still wet with morning?
To learn about the invisible, look
to the visible. But what if the silhouette
of Garbo scraping against the silver
screen is all we have? *She fled*
so quickly. What if Garbo's
Mata Hari was right:
"Here are your eyes,"
she tells her blinded lover,
placing his fingertips on her own,
"with those ridiculously long
lashes. Here are your eyes—"

Greta Garbo, Meet Virginia Woolf

How clearly I see them
leaning over their cups, Garbo's wariness
eased by Woolf's cadences—like the ocean
on a summer's eve, windows open
to the approach of stars. Surely,
Virginia spoke of her discreet seat
at the London premier of *Queen Christina*,
the gender-bending heroine Garbo
brought to the big screen. My guess:
Woolf professed admiration
for that closing allusion to Greek
tragedy—loneliness as exhilaration,
the audience buoyed, just as Clarissa
and the reader are buoyed,
after Septimus takes the plunge,
clutching his treasure. *She was glad*
that he had done it—thrown it all away.

And Garbo revealed her delight
in Orlando's journey through the centuries,
and the sexes, ultimately learning that he/she
"belonged to neither"—sex that is.
Do any of us belong? Garbo asked,
confiding to Virginia what she, too,
had always felt. Despite the broo-ha
of her on-screen smolder, often she felt
beyond the body's needs.
To the author who dove deep—
discovering yellow roses, gloves,
and pocket watches, even mother's cameo,
but death and incest also—
Garbo could have spoken freely.

What else did they share, seated close
together, just this once, in the intimacy
of a London café, amid the clink of china
and silverware, at the end of the day?

That life is a pageant,
a brilliant charade worth all the heartache:
a generation folded in the trenches, a sister
lost to cancer, a mother's death,
a father's, and illness—that country
both visited often. And yet,
I wouldn't have traded any of it...
These words, either could have spoken.

After trafficking in such wisdom,
who would have guessed that one would fill her pockets
with stones, and stumble into the sea;
the other, hurl her treasure to the wind,
and make of her life an exquisite
monastery: clean but cold.

Before parting,
Garbo must have confessed
her secret, echoing Christina's story
in anticipating her own.
And the great woman of letters?
For once Virginia Woolf fell
silent, covering Garbo's hand with her own,
and making of her face a mirror
that gave nothing back—but the light.

warren heiti

from *the metamorphosis of agriope*

(canto xiii)

after some bad months, the time of amnesia,
she finds herself in a shadowed wood,
the lake of her heart closed, her feet clothed
with sand from the beaches of the lethe,
the melanin-skinned sun
mute in the trees, in the pallid branches
and black leaves where crows
with women's faces rake
the bark with their teeth
and shit their white shit
on the dry ground. near a dead riverbed
are two bare trees, a willow and a yew, and the crows
do not approach them. the willow's bark is rotten
and water has scalded and scarred the bark of the yew,
and their shadows like strangling vines grasp and couple
with their trunks. agriope pauses here
and the crows scowl at her, showing their bilious gums,
and rearrange the wrecked foliage of their wings.
she hears a hiss, the prison song of steam,
and places her palm against the willow
and snatches it back—the bark is white with heat,
fever. the impression left by her palm
boils over with sap, an amber voice,
high-pitched, thick: *this*
is where the soul goes
when it has cut the cloud's throat,
where it rains and roots and breathes
itself into bark, needle and leaf, this
is where it blisters and withers. the yew
went to sleep in a gas oven and i
went to sleep in a stream. pansies
and rosemary, thought and memory. the yew
slept with her shadow and soon

she will give birth. the grey earth
bulges around the roots of the yew.
agriope kneels at the tree's pelvis and stares
and the earth bulges again and ruptures
and a blunt snout thrusts out from the hole,
its nostrils rippling with panic, and agriope
digs until her fingers are raw and she can clasp
the infant at the back of its skull
and feel it struggling underground,
its muscles tense as saplings bent back in a bow,
and she throws her weight and tugs and the infant
is the arrow, thin and wooden it surges forward
from the archer, the earth, the face emerges
unfleshed, a calcium moon,
the blind eyes red as yew-berries,
the bone-hard shoulders emerge,
the hoar-frost mane,
the bone-hard torso emerges,
the christ-cradle ribcage, those scaffolds of snow,
the front hooves, flint arrowheads,
thrash and lacerate its mother's roots,
and the wretched, dry cunt of the yew
clutches at its child
but the child
kicks free.
and emerges entangled
in the sun's black hair: the albino mare,
ariel. and the mare, salty and bleached
with the sweat of its birth, bites through
the umbilicus.
the yew howls: *use*
this horse to ford the arroyo, but
after you have forded the arroyo,
you must
let her go.

Peggy Herring

Beneath the Sheet

I wait for Frances, my so-called mother, to ask me just where do I think I am going tonight in that getup. To instruct me to be sure to get home before it gets nasty out there young lady, then chew me out for ruining a perfectly good bedsheet to make my costume. Or maybe for chipping the big porcelain pot when I dyed the sheet black. Anything, really. With that screwed-up look on her face. But there is nothing from her side of the room. Just that lazy flick of the wrist that Frances has perfected to Olympic standards as she changes the channel on the TV.

I grind my heel into the sisal mat. It gives me great satisfaction that my costume, with all its folds and billows, doesn't make the slightest move.

"See you," I say. For an instant, I feel like nothing can touch me in here. But then I see the tarnished brass-plated chain lock that hangs on the door frame by a single screw. And I remember all the other wrecked things around here that need fixing.

"Make sure the Christly lights are out before you go." Frances, my mother in name only, does not want anyone to come to the door and spoil her shows. She is thick and white like a mushroom. She will squat on the sofa in the dark, as she does every Halloween, until the children are all sugar-buzzed and home.

I give Frances the finger. If she knew, she'd whack me till my face turned purple. But my hands are hidden in my costume, and she hasn't got a clue.

So, I lock the door behind me and, on the porch, safetypin my house key into my sleeve. Frances can do whatever she wants, alone in the dark. Whatever it is fungi do when no one is looking.

***

On the top step, I trip on the hem. Grab the railing. Stupid. I should've had the sense to try this out before tonight. This costume is almost impossible. The sheet is tangled in my legs. How am I going to get to the sidewalk, let alone find Daisy and collect our loot? I yank at the material and start again. The slit I cut for my eyes is a problem too. Even when it's in place, I can't see past the edges. This bugs me even more than Frances. Well, stupid or not, I'm stuck with it now.

There's Daisy under a street light. Big as a moon and clear as a winter

night. Her shadow reaches across the pavement and almost touches my toes.

"Alanna?"

I can't believe it. She doesn't know me. Her long, bare arms are wrapped around and around her.

"What the hell are you supposed to be?"

I pull the slit open wider and show her it's me. "I'm one of those ladies. From Afghanistan." I bend my neck until the light shoves shadows off my face. "It's a burqua."

Daisy is dressed in a halter top, a cherry-red short skirt. It's the same skirt she wears to dances and she doesn't give two hoots about those guys who call her thunder thighs when she does. She's wearing that lipstick she found in the bathroom at Subway, and it still grosses me out that she wears it. This is the way she usually dresses. She's crapped out on me.

"You look like a black ghost," she says.

Children pass on the sidewalk: a fireman, a princess, a Harry Potter. Daisy hardly notices. She rubs my costume between her fingers like she might actually set free a genie if she tweaks long enough.

We are the only ones in grade nine going trick-or-treating. Everyone else is going to a house party. Daisy said it and I agreed: we are way too old for this. But still. One more time wouldn't hurt. And it might be fun in the same way as playing hopscotch or climbing a tree now can be a laugh, but you wouldn't want to get caught doing it. So we made an agreement: costumes. Then as many houses as we could stand. As much candy as could fit in an IGA bag. One last time. We swore on our future graves.

I'm bummed out that Daisy's decided not to stick to the agreement. But then I notice the heels. Gold. Four inches, and they're not hers. They must be her sister's. And I get it.

"Oh. You're a hooker." I should've caught on earlier. Thank Jesus she can't see my red face through the veil.

"Well, duh. Come on. I'm freezing my tits off." And Daisy tramps away from the little kids and our worn out subdivision.

***

Frances rents our house, and has ever since Dad joined the church of the almighty deadbeat dads and split. That's Frances' version. He actually got a great job in Fort McMurray in oil and gas, and he makes $24.50 an hour plus overtime and double time on holidays. He's got his own problems now, but I'll join him once he sends the fare.

"You'll be waiting to see the moon rise green then," Frances said. "Don't be a fool."

But he'll send it. He promised, his voice warm as a teapot in December. He's got an apartment already, and a truck or something, and he's getting

snow tires next pay-day.

In the meantime, I live with Frances in this townhouse crammed into a yard small as a parking spot. Frances stopped trying to grow anything but dandelions in the garden. The townhouse council sent her three letters telling her to clean it up.

"Christ," she said, "they're nothing but a bunch of Nazis."

She tore the letters up. Then she left the porch light on till it burned out, and put in a red bulb.

"That'll show 'em who's in charge," she said. She dared them to write another letter.

Our landlord is a Nazi, too, according to Frances. He lives near the school, where the houses look like wedding cakes, squatting in yards as big as football fields, icing dripping off the eaves and porches.

That's where we're going tonight. There will be real chocolate bars. Bags of chips that aren't crushed. None of the discount candy from the bulk food store which is all anyone on our side of town can afford.

***

Just before the bridge over the railway tracks, Daisy and I stop for a smoke.

"It's bent," Daisy says when I hand her the cigarette I took from Frances' jacket. Daisy bends it back, but it still sags and looks tired.

She tries to light it, but the wind's come up and she can't get the match lit.

"You do it," she says. She's pretty impatient sometimes. It takes a few tricks to light the match. I hold my sleeve up to block the wind and slide the opening in the veil down so I can get the cigarette in my mouth, while being careful not to set my costume on fire. But eventually I draw and smoke fills me up.

"Huh," Daisy says. "Don't hog it." I hand it to her and let the sleeve go. I like this costume now. When I'm standing still, it's OK.

Daisy puffs away. I can't believe she's not cold. She must have thick skin on her bare arms and long legs, her wide shoulders.

Three drags and there's a car coming.

"Hey girls!" I hear him before I see him. But when I look, my worst fear is confirmed. "Whatcha doin'?" Big Mouth Rusty Dixon hangs out the front window like a dirty shirt. What a knob. He's in Daisy's sister's class. Vince Carpacio is driving. It's a souped-up something he fixed himself at his dad's garage. He's also in Daisy's sister's class. And, in the back, Eli Moreau. He's in my algebra class, but only because he failed last year.

"You a cop or writing a book?" Daisy blows a ring of smoke that's a lazy harvest moon. And she just stands there, bold as a Roman candle on July First, as though these guys are actually supposed to answer.

"Hey, Daisy. Gimme a Halloween kiss." Rusty sucks and smacks his ugly lips. Eli and Vince crack up.

"Go ask your mommy if you want some candy." Daisy flicks an ash in his direction. I give Rusty the finger, but my hands are hidden in my costume. I wish I could think of something to say instead, something smart like Daisy.

"You girls want a ride?" Vince leans into the light.

Daisy smiles, looks at me and shrugs. But I can't believe she'd even think about it. One second in a car with Rusty Dixon would be about as much fun as taking Frances to the home and garden show in the city.

"Can you drop us by the school?" Daisy tosses the cigarette and slides in next to Eli. She makes room for me by the window.

"Coming?" I actually think about letting Daisy go, off on her own with Rusty the Lugnut and his comrades. But there's no choice. Although now I wish I'd got in the car first, wish I was sitting next to Eli.

***

I held my face over the simmering pot until the steam hit me and I couldn't breathe. It stuck to my skin and hair. Then I thought maybe I dyed myself black too, but I looked in the kettle and found it wasn't true. My eyes were buggy and everything was warped because of the surface of the kettle, but I still had the same old face.

After it dried, I cut the sheet. One piece for the dress, another for the veil. I cut a slit so I could see out and made small, even stitches along its edges.

I got the idea from TV. During the war, they showed these ladies in burquas. Waiting for buses, shopping, dragging their kids around the city, or doing who knows what. The ones in lavender made me think of masked blue jays.

There were ladies in black too, the lacy cover over their eyes like a screen door. I wondered what their world looked like. If they were on the inside looking out. Or vice versa.

The reporter interviewed a university guy who said those women had to dress like that, or else risk being attacked on account of their beauty. He went on to say of course the women were more dignified in the burqua, it suited their shape and form. He said Western clothes were ugly but maybe he meant cowboy clothes, which are.

"Nazis," Frances said. "A bunch of Christly Nazis."

The reporter said there was no choice. The government forced the women to dress that way. But some of them wanted to, because of their religion.

They showed one lady in a gold burqua. She was on her hands and knees in the dirt, waving a basket around. She was a beggar. But nobody stopped to give her anything or even looked at her. But if they had've, they

might've seen what I saw. Like a spark at midnight. Nail polish. Red as a laser pointer. And I wondered: what else is hiding under her clothes?

I watched all the way to the end. But they did not interview any of the ladies and so how would you know?

***

"Who's your friend?" Rusty asks Daisy in the car. I pull the slit open as wide as I can and show my face.

"Oh. It's her," Eli says. "What's your name again?"

I'm disappointed. He doesn't know me. But he should.

I borrowed his notes once, when I missed class because of period cramps. He looked surprised, probably because no one would be dumb enough to borrow notes from some guy who'd already failed the course, but also because I'd never spoken to him before. But he gave me his notes.

That night, I opened the notebook. There was a page or two of equations, but most of it was filled with drawings. Of eyes. Even in the margins and inside covers. Hundreds of eyes. Wide, slitty, long-lashed, angry. Crying. In blue ink, red ink, magic marker, pencil. Whose eyes? I thought I saw the teacher's and that made me think maybe I would find mine. I checked them all out. But I had to give up. Because without the rest of the face, how can you tell?

I wanted to say something to Eli, but I didn't want him to think I was a freak. So I just gave back his book and said thanks.

"Linda, right?" Rusty says.

"It's Alanna. That's her name and don't wear it out." Good thing Daisy sticks up for me.

"Weird costume," Vince says. His eyes are in the middle of the rearview mirror and I feel like an insect squashed on his windshield.

"She's one of those ladies, from Afghanistan. Like on TV. It's called a burqua."

I let the veil down again.

Vince lights a cigarette.

"Gimme a drag, will ya." Daisy leans forward, and he passes the cigarette. She fills up her big body with smoke. I crack open the window just before she exhales. "Could you close the window please? I'm freezing," she says. She blows smoke all over me. Vince cranks up the heat.

"Thanks, 'Pacio. What're you guys doing tonight?"

"Whatcha got in mind?" Rusty grins. His neck is cranked backwards. He's got that lame look on his face again, like a drooling St. Bernard with rabies. It fades in and out under the passing street lights.

Vince and Eli laugh. Eli's wearing a baseball cap and a leather jacket. He's tapping his fingers on his jeans right next to Daisy's naked thigh. Something about them together like that stirs me up. Maybe he likes her.

Worse still, maybe she likes him, but I don't think so. She's never said so.

"Don't be such a dickhead," Daisy says. This time she blows the smoke in Rusty's direction, and passes the cigarette back to Vince, her arm inches away from Rusty's ugly face. "You going to Trev's?" Everyone knows there's a party at Trevor Hitchens'. His parents have gone to North Carolina.

Eli shifts, and his leather jacket squeaks. His body brushes against Daisy. She moves too, as slightly as Eli, but closer to me.

"Maybe," Eli says. For an instant, I wish Daisy and I were going to the party. And I want to say it, but I think Daisy will get mad. In fact, I want to go back in time, to when the car stopped. I would be the one to say OK, and I'd be first at the door. I'd sit next to Eli. I wouldn't move away.

"Where's your boyfriend tonight, Daisy?" Rusty asks. Daisy gives him a look. She doesn't have a boyfriend, it's all just a bunch of stupid gossip. In fact, Daisy's a virgin, but it's not like she can go around telling everyone.

"Mind your own business, dogface."

The guys laugh.

I dream about being next to Eli. How it would feel. I know it's more than a bit perverted, but I can't help it. When no one is looking, I touch my breast. I feel it up. And I wait for Daisy or Eli or anyone to react. But they have no idea what I can do in my burqua. So I leave my hand right there on my chest, next to my heart, which beats a million times a minute.

"You know where we can get some beer?" Vince asks.

And Daisy does. Maybe her sister told her. But I only half-listen, because I am holding myself, watching Eli and wondering: what would he say if I touched him? On the back of his tapping hand? If I didn't pretend it was an accident?

"Stop the car," Daisy says. We are across from the school.

Vince slams on the brakes. The tires squeal. Daisy almost lands on Eli. I slam into the back of Rusty's seat.

"Yes, ma'am!" Vince barks.

"Oh, you crack me up." Daisy rolls her eyes. She pulls her skirt down.

Daisy and I climb out into the chill. I feel sorry for her. Goosebumps erupt on her skin.

"Nice raspberries, Daisy," Rusty shouts, and the car speeds away into the night, propelled by the laughter of Eli and Vince, and Daisy shouting, "Screw you."

***

We're slowed down by Daisy's heels and my twisting sheet, but our bags fill up with the good stuff we expected. Of course there's the Martha Stewart wannabes handing out raisins and the Boy Scout rejects with bruised apples, which just goes to show you that Halloween grinches don't care where

they live. But I've got enough chocolate and chips for a month. And though I'll save them till December, I actually don't mind the candy kisses.

Then Daisy gets a bright idea.

"Let's go to Fatty's."

"Why?" I can't believe she's serious. Fatty is Fatema and she's in our class. She's a loser. An even bigger loser than Rusty Dixon if such a thing is possible.

"Come on. Why not?"

"What do you want to go there for?" Fatema is really fat and it doesn't help that she wears Winnie the Pooh T-shirts that don't even cover her flabby gut. She smells like she's pissed herself or rolled around in rotten fish.

"Let's surprise her." Daisy laughs.

"That's a dumb idea." But I forget that Daisy never has a dumb idea—according to Daisy.

She's pissed at me now. "Hmph. You're chicken shit."

"I'm not."

Then Daisy bawks like a chicken. She doesn't care who's looking, but I feel like a total dork. "Shut up."

"Bawk, bawk, bawk," Daisy says. She flaps her arms.

"Ok, ok," I say. "Just shut up."

Daisy laughs even more, until she nearly falls off her heels. She grabs my arm, straightens up, and off we go.

***

Tomorrow is November. One year since Frances left work at the bakery because of the bum shoulder.

"Christly hell," she said, about the manager, the union and all the doctors, hospitals and tests. But it's about me, too.

She used to call the workers' comp every day, but now it's just when she remembers. They want her to go back to school or get another job but she says she can't.

"You'll have to support your mother, Alanna, that's the way this Christly government wants it."

After the dollar store had a sign up, she told me to get a job. "No reason why you can't put in a few hours after school. Nothin' wrong with your shoulder." Of course I didn't want to, but what choice did I have?

I filled in the application, and where it said "salary expectations," I wrote $24.50 an hour. Daisy said I should've put "willing to negotiate." Still, they called me for an interview, but it was almost as bad as the principal's office telling you to see the guidance counsellor.

"Why do you want this job, Alanna?" the guy asked. I didn't. And I couldn't get it out of my mind that he stank of boiled cabbage. I froze up.

"About your salary expectations. You seem an ambitious girl," he said. "We pay minimum wage. What do you think of that?"

I didn't think much, to tell the truth. But I couldn't explain about Dad. Or Fort McMurray. I couldn't find my voice in there. He never hired me.

"Christly useless," Frances said. And I gave her the finger under the table because I didn't know if she meant the guy, Dad, the dollar store or me.

***

The lights are on at Fatty's, but there are no pumpkins or skeletons on the lawn. Does she even know it's Halloween?

"She probably went to Trevor's," I say. "Let's get out of here."

"Are you crazy? She's home. Squeezing her zits."

"Gross."

"Or maybe the zits on her father's back."

"Shut up, you're making me puke."

"Oh, don't get your knickers in a knot," Daisy says. She'll decide what's funny, what's gross. That's her way. But I think about my underwear and hers and feel strange. Maybe she is thinking about my underwear, too, which freaks me out.

Daisy rings the doorbell.

Nobody answers. But it's obvious someone's home. The lights are on, and you can hear the TV, even on the front step. So Daisy leans on the bell.

Fatty finally opens the door. "Sorry—" she starts to say, then she sees it's us. Well, Daisy anyway. I don't know if she recognizes me.

She's wearing an apron with greasy, yellow stains all over it and three Smurfs—which I thought went extinct with the Partridge Family—embroidered on a pocket.

"Trick or treat," Daisy says.

I don't know if it satisfies Daisy, but Fatty is surprised. Shocked even. It takes her a minute to check out Daisy. Then she looks at me, and you can tell, she doesn't have a clue what to say.

"Who's there? Who's there?" a voice calls out from inside. Fatty looks back and I see an old woman on the couch watching TV. She's so tiny, you can hardly see her underneath the afghan she's pulled up to her chin.

"No one," says Fatty. "It's no one. Never mind, Nani."

"Don't you recognize us?" Daisy says. "It's me. And here's Alanna. From school? Well, duh."

"Is it your friends from school?" The old woman twists her neck toward the door. "Invite them in. Give them tea."

Fatty pulls the door until we can't see in anymore. "We don't have candy," she says.

"But it's Halloween." Daisy's indignant.

"Sorry. You'll have to go." She's closing the door in our faces.

"But you have to have candy," Daisy says. "It's the law. You could get in trouble."

Fatty rolls her eyes, and then her fat cheek squishes against the door frame as though she's been pushed. "Shamima!" she says, and a little girl pokes her head out from behind the apron.

"Nani," she cries out, and pushes Fatty aside. She reaches her arms out to me like I'm supposed to hug her.

"That's not Nani. Nani's inside. That's—" and Fatty falters. "That's Alanna," she finally says, and pushes the girl into the house.

The girl cries.

"Fatema," the old woman calls. "What's going on? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Nani," she says. "Nothing." The girl's yanking on the door, but Fatty won't let go.

"Come on, Fatty," Daisy says, her voice lowered so the old woman can't hear, which she couldn't anyway since that kid is wailing now and banging on the door. "You heard her. Invite us in."

But no way am I going into that place.

"Fatema? Can you hear me?" the old woman calls, and the kid screeches and bangs harder. Fatty looks frightened, like she's expecting Daisy to do something. But Daisy's smart. She's waiting to see what Fatty'll say next.

"Fatema! Welcome your guests!"

Then maybe it's the headlights on a car going down the street, maybe it's a cloud that passes over the moon, but Fatty's face changes. It grows hard and older.

"You think you're so smart," she hisses. "What do you know about purdah?" I can't believe Fatty is talking like this. She must have a death wish.

"Fatema!"

"Can't you see how stupid you look? How stupid you are?" And all of a sudden, I see. Fatty's looking at my burqua the same way I'm looking at her apron.

I'm flustered and I need to explain, but I don't quite know what. Just that this is not what she thinks.

Fatty sighs and shakes her head. "If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, please go. I'm busy."

Daisy gasps. But Fatty closes the door before we even have a chance to think about the something we might say.

***

"She's a total dork," Daisy says, and storms down the sidewalk.

I follow. I'm red again and glad Daisy can't see beneath my burqua.

"She'll be sorry," Daisy continues. "Bitch. Freak."

She's at the end of the street. I'm falling behind. "She's the stupid one." She turns left and fumes her way down a hedge. "Loser." She kicks the hedge, stumbles, then stops. "I'm bored."

I think about Frances the Fungus hiding out with her TV. We should've gone to the party.

But we decide to head home. Away from Fatty. Back up the hill to our subdivision.

***

A car creeps along the street. It's Rusty and those guys.

"Hey, girls!" Rusty hangs out the window. "Where're you going?" He has a can of beer.

Daisy has blisters on her toes. "Disneyland to pick flowers with Goofy, what's it look like? Duh." She marches along, ignores the guys.

"Want a drink?" Rusty holds out the can.

"Not from you, Daffy Duck."

The guys laugh. Eli opens the back window. He has a can of beer too.

"Wanna go for a drive?" Rusty calls.

"No." Daisy keeps walking. But I wish she'd ask me. Rusty may be a little drunk, but I might've said yes. Not for a ride exactly. That might've made Daisy mad. Just for a drop, back up the hill. And I would've got to the car first.

"I got a treat for you." Rusty makes kissing noises. Vince and Eli laugh.

"Get lost," Daisy says. She's swinging her arms. She's really pissed off now.

"I know a good trick, too." He humps the car door until his ugly belt buckle gets stuck and the other guys burst out laughing when he yanks himself loose and falls down in the car.

"Fuck off, you asshole," Daisy says. I give him the finger again, but he can't see my hands in my burqua.

"Oooooh," Rusty looks at Eli and Vince. The car shadows us. "Is this how you girls say 'thanks' for the ride?"

We walk faster now. There's a park up ahead. We can cut through there.

"Daisy, Daisy, gimme an answer do," Rusty sings and waves his beer. "You're half crazy and I need a blow-job." The car explodes with laughter.

"Go fuck yourself, limp dick," Daisy shouts. "Come on, Alanna." She breaks into a run. I'm right behind her. But this is the first time I've had to run in my burqua. Good thing the park is only a couple of houses away.

The car stops. Rusty jumps out.

"Hey! Where you going?" There is no joking now, no laughter from the car.

He catches my sleeve. It's all that material.

I pull my arm back. The bedsheet tears. I yank up my skirt and run after Daisy. Rusty's right behind. Daisy stumbles.

"Help me!" I grab her arm and pull.

"Come on, slut, we're going for ride." Rusty grabs her other arm.

"Let go!" she screams. I hold tighter.

"I'll show you who's got a limp dick," he snarls.

"Take your slimy hands off me!"

Rusty pulls Daisy to the car. I'm dragged along like soggy toilet paper. We are tearing Daisy in two. But I can't let go. Eli opens the back door. The car howls like a cornered animal. It's set to take off as soon as Vince lifts his foot off the clutch.

"Let go, you bastard." Daisy's voice breaks. She's afraid and we all know it.

Rusty yanks and he's strong. My hands slide down to Daisy's wrist until I am about to let go. So there's no choice. Nothing else to do. I hear a roar. Something rushes in to replace my weak grip, my silence. I find part of the words I wanted to say to Fatema. With Fatema.

"NO!"

That's my voice. Beneath my burqua. Heavy, solid, strong.

"LET HER *GO.*" I raise an arm and my costume follows, sleeves like a shield, wings, like an apron that covers a doorway. "NOW."

Rusty and Daisy freeze. Eli's mouth falls open. Vince takes his foot off the gas. I'm as stunned as everyone to hear this voice coming from me.

Rusty lets go. He throws Daisy's arm down, jumps into the car, and slams the door. "Go fuck yourselves, bitches."

Vince floors it. Tires squeal. The car rockets away.

I shake. Daisy cries. The heel on her right shoe is broken. I pull off her shoes, then put my arm around her shoulders.

***

We cross the park and crawl under the bridge, out of the cold wind. We sit with our backs to the concrete, our Halloween bags and Daisy's broken heels before us. We can't go home. Daisy's afraid because she never asked her sister about the shoes and somehow I've lost my house key and Frances will never answer the door tonight.

The railway tracks stretch out below us, silver arrows that point the only way out of here.

"Are you all right?" I ask, but Daisy says nothing. She shivers and can't stop, so I cover her with my veil. On her arms, Rusty's and my fingers have left red marks that will turn into bruises. She rubs her skin as if she could erase these fingerprints.

I pull up my knees and arrange my burqua like a tent. I slide closer to Daisy where it will be warmer. We curl together and eat tiny chocolate bars and share a bag of chips that's nothing but crumbs.

But the Halloween wind finds us anyway. It doesn't care what we look like. Doesn't care what we wear. It chills our bones.

Michael Kenyon

Prison Life

I've been shot, thrown
off a plane, I've jumped
out a building, I had nothing
to lose. I liked the basement suite
because it was cool
in summer and the girl in the next

building never drew her blinds.
I wasn't looking, but she was
spackle and I was hot as hell. She
was a heartbeat away, across
the narrow path. I couldn't leave
myself alone in the dark. I forgot
the stove's spiral elements burning

red. She liked the single candle.
outside, jaws waited for the moon,
and when it rose full I crept
out my window, through hers.

Months later, in the courtroom,
after she said what she said
had really happened, I realized
the itch had been mine alone.

Two years. I am not frantic
for escape or belonging. We
made contact; we transformed. People turn
into teachers. Do this, they say, pick a job,
wake up, go to sleep. Fear's amazing,
life's amazing. Two years is nothing.

Dan Carpenter

Fortune

Stevie swivelled away from the pay window to turn down his box and swivelled back to flip the toggle switch activating the PA system. He did it with an upward flourish, finishing with his thumb pointing backward over his shoulder. Biting his lip, tapping his heels against the footrest of the stool, he watched the big golden woman fumble with the nozzle and stick it into her car. Brand new Park Avenue. Ignorant bitch.

"You got to pay in advance, ma'am."

One o'clock in the morning, what's she expect?

"Shit. I got it right here. See?"

She held up a credit card and turned away, paying him back for his disrespect. Her amplified voice filled his bulletproof, fluorescent cage like the thoughts of God. Five hours to go, and he needs this.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't give nobody no gas after ten o'clock without they pay me first."

The lady dropped her card to her side and stood there a long moment. She wore a glossy gold trench coat and a white headband with a jewel of some kind in the front. He had seen this a thousand times. She would tell him he could keep his fucking gas, and would drive off scraping and bouncing like a damn holdup man; or she would tell herself she needed gas and he was just doing his job and she would walk over and fling the credit card into the sliding tray. It made absolutely no difference to Stevie. Stevie had a rap CD waiting for him that kicked all kinds of ass, and a telephone still warm from Cherise, and no problems, none, tonight.

The lady approached, swooping in her open shiny coat, like a queen roused from her chambers for some piddling emergency. He was going to grin at her through the glass, thought better of it, got busy rearranging the cigarettes in the racks over his head. She snapped the credit card into the tray and swooped back, already recovered from the blow to her dignity. Stevie pushed the lit green button to start pump Number Two, and swivelled back to turn up his Tupac Shakur. He smiled as the furious bragging pounded into his little bunker with its hoard of hanging potato chips, dented pop machines, dead coffee, strategically stacked cigarettes, soaked and sagging cases of motor oil, and gleaming rolls of lottery tickets.

And money. Yes, he funnelled it into the old safe in the corner, which was painted light blue to match the scarred woodwork and the tin ceiling

and about everything else permanent and not transparent under the only working cold white tube of light. He put the money in the safe like the sign told would-be robbers he did. He just didn't do it till the end of the shift, after he had amassed it and counted it and caressed it and talked to it and bought a headful of precious goods with it and warmed it in the cash register drawer that opened like a fresh freaky woman over his lap. He had the truth, he had thousands of dollars on a good night, Stevie did, and he had a carving knife from his mother's kitchen hidden in the wall just to the right of the cash drawer, just in case what he knew or what he should have known got the wrong somebody inside that locked door.

The lady pumped three dollars' worth—less than half the prominently posted minimum for credit cards. Stevie decided he would rather fight with old fart Fennell about it in the morning than with her right now. He scrawled a monstrous "3" on the charge slip, put an "X" on the signature line just to see if it pissed her off, and shoved it out the pay drawer. She came to the window and did her business without looking up, but she crossed him by ordering the $10 Lotto Special, meaning he had to pull back and throw away the slip, write up a new one, and hold his tongue. As the lady signed the new slip, Stevie looked over her shoulder and saw a black Camaro with its lights off parked up the street, two heads inside silhouetted by the street lamp.

He always thought of the gasoline at times like this. He worried about the strength of the door bolt, sure, and whether the glass could take a ball bat and whether somebody might just ram a car right into his bastion and his belly. He couldn't call the cops every time he had a reason to get scared; their response, now slow, would turn to none. He felt cold, alone in the universe, and it wasn't the breaking in, the real danger, that filled his mind, but the fact of sitting atop thousands of gallons of explosive. It was a vision of hell greater than the terror he'd seen on earth. He had dived under the counter a few times and huddled against the oil cases, knees in his arms, while some asshole with a gun threatened to shoot the windows out because he wouldn't slide money or tickets out the cash drawer or let the motherfucker in to help himself. Sometimes the dumbass actually would shoot, leaving precise quarter-size arrangements of concentric circles that Fennell kept there as evidence of his cheapness and of the effectiveness of the shield. Maybe the message got through to a lot of people; Stevie only got attacked maybe every six months, never breached. "If anybody does get in and gets away with anything in here," Fennell once told him, "I'll know damn well it's friends of yours, nigger."

The Buick sailed off, shimmering in the white light. The Camaro's headlights flared.

Lazily, the low-slung muscle car covered the half-block distance, turned in and came to rest at pump Number Two. The men who got out looked

like ex-high school football teammates, halfback and nose tackle, the driver tall and thick-chested in a black T-shirt with a gold necklace, the passenger round as a Buddha and draped in a yellow MICHIGAN basketball uniform whose voluminous trunks flapped below his knees.

The driver strode up to the window, watching Stevie, while the other guy scuffed in untied sneakers toward the side of the building. Stevie watched till he was out of sight, then swivelled to greet the driver, who dropped a couple of wadded bills into the drawer and stayed put.

"Steven, my man!" The voice was muffled by the glass, but bright, cheerful.

"What's up, Cheezit."

"Ain't nothin', Stevie. You still workin' all night up here in this shack, man?"

"That's way it looks, Cheezit. Say, Cheezit?"

Stevie beckoned him to move closer to the window, where they could hear better through the slot.

"Yeah, man."

Cheezit was smiling hugely. Stevie smiled back. He was scared but would not be stupid.

"What's that chubby ol' boy doin' up behind my gas station, man?"

"Say what? You mean Walter, man? Walter ain't behind your gas station, is he, Stevie?"

"The only place I can't see out these windows is back in the back. Your boy need to get his big ass back from behind there."

"Aw, he ain't doin' nothin' back there, Stevie. He probably just peein'."

"We got restrooms on the side, he need to pee."

"You worry too much, man. Walter! Let's go, man."

Walter emerged from the opposite side of the building from where he'd dropped from Stevie's view. He smiled at Stevie and came shoulder to shoulder with Cheezit.

"Say, Stevie," Cheezit said. "I thought you knew Walter, man. Why don't you come on out and get introduced."

Stevie had made his point. He loosened up with a joke. "Wish I could, man. Old man got the place wired. Blow sky high if you open the door."

Cheezit laughed and looked steadily at Stevie. He had backed away a step to survey the smudged glass cage and the glass door with its battered metal frame. His voice became remote.

"Bet you come out if there was some pussy here waitin', dynamite or no dynamite. You do that, wouldn't you, Stevie?"

"Well," Stevie said, picking his tone, hoping for the right key to end the dance, "ain't seen no pussy yet worth gettin' killed over."

Cheezit came closer, still smiling. His neck, as it spread from his broad jaw to his shoulders, reminded Stevie of stylized drawings of horses. "I bet

you ain't. But you ain't seen much of any kind, have you, bro?"

Stevie glared at him, then dropped his eyes and exhaled wearily. "You want gas?" he said into the tray.

Cheezit drew even closer. "Uh, naw, man. I don't want no gas. Gimme couple them scratch-offs, man."

Stevie smoothed the bills, rang up the purchase, slipped the money into the drawer and quickly closed it. He peeled off two of the cheap instant lottery tickets and handed them to Cheezit, who watched the whole process as avidly as a child. Cheezit scraped a coin across the cards and added them to the litter of instant losers at his feet.

"Say, how much y'all take in on this lottery shit, man?"

"Don't know, man. I pretty much stick it in that safe right there soon as I get it."

"You stick it in the safe, you say?"

"Yeah, old man want the money right in the safe where can't nobody get it, except him."

Cheezit was glancing rapidly from Stevie to the cash drawer and back. "Look like some of it go right in there. Maybe you plannin' on goin' in the gas station business, Stevie?"

Stevie grinned and threw his arms wide. "Ain't no future in that, man."

Cheezit rapped his knuckle against the glass, then laid his open hand on it and pushed himself away toward his car. It was a gesture that said "See you later" in both senses. The hefty fellow Walter scuffed after him, and the Camaro eased away.

Finally, Stevie turned back to turn up his Tupac. His trembling hand was above the sound box when the phone rang.

"Yeah."

"Hi."

The voice seemed like that of a thirteen-year-old meeting a movie star. Stevie never knew Cherise to sound different, even when she was angry, even when she was marching him around like she was his mother.

"What you doin', callin' at half past one in the morning?"

"You asked me to call you back soon as I could. This is soon as I could. You got somebody else you expectin'?"

"You supposed to be in bed, girl."

"I am in bed, mister. I ain't stayin' up to call you."

"You in bed? Not all by yourself, now."

He twisted on the stool, felt the hardness flow into him, felt himself arcing under the counter like a turret gun in grime-shiny work pants, wasting the Cheezits and Walters and rude bitches and smartass cops and raunchy old Mr. Fennell who probably had a rule against getting it up on duty. Oh, Cherise.

"You shut your mouth, boy. You know who I ain't in bed with, don't

you?"

"Hey, mama, what you think I'm talkin' about? I thought maybe one of your little kids in there with you."

He grinned as he said it. The point was to show her how quick he could spar—dirty jab to innocent backpedal. But Cherise did have a little brother and sister, and it seemed they were always a group—Cherise with Marcel on her hip, Cherise clipping colourful plastic barrettes into LaTasha's hair. Stevie knew her mother. Yvette was loud and sour and hated Stevie. He was more interested in what Cherise thought of Stevie. He saw her on the street more than he saw her at her house, and he knew those kids nearly as well as he knew Cherise.

"What you mean, talkin' about kids?" Cherise jabbed back. "You be nosin' into my life is what you be doin'."

"Damn, woman, I ain't nosin' into nobody's life. Who called who on this telephone anyway?"

"Maybe I got a wrong number. Excuse me. Goodbye."

"Hold on now, dammit. You can't come interruptin' my hard work and then hang up on me just like that. I know you got something important to say."

"You asked me to call you when I could get on this phone, and that's what I'm doin'."

"Damn. She woofin' you tonight. She high or somethin'?"

"She—well—she ain't your problem."

"How about you, Cherise? You be my problem?"

"I ain't nobody's problem, and I will not be. What you want from me, Stevie?"

"I want to talk on the telephone with you, and I'm doin' that. Did I ever tell you how fine your voice is? You could be one of them late night radio chicks, the ones that do the jazz. Music to lay up by with someone you love."

He revelled in it, the talk and the little island of privacy behind the counter in his fishbowl. He could have Cherise in his right hand and himself in his left and the drawerful of money in between, and nothing short of a car slamming against the shack or Fennell with his key on a surprise visit would expose him. The slight risk was a lightning flash over his tiny sea kingdom of desire, the perfect touch. He was never so alone with Cherise, not even when she was present. Even if he wound up in bed with her some day, it might not be as intimate and electric and strong and sweet as this.

"What you know about music to lay up by?" she said. "You in that dump all night with nobody but the roaches."

"I know about a lot of things, and I mean to have all of 'em. Remember where you heard that, girl."

"You ain't the only one wants something and you ain't the only one knows how to get it."

"Cherise, you know I never doubt you. When you gonna go out with me again? You and me had a good time last time. Tell me different."

"It was OK."

"You didn't think much of my ride, did you?"

"I don't care about nobody's ride. I just ain't got time to go out."

"With me, you mean."

"With nobody, I mean."

"You got time to go out with Andrae."

"What you know about Andrae?"

"I know I seen you with him, him and his little B, M, Double, You. Jive ass."

"Who you callin' a jive ass?"

"Motherfuckin' dope dealer is what I ought to call him. Where you think he gets that money, sister? He a doctor or somethin'?"

"Why you askin' me? I'll get off the phone so you can call Andrae and ask him."

"Same number as this? He squeezin' your ass right now?"

The phone clicked off. "Shit!" Stevie screamed. "Shit, shit, shit!"

He banged the receiver down, twisted away from the window on his stool and bent double. "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

When he turned back toward the window, a face was there. He jumped like someone shot in the chest. It was a customer, who stuffed two crumpled ones in the drawer Stevie pushed out to him. Young guy, tall and thin and expressionless, with no apparent awareness of the open cash register and its treasure. Stevie was relieved his pants had gone slack. He could only wonder what the kid had seen and heard standing there. He flipped on the intercom after the customer walked back to the pump and barked "Use Number Two" completely unnecessarily. He was debating whether to call Cherise's haunted house when the phone rang.

"Yeah."

"You gonna signify and loud-talk me some more, or you gonna act decent?"

"I'm sorry, baby."

"Don't you 'baby' me, I'll hang up on you for good."

"Goddam. Why you want to go around with Andrae. He nothin' but trouble."

"Somebody got money, you say they trouble."

"Andrae think he got money. On a weekend like this close to the end of the month, I got five thousand dollars right here in this drawer."

"And it ain't yours."

"It's mine to take care of. And the man knows I'll take care of it. And

that's the way some day I'll get me some. And I won't be watchin' my back for cops or tellin' lies to get my lady to go with me."

"Don't nobody lie to me, and I go where I want to go."

"That's right. Don't nobody run Cherise. Don't nobody run Bro Stevie neither. You and me, we alright."

Her little girl's voice, piping even in rage, became smaller now, and more potent. "Maybe we are, Stevie."

The sudden soft tone caught him up short. He smiled and leaned back. He waved to the skinny guy pumping gas and then waved both arms violently to keep the stool from tipping over backwards. He held on to the receiver like a baton in a footrace, but the console fell to the floor, cracking open at a corner. Fennell. Shit. Another morning of explaining.

Stevie squatted on the floor next to the broken phone.

"Sorry," he said. "Phone fell."

"Sounded like somebody got shot. You gonna get shot workin' there all night, Stevie."

"I got a better chance gettin' shot out on them streets, doin' what some folks we know been doin' to make they money just a little faster."

"Preach, Stevie. Tell it."

"I ain't preachin'. I'm just maintainin'."

"We all maintainin'."

"We all don't be playin' no fool for somebody looks like he got some slick way to get over."

"Stevie, you give me such an attitude with your bullshit."

"You give me an attitude just by being so fine and being such a hard sister. Come on, see me, girl."

"I'll see you, Stevie."

"When?"

"It'll be a surprise."

***

Stevie was sweeping the floor, stutter-stepping to a seriously dialed-up jam on his box, dreaming of Cherise and kids, when her raggedy Ford Escort slid up to the door. Having parked with the driver's side away from the building, Cherise got out and walked slowly around the car, her head bowed. When she reached the door she looked up, smiled, and touched the glass with the fingertips of her right hand. Her eyes, almond-shaped and nearly too large for her delicate wedge face, opened to him as if he'd never really seen them before. Stevie turned down the music and moved to the door with his hands clenched at his sides.

"Girl, dammit, what you doin' here?" He laughed as he shouted through the barrier, and discovered he was nervous.

"Here to see you, like I said I would," came the muffled reply. "You gonna open this door?"

"Shit, you know I can't let nobody in here."

"Well, you told me you done messed with the money. You can't do somethin' else your bad old boss told you not to do?"

"Cherise, you don't need to be out runnin' around at no two o'clock in the mornin'. You need to be home."

"I'm a grown woman, Stevie. And I'm about through tryin' to talk to a fool who locks a door in my face."

Stevie gazed at her, at her sharp thrust chin and her immense cat eyes, at her narrow adolescent figure, defenseless in cut-off jeans and a halter top. He turned the key and pulled open the door, intending to step outside. She shoved him inside and threw her arms around his neck.

"I want you, Stevie."

"Cherise..."

"Ain't you even gonna kiss me, Stevie?"

"I kiss you all night. But you crazy."

He felt the swelling in his groin, but tenderness wasn't there this time. She was in his lair, and his lair was no longer his. She engulfed his mouth with her teeth bared, her long fingernails plying his hair. She smelled of cinnamon and sweet smoke.

"Goddam," he gasped. He watched their reflection in the window as he cupped her butt in his hands. He pinched madly at the halter, unlatching one stay, ripping away the other, baring one chocolate nipple before she snatched the garment up.

"No, baby," she hissed. "Not out here."

He released her, turned her by the shoulders, and let her tow him to the door against the back wall which led to a storeroom. The room was piled with cases of oil and soft drinks and cardboard boxes of potato chips and candy bars and beef jerky, nearly concealing a sink and toilet in the corner. He stepped around her and frantically set to stacking in order to clear out one layer of cardboard containers where they could lie. His heart felt like a snare drum. His hands shook. He thought about Fennell and a week's pay's worth of crushed snacks. He wished there was a way he could drive the cost of this moment still higher, just to make sure he deserved it. "Cherise," he whispered, virtually to himself. Cherise stood and watched, her arms wrapped around her torn top.

Stevie was on his haunches, tossing boxes, when he heard the tiny bell that meant the cash register was being opened. He rose and spun and started toward the door, but the sight of Cherise stopped him. He looked at her, at her hanging head and her thin crossed hands, and he knew.

Stevie kept his gaze on Cherise as he backed the couple of steps to the storeroom door. When he turned to look, Andrae was calmly pulling currency from the drawer and stuffing it into the front pocket of his jeans. His tight T-shirt made him appear larger than Stevie remembered. Andrae

looked up without reaction—Stevie hated those fucking green eyes.

"What the fuck you think you're doin'?" Stevie said.

"Hey, Stevie," Andrae replied, smiling slightly.

Stevie felt Cherise's presence behind him. He thought about his knife, inches from Andrae's busy hands and just out of his sight on the other side of the cash drawer.

"You and this little bitch just picked the wrong hustle," Stevie shouted. "You gonna put that goddam money back and get your black ass out of here."

"Stevie," Cherise pleaded.

Andrae said "Shut up" before Stevie could. "You full of shit," Andrae said to her as if only they two were in the room. "Ain't but about two thousand dollars in here. But that's all right."

He turned back to Stevie, looking sober, like a lecturer, a father.

"I'm cool with you being pissed off, Stevie. I wanted you in on this, man. I just figured, you know, you wouldn't go along with it unless I sort of set it in motion, see what I'm sayin'?"

"Fuck you, Andrae. Just fuck you." Stevie edged past him to where the knife was within reach. Andrae had no weapon as far as Stevie could tell.

"Hey, man, I understand how you feel," Andrae said. "Lookit, you got a good couple large here I'll split with you right down the goddam middle. Just tell the man you got robbed, man."

"Can't nobody rob me I don't let 'em in first, asshole. Even if I wanted to be partners with you, whom I don't, I can't explain any robbery."

Andrae nodded toward Cherise. "Sure you can. Tell him the truth, brother. This fine bitch come and offered to give it up, and you lost your head and left the door unlocked. Could have been anybody slipped in and ripped you off while you was gettin' it on. You never seen who done it. So he fires you. You need this shit job?"

Stevie clutched the knife. He was within arm's length of Andrae. He turned toward Cherise, who was staring at Andrae with the malice of the betrayed.

"You will be my witness, won't you?"

She turned to him, her lips moving silently, her large eyes lustrous with tears.

"It is the truth, ain't it? Bitch was ready to give it up."

She shook, made fists at her sides.

"Bitch puttin' out—for somebody. For a little money. Bitch in heat for some money."

She saw his hand rise with the butcher knife a half-second before Andrae did. "No, Stevie!" she cried.

The blade had penetrated Andrae's neck by the time his right hand caught Stevie's right wrist. Andrae grunted as if the inch-deep wound were

a rabbit punch. Astonishingly strong, he forced Stevie's arm upward, pulling the still-held knife from his flesh. A wire-thin stream of blood made a three-foot-long arc into the room. Cherise screamed.

"You gonna die, punk!" Andrae growled. He slammed the knife hand onto the counter, sending the weapon clattering to the floor. Stevie thought Andrae would pick it up and turn it on him, but he ignored it and twisted Stevie's arm behind his back and shoved him against the side window. The pain was out of hell. The flow of Andrae's blood was faintly audible, like the sizzle of distant traffic.

"I'll fuckin' kill you, Stevie! You motherfucker! I'll kill you!"

Stevie dropped to his knees, moaning.

Still holding his wrist, Andrae seized Stevie's head in his left hand and banged it against the impregnable glass, once, twice, thrice.

"Fuckin'!"

"Kill!"

"You!"

Stevie watched the window smear with his own blood. The pain seared his brain with the first blows and seemed to spend itself as they kept coming. Andrae's snarls and shrieks faded in his ears till they sounded as if they were coming from outside. Then he heard a gabble of male voices, and vaguely glimpsed a tangle of arms and legs. And then Andrae was gone from him.

Stevie turned, hunched against the window like a fetus. He saw Andrae sprawled between someone's blunt-toed work shoes. Andrae's empty green eyes studied the white ceiling light. Stevie's gaze moved upward. Cheezit was smiling.

"Ste-ven, Ste-ven, Ste-ven. I think you done messed up this time, my man. Let that pussy put you right on your back. Yes, sir. I can't say I'm surprised. Me and Walter wouldn't been sittin' up the street all these nights waitin' if this be a surprise, somebody gettin' in your little crib here."

Stevie wiped blood from his eyes with his sleeve and found Walter. Walter had Cherise's fragile neck in the crook of his ham-hock arm. He, too, was smiling.

Cheezit knelt and briskly went through Andrae's pockets, slipping the bills into his own baggy pants. The butt of a .44 Magnum protruded from his waistband. He obviously had not needed more than his knobby arms to take out Andrae, whose still head was surrounded by blood. Stevie prayed for a cop, a customer; customers came a half hour apart this time of night, but Cheezit was not dawdling.

"Stevie, honey," Cheezit said. "I want you to do whatever you gotta do. Don't have to take none of my advice. But you got money missing and a dead dude you stabbed here on your floor. You also got two dudes out here that will wait for you every night if you fuck up and decide to run your

mouth. If I was you, I'd say I let some dudes in I thought were okay and they turned around and tried to rip me off. And one of 'em—the one I didn't get a good look at—got away with some money but I was a brave man, and look here."

Headlights. An ancient white van heaved toward the far pumps. Cheezit rose.

"You think about it, Steven my boy. And you think about it too, bitch. Let's go, man."

Walter let Cherise drop like a rag at the command. He and Cheezit vanished in the darkness behind the building. The squeal of the Camaro's tires was muted to a hyena's mockery on the periphery of a campsite.

Stevie tried to raise himself on his good arm. One of his eyes was caked closed. Cherise whimpered on the floor. The ends of her hair were wet with Andrae's spreading blood.

The customer was at the window—an old man in green coveralls with dense glasses that magnified his filmy eyes. He gaped at the human pile on the floor. "They's been an accident here," Stevie yelled up to him. "They's been a big mistake. Ain't that right, Cherise? Big as hell. Girl?"

Susan Elmslie

Architectural Chairs

for Marion Quednau

It could be said that when we design a chair, we make a society and city in miniature. Certainly this has never been more true than in this century [...]. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Miesian city is implicit in the 'Mies' chair.

—Peter Smithson, British Architect

Barcelona Lounge Chair
(designer: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1929)

Always smug in the pages of *Architectural Digest.* In pairs,
in uniform black and chrome,
squaring off with the pale sofa.
Ahem.
They police the living room,
holding out their open briefcases.
Pay up:
ornament is a crime.
Do we need to spell it out for you?
You've become sloppy and you're too fat.
Lose a few pounds
as well as those cushions. Chintz!
Cowhide or fur is acceptable, but barely.
And buttons must be covered
in the same material and used sparingly.
You should feel them. None of this princess and pea
shit. Everything is overstuffed,
I'm queasy—You queasy?
Turn down the heat in here, you could fry
an egg on that chandelier. And what, precisely,
is the function of this bric-a-brac?

The sofa reaches for its wallet,
the side chair searches through the roll-top desk
for its papers.

OK

pedigreed Windsor, you can stay. Though old
and flawed by unnecessary curves,
some Windsors live in Mies's own house.

A murder of crows, an unkindness of ravens.
I call a showroom of these glossy black birds
a Gestapo of Barcelonas. Perhaps that's not fair;
I love this chair. Who doesn't
love it like discipline and spring
cleaning—the kind of toil that's hard
until you are done
and then step back. Yes,
just as it should be. Perfection.

Lady Armchair, 1951
(designer: Marco Zanuso)

Half lounge chair, half
tank; in moss-coloured velvet and stilletos
she manoeuvres through the doorway
to your den or home studio
and the occupation begins. That performance
that somehow ended up on the cutting-room floor.
Camera, action! Close up:
she drags on a cigarette, removes a bracelet,
uncrosses, re-crosses her gleaming legs,
a shoe dangling from the toes of her polished foot
stirring the air like a dynamo.
Cut.
In another scene
she'll carry her tumbler in one hand and those shoes
in the other, traipse through the garden
to your patio door, needing
ice. Many times
you'll rehearse the same lines.
She's got ideas, never mind
armrests like the flanks of an Italian starlet
fed on ricotta, olive oil, melon.
Shorn and love-sleek, she's ripe ripe ripe.
Why should we not be comfortable, darling?
It's so boring here.
Lifetimes after the casting couch, she is
the director's wife, the life of the party.
A martini followed by a long massage?
A little pumice for the soul, you dirty, dirty.
Come to Mama.
Whoever sinks into me
is swallowed whole
and aches to be forgotten.

Patrick Sampler

Kazakhstan

February 27

Windshield wipers.
Nostalgia for spring.
South of the Fraser River on a rural road.
A purée of dead leaves on the paved shoulder.
A yellow slug crossing my path.

I was going fast, and so was the slug. I wanted to avoid hitting it with my tires, but feared it was on a collision course with its own mortality. As the moment of interception rapidly approached, the slug turned its optic tentacles in my direction. Was it mesmerized by the headlamps of my car?

I wondered about slugs. How do their circulatory systems work? Do they have hearts? Do they thrive in rain or search for cover? Driving over the slug, I wondered whether it had been hit. I wondered if it had indeed been a slug. Perhaps, in my exhaustion, I had confused it with a human being.

I stopped my car and backed up slowly, looking for a dead human. Although I was certain where the hypothetical incident had occurred, I hesitated to step out and inspect the ditches. For some reason I felt that, if I were to step out of the car, I would be walking into a trap. But what kind of trap? An army of slugs? Legalistic treachery to abuse my sense of guilt? In any case, I decided to stay in the car and keep driving in circles, hoping to see something through the windows. I did this for about an hour.

There was severe tension in my stomach and neck. My mouth went dry. A movie screen in my mind kept playing an image of the slug crossing my path. I had a sense of wrongdoing racing back and forth across a certain line of synapses in my brain—or I had a localized headache. I wondered if I should phone the police. There is a platitude: things go more smoothly when one uses the proper channels.

In the end I decided it would be best to visit my lady-friend. She would be able to give me counsel, I thought. But her dwelling was on the other side of the Fraser River, and I found myself oppressed by an irrational fear of crossing it. Nevertheless, I was determined to see her, and so devised a plan of action: instead of crossing the river from the south, I would approach it from the north, over the North Pole, via Kazakhstan.

February 28

Today I went to the bank and withdrew all my savings to make the journey, prepared to do anything to see my only one. I visited the Chinese consulate to get a visa. After that I went to the Vancouver International Airport and bought a ticket to Beijing.

While waiting to board my flight, I witnessed the most exquisite woman. She sat with three male suitors and continuously applied an appealing shade of lipstick while gazing at her lips in a hand mirror. To me, she was faultlessly beautiful, and I felt a strong desire to say the following sentences to her: "Could you please show me your cunt? I want to see you put lipstick on your cunt and stare at it in a hand mirror." I didn't do this, however.

The only impulsive behaviour I engaged in was to leave my carry-on luggage in the airport's food-fair. This delayed my flight for about half an hour. Airport security workers came aboard my plane and escorted me off. They asked why I had neglected my luggage. I told them I had felt a spontaneous urge to travel lightly, and decided it was unnecessary to carry so much. They didn't believe me, and asked me to leave the airport. Consequently, I missed my flight. I went to the Port of Vancouver and found a berth on a freight ship leaving for Yokohama, Japan.

March 6

It takes a long time to cross the Pacific Ocean. I haven't written in my diary for a while because not much has happened on this journey so far. I was disturbed when the sailors tried to throw some stowaways overboard. I implored the sailors to spare these people's lives. It worked, and now they are staying with me. Not the sailors, that is. (I tend to have problems with unclear references.) Another notable event was the disappearance of my luggage one evening. The next morning, I found it on the deck of the ship, completely soaked with rainwater. All that went missing was my watch.

How strange.

March 15

Now I am in Yokohama. Last night something significant happened: Inadvertently, I attended the birthday of my four-year-old son. After disembarking from the ship, I found a restaurant in Yokohama's Chinatown. It looked busy, as if a private party was being held. Despite my supposed intrusion, a waitress insisted I would be welcome to a table and would not inconvenience the other guests. So I took a seat.

One of the guests approached. She advised me to leave before I was noticed by the mother of the boy whose party it was. I looked to see who the mother might be. It was Yoshiko, with whom I had spent a few evenings in the past.

Before I had time to consider leaving—in fact, I had no intention of leaving, as I had no reason to believe Yoshiko would be offended by my presence—she approached, guiding the four-year-old boy to my side.

"This is your father," she announced to the boy.

"Is this my son?" I replied. "How can this be so?"

"When we parted, I restrained myself from telling you I was pregnant. I was so in love with your plans that I couldn't dare distract you from them."

At this point, a woman—who I assumed to be a relative of Yoshiko's—approached with a baby in her arms.

"This is your other child," said Yoshiko.

"But how can this be so? I—"

In a stage whisper, my former lady-friend interrupted me with the following command: "Be quiet!"

The relative retreated, leaving us in privacy.

"It has been almost five years since we last saw one another," I said. "I don't understand what's going on."

"These are our children," replied Yoshiko, "and I am stoically resigned to bring them up by myself, and accept your abdication of responsibility."

"Very well," I answered. "This 'stoic resignation' seems to suit you, somehow. Perhaps that's why I was attracted to you in the first place. There was something mysterious and hurt about you. So this suits you quite nicely."

"Yes, and your current attitude seems right for you, too. You always aspired to be a man tormented by the disparity between his impulses and his desire to transcend them. Can't you see that we were made for one another? Nevertheless, *genjou iji*—things will remain just as they are now."

Yoshiko walked her son back to his party.

March 18

Today I am in Beijing. I like it here. The food is good and the atmosphere festive. Occasionally I have questioned what this journey is really about. Nevertheless, I do feel the conviction of my need to be with *her*, on the other side of the river.

The yellow slug torments me day and night. In my mind, I play the same film over and over again: a pair of optic tentacles gazing plaintively into my headlamps. Did the slug survive? Indeed, was it a slug?

April 10

It feels like such a long time since the last journal entry. My compulsion to pass through Kazakhstan en route to the north bank of the Fraser River necessitated I make the journey as expeditiously as possible. I am mindful that an excursion that might have taken merely fifteen minutes has now stretched beyond a month. Nevertheless, this long duration has afforded me little time for journal writing. I have been busy with the logistical necessities of travel. Due to inadequacies of planning, and of my own language abilities, certain sections of the journey have taken days when they might have taken hours. Not to mention the drinking parties and other opportunities I have taken to accept the hospitality of those along my route.

I have come to Kazakhstan, and now am about to leave. As I write this, I am waiting at a train station for a train that will transport me across the border to Russia. I have merely thirty minutes to spare—not enough time to relate the various experiences I have had. Therefore, I will save some labour by inserting here a copy of the letter I wrote to my lady-friend. It provides the main details of the past month.

Dear X:

It is the time when fresh grass sprouts that I write you this letter from Kazakhstan. I trust that you are doing well recently. I apologize for neglecting to write for such a long time.

Since my last letter, I have arrived in Kazakhstan, the midway point toward the object of my journey, which is you. In no way do I wish to diminish the pacific effect you have on my life, yet must declare I encountered something close to paradise. My departure was hastened as much by my intense desire to be near you, as by the demise of the place to which I refer.

Hitchhiking across the steppe of northern Kazakhstan, I sought refuge at what I thought to be an inn, but which, in fact, was a cooperative farm, a hold-out from the communist era. It seemed like a mirage. I know you have little interest in politics, so I relate this story to you only in order to expose the depths of my soul.

On the day I met Andrei Ivanovich, a former director of Collective Farm No. 43 in Kazakh S.S.R., he provided me with a room at the cooperative farm to which I referred and proceeded to acquaint me with the farm. A frayed Soviet flag blew atop its mast at the main entrance. Members of the cooperative evidently had high morale, and produced a variety of agricultural products. They were hindered only by the disparity between concrete labour and the hegemony of abstract money in the new capitalist regime. Therefore, their labour was not convertible in a way that allowed them to

fairly acquire some of the goods they could not themselves produce. Nevertheless, things by and large worked well, and I myself spent a few blissful weeks working the soil with my own hands.

All was lost, however, when the United States of America decided to scapegoat Comrade Ivanovich as the enemy of that country. Only hours before a squadron of F-15s (which I must say are not very aesthetically pleasing, as far as aircraft are concerned) obliterated the farm with incendiary devices containing D.U. (Depleted Uranium, which guarantees that survivors' babies will be stricken with the most severe birth defects), Comrade Ivanovich, with my safety in mind, made me leave the farm. I will never forget what he said to me before my departure, and I will relate it to you exactly as it was said:

"Soon the F-15s will descend on our farm, utterly destroying it. The U.S.A. will declare that I was a terrorist, and blame me for blowing up some building or other, which they themselves blew up, care of the CIA. They will publish the photo of me as found on my driver's license or passport, both of which are really terrible. They will do this despite the large number of sympathetic photos taken of me playing with my children, or in the company of my wife. In fact, I am quite photogenic. And this, comrade, will be the greatest insult."

And so, with sadness, I left the farm, and now am on my way to you. Now, more than ever, I feel the need to be with you, and will hasten my journey to make sure this happens as soon as possible. I trust you are in good health, and send you my kindest wishes. Take good care of yourself.

Love, Y

April 18

In my last journal entry, I neglected to mention a thought I had while at the collective farm. One evening, while wandering out onto the steppe, the setting sun emanated a mysterious golden light that altered the colour of everything. I sat down, listened to the wind blowing through the grass, and began to ponder.

I started thinking of my only one. It had been approximately six weeks since I departed on my journey to the other side of the Fraser River, and merely three months since we first met. Reuniting with her would be almost like a blind date, I thought. Then I considered my various experiences comparing expectations with reality—the times I had waited at the ticket gates of train stations, waiting for women to arrive, wondering how they would compare with my prior impressions.

I recall a woman whose eyes enchanted me from a photo taken at a party, but whose face was too wide and too white. (Ultimately this was a

deterrent, despite the excitement I felt as my hand brushed her hip as we walked—it was summer and she wore a dress.) There was also the alcoholic topless dancer. The woman who turned me on with what I thought was confidence (really just pathology). The woman whose face was strikingly unique, yet just millimetres on the wrong side of the fine line between beautiful and ugly. The woman with luxuriant lips, and a necklace dangling suggestively over the bare line of her collarbone. (Meeting her only once created physical tension so intense, it could find only autoerotic release. If only she had agreed to meet me a second time, I might have been able to get bored of her looks.) The angry woman whose indecision infatuated me. (Did she have a conscience? She cried, realizing she couldn't return my feelings. Her excuse was that my eyes didn't slant the right way, and my skin wasn't the right colour.) The woman who showed me kindness I couldn't return and I regretted it for seven years. The woman who slept with me because she thought I needed it. (She expressed her wish that I get a real girlfriend so that she wouldn't have to cheat on her fiancé.) The woman who was so grotesquely eager I didn't want to meet her again. The woman who impressed me in so many ways, yet betrayed her naïveté through bad musical taste. And many other women I had met.

I wondered how I would see my only one after such a long interval. Yet I was determined this journey would be worthwhile. This time I had to make it work. Someone would be good enough for me.

April 21

Finally, I have arrived in Nordvik. I neglected to mention this destination in my last journal entry. After reaching Khatanga, I hitched a long, bumpy ride in a Yus minibus. I was told I could take a ferry to Canada from Nordvik. How this is to be achieved seems beyond belief to me. I do recall Comrade Ivanovich telling me that, in the days of the Soviet Union, technology was invented to control the weather. Apparently, the ferry I will take makes use of such technology. It changes local weather conditions to melt itself a trail through the ice pack. I am both looking forward to and fearful of the mystical aesthetic of that experience.

The Arctic has qualities possessed by no other location on this planet. It can induce abnormal psychic experiences. I have been told some Arctic travellers report having seen their own double running away in the far distance. Some have exhausted themselves in pursuit. I have been warned, that if I have such an experience, I should ignore it.

April 23

There was no time to write. Now I am on the ferry, crossing over the North

Pole. Between now and my last journal entry, there is not much to report, aside from a bicycle trip to the ferry terminal. A smooth paved bicycle pathway led to a grassy hilltop above the shore. It ran parallel to, and sometimes intersected with, a railway line running to the same destination. The line ran through a number of canyon-like sections, and I had to be careful, for the locomotives were completely silent and undetectable until only metres away. But I arrived safely.

I have my own berth on this ferry, and gaze out the porthole at a vast, icy wasteland, mesmerized. But what of the slug that may or may not have crossed my path? No, I haven't forgotten about it—if it was, indeed, a slug.

While in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, I had time to do some research. In order to appease my conscience, I wanted to know if the behaviour of whatever had crossed my path that fateful day had been consistent with that of a slug. Also, I wanted to know more about slugs. So I located an English-language library and was lucky enough to find, of all things, a book on the physiology and behaviour of slugs.

I discovered that slugs are a member of the mollusc family, which also includes squid and octopi. Do such animals swim across the path of this ship? Never mind. I'm on a mission to be reunited with my only one. Was the slug not also on such a mission? I read that slugs are territorial, and prefer to return to a cosy den. Why, then, would a slug attempt to cross the road on which I drove my car? Would it not choose a lifestyle exclusive of crossing dangerous roads? Perhaps the theory that I ran over a human—not a slug—is more plausible. What, then, am I doing returning home? There are so many things I have experienced and dreamt on this journey. Was my initial instinct not to cross the river correct? Am I running headlong into a trap?

To trap and kill a slug, there are many techniques. One such technique is to take two boards and place them one on top of the other, separated by a few small stones. If the trap is left overnight, slugs will crawl between the boards. In the morning, the top board can be lifted off and replaced after removing the stones. Then one can stand on the top board, crushing the slugs to death. Am I not venturing into such a trap?

Now I run from my berth to the balustrade of the top deck. Again, my heart is racing and my mouth is dry. Again, I feel the same concern running back and forth along a certain line of synapses in my brain. I gaze out at the ocean, looking for solid ground. I run to the bow, to the stern, starboard, portside, looking for the same. The gap is too wide. Something to smash my body against. No—that's not really what I want. Is there some way I can turn this ship around?

Contributors

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Susan Elmslie lives in Montreal. Her work has appeared in anthologies and journals, most recently in: *The Malahat Review, www.Poetics.ca,* and *Room of One's Own.* She has poems forthcoming in *Queen's Quarterly* and *The Antigonish Review.*

warren heiti was born in sudbury.

Peggy Herring's short fiction has appeared in a variety of Canadian journals. Most recently, she placed third in *This Magazine*'s 2003 literary competition. She is currently writing a novel and divides her time between Victoria, B.C. and New Delhi, India.

Michael Kenyon is the author of four books of fiction and three books of poetry. His newest collection of poems, *The Sutler* (Brick Books), is forthcoming in 2005.

Jacqueline Kolosov has published poems in journals including *Smartish Pace, Poetry, The Malahat Review,* and *Prairie Schooner.* She is the author of

two chapbooks: *Danish Ocean* (Pudding House Press) and *Fabergé* (Finishing Line Press). Her young adult novel, *Grace from China*, is due out this spring. She teaches literature and creative writing at Texas Tech University.

EJ Levy is the editor of *Tasting Life Twice* (Avon, 1995), which won the Lambda Literary Award. Her short stories have recently appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and *North American Review*. One of her shorts was named a "Notable Story" in *The Best American Short Stories 2003*. She holds a Bachelor's degree in History from Yale College and completed a MFA at Ohio State University in 2002. She is currently Assistant Professor of creative writing at American University in Washington, D.C.

Laurenn McCubbin lives in East Bay, California. She is the illustrator and author of the award-winning *XXXLiveNudeGirls* and *XXXLNG:Pretty Like A Princess* (with Nikki Coffman), as well as Creative Director for *Kitchen Sink Magazine*. "Foreign" was part of the international SARS art project.

John Pass's last appearance in PRISM was in 36:3. His most recent book, *Water Stair* (Oolichan Books, 2000) was shortlisted for the Dorothy Livesay Prize and for the Governor General's Award. "Parallel Parking" is from a new collection, *Stumbling In The Bloom*.

Patrik Sampler has published nonfiction and poetry. Currently he resides in Japan, moonlighting as an industrial noise musician.

Andreas Schroeder is the author of seventeen books, including works of fiction, nonfiction, translation, and poetry. Currently a member of the faculty at UBC's Creative Writing program, in 1976, his memoir, *Shaking it Rough*, was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award. In 1986, his documentary novel, *Dustship Glory*, was shortlisted for the Sealbooks First Novel Award.

Russell Wangersky, who has been a volunteer firefighter for all his adult life, is a short story writer, newspaper columnist, and editor in Newfoundland/Labrador. His columns appear regularly in the *St. John's Telegram* and the *Corner Brook Western Star*, and have also been published in the *Calgary Herald*, the *Edmonton Journal*, the *Ottawa Citizen*, and the *National Post*. His magazine credits include articles in *BBC Wildlife Magazine* and *Canadian Geographic*. In 2002, he was a recipient of both the inaugural Dalton Camp Award and a National Newspaper Award for Editorial Writing.

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42:2

It's a funny thing: if you get close enough to someone who doesn't blink, someone who will never blink again, you will see your own face reflected back at you and distorted slightly in the gentle curve of the iris of their eye.

—Russell Wangersky, Page 15

Stephanie Bolster
Dan Carpenter
Jon Cone
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