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Contemporary Writing from Canada and around the World

PRISM international

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Jonny Diamond

The Day of Julia Miller's Death

Prologue

It was ten days until she'd planned to die, but Julia had made only half the arrangements. *The Hall:* Done, thanks to second cousin Elliot, a past-treasurer in good standing, despite the requisite improprieties. *The Invitations:* Sent a few days ago, minus the anxiety she and Bob had endured in the selection of guests for their wedding (she'd be dead; why worry about bruised egos). *The Musicians:* Theatrically non-committal, probably angling for more money. *The Caterer:* New, and perhaps a risk, but she wanted everything perfect and unique. *The Enactor:* Stress-free. He'd done her mother, her father, and her aunt Paige, and was highly favoured by the local council.

She worried, over these and other pre-death matters (Casey's entry applications, the price of real strawberries) as she sat waiting for Bob (now ex-Bob) in a strip mall "café," a place for which the quotation marks could never be too big. They'd tried, she and Bob, for sixteen years—but once Casey had made the adjustment to high school, divorce followed quickly. They'd both made half-hearted attempts at other relationships, but remained each other's first phone call from a sinking ship. Julia anticipated an argument, but her mind was made up.

–Hi Bob.

–Julia.

The decision had been made in the shower. She'd always loved water, in all its forms: lakes, puddles, rain, rivulets, eddies, leaks, tears, in a glass on a hot day, the bath, the shower (oh the shower!). But on that morning, inexplicably and for the first time, the shower appalled her, was a chore, a waste of time, insignificant. Leering. False. If she couldn't enjoy a shower, she couldn't go on. It felt like a source in her life had run dry, would soon begin to leak out from all things, begin to flow backwards, consume her. It was better to anticipate, she thought, better to leave on your own terms, without bitterness, anger. And if she did it before her next birthday, Casey's inheritance would yield a better percentage.

–It just makes sense, Bob. And I would love you to be there, it would mean a lot, and it would be good for Casey.

Bob said nothing; he sat there, quiet. Julia wasn't going to press; the appeal to Casey's well-being had perhaps been too much, but it was the truth.

–Okay. But for the record, I think you have a few good years in you. But okay, I'll go.

–Thanks Bob. The timing is right: it's the most beautiful part of fall, people's schedules are freeing up, I've got this great locale, it'll give Case time to recover for his winter trials. And with the way things are these days I'm just glad I get to make the decision myself, and plan it my way, just how I've always imagined it.

The two were silent. Bob recalled the day of his grandmother's death, before everything had become overwrought and commercial, before the greeting cards and photo albums, the scented embalmer's fluid, before the choreography and the protocol. He'd gotten drunk that night and narrowly escaped an ill-advised fling with a distant and older relation. Julia imagined a hall full of loved ones and admirers, tasteful music, interesting but edible food—celebratory solemnity among her nearest and dearest, mournful, but not indulgently so.

–Well, let's order.

–Yes.

Part I

The musicians fell through (it turned out they didn't even have their own threnodium, she would've had to rent it herself), but Julia was able to find a decent stand-in at the last minute, who would do all the standards, plus a few of her favourites. The weather was good; not wanting to leave the bright fall sky, Julia decided to greet her guests on the steps. Her aunt Cecil, who always cried at deaths (regardless of whose they were), was among the first to arrive. She was already on the verge of tears.

–Oh Julia, my dear Julia, so good to see you. This is my friend Roger. Cecil was Julia's youngest aunt, and every time she went to a family function she brought a new friend who was always precisely thirty-two years old.

–Nice to meet you, thank you for coming, please, go right in and enjoy yourselves. The bisque is a delight.

People ambled in, sober and elegant: friend, colleague, citizen. Julia had done well in life, and she was pleased to see that fact reflected in the quality of her guests. Perseverance and a little bit of good taste had paid off. Judges, lawyers, enactors, managers; for a period before Casey was born (a stressful, awful period) Julia had volunteered at the local courthouse, and had numerous friends in the legal community (among whom high cheek bones and straight teeth counted for a lot).

–Judge Peterson, thank you for coming.

–Hello Julia. I couldn't resist, I knew your enactor in law school, a fine

man—I'd say you're in good hands.

Julia waited until three-twenty before going inside. The hall was nicely full, not crowded. She flushed with pleasure to see the disparate characters of her forty-seven years chatting together, decorous and charming, surrounded by swoops of crenated, taupe bunting. She went slowly to the podium—for a long moment no one seemed to notice her. Is this what it's like to be dead, she thought?

But then Corporal Bosky gave her a conspiratorial little squeeze on the elbow, and the illusion ended. Julia ascended the dais, took her place behind the lectern, and delivered the short benedictory that would begin the Epikedion.

Part II

As is the custom, people stayed until the small hours to drink, eat, dance, and tell riotous stories of the deceased. And as is also the custom, people drank too much, complained about the food, danced like idiots, and told stories that were really about themselves. Strangers sat close, made assignations, drank just enough to charm and be charmable, left together leaning precariously on one another. Old and young stayed up past bedtime, refused to think about the next day, of life's exigencies (death's exigencies proving easily dismissable).

It was now four-thirty a.m.—Julia had been dead for seven hours. There remained three old friends: a broker, a teacher, and a television producer. They were between the ages of forty-three and forty-six. They were drunk, very drunk, and had not seen each other for eleven years. Each of them had once been in love with Julia. They were now in the middle of organizing a fishing trip. Julia had been dead for seven hours and the world was busy making plans without her. The broker (Tom) was asleep. The teacher (Phil) and the producer (Eric) shook him awake, and they listed to the exit, rudderless and happy.

The hall was now an empty mess. The blue and taupe bunting had fallen everywhere. People had left with the scented candles, which came in a slightly less pungent version of embalmer's fluid. Tables glistened with spilt alcohol and soggy ash. In three hours, six people would be in to clean the mess. Of the six:

two were presently sleeping dreamless sleeps
one was having a nightmare involving shopping carts and punch clocks
one was dreaming sweetly of an old girlfriend
one was staring at the mirror in mute horror
the last was happily abandoning thoughts of sleep in light of the ongoing and unlikely perfection of a third date.

***

By the time they'd finished cleaning and scouring every inch of the hall, Julia's earthly remains would have little to do with what she'd meant to anybody, ever—the world would have begun the long simple task of forgetting her. And that was the day Julia Miller died.

Margaux Poueymirou

The Myth of Playa De Oro

Once, the natives said
(and they spoke of many things
but none so beautiful as this)
the sun, made of glass, hung
above the sea in a charred-
bone sky, a bright fireless
globe, as yellow as tulips.

Then, there was a crash.
Waves, struck for the first time,
carried remnants of the collision
to create their ending: the shores
of Playa De Oro, where
this story is being told
by two men playing dominoes.

Drinking juleps in the heat,
chairs sunk in the black beach
leafed with gold, they ask me,
"Could this have gone unnoticed or untold?"
arms raised, fingering the horizon.

Troy Jollimore

Tom Thomson in Bed

Each night ride he his damp nostalgia-bed
into dark territories vast with vast
and hideous with memory-sculpted pain.
At openings where man without a past
might slip through like a fish, he jams and sticks,
twisted in harsh contortions—calls for help,
but only man in hearing range (himself)
does not awake or stir. Slimed slick with kelp,
he sees the crew of wretched craft, his life,
swimming like dogs toward the farther shore,
and strikes out for the opposite compass point.
(Surely we can't all *drown.)* But ocean floor
call to him like lost love, and down he goes.
Always asked he what lay there—now he knows.

Tom Thomson in the Morning

Wake with a start. Cold sweat-doused sheets. Good morning.
Close eyes, go over molecules one by one:
all present and accounted for. The dragon
of one more day stretch out before him, set
to be faced down and, in the end, laid low
with his good blade (which he's with guile disguised
as leather briefcase). Into hot shower now,
slough off and steam-dissolve debris of night
that coat pale skin, yet try not to let pop
bubble of optimistic morning hope.
(Realistically—but he must hide from this—
the calculus do not support his knighthood:
he has inflicted more distress on damsels
than saved them from. The dragon, friends, *c'est Tom.)*

Sandip Mukherji

Crying Shame

I never usually have trouble falling asleep, but I'm lying in bed watching the impassive white face of my alarm clock. Papa almost died today. I saved his life. He hasn't told anyone. If he was just careless, it's okay, but if he wants to die, he probably will. I won't be there to save him every time.

When the letter arrives, I don't need to read it. I don't even take it out of the letterbox because the *bakul* tree that guards our gate is sniffing and snorting from a special-effects thunderstorm that washed out its afternoon nap, and I don't want to get the letter wet. I look at the U.S.A. stamp and Unca's girly handwriting, stick the letter under the electric bill for Papa to find when he returns from the office, simmering in his polyester suit, I and hightail it to Tan's place.

"Howdy pardner." I touch the brim of my imaginary hat.

"Howdy." Tan—Tanmay to the rest of the world—unties the slack string that's losing its grip on his belly for the nth time, pulls up his pajama, and fastens it tightly just below his chest. A good part of his time at home is lost to this epic battle with gravity and he's fessed up to me that he suspects the tailor rigged his pajamas because the making charge was bargained down. When I go to America, I plan to patent halter-top pajamas, but I haven't told Tan because telling him anything is like broadcasting it on All India Radio.

"Did it come today?" There are some things I don't have to tell him; he just knows.

"Sure did. We'll be off soon."

"Wish I could come too. Don't know what I'll do without you."

"You must come there for college."

I always knew I was going to America. Unca—Papa's older brother—sponsored our immigration when I was two. Who'da thought it'd take more than ten years? Brothers are bottom-rung for immigration, Unca kept reminding as the years rolled by; we'd just have to wait it out. I've grown up knowing that I'll live in America and I've prepared for it all my life. I love everything American; comics, movies, songs, hot dogs, colas, pies. I can name all fifty American states and recite the Star-Spangled

Banner; the tune is too challenging for my limited vocal skills. Guys call me Gringo at school. I wear the badge with pride.

I spell the sensible American way—no ornamental u in color or favor, no superfluous l in traveler or reveler, and e properly placed before r in center and meter—sacrificing points on exams at the altar of principle. It doesn't really hurt because English is my favorite subject and my marks are good enough to satisfy Papa. It does sting when a mean-spirited teacher returns an exam with the cheap shot—"When in India, spell as Indians do, Gringo!"—and the whole class dissolves into laughter. I fire back in a later class that spellings and meanings are nobody's ancestral property, for example, even apparently simple words like "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall" might be interpreted as meaning that he really enjoyed himself during autumn, just hanging out on a wall. The stickler-for-details teacher enquires, why then did he need to be put together again? My perfectly reasonable response—he had such a great time that he totally lost it and just couldn't get it together again—earns me fifteen minutes on my knees on the merciless cement floor of our classroom.

Unca and Aunty moved to America soon after they married. They show up every three years, like house painters, with gifts for everybody who is anybody. Their suitcases overflow with the everyday pleasures, smells, and conveniences of America—chocolates, cookies, liqueurs, perfumes, lotions, creams, T-shirts, tops, Ziploc bags, Saran Wrap. Grannie oversees distribution, carefully rationing the bounty to maximize overall satisfaction, but often having to be content with minimizing total resentment. Grannie remembers every gift anybody ever gave us. Tit for tat is the holy mantra of gift-giving. So-and-so's son brought us that so-useful folding umbrella from Bangkok, which weathered two monsoons and still opens and shuts with no trouble, okay, they get this big box of nutty chocolates. That cheapskate gave a book of poems at our cousin's daughter's marriage, hmm, he gets this chapstick, that too only because he gossips so much; we don't want him going around saying we didn't give him any gift, and his lips are always chapped with all that gossiping.

We won't have any trouble recognizing Unca's house when we get there. We've seen pictures of everything, inside and outside. We're familiar with the eggshell white vinyl siding, wooden porch, piano key doorbell, garage with two cars (everybody needs a car in America, only dogs and health freaks walk in the suburbs), mud room (to remove your muddy shoes before you enter the house from the garage), hardwood floors, granite kitchen counter tops, breakfast area, formal dining room, family room, living room, powder room, finished basement, four bedrooms, and attached bathrooms. We're also acquainted with the army of appliances that

await our arrival—washer, dryer, dishwasher, oven, double-door fridge, microwave, and two TVs (Aunty's fond of game shows and sitcoms, Unca's addicted to CNN). It won't feel strange at all to move into their home.

Unca isn't shy of talking about his gutsy escape from the slow death of slogging for pitiful annual increments in India and the foresight and initiative that aren't visible in the photos of his accomplishments. "Dad thought I was crazy to give up a cozy government job where I just had to read files and write notes all day, half a day actually, because everybody went late and left early. But I wanted to live life king-size." His eyes sparkle like Christopher Columbus's might have when he set sail for what he thought were the riches of India. "It wasn't easy, mind you. Worked my butt off, excuse me. When I was doing my Master's, I didn't waste time in coffee houses and cinema halls like these pampered fellows. Pumped gas in the afternoon and dished out fast food in the evening. Slept like a sack of Idaho potatoes the moment I hit my bed. See where I am today. In America, you can do anything and be anything if you're willing to pay the price. There's no free lunch, but if you skip lunch, you can gorge at dinner."

Unca's favorite phrase when he talks about the country that was fortunate enough to have been his birthplace, and he was fortunate enough to escape, is "crying shame." It's a crying shame that nobody works, nothing runs, everything is broken, and everybody accepts it all as fate. A crying shame that city streets resemble the surface of the moon, water and electricity are rationed, and phones often give you a wrong number or cross-connection. A crying shame that trains and planes are oblivious to timetables. A crying shame that the brightest minds have to leave the country to shine. A crying shame that one billion people can't win a single medal at the Olympic games. A crying shame that criminals get elected to office and politicians are the biggest crooks.

Unca sold Papa on the idea of moving to America soon after selling high some properties he had bought low, and dumping the booty into a custom-built house. Papa probably didn't need much selling because at the time he was a junior officer in the accounting department of a local company. But the wait for our green cards turned out to be much longer than anyone had imagined and like Unca, Papa was not one of those pampered fellows who wasted time in coffee houses and cinema halls. He's the regional manager of a foreign company now. We have a car and full-time driver, cook, servant, and maid, annual vacations with all expenses paid, and I have an unlimited budget for comics and CDs. Still, there is no question of staying here after all the trouble Unca took for us. Very few people are so lucky, to go to America with green cards; even Unca himself went with a student visa. Papa says we have to go for my future. Unca has written that if Papa can make progress in the quicksands of India, he'll trot along just fine on

the level playing fields of America.

Until the letter arrived, the trip was just something that would happen sometime. We were ready to go, but not really prepared for it. There are so many things to be done. We go to a dentist for the first time in my life because Unca has advised that dentists in America are scalpers; we should get our teeth serviced before we go. Papa and I are fine, but the dentist's aggressive probing opens up a cavity in what Ma insists had been a perfectly healthy tooth, and she has to have a root canal done on it. We have new clothes stitched because ready-made American clothes are for giants, and in any case, we'll have to watch our dollars until Papa gets a job. We stock up on army-sized supplies of essential Indian items that might be hard to track down and will cost more in America—Keo Karpin hair oil, Pond's talcum powder, Nivea face cream, Vaseline lip balm, Lakme face powder, Boroline all-purpose cream, plastic combs, tongue cleaners, and tablets for every low-lying ailment that might ambush Indians venturing abroad—headache, cough, cold, fever, constipation, diarrhea, gas.

Everybody's going to the airport to see us off—friends, relatives, neighbors, Papa's office staff. When cook, servant and maid learn that there's no space for them in the available cars, they crumple their faces into sagging balls of gloom, misery, and calamity, so a taxi is hailed for them. The house will be totally empty for a few hours. Since it's never had to be locked from outside before, a new lock is bought for the bolt on the front door.

Papa is the most organized person on planet Earth. He's made lists of every piece of luggage and all the items in each piece. Our names are hand-painted in the sad grey that passes for white here, on the left side of each VIP suitcase. The right side reads CALCUTTA-WASHINGTON DULLES in large, bright yellow letters. We probably cannot use these suitcases for the return trip or for trips on other routes, but we're not thinking that far ahead. Reaching America will be the fulfillment of a dream we've been dreaming for more than ten years. Papa notes on his list which car each piece of luggage and each person has gone into and only when everything checks out are the cars allowed to leave, with strict instructions that the people and luggage are to be unloaded in his presence at the airport.

We arrive at the airport hours early. There are plenty of empty seats for our large posse.

"Better early than late," Papa smiles, pleased with the pre-emptive use of his standard response to "better late than never."

"The early bird gets the worm," a neighbor with stork legs chimes in, looking around, as if searching for the expected reward.

"Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise,"

adds a member of Papa's office staff with a question mark back, crumpled shirt, and vacant look.

Ma puts an early end to the early sayings contest by suggesting that the see-off party be served food while we still have time. *Luchi, tarkari,* and *sandesh* emerge from stainless steel *tiffin* carriers and are passed out in paper plates. We're not supposed to eat now because we have to eat the free in-flight meals, but the familiar oily smells are too tempting for Papa and he gives in to pleas to enjoy his last taste of Indian food before he's condemned to bland *sahebi* dishes.

We bypass all the long lines to get to the plane. Somebody knows somebody, as somebody often does in India, and an airport officer greases our way. I get the window seat, Ma's next to me, and Papa's at the aisle, guarding us from the world. He's not much of a sentry, sleeping through the journey except when meals are served. Ma refuses to eat anything because she doesn't want to risk having to use the tiny, unfamiliar toilet. She cannot sleep sitting on a shaking chair, so she passes the time watching movies and reading magazines. I try to stay awake as long as I can, to see, hear, smell, and feel the wonders that I want to remember all my life.

When we land in Washington, it is dark. Unca is supposed to meet us at the airport but he is nowhere to be seen. We have collected our luggage and Papa has checked all the items with his list. What are we to do now? Ma is showing signs of panic. She takes a photo of her guru—Sai Baba—out of her handbag, touches it to her forehead and mine (Papa's forehead is off limits; he's a mocking disbeliever) and returns it carefully to the zip pocket. Then she closes her eyes and silently beseeches Sai Baba to make Unca appear as promised—a minor favor for a man of his powers. I know her well enough to guess her line of argument. "We are your loyal devotees, Baba. We have come to this distant land relying on our faith in you to see us through any danger that might befall us. Do not desert us in this time of need. Make him come, Baba, make him come. I will offer a special feast in your name." As if Sai Baba doesn't have more pressing problems to attend to. He has so many devotees; at any given time, some of them may be ill, dying, or giving birth. Ma should know better than to bother him with every little problem we face. Otherwise, with her history of false alarms, she may not get any help when she really needs it.

Papa fishes Unca's address out of his wallet and suggests we should get a taxi and make a run for it. Ma reluctantly puts Sai Baba on hold and emphatically nixes Papa's idea. "I didn't come all this way to be kidnapped and murdered by a taxi driver. You go if you want to, but I'm staying here until he comes. And I'm not letting you take my son."

Just when it seems like we will set a record for the fastest family split on American soil, Unca lopes into view, breathing heavily through his mouth. "So sorry, so sorry, Beltway jammed, biiiig accident, waiting long? Oh ho,

who is this? Almost as tall as ma now, handsome young gentleman. Wait till the girls here see you. Ha, ha! Don't mind, just joking. Welcome to America!" And then he pinches my cheek in front of a terminal full of strangers.

America is everything I'd imagined it to be and more. Houses, cars, roads, and people are all bigger and brighter. Life is meant to be lived king-size here. You can get just about anything you want and some things you never imagined you might want. Aisles in every store are packed with choices. You could spend a good ten minutes just picking your chips, longer if you're worried about your health and have to read the labels, which fortunately we aren't and don't have to because we've just come from India and can use all the calories we can get. "Don't put your hand in your pocket unless you want to take your hanky out," Unca tells Papa. "I'm paying for everything until you get a decent job and settle down. By god's grace, we have enough money and this little guy is like my own son." He sweeps the hair off my forehead with his hand. I have to wait a while before I can let it down again.

Unca and Aunty both work. We have the house to ourselves all day. Papa reads the whole paper in his orderly manner; news, politics, business, sports, entertainment—"have to learn everything I can about our new country." He pores over the employment ads with their cryptic abbreviations, wondering aloud whether prof. is professional or professor and if exp. means experience or expertise. When he has finished reading, he types application letters with his index fingers.

"My secretary typed for me in India," he says defensively, when he catches me smiling. "Here, you have to do everything yourself."

When Papa gives him the first batch of applications to mail, Unca tells him to take it easy. "At least get over your jetlag first. There's no rush. A few days won't make a difference."

"I want to hit the ground running." Papa slaps his right palm on his upturned left one.

When the dishes that Aunty had prepared for our arrival run out, Ma cooks chicken curry and fish *kalia.*

"You shouldn't have," Aunty says, when she returns from the office. "I would have fixed some noodles or stir fry chicken. I don't get time to cook regular meals except on weekends."

"I have time and time," Ma smiles. "Can't spend the whole day sitting and sleeping. You're doing so much for us, let me do what little I can."

"We're not doing anything special. Anybody would do it for their own family. And you know how dear you all are to us. Of course, I'm not

complaining. My Indian dishes are not that tasty. Your hand's cooking is simply without comparison. We will have a real Indian meal after a long time."

Unca throws a dinner party to introduce us to his friends and spread the word that Papa is looking for a job. Ma cooks most of the dishes and Papa vacuums the carpets. The party is supposed to start at eight but nobody shows till nine. Aunty says it's normal—here, you have to ask Indian guests to come an hour before you actually want them to. She herself starts getting ready only at eight-thirty. Papa gets a ton of advice during the party and accepts every pound with a deferential nod.

"Do an MBA here. Bachelor of Commerce from India is not enough."

"Don't expect to start as Regional Manager. Rome was not built in a day."

"Landing jobs and holding on to them are so random. You can get hired in a day and fired in a minute."

"Don't just grab the first job that comes your way. Hold out for the best offer."

"Network. Talk to everybody you meet. You never know who might know someone who knows someone."

"Your salary depends on how much they need you, not how long you've worked."

"You need transferable skills to work here. Knowledge and experience are not enough."

Papa foists his resume on all the guests. Most of them fold it and put it in their pocket or wife's handbag. Some say that things are real tight right now, but they'll do what they can.

Nobody speaks the lingo here. People don't howdy pardners. It's either "how you doin'?" or "hey, what's up?" It's probably because I'm nowhere near Texas. But it's cool, I'll learn the local dialect. The guys in my class seem much older than me, talking about parties and chicks and grown-up stuff like that. How do you make friends if nobody wants to talk about personal things?

"Who's your favorite singer?"

"Can't really tell. I listen to a lot of different music."

"Which is the best movie you've seen?"

"I don't know man. I've seen too many."

"What sports do you like?"

"Whatever's showing on TV. I watch everything."

"We just came here from India."

"Good for you."

"My dad was a regional manager."

"That's cool."

"We're living with our uncle, in his custom-built house."

"Uh-huh. Gotta run. Catch you later."

Papa hasn't got any interviews yet, but he's started preparing. He's typed a list of likely questions and killer answers. Every morning he goes into Unca's study, sits in front of the desk, opposite the imaginary interviewer, asks himself questions, and practices his answers.

"Why do you want to work for us?"

"Because you're a market leader, poised for growth, and I want to grow with the company."

"Why should we hire you?"

"I have all the qualifications for this job, fifteen years of experience in the field, and the drive to excel in any situation."

"What is your weakness?"

"I'm a perfectionist. I have to get everything exactly right. Some people might consider it a weakness, but used judiciously, it could be a strength."

He stops every now and then to mark changes to the written answers in pencil. Sometimes, he repeats his answers, stressing different words, until he's satisfied with his delivery.

Ma is working at a department store, in the women's clothes section. She says it's better than sitting at home and will help pay some of our expenses until Papa gets a job. There are some extra benefits; she gets an employee discount and always knows when things are on sale. The first things she buys are some cool sweatshirts, jeans, and sneakers—the virtual school uniform here—to replace my Indian dress shirts, trousers, and leather shoes, which stuck out like a three-piece suit at a fakir convention. Ma sleeps with a pillow under her feet because she has to stand all day at work. She still cooks for all of us, mostly in bulk on weekends, because everyone agrees that her hand's cooking is so much better than Aunty's. Aunty heats and serves the meals every evening. Papa washes the dishes. He has also started watering and mowing the lawn, countering Unca's protest that he needs the exercise with a smiling "my need is greater than thine."

Papa hasn't got a job yet but he's had two interviews. He was real excited about the first interview; put on his suit and tie and practiced walking, shaking hands, sitting down and answering his questions in front of Aunty's full length mirror. He was hopeful after the interview, thought it went real well; they actually asked some of his practice questions, but of course, you never knew who else they were talking to and who would be the best fit for the job. For weeks after the interview, he rushed to the phone every time it rang during the day, but after a couple of months, he got a letter saying that they were happy to talk to him, had hired a suitable person for the position, and wished him well in his job search. The second interview didn't go well because they wanted someone with good computer

skills and Papa had never used a computer in India.

Ma bathes twice every day; in the morning before going to work and in the evening after drinking tea with Parle biscuits bought from the Indian store. After her evening shower, she lights rose incense before the photo of Sai Baba—in a plastic frame on a side table in her bedroom—sits cross-legged on the ground, and prays silently. From the movement of her lips, she seems to be repeating the same Bengali word over and over again with single-minded devotion, "job, job, job, job, job...." She already has a job and since she's not saying "different job, different job, different job...." she must be praying for Papa. I think she's wasting her time. Sai Baba is South Indian; he may know English, but I doubt that he knows Bengali. Even if she gets through to him somehow, does he have any influence for American jobs? Shouldn't she pray to someone with clout in America? And is secondhand prayer any good? If Sai Baba does have influence in America, why should he use it for a disbeliever who is being prayed for by someone else? Of course, I know better than to mention any of this to Ma. She's really touchy on the subject, especially because Papa tells Sai Baba jokes. Perhaps she can make the argument that she, Baba's most devoted devotee, is suffering because he doesn't have a job. Anyway, it doesn't hurt to pray. I am willing to give Sai Baba the benefit of the doubt if Papa gets a job soon.

There is some debate about what we should do. Ma wonders if we should return to India. With his experience and connections, Papa will surely find another good job there. Papa doesn't seem very keen on the idea. It will be the only failure in his shining career. A foreign-returned person has high status in India, because he has lived abroad and returned to his country, but obviously there is no prestige in being forced to return because you cannot make a living abroad. Papa wants to continue struggling because I will have a better future here. Unca observes it's a crying shame that the U.S. economy started acting coy just when we got here. Couldn't it wait a couple of years until Papa had got some experience and savings? Aunty insists that we are their responsibility and we can live with them forever. If we return like this, what face will she show to our relatives in India? I think it's unlucky that I'm thirteen. Can't I just go from twelve to fourteen like hotel elevators?

Papa has taken a job, selling insurance on the phone. He says it's not for the money, which is no great shakes; it's just a temporary pastime to keep occupied and practice communication skills until a job opens up in his regular line of work. People run from insurance agents and nobody wants to talk to a telemarketer, so an insurance telemarketer is the ultimate challenge, he jokes. "I'm compiling statistics on how long I can talk before people hang up on me. Mean, median, standard deviation, everything is

very low. If I can go a whole minute without getting cut off...." He pats himself on the back to complete the sentence.

I've made some friends I can hang around with on weekends. They're sons of Unca's friends. We watch TV and videos together and sometimes go to the mall for a matinee show. Neil and I shoot pool in their basement. Pete is teaching me how to ride a skateboard on the long driveway in front of his house. Ma worries that I never seem to study. I tell her that serious studying doesn't start till high school and my grades will be fine.

Papa, Ma, Unca, Aunty, and I are like a regular family now. We don't have much to say to each other because everything has already been said. In the evening, I'm usually at the computer in my room, the boom box on loud and the door locked. Papa and ma read or attend to chores. Unca and Aunty watch different programs on their separate TVs. We still have dinner together and Papa serves up funny stories or jokes. Sometimes Aunty doesn't get the joke and Ma has to explain it to her, but Unca always laughs loudest and Papa beams. There's no more discussion about returning to India. Perhaps they talk about it when I'm not present, or their positions are too well set to be changed by talk.

We've been here for a year, although Aunty says it doesn't seem that long. Papa works as a cashier in an Indian restaurant. He gets free meals and sometimes brings home leftover food. Ma is still at the department store. I've just entered high school. Papa wasn't happy with my middle school grades. He told me that they came here only for my future and I must work harder so that their sacrifices are not for nothing. Ma complains that I'm becoming too American too fast and not showing enough respect for elders, especially her. Papa doesn't talk much anymore. Ma fills the silences with her chatter, trying to make things seem normal. Some nights, Unca and Aunty argue in their room, next to mine, but their door is locked and they keep their voices low, so I can't hear what they are arguing about.

Papa and I are returning from the local store. He wanted to pick up cigarettes; he's started smoking again after a long time. I came along to buy gum and get out of the house after watching football on TV all afternoon. We walk silently. Papa is sweating in his blue canvas shirt that is too warm for the mild weather. He's staring intently into the distance, as if better times lie just out of sight, and he might catch a glimpse if he squints hard enough. We come to an intersection. I have to grab Papa's arm and shout, "Papa, don't walk!" to keep him from walking into a rushing sports car that swerves and blasts its horn. He stumbles as I pull him back on the curb, and steadies himself by holding on to me. Cars swish past, oblivious to our presence. I watch the Don't Walk sign, my heart exceeding its speed

limit. And then Papa gently massages my back with his palm, like he used to when I was a kid. As I stand next to him, whiffing the familiar smell of his Aqua Velva aftershave lotion, I wonder if Sai Baba can make this one of those long lights that takes forever to change.

Juan Armando Rojas
translated from the Spanish by Jennifer Rathbun

Vertebral

beneath rains
of needles and razors
the flood announced itself to me

one second ahead of the erupting minutes

lost in the middle of the river
I search for my shadow in its spiral
it is the desert

and we were summoned
to navigate the first chronicle of the river
with its rough waters

we found a clock
amongst the torrents
marking the misplaced hours

the abandoned raft beneath the river
allowed us to escape from the dock
and sink the oars into the mire

to the rhythm of the current
we ran the trenches of the beach
we crossed a veil of white sand

under the solemn shadow of a raft
the scars ran
to their delta

I saw a turtle dig
in the flesh
of a bottle
that navigated close to the wind

a candle blew out every night
to sustain the river's
darkness

ancient fish
swim overhead with long beards
between the nadir and the zenith

to the chant of a distracted frog
the reflections gathered
the heart
a bubble

over the dove's wings
the calligrapher ignites a fatuous fire
while remembering the end

fossilized crystal
axial bones
in our boat

a seaman recalls the invasion
upon seeing hazelnuts float
and slide
over inclinations

I sketch
a hummingbird's flight
the firm step of a star

we arrived to the perfume of a plum tree
covered in flowers

and here
we tied a knot in the river
we decided to rest
after a rainy day

a cup was thrown into the water
red and yellow flowers
sprouted over the porcelain wall

a bird abandoned its wings
the river the sea snake swore to return

she left to gather the wax from a hive
and fell asleep
there are dreams in which the candle burns out

it could be the delirium of the river
that we never navigated
at the same time as its waters

through the path of the vertebras
that never cease
a full moon ignites

the calligrapher
appears to have learned
to cast nets in the rain

between the dew's scales
blind men contemplate
mountains like labyrinths

they savour lost silence
shadows of a love between the rocks

the navigation has not ended
at night we pursue
the atlas of that distant dawn

II

that night we reached a river

there is a dream beyond this dream

which was very deep and wide

there is wind beyond this wind

and had a strong current

if by chance there is a river beyond this river

because we dare not cross it on rafts

we made a canoe

we spent a whole day crossing it

we had great difficulty

Heather Jessup

Boxcar

The ceiling is caving in like mould on a rotting orange and Alistair, looking up at the graphs in his head, begins to believe he loves his wife and recognizes that it is Tuesday.

Alistair is on his regular 11-7 Friday-Tuesday shift as the helicopter crashes into the roof of the calendar factory he has been working at for nine years. Alistair's job is to put the coils in the calendars. He is wearing his hat backwards and his fingers are worn and smoky from curling plastic snakes into cardboard holes. Alistair has been thinking, as he has been on and off for these nine years, about destiny. He believes things happen for reasons, that even if you were to map them scientifically somehow, in a reverse wave formation, say, there would be conclusive, evidential proof. Things. Happening. And all for reasons. That's why Alistair is picturing the large dark graph with bright white lines that proves things work out for reasons just as the helicopter falls through the roof.

Alistair has been glancing upwards for most of the morning. The ceiling, cobwebby and grey, is where he usually sees his graphs. The helicopter, its choppers loud as luck and tinny as a toy's, falls like fireworks from the sky. Alistair, looking upward, hand on hat, white skin to white cotton, jaw slightly open, eyes glazed, suddenly becomes more aware than ever that destiny is happening. He tucks a loose piece of chin-length hair behind his ear, clasps his hands in front of himself and takes large steps backwards. He sits down on the metal floor of the calendar factory and ducks-and-covers like a grade-three during the Cuban missile crisis.

Before:

Janey: "Honey, I'm going shopping now."
Alistair: "It's twelve o'clock at night!"
Janey: "No one will be out. I can look in the windows."
Alistair: "I will never understand this, Janey."

Janey works at home. Sometimes she goes to elementary schools. She is the chief director and manager of the Parker Brothers Monopoly, Trademark with Hasbro, Inc., Web-Based Research Company that figures out such important details as *What is the nation's FAVOURITE Monopoly game-piece of the new year?* Janey also is in charge of writing the descriptive

passages for each piece so that people can remember their significance, historical and otherwise, before they make their once-in-a-millennium vote. *Mr. Monopoly Pennybags loves the feel of a cleanly-pressed shirt. Don't you? The Iron is a symbol of personal maintenance and always being ready to look your best, whether it's making a million on Boardwalk, or being judge at the beauty pageant. Is the Iron your vote?*

"Shop safe. I'll be asleep when you get home."

Alistair and Janey have been married almost four and a half years. They met at a dog show. Neither of them liked dogs; they both went with friends from college as a joke. Dog show judges inspect everything from the anus to the teeth. If two dogs start humping the whole day is ruined for those dogs. That's it. They're disqualified.

"Night."

Janey walks to the same closed clothing store every other night. She's never been inside. It's a maternity store called Boxcar, which is why Janey first thought it'd be funny to stop and look in one night as she and Alistair were walking home from a movie.

"Al, look! Can you believe someone would call their maternity store Boxcar? Wouldn't that just make the women feel even larger?"

"Maybe you could be their PR manager, honey. Luscious pregnant women: accept it, you look like a fricken train car right now!"

"Yeah, classy Al."

Janey doesn't even think she wants to be pregnant. She doesn't know why she keeps looking in the window, but she has to. She's tried walking other ways at night, looking in other stores, but she always ends up at Boxcar.

Alistair proposed to Janey on a Tuesday, although he wouldn't know that. Alistair never remembers what day of the week it is, which is ironic considering his line of work. Also, because he works Friday to Tuesday, his weekends, arguably the most important days of the week, are Wednesday and Thursday, not Saturday and Sunday, so what does it matter what day it is when Wednesday is Saturday? They were on a beach. They had graduated two months before and didn't know what they were doing with their lives. They thought each other would be a good place to start. They were never really in love with each other. They were just glad they weren't alone.

Tonight, while Alistair is in bed and Janey is walking downtown after midnight, she is thinking something she has never thought before. She is thinking that she is pregnant. Janey has definitely thought before that she *might have been* pregnant, but she's never thought she *was* pregnant. Janey, as she is walking alone in the dark, on which day her husband doesn't know—her husband, with whom she isn't entirely sure she's in love—thinks she *is* pregnant.

It's never bothered Alistair and Janey that they aren't in love. There has never been the pretense of love. They both have reasonably well-paying jobs. Alistair likes the feel of the plastic coils in his hands, their stark neutrality, like copper, like milk. Janey likes to pretend Monopoly is real. That in the game box that resides constantly on her desk for inspiration there is nineteen thousand, nine hundred and ninety dollars of real money contained in the seven perfectly-sized plastic compartments.

Together they have a very nice apartment on a street where the buildings are painted interesting colours and there are coffee shops and parks nearby. They have nice furniture. They have decided to subscribe to the opera, give to Save The Children. They live together, yes, but they don't often interact. Occasionally they will go to a movie or eat out. They don't talk about how they *feel*. They discuss finances occasionally, although they have the system of Janey buying the groceries and Alistair paying the household bills, so they don't even talk about that much. They each have their own Visas. They do their own dishes. They do their own laundry, which they place in separate baskets side by side at the bottom of their closet. They perform admirably side by side. They call each other Honey. And sometimes they have sex.

Janey, so far fine with being alone, although married, stares at the dress in the window. The white neon light of Boxcar is reflecting her face in the round tummy of the mannequin. She covets the denim jumper.

As she slips into bed with Alistair at a quarter past one, Janey lies still on her side of the bed, staring at the slivered light the venetians are casting on the ceiling. She sees the faint outline of a graph. She doesn't know what it's for, but senses Alistair would like the look of it. Sharp black lines against white. Janey stares at the graph on the ceiling and then she does something she normally doesn't do: she turns on her side, curls herself against Alistair's back and settles her knees into the space against his bent knees. She pushes her silk-pajamaed breasts against his back and gently places her arm around his shoulders so her palm hangs flat against his chest. She lays her cheek against his hair on the pillow. She smells his shampoo. She feels his relaxed body rest against her in sleep.

Alistair is not asleep. He deliberately leans into her soft body. He is surprised how much he wants her arm around him. Her silked flesh against his back. Her nose against his scalp. Her hand on his clavicle. The fading smell of vanilla perfume from her wrist. Like cupcakes.

The next morning Alistair dresses for work and Janey slowly wakes up. He has made her extra coffee and it is being kept warm in the pot.

"Morning."

"Mmhhhmmm...Good Morning Alistair. Mm...You off to work?"

"Yep."

"Have a good day."

"You too, Janey."

Today is the day Alistair's calendar factory will be hit by a helicopter. Janey doesn't know this. Neither does Alistair. This morning they both say each other's names.

Janey sits at her computer for an hour. She has written and rewritten the Wheelbarrow. She just can't seem to get it right. *The Pennybags estate at Marven Gardens reflects Mr. Monopoly's wife Madge's devotion to gardening and their beautiful life together. The little Pennybags children ask their mother for a ride. Do you want to push dirt and children around in a wheelbarrow for the rest of your life? Is the Wheelbarrow your pick? Or the god-forsaken Thimble? Don't you want to be the Racecar, Janey? Even the Shoe would be better!* "Shit. I can't post that." Janey gets her coat on.

Alistair's been coiling slowly so far today. He keeps switching back and forth between thinking about Janey's silk pajamas against his back and the Things Happening For Reasons graph above his head.

Janey walks past Boxcar on her way to the birth control clinic. She doesn't like to shop in the daylight. She doesn't like to see people moving inside her store with the lights on. Janey sits in the waiting room for thirty-five minutes surrounded by fourteen-year-old girls in tight pants and belly-tops. Then her name is called, "Mrs. Jane Winterhause," and a nurse hooks a clipboard with her chart to the door and lets her sit alone in the sterile-room-of-many-metal-clamps to contemplate. Janey looks at the ceiling. She sees the graph again, the dark lines against white. She thinks of Alistair at work. She's never thought of Alistair at work before. She's only been aware that he's been gone. She pictures him in the clothes he left in this morning. She pictures him in what she thinks a calendar factory might look like. She wonders what he does all day. If he's ever thought of her.

Alistair eats a sandwich on his lunch break in the room with a coffee machine and twelve lunch tables that could also be found in a high school cafeteria. Destiny's got him down again. He can't seem to figure out mathematically the ratio between personal choice and fate. He's carried the nine to the fifth column and squared the reciprocal, not to mention multiplying the length of life by the average amount of inexplicable occurrences within the bracket. "What is the contributing factor to the unknown?" he wonders as he returns to his position on the calendar factory floor.

Janey has peed in the cup. She's back in the sterile-metal-clamp room to await the overenergetic curly-haired woman's return. Janey is not thinking of babies. Although she believes she *is* pregnant, not that she *might be*, Janey can't think of anything but Alistair. "Why at a time like this am I thinking of Alistair?"

Just after lunch is when the helicopter hits. Alistair is looking up at the cobwebby ceiling, seeing destiny's graph. He is also thinking of Janey holding him last night. Her cupcake smell. Her breathing into his hair.

And that's when he hears it. The beating of air. He thinks of the graph. The ruckus of tin. He loves her. The slamming, crashing creak of rotting wood. "What day is it?" Hundreds of splinters. "Tuesday, it is definitely Tuesday." And the sky. The darkened wooden rafters alight with sky. And the body moving faster than the mind. The hair behind ear. The step, step, step, back, sit, duck, hands over head. And "things happen for reasons."

Janey is pregnant. She's walking toward Boxcar peeling an orange, holding a bag with vitamins and pamphlets that say *Pregnant? Here Are Some Options.* She wants to call Alistair at work when she gets home, after she's sat down for a moment and had a cup of tea. She stops in front of Boxcar in the middle of the day. Everything is lit up from inside. Women in smart suits move to help customers, to lean over strollers. Janey thinks of Alistair. His warm skin against her silk pajamas. Janey stands still and stares at the jumper.

Rob Desjardins

Tabitha

If I had a daughter, if I *could*
have one, I would name her
Tabitha. For no other reason
than to skew the family line.

Grandmother would have
never considered it as a name
for her tree. She was a manic
painter of hands in scenery;
she believed in the resurrection,
but not the crucifixion; the devil
chatted with her daily over tea, but god
never returned her calls.

Grandfather spent his last weeks staring
at burning wood, though the fire
never blinked. After killing a man
in a war, he snuck a taste of the
dead man's liver to see if it tasted
like liver. He confessed all his sins
to each generation of dog.

Mother collected pebbles from
a Mud Lake beach, as she did
as a girl, huddling them into
her marsupial parka in memory,
reciting names from the new
British colony, balancing stone
on stone and calling them children.

Father had the tattoo
of his childhood bear removed,
revealing his inoculation scar,
no longer shaped like a scimitar,
ending his days wondering
what to cure next.

Sister, ah sister, now long dead,
her middle name without roots
to anyone with a surname,
perhaps a character in a favorite
TV show, some mighty aunt,
or a first pet in an old decade.
The closest to becoming
a Tabitha.

And I, knowing the beginning
of tradition lies with a childless
father, husband without a wife,
feel almost powerful being
the last of a line.

Halfway through this
familial anaconda, I
swallow, thinking about
my childhood sweetheart.
Her name was Jane.

Steven Lautermilch

The Locust Songs

for Izumi Shikibu

1

Old clothes. Though they no
longer do, how can they be burned
or given away?
Dark wine, blood wine, this stained cloth
was my heart's blossoming.

2

Fog and footbridge. Cold
and warm walking hand in hand
with cloud. Soft wind, pure
twilight. The distant valley,
begging bowl filling with snow.

3

Out of all the leaves,
this one, weathered to the hand-
rubbed leather of a
holy book. Too poor to buy,
my eyes blur to know such wealth.

4

How a drawn lyre, strings
tuned, plucked tight, can sing and snap.
Decided, this nightfall,
to have no more of waking.
Till this small child comes laughing.

5

Still as this grass mat
my breathing weaves in and out
of the night monk's song.
How dear a monkey this mind.
What sweet open cage this heart.

6

The world is water.
And upon the star river
the heart is a breath.
This floating mirror we walk
as if a bridge over death.

Yasuko Thanh

Action Jackson's Bar

Once upon a time two children find a cabin belonging to Trapper Red's wife—Trapper Red is dead, over twenty years dead. Trapper Red's wife hears the snap of branches under tiny feet. She squints at the lookout by the gun rack, because today, she is not felling alders with their weedy-woosh, or chopping kindling, or hunting raccoons with her .22. She is having one of *those days*: perching with her hands folded in her lap, staring at the oil stains in Trapper Red's wool pants that itch her thighs, and thinking about the past.

Atticus and Millicent scrape down the hill on their backsides. The boy's blue jacket and billowing pants get choked in the bushes like sail scraps. He is innocent, she thinks, like the kids who play video games at the Trading Post in town, but the girl's face is too dirty to be the kind who heeds her mother. She gathers up the torn bits of red silk scarf scattered about the cracked, dusty linoleum floor and throws the lot inside the wood stove, shutting the door with a clang: the past is a useless thing.

"Hey, you!" she hollers out the window.

Berbyl closes the door to the truck, not quietly, not slamming it. Hans doesn't wake from where he sleeps with his head resting on the steering wheel and his arm on the dash. She skips along the growing-warm shoulder of the highway. The sun is rising at the highway's end like a bright candy. She is wearing a tube-top and tight jean-shorts cut higher than the round curves of her white flesh. It is seven a.m. and the highways bobs with Tequila.

An albino man with a flatbed truck and a dead deer in the back pulls over. Flies buzz around the deer's jelled-open eyes. The hunter rolls along slowly, keeping pace with Berbyl, her swinging gait.

"Hey, baby," he says, "wanna hop into the back and have some fun?"

She spits at his tire.

"Take it easy, baby, just joking. Do you need a ride?"

"Where?"

"I dunno. You drink?"

She stops, digs her toes into dirt, and jams her hands into her back pockets. "You got cigarettes?"

He holds up the proof; the flap of the blue Export 'A' pack is open, the

foil torn off one side, one missing. "Full deck. Hop in."

"Okay." She clambers up in and kicks aside some Kentucky Fried Chicken boxes by her feet. The vinyl is torn on the seat and it scratches her thigh. She looks out the window and bounces on the springy seat every time the highway dips.

Hans wishes he could be more like his friend Clive. "Once popped a man's eyeball from his head with one punch. I'm not proud of it but he had it coming. Down at Rialto's if you get into trouble, just tell them assholes you know Clive McMurty." Hans knows Clive loves him like a younger brother, wants to protect him because he thinks he can't stand on his own two feet. It's true, Hans thinks, it's all true. Instead, he builds places for himself to hide. He makes wooden toys, knowing they will listen to the lathe, counting on what they will become.

Yesterday, he found a crumpled note floating in the trash can. It was from Millicent to his wife. It read:

> *You're drunk all the time. Even when you're kicking my ass, I feel sorry for you because you've got something inside that makes you need to look at things with your eyes half-closed. You think I scare easy but you're the one who's afraid. Dad's weak. We both know it. Instead of taking the reins he brings the horse inside; he hides in his rotors and sawdust, but you will never own me. You are too small to hold anything in your hands. Atticus's mine.*

"I told Atticus we could build a cob house and live off the land," Millicent tells the trapper's wife. "I said we could eat sage and rattle snakes and live happily ever after."

"Yeah, well who gets to be anything they want in the woods?" Atticus says. "You can't be a fireman or a truck driver."

Millicent thinks back to the tantrum Atticus had after she took away his Ham-Hams, which were distracting him from his work of collecting firewood. She had just twined a willow wreath and put it on his head like a crown. "We'll grow old and fat and people will tell stories about us," she had said.

They had sped through the woods, tangled roots butting their toes and the cold rushing air numbing the tips of their ears. The trees were a green clouding fog, telescoping the darkness and clawing boughs ahead.

"Stop!" she yelled. "Atticus, come back."

"I hate you," he screamed. Plunging forward ferociously, heedless of tears in his shirt or blood in his nose. Rocks leapt from the creek bed like fists, ferns like rope coils, fallen saplings like gates.

"Atticus, please."

There is a knock at the door. Doubt flickers across Trapper Red's widow's face. The police cruiser by the woodpile shines gigantic. This makes her get up quickly and she waves frantically at the two children, beating them back into the cold storage, bidding them to hide.

They leave their empty water glasses on the coffee table.

Atticus and Millicent listen at the mushroom-smelling wood surrounded by soft apples and withered potatoes with inch-long eyes. They feel themselves getting drowsy. Millicent has never yet felt this way. Out of herself. Atticus is already snoring—he has never snored before—his head lolling off the potato sacks. The last thing she sees is that he is drooling.

Berbyl and the red-eyed hunter sit at the back of Action Jackson's Bar pounding back shots of Tequila. Cowboys play darts; women with blue eye shadow do lines of coke on plastic tables. Berbyl orders two ryes and drinks them straight. When the hard lines have grown soft, blurred like a scene from a movie, she begins to talk. To talk, and laugh, and tell jokes.

They hold each other up when they stumble to the truck two-and-a-half hours later.

"You're hot," he says, rocks bouncing off the windshield.

"I'm married."

He slaps his right hand between her legs but she's been around. She catches him by surprise and yanks his hand out and bites it; she knows the type that expect the world for nothing. He swerves, looking at his hand, shaking it in the air.

"You crazy bitch." He grabs her hair. "I bought you seven shooters."

"At two bucks apiece that gets you my toenails," she says, her voice even and steady.

When they awake Millicent's ankles are bound together like a goat's, her hand roped to the kitchen sink, and Atticus is gone. The Teflon pan and enamel pot the trapper's wife used to prepare a meal soak in water, chunks of batter and grease floating on top like islands: the trapper's wife orders Millicent to scrub them.

Atticus spots a hillock of bones: some slender as reeds and others thick as tree stumps, covered in flakes of ash, in a corner of the yard. His cage is big enough for a bear. Beside him in the cage is a chocolate cake, a pound of cooked sausages on a china plate, and a strong-smelling wedge of yellow cheese.

He pushes Berbyl out of the truck and she rolls into the ditch. Air flash, ground rushing, spitting small stones from her teeth. She brushes herself off. Her first thought is has anyone seen? She licks the palm of her hand and wipes the blood onto her thigh. "Cock tease." His voice still ringing

in her ears.

She creaks the truck door open but Hans is wide-awake. By now, twelve p.m., the gravel lot behind the Cedar Creek (population 260) liquor store is busy enough, compared to seven a.m. when they pulled in from Osoyoos; it was empty as a page. Then Hans dozed and Berbyl got bored and thirsty. Fear wide in his eyes.

"Howareya doin?" she says, tempted to hug him.

"I thought you'd left."

She knows immediately he means forever. "You? And the kids?"

"I would've waited," he says. After this morning, any kindness is crushing, makes her want to weep. She hides her eyes.

Filled with love, Berbyl takes Hans to Action Jackson's Bar where amazingly they don't recognise her from this morning.

Hans feels a blossoming solidarity with his sexy wife that he hasn't felt since their courtship, since the beginning of their marriage. He notices the way men ogle her. Their marriage, that the town believed a sham; he vowed to disprove it ever since. Every drink bonds him more strongly to her, and track of the clock that chimes bird chirps on the hour, the sun going down in the woods, escapes him.

The trapper's wife slurs, flipping through black and white photographs from the hatbox. Millicent listens to her, trying to gain her confidence. Her voice speeds forward, dangerously out of control. "I fell in love. He came to visit me where I worked—imagine me punching in figures at a supply store in town before my hands were red and cracked as cedar bark. I imagined. Tried to think what his cabin must have been like. That was this cabin. I thought he would show me life. But every day it was more of the same: felling alders, bucking wood, cleaning and salting the deer, tanning the hide of those dead animals.

"I had a red scarf my aunt brought me back from Paris. That was the kind of family I was from. Family that travelled, went to university."

"Just get out of here," Hans says, "the sight of you hurts my eyes." Usually he would let his wife answer the phone, his heart thumping at its ring, thumping as it always did when the outside intruded. Usually he would be outside in the llama yard, looking to the foothills through his breath-fog, blowing on his hands with his foot on the pitchfork, wondering about his kids out wandering the hills again. Usually he would be digging the prongs into a steaming pile of dung, levering the weight with his gum boot, thinking wherever they were, they at least had each other.

They have returned home without the children—drunk, that was no lie, from Action Jackson's Bar—but the children were not where they were supposed to be, at the arranged pick-up point at the A&P Supermart on the

3a Highway.

He sits with his ear to the phone, rigid and mean, leaning with one hand on his cheek and the other on his forehead. Berbyl tries to play it careful, offering drinks, offering sex.

Soon the police will come by and collect photos of the children. There will be questions. She is in the kitchen making him a hi-ball. She stirs his rye and water with her pinky and then licks herself clean. As she walks across the kitchen her red negligee catches his eye.

"Just get out of here," he says, his semi-erection uncomfortable in his jeans.

"I know this is a hard time," she says, "but let's try to make the best of it."

Who is he to hate her, she thinks. A yellow-bellied farmer who will die with a shovel in his hand. She knows it's true; she married him because he would take care of her. But who is he to stand up to her now?

Raging, she drinks. Then alcohol dulls the edges the way it always does: maybe they can make it, if they just get rid of the kids. Especially that Millicent. Always talking back, oh *she* has ideas.

In the months that come, fear riddles her arrogance like a disease. There is something in Hans' anger that makes him a man for the first time. She stops sleeping around. She drinks alone and stays away from Rialto's bar.

***

Millicent can't believe the way Atticus is eating—in the woods, all she'd wanted to do was to feed him but he wouldn't open his mouth for even a berry. Now, after six months, the trapper's wife, whose name is Elizabeth, is ready to roast Atticus, and his forty pounds of fresh fat.

Millicent is watching Elizabeth chuck wood into the brick oven. Millicent herself is chained to the plum tree, can't do a thing. She thinks back to the day her step-mother Berbyl threw them into the truck to pick blackberries by Mule Deer while her father explained, "We have shopping, loan business to take care of. Then we're coming right back, we'll be right back."

"God, what are you placating them for?" Berbyl said. "They're your kids for chrissakes."

Millicent remembered how, on seeing the taillights of the truck, she vowed never to get back in to the truck with Berbyl again. She made Atticus vow too. She had already practiced at home. Practiced for the day she would run away. In her diary the week before she wrote:

> *I go into the woods a little at a time. Testing the hills, testing myself. I don't want to be afraid of the Glory Holes or the wildcats. Berbyl caught me wandering too far and it was as if she knew. She made sure to put a stop to it. I forced myself to try again. I knew each day I would*

go further. Looking out the dusty shed window where she locked me for a week, I could obey this stepmother and live in fear, or disobey her and create my own world, starting with the leaping hills.

On the lee side of Dead Man's Ridge was the desert: dried-up as lips no one wants to a kiss. Out there a man could burn-up and die for want of even a spindly tree, shade, a disappointed heart. She knew she could be as hard as the desert.

She looked across the ridge before jumping into the sweet-smelling valley that day, seeing the taillights disappear. Atticus followed. Boughs of fir wagged angry fingers: she heard them calling in Berbyl's voice. Millicent had never been as far as the next valley. Her foot seemed to soar as she stretched beyond the arid crossing and decided her father's farm could crumble under the mountainside.

In the woods she'd wanted so much for their lives, but they were tired and the grass lay down to pillow them.

One second Elizabeth is tossing wood in the fire. The next Millicent is imagining her gone.

Millicent had found out that when Trapper Red died, his widow Elizabeth opened a burger stand on the side of the Crow's Nest highway. It was said she roasted children, but in a small town people started rumours. Elizabeth had long been hated for her red scarf and uppity ways. Or maybe, the rumours were true: she had eaten a toddler that wandered from its mother at a campsite in Willow Beach, starting with the toes and ending with the eyes. Vile, inhuman, to force herself to do the most hellish things imaginable, punishing and grotesquely freeing herself both.

Chopping wood in the corner of the yard Millicent hears a melody tumbling out of her mouth like tears. Elizabeth winces, and stokes the fire, as if the wind is splintering and what she touches is too hot to bear.

"I love the succulent flesh of fat little boys," Elizabeth says.

Millicent can imagine the way Elizabeth's fingers will tear into her eyes, even with her osteoarthritis, when she attacks her. The way she knows she must, any second, to redeem her brother and herself.

"You're going to eat him."

"Yup."

"Why would you want to do that? I mean, wouldn't you feel sad or scared that you yourself had done it?"

"Don't talk to me," she says, unchaining Millicent so she can chop more wood near the pile of bones. "You h'ain't gotta clue."

"But we could help you around the house, with the firewood, the cleaning. You are so old."

"Go to hell. Why d'ya think I never had kids? Or maybe I did and ate

them too, whadya think of that?"

Her scarved head will burn first. Her black gum boots will melt if she pushes her in far enough. She continues humming a tune, wistful. Millicent sees the hair, the jacket, the black boots sizzling and melting like crayons.

Elizabeth lights a cigarette, her brown woollen pants thick-legged and stained. In that instant there is something in her that reminds her of Berbyl, the tiny lines pencilled in around her mouth, her skinny body leaning on the turned-over axe. Something about strength and fear and not finding the right infliction. Her gumboots disappear up to the ankles in the mud. She doesn't even make a face when she spits.

"Millicent, git over 'ere," she says.

Millicent approaches.

"I want you to stoke this fire. Then I'll share your brother with you. Lean in."

"I don't know how. Can you show me?"

"God lord, girl, how long you been living here and still hain't learned a thing."

As soon as Millicent is in position, she bulldozes Elizabeth into the fire. Her black gum boots hiss and pool. Flames blacken the lump of flesh like tiny tongues. Layers of skin peeled with the ease of the bark of arbutus trees.

At the same instant as Millicent kills Elizabeth, Berbyl feels vomit rising up, gurgling onto her undershirt. She lies on her back staring at the beams of the shed ceiling. She lets the bottle drop from her hand then regrets that she has let it fall. Atticus and Millicent: there is nothing to be done and no warm place to fall into without seeing their faces. In knowing herself, she feels used up.

Atticus and Millicent steal Elizabeth's Ford truck and use the road map they found on the shelf by the cat food to guide their way home. Millicent thinks about bones as she drives, of old cowboy trails, holding up the weight of ages. The roads on the map are white and look like bones, and there is something funny in that—embedded fossils, laid out in skeleton shapes, pushing up through flesh-coloured hills. There are so many ways for a road to end.

Millicent can see herself wearing out, like flesh growing papery and thin over time, to find the right one.

When the sun rises over Dead Man's Ridge she imagines she sees a cowboy riding on horseback, looking for a wife. And he will find her, not a princess of the prairie, but an evil maiden waiting to capture him easy as wind in the carved channels and sculpted grooves of Brampton's Hollow. They echo like bells, filled with the loneliness that always inhabits such vast spaces.

***

Hans sees a truck descending the potholed driveway and wonders who it could be. The grave he dug for Berbyl is still warm and soft.

When he realises it is a puffy Atticus and a worn-down-like-a-pencil-nub Millicent he faints for joy. He wakes up with his head in Millicent's lap.

"Your mother died," he says.

"She was never my mother," Millicent says. She is stroking his hair.

Atticus cries. He bursts into the house to find pictures of themselves, of zoos and parks, but naturally he can't, because there never were any at all.

Suddenly Millicent looks confused. "Dead? Are you sure?" she asks. Because Millicent can hear Berbyl's voice loud as lightening, and she feels torn-up inside like Berbyl has won again: Millicent was angry but Berbyl was angrier, taking away Millicent's right to howl and punch and cry.

It's not fair. The game is lost yet they are all liberated now. Millicent's chance will never come around again. The starving land itself seems to suck up any life in the sky and the suffocating air.

Johanna Skibsrud

The Cylinder, the Sphere, the Cone

"See in Nature," Paul Cézanne advised young artists, "the cylinder, the sphere, the cone."

I would urge you to see within the apple—everything.

I would say stare,
and when you have stared,
stare longer. Stare again.

Until there is no apple beside a pitcher, which
is not a pitcher—
by the pear, which is no pear—
but is a cylinder, a cone.

It will scare you half to death to find it. One day,
in glancing at your table, after having given up.

It is, after all, only after having stared
(at the dint in the side of the yellowing pitcher,
the chewed stem of a pear)
that you will see—suddenly—
and when you don't expect him,
your son.
The way he was at six—
catching the pocket of your coat
as you passed in the hall.

And all of Paris burning, you will see there.
And an idea of America,

and your own head,
bent back and floating
half-in, half-out of water.

An under-water sound.

A man and a dog will be there too—just there,
in the shape of the inkwell—

killing each other in your living room, over
and over again.
Put up with it, I advise you, then paint.

Paint forever that instinctive hand, reaching—
oh, your son at that holy age, forever!
Paint his staying the fringe of your torn coat as you pass,
paint him stalling you in the hall.

And that sound—which is not so much a sound as a skin,
soaked in cool water and loosened from bone—
paint it.

It will be you, then, and not the dog on the rug,
with your paw on the throat of the man.

The Art of Living One Hundred Years

Dr. Paul Ferdinand-Gachet, a friend of Paul Cézanne, spoke of someday completing a novel bearing this title.

I have invited the painter to tea but we hardly speak.
He is just across from me, pushing a new potato
about his plate with his knife.

It is a wonder to look
at the rough fingers of a painter on a fork,
and then glance above him,
to the left, at his picture—

I suppose that there are only those lucky few
(every man being a globe, and so round we spin)
capable enough of raising a hand, to still us long enough
at least to say "Behold!
A pear beside a tumbler!
Here, an onion!
Here, a woman!"

If I could, I would persuade him after the meal for a stroll
and tell him that such a lot gets lost
in unspent mornings.

I would urge him to rise early
and to eat two eggs which have been boiled hard.

Roy Kesey

Scroll

It took thirty-four years. He ate mostly raw garlic, and flour mixed with creek water, and occasionally splurged on noodles. He found work when necessary, plumbing and roofing and sometimes welding as well, but spent all other waking hours at the easel and now at last it was finished: the entire mountain range, minus the boring parts, the individually-stretched and -primed and -painted swatches stitched into a single canvas seven feet high and nine miles long.

By the time he was done, of course, many parts of the range were no longer as he'd painted them. Towns had been born, towns had aged, towns had died. Roads had been laid, had washed away. Quarries had cut holes, saws had cut trees, and the range as a whole was several thousandths of an inch shorter due mainly to rain and wind.

He tried not to think about this; thought instead of transportation, and hitched a ride to the Big M outside Albany. There he found a flatbed independent in ostrich skin boots, mucky emerald Kenworth with sapphire antennas and Brueghel on the bug screen.

He asked, and the man said it was maybe the load he'd been waiting for all his life. They deadheaded southwest, the jake brake on maxi as they fell down the hills; they hired junkies to help disassemble, to load and tie down. Then they aimed the rig toward the center of all meaningful things at that moment. The trucker turned on the radio and the painter sang harmonies until asked to please just stop. The mountains scrolled by outside.

–Seventy nine thousand, six hundred and eighteen pounds, said the trucker when they stopped on the scales. Little heavier than I thought, but we'll be all right.

–It can't weigh that much, said the painter. I used seven-ounce cotton duck and painted thin.

–I'm talking the whole shebang, said the trucker. Your picture there, plus the BCW, the oil and diesel, the mud on the flaps and the dust on the dashboard, me and you and the trailer tongue, the fresh water and grey water and black water and whatnot. But even dirty as she is, and I hate to see her this way, just hate it—I'll get you washed soon, old girl, and that's a promise, reverse-osmosis or deionized rinse, whatever your heart desires—at seventy nine thousand, six hundred and eighteen pounds we're

still inside the GVWR, is what I'm saying. We'll be just fine, is what I'm saying.

He bought the painter a Snickers and a Coke, lent him a Skoal cap to keep his ass from getting kicked by other truckers, and they waited in line to clear. The painter had run out of blue a mile from the end of the canvas, had used greys instead, but blue is kindness and greys are greed, that's what he'd always heard. He worried. He ate his Snickers and drank his Coke. He climbed back in the rig when the trucker told him it was time, and sat straighter than he otherwise might.

Again underway, the trucker pissed into empty bottles, held forth on Red Man and Rothko, clicked on the CB and picked up the mike. He chatted with Whambam, with Twelve-Finger Sammy, with the Big Black Bitch. They talked of roadwork and law enforcement and highway chiaroscuro. Six hours of this. Then the arrival.

***

The gallery owners looked and grinned and all said the same thing: A bit long for the living room, don't you think?

The painter composed a smile each time, and explained the imagined means: stainless steel scrolling posts five hundred yards apart, some minor questions of grommets and scaffolds and bearings and gears, a week to work up, ten days at the most. The trucker stood off to the side, cocked his head, watched the dealers pace and visualize.

–Are we talking Banvardian panoramism, or something more along the lines of Li Yushan at the Three Gorges?

–Neither, really, though a bit of both, I guess.

–And how do you plan to film it?

–I don't.

–You're sure? I'm thinking a video installation of some kind, with maybe—

–Nope.

–So this would be nothing but a scroll, scrolling.

–Exactly.

–No thanks, then. But thanks all the same.

When there were no remaining galleries to refuse him, the painter tried with municipal authorities, with co-op managers, with community college administrators. But they weren't sure. They couldn't say. They didn't think so, but were very glad he'd stopped by.

The painter told the trucker about the problem with blue and greys, asked if he had any ideas.

–Nothing wrong with your picture, said the trucker. These folks just aren't with the program, so fuck 'em and on down the road.

–Except there isn't anywhere for me to go at the moment, art-wise.

–Figuratively, is what I'm saying.

–This isn't helping.

The trucker shrugged.

–So maybe what you do is, you set up your scrollers and you film for a while. Middle lane, is what I'm saying.

–But it isn't a goddamn film. It's a painting, scrolled, end of story.

–Just thinking out loud here, bud. Just trying to help.

–I know. Sorry.

–Okey-doke, then.

–Indeed.

The trucker took his cash, dropped the painter off at an empty warehouse, scribbled down the number of a Tulsa truck stop payphone just in case. The painter sat still for a day. Then he hit the want ads, plumbed and roofed and welded to stay flush with flour and garlic, waited for an idea, and none came.

He circled and spun, swore and decided okay then, all right: digital video of the scrolling scroll, doing in time what no one wanted in space. Edgy was how he imagined it, light and darkness, cornices and crags. He borrowed equipment, built a small-scale version of the imagined means, filmed and filmed and in a month it was done: seventeen hours of moving mountains.

The gallery owners and municipal authorities and co-op managers and community college administrators were each thrilled and proposed significant editing. Cut it down to eight minutes, they said, and you've got a deal.

–It is not a group of pieces, said the painter. It is a single thing.

–A single impossibly long thing. Eight minutes, nine minutes tops, and we're good to go.

The painter thanked them for their input, walked out to the parking lots and keyed their cars. He then grew old very quickly—constipation, osteoarthritis, pigmentary glaucoma. He could no longer paint, could no longer weld or roof, could barely plumb. This, then, was it: his one large bit of art was what there was to be, his sole source of sustenance if he was to be sustained, and now an idea, a final idea, an unpleasant but only remaining option.

No local driver wanted the load—too heavy, they said, uninsured, they said, no way I want no hairy-leg riding along, they said—so he called the Tulsa pay phone every twenty minutes for eleven days, at last got the trucker and they worked to agreement. Fifty-one hours later the rig arrived, mud on the flaps, dust on the dashboard, the trucker strung on meth and smiling. They loaded up, and with scrolling posts included they were no longer inside the GVWR, but the trucker twitched twice, cocked his head, said they'd give it a go all the same.

They skirted the scales, paralleled the mountains, tried lake-towns and failed. They tried river-towns, and failed there too. They tried everywhere else and at last fell into luck: Thrombaccus had aged but not died, was sick of its sickened view and would have them. Ten days, then, and nearly as planned, a kiosk raised, the questions of grommets and scaffolds and bearings and gears answered, the posts installed five hundred yards apart between the town and its mountains sullied by quarries and clear-cuts and roads.

It was one a.m. when they started the pull, the trucker up high and the painter down low, flashlights in their mouths as they walked the edge of the painting toward the far post; it was six a.m. when they finished, the dawn sky opening behind them, the edge now secured, just the two men and the vast stretch of paint, light and darkness, cornices and crags. They stood and looked. They nodded and shook their heads.

–Nice little picture you got here, said the trucker.

–Thank you.

–Still and all. Shame it had to come to this.

The painter agreed, but was fairly sure there were worse things. He paid the trucker, tipped him a case of Snickers, waved as the rig pulled away and now people were coming to look. He stepped into the kiosk. He took up his bullhorn. He breathed deeply once and began to chant, A Dollar a Turn For a Chance to Paint on a Painting!

The good people of Thrombaccus would mainly paint more quarries, more clear-cuts, more roads, he knew, except for the children who'd perhaps paint giraffes; there would also be screeds and sermons, ads and aphorisms, Fuck You! and Asswipe! and Greta Please Come Home! When the current stretch was fully marred and they wanted their old new old view back, he'd run the scroll and they could start again. So it would go and the canvas would outlast his body; too bad, yes, but sustaining, and still a single thing, and as the line begins to form he imagines the postcard he'll one day send to Tulsa: All is well. Blue is kindness and greys are greed, but you already knew that. Keep her clean, is what I'm saying.

Anita Dolman

The Economist

Sits, patient behind desk, piled books outnumbering;
knows I'm not from here, not even, we've established,
from this part of the brain, but is kind,
as if I'm exotic, have been misplaced by my handler.

Normatively speaking, he says, and I try
to picture it, to remember the last rule I made:
maybe for the cat C not on the table at dinner; but the cat not understanding.
And, of course, I don't either; am prepared to be swatted down
for my failure to comprehend.

Think of your taxes, he says,
and, oh god, I'd rather not.
My receipts travel three provinces each
spring, so they can be as far from me as possible
when stripped to their numbers,
their key-stroked nudity too obscene for me to bear.

His office has a view, which I am watching, and a blackboard,
which hangs over; long blackness covered with measured art:
chalked spirals, prostituted letters, numbers
climbing each other across geometric scars, mechanical gestures of lines
building
towards Answer. Like words, I think,
he fragments the world in small insights.

Authored, he says. A book with graphs and tables. And I am lost again.
His paper scratching, number raking is genius
to others. Creative intensity. Analysis and theory.
Same desires, I think. His language cutting the world
into meaning, precise poems of explanation.
But not the same, I think, leaving. Can't be
so sure I'm right.

James Thomas

love, its problems

it started off with sex, then she complained of nausea.
she made a cup of peppermint tea thinking
it was good for digestion, it must help.

it didn't and robyn puked again—
while i was asleep, apparently—but she went back
and finished making her breakfast anyways.

so it started off with sex. then she complained of nausea, and then,
after all that, she brought a bagel back to bed
and woke me.

she rocked to keep her stomach easy
and each time robyn leant forward
her housecoat opened. the sling of her left breast lolled
out, like an exhalation.

its girth was just settled at the maw of her armpit,
just pronouncing its own om—a hermit—
when the curtain closed, and she complained of nausea again.

Krista Bridge

Retention with Afterflow

It was the beginning of winter, when threadbare skies and naked trees still seemed romantic, and I decided that having sex too often was making me look dirty. Just after dawn, I looked in the bathroom mirror and noticed that my skin looked greasy and tired, my arms looked undernourished and sinewy. I leaned my head back into the bedroom, where Stephen was still sleeping, and it smelled like breath, like mouths held open all night. I thought I might be tired of commitments.

This happened in the year I turned twenty-seven, just before I met my old friend Julie again. Before I met her husband, Angus, and a jolt of something keen and sly went through me. It was the year I learned that reciprocation need have no part in love.

Each morning and night, I took a hot shower and scrubbed myself with potent antibacterial soap. I massaged my scalp with tingly green shampoo that smelled of men's cologne. In the dawn cool of our apartment, I examined my hair, which hung in flat ropes, and my cheeks, which had no colour, and informed Stephen that we would no longer be having sex. All he did was raise his eyebrows. He was standing naked by the toaster. His body was wide and stocky, but his face had a prettiness about it—the kind of ordinary womanly prettiness that doesn't say anything. People sometimes thought we were brother and sister when we went out together, and I would stare at my face in the mirror when we got home and think of how profoundly insulted I was. Other times, I was grateful and knew I was lucky to be connected to him; I didn't have a job and he was a biotechnologist who supported me without a word of complaint.

He dropped two slices of bread into the toaster. It was his habit not to respond to me. He considered exaggeration the sign of a fanciful character, and was skilled at refusing to indulge it. When he sat down to the table, he slapped thick wedges of cold butter on his toast and said, "You're perfectly clean, you know. I've never seen anyone so clean. So if you want to stop, we'll stop, but I'm not the one waking up the neighbours at two o'clock in the morning."

We didn't stop having sex, though. In fact, I began to initiate it, often at two o'clock in the morning as he had said. The more I hated sex, the more I became convinced that it was robbing me of something fine and pure, the more defiantly I took to proclaiming my love of it. When Stephen traced

a hand along the side of my neck, I shuddered and moaned at a low, ripe pitch. When we moved from the kitchen to the bed, from the bathroom to the bed, from our desks to the bed, I panted meaningfully, as if I had never known such painful anticipation, such temptation. I shrieked as if sex were returning me to something essential, to a primordial kind of efficiency, as if only sex and breathing could be necessary. The more I wanted to push his body away, the more freely I screamed. Afterward, I would lie in bed with a burning between my legs and a ringing in my ears. I often couldn't sleep until I had a bag of frozen vegetables hugged between my thighs.

This became typical. I realized later that we were waiting to fall in love. All that teasing made us feel that it might be on the verge of happening, but it never did. All through autumn, we had been waiting, but we couldn't have said what we were waiting for. It was nothing palpable, like news of an exciting job opportunity or a windfall of money. Nonetheless, our time together had that useless, meandering quality time has when you are waiting for something golden and idealized, something transformative. This is what made our patience so thin, what made us turn to the rituals of sex, to its militant physicality. We were waiting for something that should have happened long before.

***

Julie was an old friend from high school. She was the kind of woman who could hear someone biting into an apple three rooms away: she was alert to the enthusiastic crunch, to each vigorous chew. It made the skin on the back of her neck spark. If she could, she got out of the vicinity. If that wasn't possible, she put on her Walkman. She believed that it was only polite to eat crunchy foods, such as carrots and chips, in high volume areas where lots of people were talking or televisions were blaring, or in isolated rooms where your chomping wouldn't be inflicted on others.

We met as teenagers, a time when every day held the possibility of treachery, at a small Toronto girls' school where our powers of fault observation became attuned like the hearing of wolves. I hadn't spoken to her since grade twelve, when I decided I was tired of her and started scrupulously avoiding her. Then, one day, we saw each other on the street. Two days later, we were sitting in a small café, our table ringed with sunlight.

Julie had always been one to find love, or the belief in it, everywhere. She was living with her husband, Angus, in North Toronto, but she could not stop on the subject of her therapist, whom she had seen just that morning. At the beginning of the therapy, he had been a disappointment, short and unattractive with copper-coloured hair and a bald patch he was attempting to conceal with highlights, but (no doubt through some devious psychological strategy, she said) he had gotten to her. She was having nightly dreams about him.

"I had a sexual nightmare," she told me. "I went for my appointment

and he wanted to take me somewhere else. I was afraid and didn't want to go, but felt I couldn't say no. So he drove me to an apartment building, and he had this stark, empty apartment there. We went in and he spread a blanket out on the floor, like we were going to have a picnic, and he was staring at me in a gross way, kind of flirty and scolding. Then he started stroking my breast over my sweater in a slow, horrible way. He was sitting cross-legged and his penis was bulging out of his pants. I was afraid of him and wanted to get out, but I didn't want to be rude. I thought that it was best to go along with it and get it over with. I kept noticing this bare patch of skin above his black socks, and it made me hate him."

After that, at a mainly silent session during which he watched Julie while she sighed theatrically and contemplated the diplomas on his wall, she had suggested leaving. He shook his head apologetically and smiled as if at a small child pleading for candy. It was unthinkable, he explained, she wasn't nearly ready to be on her own. "You're being resistant," he said with a tender dip of his head. "But that's part of the process."

I told her that twice I had seen a female therapist who called me "Doll" and assigned as homework a book entitled *Good-bye Mother, Hello Woman.*

"I know," said Julie. "They're all bullshit. I can see that, but I can't see that, if you know what I mean."

I did know what she meant, exactly.

"Then I was in his office and I noticed that he really did have a white band of skin showing between his socks and his pants." She blew on her tea. "And I realized I had always seen it there, but obviously I had repressed it because it is so revolting. The hair is sparse. His skin makes me think of chickens."

We put fresh tea bags in our mugs and steeped them until the tea was almost as dark as coffee. In those days, we were always tired. We ate crunchy winter peaches she had smuggled into the café.

Julie spoke to me as if we had never stopped speaking. She had never been one for slow introductions, for easing through beginnings that could be bypassed. Her voice was full of impetuous good will, a desire to abandon false reserve, and she made me feel I didn't have to work with her. As a teenager, her voice had had a kind of gilded elegance, a regal breathiness that would have suited someone older. Her adult voice was the opposite—loose and sing-song, countrified. It made our conversation seem friendly and expansive, something not bound by consequence and expectation, unencumbered by the reserved hostilities that weighted my conversations with Stephen. We talked with that rare mix of comfort and newness that occurs with girls quite young. She took a long breath, looked at me and said, "I've missed you." It was the only time I had been out of Stephen's and my apartment in three days, and I was hungry for the first time in a week. I let out a long breath in the winter sun, listening to her. I thought,

this is it, finally, here is what I need: a warping and rechanneling of routine, unplanned alterations.

"I think I'm secretly in love with Dr. Stillman," she said.

Looking back, I can see how what seemed so lovely was in fact the start of the problem. Julie seemed so easy, and it had been so long since I'd felt easy. I wanted something of her life, so that I would feel as she seemed to. It was an impulse that was cousin to the wish I'd had as a child when I wanted to be someone else altogether, when I would violently pray to slip out of my own skin and into the body of the girl next door who had long blonde hair, wore ballet shoes everywhere, and did pirouettes under the apple tree in her backyard. At the time, though, sitting across from Julie with the sun on my face, I wasn't aware of my more selfish instincts. It was years until I realized that I had not wanted to take part in, but to take. Then, I thought not of theft but of truth. It had been so long since I had talked to someone as truthful as Julie; I believed everything she said. I did not consider her the type for reckless statements of extreme emotion. Pronouncements of that order were my territory. It all seemed simple enough. Julie felt a kind of repelled love for her therapist, a pornographic undercurrent in every moment she spent with him. She hated her husband.

I suppose I had such need that I could not separate, then, what she told me from what I believed she had told me.

***

The first time I met Angus, Julie wasn't there. She had invited me to her house for breakfast, and when I arrived, there was only him, sitting in the back of the house in a small greenhouse he'd built. He was surrounded by glossy emerald-green plants and ink-stained paper. I remembered, even years later, exactly how he had smelled, like tree roots and ravine air.

When I arrived, no one answered the door. After knocking and ringing the doorbell for five minutes, I finally went around to the backyard. I had it in my head that Julie might be gardening, that it was the kind of thing she might do, even though it was December. I was calling Julie's name as I walked around to the back and saw the greenhouse. I knocked on its glass door and turned the knob, which was unlocked. When I went in, at the far end I saw a man sitting at a desk, facing the rear windows. I walked over slowly.

"Is Julie here?" I asked. I didn't feel in the least embarrassed that I had just walked into a stranger's house.

The man turned around. All around him were plants, on shelves along the windows, on the floor in large ceramic pots. The desk itself was covered in loose papers. His eyes were green. They were half-open, but gave the impression of uncommon alertness.

"You're Julie's friend," he said.

I nodded. "She invited me for breakfast."

"She's not here," he said. "She went to a medical doctor. Her therapist. But he is, in fact, a medical doctor."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"It was an emergency," he added, but didn't say what the emergency was, and I didn't ask.

"Would you like to sit?" he asked, disappearing into the kitchen. He returned dragging a chair.

"I can go," I said. "I don't want to interrupt."

He set the chair down definitively.

He was wearing a T-shirt that said, "I'm surrounded by assholes," and I noticed when he came close that all his fingernails were bitten. He was tall and had a flabby kind of thinness, with a little belly that went around his waistline like a snake. Julie told me that he was a psychology professor at the University of Toronto and had been known to wear this T-shirt on teaching days, and he was working hard, researching an article on the psychological underpinnings of drunk and sobre decision-making. I imagined him lecturing a hall of first-year students, the kind of teenagers who ingratiate themselves with a well-timed compliment, then devastate you with a smirk of pure contempt. I asked him about his research and he talked about it with jumpy gestures which periodically blew the papers off his desk.

"What people don't understand," he finished off by saying, "is that people who are drunk are actually less likely to have unprotected sex. So you see, people don't often make the decisions you think they will make."

He looked at my stomach while he spoke. There was a sweet asexuality about him. He seemed an odd mixture of jittery discomfort and academic composure. His entire body stayed perfectly still while his hands flapped nervously. I thought he was probably often on the receiving end of that dirty adolescent laughter, the kind of laughter that means you to know you're being laughed at. Julie had told me that he had been married before. When he was twenty-five, he had married a red-head who was fifty but looked thirty. She was perpetually melancholy, a closet poet. Incurably miserable, even though he did all sorts of things to cheer her up, like bringing home mint chocolate chip ice cream and surprising her with funny rhymes about grumpiness. She wouldn't snap out of it. Being a poet said a lot about a person, Julie pointed out. He shouldn't have been surprised by what happened. He came home one day to find that she had sloppily burned all her poems, which he hadn't even known existed, in the middle of the kitchen floor, and all her clothes were gone. Everywhere were little burned bits of paper with allusions to other poems, such as "The Grecian urn has cracked," and "We will not go then you and I until our blood has lit the morning sky."

"When you marry a divorced man, you're getting another woman's baggage," Julie had said in a satisfied sort of way.

Angus stretched his spine over the back of his chair, and his T-shirt receded, exposing the lower part of his stomach. I noticed he had a scar the shape of a crescent moon over his navel.

"Would you mind if I had a glass of water?" I asked.

"Go ahead and help yourself," he said. He turned around and started writing as if I weren't there.

I walked back toward the kitchen. The greenhouse was overheated, and I was sweating under my heavy sweater and winter coat. I stood in the middle of their kitchen. I couldn't hear street noises or Angus moving in the greenhouse, just the distant stir of old copper pipes. I do not know what I thought of Angus then. Certainly I was not aware of any romantic envy of Julie, any immediate fascination with his sexual self, or even the kind of person he was. What I felt most was the nosiness that had at one time been my most infamous character trait, that itchy longing to know other people's business that had led my sister to have a lock put on her door when she was fourteen. I was not a gossip but a terrible snoop, a seasoned reader of diaries in night tables and letters in desk drawers. I had even been known in grade school to pocket notes meant for other people.

I looked at the kitchen ceiling and imagined I could hear the paint chipping slowly, peeling away in smooth curls. The glasses were in the first cupboard I opened, but I kept going. I inched each cupboard door open, afraid that their creaky hinges would give me away. I wasn't looking for anything specific, just the usual. Something distasteful, something foreign and subversive. Things I would never buy. Teriyaki sauce. Gnocchi. Strawberry Pop Tarts. Crystal Light drink mix. But Julie's cupboards were stacked just like mine. Rice Krispies. Peanut butter. Spaghetti noodles. It was all the same. I couldn't quite see to the top shelf, but I thought I glimpsed something familiar. I leaned around the corner and saw Angus, sitting motionless with his back to me, at his desk. Quickly, I pulled myself up onto the counter, determined to find out what was up there. I stooped on the counter so my head wouldn't hit the ceiling, and looked into the top shelf. In the corner was a boiled egg holder in the shape of Humpty Dumpty, a birthday present I had given Julie when she turned fifteen, in the days when she was caught up in memorizing nursery rhymes. I held it in my hand for a minute, then put it down and started digging to the back of the highest shelf. It was mostly cobwebs and kitchen things no one ever used, like beer mugs and rusty whisks.

I was trying to figure out what Angus's favourite foods might be when he walked in. He stood quietly for a minute. My arm was extended into the back corner of the cupboard farthest from the door.

"What are you doing?" he asked. He sounded calm and curious, as if he

had just caught me in the middle of a benign activity, like reading a geography book.

He came over to the counter and stood beneath me, looking up. He lifted his arms like a child, and I lowered myself into them. He set me on the ground delicately and looked at me. In his eyes, I saw the possibility that he had never harmed anyone.

Then he turned to the refrigerator and took out a pitcher of water.

I stood behind him and tried not to imagine myself touching the worn back of his T-shirt.

***

The shift from friend to competitor was sudden and surprised even me. Julie was on my mind constantly. One morning, I awoke at dawn in the middle of a dream because a branch was scratching the window next to my cheek. I opened my eyes with a start because I imagined, in the lazy tension of half-sleep, that men with long fingernails were trying to climb into my apartment through the window. I could hear the pull and creak of streetcars outside. Stephen was not moving beside me.

I had dreamed that I was standing in the greenhouse with Angus. My hair was wet, and had frozen in the cold air. He went over to his desk and sat down, then opened the top, pulled out a piece of paper, and handed it to me. The writing was neat, in clear black ink: Love is for others.

"You feel that way, don't you?" he asked. His voice sounded slender and relaxed, cigarette-tipped.

He undressed me slowly and held me. His body was nearly hairless, but it had the kind of masculinity that doesn't need to announce itself. Then my high school math teacher came to the door and said, "But you haven't done your homework," and I turned from Angus and noticed that the plants were actually car parts.

I wouldn't have called it longing, what I felt in the dream. It was more of a solemn, furtive feeling, the sensation you get when you tell a lie simply for the sake of entertainment. I thought there was something sort of obscene about longing anyway, something lustful and vapid. It made me think of musty motel rooms and too many lit candles, of booming bass and cars with tinted windows, Stephen's hot breath in my face. It was not something you could feel with a quiet man in a greenhouse mid-morning. It was not something you could feel as you rose slowly from the ground with that man, as he took off your coat with a pure sadness like the sadness of childhood, as he pulled your sweater over your head and unhooked your bra, as he unbuttoned your pants and let them drop around your ankles. It was not something you could feel when he reached out his hands, when your breasts felt firm in his grip.

But, oh, the longing did come later, when Julie called before breakfast

and I heard Angus in the background asking her about strawberry jam. When she wanted to make plans and I found that I was trying to contrive something where he might be there. Lying in bed every night for a week thinking of my dream and wondering whether Julie and Angus were in their bedroom, talking in intimate spousal voices. It came with a smacking vengeance that made me vile to anyone who dared speak to me. Does it matter whether we create these feelings or whether they have grounding in something substantial? No, I think not. I found ways to support my beliefs, as people often will when they are working from nothing.

Julie and I met one Saturday afternoon, because Angus was at work and Julie wanted to be entertained. It was a strangely warm December day, and we went for a walk by the river down in the Rosedale golf course. Our jackets were open, and we were wearing thin T-shirts underneath. We were talking casually, with the relief that comes with spring, as if dirty street snow was just behind us and not still to come.

She told me that Angus was in a depression. She said it just that way several times—in a depression—rather than saying he was depressed. This made me picture Angus sitting in a groove dug out in the ground, just sitting there calmly. I imagined his face the way it was when he found me going through the kitchen cupboards: bemused, allowing, detached in an affectionate way. I already imagined that his face often carried this expression to some degree, so he could conceal what he was truly thinking. And I believed that this was the face of someone I could finally love, someone who kept things hidden, unlike Stephen, who showed whatever he happened to be feeling.

Julie said that Angus suffered these depressive bouts frequently. Two years before, he had had a near-death experience and he had not fully recovered from its impact. He had gone into the hospital to have his gall bladder removed by laparoscopic surgery, and was allergic to the anaesthetic. His blood pressure dropped and he went into cardiac arrest. In the end, he was fine, but he told Julie afterward that he had been dead for a moment. For the rest of his stay in the hospital, he had acted strange, quiet and punished. She attributed his behaviour to nerves. Then he told her when they got home that something had happened when he was hovering near death. Julie drew out these words with relish—hovering near death—as if she was proud of Angus for such an accomplishment, impressed by his ability to almost die when the rest of us landed squarely in one extreme or the other. He had announced in the middle of the kitchen that almost dying was like having an extended orgasm.

"He tells me this, standing in the middle of the kitchen with the lights on full!" she said.

He had encouraged Julie to imagine the most intense orgasm she had ever had, one that went on and on, the kind that made you feel, for a few

minutes anyway, that everything in the world is fine, anything could happen. "That was what it was like when I almost died," he said, pouring orange juice. He told her that he had never experienced bliss quite like that, and knew he wouldn't again, not until he really died. Then she said that once, after he got out of the hospital, he took too many Tylenols, a fraction of him hoping to die, a fraction hoping not to, just so he could have that feeling again, that ringing physical bliss, even in his forehead and his fingertips.

"That's why he still gets depressed sometimes," she said. "Dr. Stillman and I have analyzed it. He misses that feeling and wants to have it again. Then he feels guilty because of me. Also, he realizes he doesn't really want to die."

I didn't say much while she was talking. Julie had always been someone who could talk on and on and get no response. The more I heard about Angus, the more I believed I was bound to him beyond all reason. When I was three, I had run headfirst into a wide concrete pillar in a neighbour's basement, and I had never forgotten the feeling I had at the exact moment of impact. A wonderful numbing had come before the pain, before I was carted upstairs and given a squeaky orange teddy bear, before my forehead split from the swelling and bled down onto my nose, long before the neighbour jarred me with her cheese breath and tried to lull me to sleep (tempting death by concussion, my mother later accused). I had never forgotten that moment of impact, my head banging so hard that my entire body catapulted into a state of deep relaxation. For years after, I wondered if that's what it was to have something so close upon you—it felt like anything but the thing it was.

I believed that not only was Angus' sexuality concealed and resplendent, but in fact made more brilliant and forceful by its removal from the public view. You would not know his desire until it was upon you. He would stand by what did not make good sense, by a sensation that had occurred when he was too compromised to confirm it lucidly. Never would I have guessed such things about him at our first meeting. Stephen would roll his eyes at such musings. He would make jokes. "I went to the car wash today. It was like skydiving from a plane up in the clouds."

The more Julie spoke, the more I began to think it was only right that I should feel the way I did about Angus. I felt that, although she was his wife, she was clearly not an authority on his character and in fact knew nothing about him that really mattered. She might know his toothpaste brand and the colour of his underwear. She might know the sound of his breathing in the dark. But these things couldn't matter if they weren't attached to a more important, resonant knowledge, if they weren't attached to a silent connection of wills, to a cloistering of affection.

The languages of obsession and reason are often alike: arguments are

measured out carefully, with passion that restrains itself, with the bite of superiority.

I crouched by the river, and swept my fingers through the current. Julie knelt beside and put her arms around me.

"Anyway," she said, "I just can't stand it when he gets this way. He's just black black black."

"Look on the bright side," I said. "If he were happy, you'd have nothing to complain about."

She didn't take her arm off my shoulder, and she showed no surprise, but I saw her face steady itself as she looked toward the ground. I could tell she was making her way back from me.

She was so present beside me that it seemed she was very far away.

***

When Julie and I first became friends in grade ten, I was designated to keep track of her homework and upcoming assignments because she was going to be out of school for two weeks. It was a minor surgery, but she had planned enough time to recover fully before returning. We had known each other before but never been friends. There was a certain rowdiness about her that was off-putting. When she laughed, I thought there was mockery in it; I thought she was noticing that my ponytail wasn't as smooth as hers, that my breath wasn't quite right, or that the pleats in the back of my kilt had worn flat. Our teacher had chosen me to take her work to her because we lived near each other. The first time we sat down in her kitchen, to make a schedule for when I would come by, she told me about her surgery. She had a problem called retention with afterflow. It was a bladder problem, more common among older women. She would think she had emptied her bladder, then she would have to go a little more, sometimes even urinating a bit without feeling it.

"It's just that it doesn't all come out when you want it to," she said. "There it is a bit later, when you have no control."

Her mother thought it was caused by the fact that Julie, as a child, had refused to urinate more than twice a day and had even gone away for the weekend to a friend's cottage and drank little and only allowed herself to go when everyone was outside, after she had already been there for almost twenty-four hours. She was mortified by the prospect of people hearing the revealing tinkle through the thin wooden walls. Of course, Julie's mother had no medical knowledge whatsoever, other than being married to a cardiologist and being impressed by all doctors. She was a shopgirl at Holt Renfrew and had long, thick red nails. She insisted that all their cars have vanity plates and claimed that there was not a man alive who could fail to become pitifully besotted with Julie. When she talked about the reason for Julie's retention with afterflow, her voice became loud and nasal

and she used words that were not words, like "lossage" and "drainery" and "expulge."

I was surprised and honoured that Julie told me the reason for her surgery so openly, given that she had the kind of mother who invented words to replace the words that corresponded to the real functions of the human body. Julie always surprised me in this way. She would behave in a certain way, which her behaviour a moment later would call into question, then revise. She could be ashamed at the prospect of people hearing her urinate, and also capable of telling me she had a bladder control problem. I discovered later in our friendship that Julie was like this. Verbally, she was telling and factual. But there was something beyond this too, something directly contradictory, the side given to petty anxieties. Julie had a skill for seeming to reveal without actually revealing.

She bonded with my mother over their fondness for discussing sex, but even then she never went deep into her feelings. I came from looser people than Julie but had turned out much tighter. In my house, the toilet was likely to be full of unflushed urine at any given time. Julie had sex, which her mother did not know, and she and my mother were united through their sex-loving complacency. My mother was disturbed by my lack of sexual activity, and she wanted to be reassured that I masturbated. She seemed to harbour suspicions that I was not sufficiently sexual, and that I failed to experience the degree of horniness that normal teenage girls did. When facing her inquiries, I often pretended that I did masturbate regularly, although I did not, simply to ease her mind. Later, during my phase of furious sex with Stephen, my mother came to visit and made it known to me before she left that she was delighted to see three empty condom boxes in the garbage.

"I feel personally rewarded," she said. "Personally rewarded."

About halfway through grade ten, Julie broke up with her first boyfriend, and for six months in the wake of the break-up, he argued for her love through daily letters. "He's obsessed," Julie told my mother matter-of-factly and my mother nodded eagerly, somehow beaming without actually smiling. The three of us pored over his letters at my dining room table after school. "You move through my head like some useless tune I have unconsciously taken to," he wrote. "I whistle your cherry kiss, your sweet honey voice all day. I hum your spirit!" Each paragraph ended with an exclamation mark. He never signed his name to the letters, and in one of them explained that he couldn't bring himself to sign his name to Julie. He was afraid that the name would throw her off, that she wouldn't be able to connect it to the person he was in her head. "It is my label, but it is not my essence as you know it," he wrote. He spoke frequently of his essence. Instead of signing, he trailed off each letter with a squiggly line.

I used to lie in bed at night wondering what it was like to be on the

receiving end of obsession. It seemed to me the most honourable gift you could bestow upon someone. I knew I would behave quite differently than Julie if someone were possessed by me, consumed to the point of superlatives and imperatives, the hyperbolic language of hope and defeat. Julie and I talked endlessly about the facts of the letters, but Julie never examined her own feelings about them. Julie and my mother laughed to read the boy's words. It was clear that Julie didn't feel adoration gave her anything extra; she never thought it nourished her in some way she was not already nourished. And for this I sometimes hated her. I recorded in my diary on May 12, 1990 that her smile was wide, but empty.

For years I practiced skilled circumvention. There was no moment in which I ever saw myself as someone who only wanted what was not mine.

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As I lay in bed at night, two scenes came to me again and again. One was real, the other not, though they seemed to have switched places in my mind, with the real masquerading as fantasy, the fantasy posing as reality. The real scene loitered in my head in a lazy way, in the washed-out grey of distant imaginings, so that I had to remind myself that it had happened:

Stephen is at work on his computer when I get home from a walk, but he gets up energetically when I come in. I turn my back to him as I close the door and hang up my coat, and he comes up behind me and grabs me around the waist. He presses himself into me and rocks me from side to side in his arms.

"How was your walk?" He speaks directly into my ear and I can feel his breath deep in my ear canal. He smells of wet wool and apples. He keeps rocking me and I resist. "Come on. Won't you dance with me?"

I wrench his arms loose enough to turn around, and he bends his knees and slings me over his shoulder in a fireman's grip, laughing uproariously, as if we are two university students who have been drunkenly flirting and touching and sidling our way toward sex all night.

"Ouch," I say, pushing at his head. "Your shoulder is digging into my stomach."

He half-runs across the living room into the bedroom and throws me down on the bed. He descends on me quickly and straddles my legs so I can't move. He looks down into my face.

"Get off me," I say, squirming.

He holds his hand above my stomach, soaring it back and forth like an airplane. "This is the hand," he says with dramatic menace. "This is the hand that has come to discipline you."

He pulls up my shirt and starts tickling my stomach and underarms and the back of my neck. I bat him away until he grabs both of my wrists in one of his hands and holds them against the mattress above my head, all

the while tickling me with his other hand. I try to move my legs, but he has me pinned firmly.

"Stop it."

"Oh no," he laughs. "The discipline has just begun."

I squirm up enough to flip over onto my stomach, and I start to crawl away. I kick at him and he grabs my ankle. Then he catches hold of my waist and twists me again onto my back. He moves his hand up to the side of my cheek and kisses the length of my neck. Long wet kisses broken up by tiny nips at my ear.

"Ah ha," he whispers. "Submission at last."

Separating truth from imagining can be like devising a list of pros and cons. I had to puzzle it out, focus hard to determine which was which. The more I entertained my fantasies about Angus, the more real they became, while the truth of my moments with Stephen faded the more I considered them—with playing and replaying, they became as tepid and irrelevant as childhood nightmares. I could not fathom that these dreams about Angus had not happened:

A gift arrives in a cardboard box wrapped in plain cardboard-coloured paper. My name and address are printed across the top in black marker. I set it on the bed and begin to unwrap, carefully peeling back the tape so I won't rip the thick brown paper. Inside is a long flannel Victorian nightgown with an antique, yellowing lace trim. I hold it out in front of me, and the hem dangles to the ground. I glance back to the box, and a handwritten note is lying at the bottom. I know it is Angus' handwriting. "Wear this sometimes, and think of me," is all it says. I slip the nightgown over my head, and it makes me feel generous and untroubled, like a woman from another era. A woman with a softened imperial dignity, an innate nobility that doesn't think itself noble. I feel this so strongly I can't conceive of it not being real.

Phones ringing. Letters arriving under cover of night, sealed with a stamp of dark red wax. Being lifted as he lifted me that day from the counter in his kitchen, as if I weighed nothing. He holds me, as in my first dream about him, and the air in his greenhouse is so humid it coats us with dampness. He is always naked and never naked. Wherever we have been is a spasm of silence in the air, the silence of allowing. No laughter, sharp like the smell of scotch. No shrieks of abandon, promises or retractions.

For two weeks, I even checked my drawers for the nightgown.

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Wanting Angus made me secretive and strong. It allowed me to escape from the dependence and irritation and lethargy that had been my everyday life for so long. I tried out different roles that kept me feeling light and powerful when I was with Julie. Concerned supporter, analyzer of thera-

peutic intentions. Deliverer of ribald stories about the mania of sex. Devotee of yoga and all secular spirituality. Long-suffering girlfriend, stoic while being taken for granted by the man to whom she gives everything. I told her about the fights with Stephen. I made them sound more dazzling and tragic than they were. I told her we yelled so loudly that the neighbours pounded on the walls. In truth, we hardly raised our voices. The fights had a kind of opacity to them, unfolding in gestures like the disgusted turning of a head. Gritty voices punctuated by long bouts of awkward silence. I told how he resented me for refusing to make eye contact, and how he forcefully turned my head to his and pushed my eyelids back. I made this moment sound desperate and dangerous, when it had actually been jokey. Even in the thick of the fights, that pungent cauldron of accusations and door slamming, our hearts didn't seem to be in it. Our words and gestures had a certain spent quality, as if we knew we should be doing better but couldn't dredge up the energy.

All this allowed me to feel that I was on a level playing field with Julie. I served myself up as someone with a teeming and exotic life, a person worthy of shock and concern. It helped me get used to how much the same Julie looked, with the same healthy, bouncy hair, the same blush cheeks, when I feared the way I looked might be held up as an example of the ravages of aging. By this time, I had noticed a trademark tone of voice when Julie spoke of Angus. She talked about everything from his desire to invest their money unwisely to the way he poured chocolate soy milk on his Cheerios. There was always a conceited contempt in her voice, as if she was gratified to have a husband about whom she could complain. I was careful to show nothing. I asked no questions when it came to him.

Later, I would rant to Stephen.

"This is why we couldn't stay friends in high school," I said. "Julie is a woman who has everything and thinks she has nothing."

"Is that why you couldn't stay friends?"

"Absolutely! I tried but it became too much."

He pointed out that I had never kept any friend for more than two years.

"Well, she's always been this great complainer. But an outward complainer only. I can assure you Julie doesn't cry herself to sleep at night."

"Maybe she's going through something. It's temporary."

"And she has this terrific husband," I said. "Terrific."

"Terrific?" he asked. Terrific was not a word I ever used.

"Terrific," I said again emphatically.

Stephen said something about how he was glad men weren't friends the way women were. He had known all his closest friends since high school, and they spoke an intimate code, full of nicknames and short forms, like lovers almost. He said female friendships were a process of dissection, but a dissection performed without a scalpel or a clear knowledge of what you

were supposed to remove.

Julie printed out e-mails written to her by two close male friends and showed them to me. One had recently moved to New York. The other had retreated from her life after objections from Angus. Both professed feeling adrift in their lives, without the easy intimacy they had with Julie to sustain them through each day. One said that he could not see the interior of an almond without thinking of the colour of her skin.

Julie said, "This happens to me sometimes. People think I'm the person they connect with best."

Not me, I thought. I felt superior, a kind of calm, bitter triumph that no one really knew me.

***

I only saw Julie and Angus together once. One evening I met Julie at their house before we went to a movie, and we were in the kitchen. Julie was standing with her back to the greenhouse and I was sitting at the antique oak table facing it. Angus came up behind her, put his arms around her waist and swung her around, laughing.

I noticed that his gums showed as he laughed. This made him seem like an altogether different person, more eager and vulnerable.

He heaved her up and swung her around, let his head fall back. His gums looked hard and streaky, not a uniform pink, bright flashes of red.

I thought I detected that he was careful not to look at me.

Still laughing, walking with a dizzy clumsiness, Julie went down the front hall to get her purse. When she was halfway along the hall, she stopped and did a little jump with a sideways kick.

For a long time after that, I tried to replay what happened next, tried to rescue it from the canals of memory and set it before me like an artifact, so I could determine whether I saw what I thought I saw. I had been drinking tea while Julie put on her makeup, and I had left my cup half-full on the counter. While I was watching Julie, I thought I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Angus pick up my tea cup and hold it to his lips in a casual but lingering way, then take a long sip. By the time I turned to him, he had put the cup down and lowered his arms to his sides as if nothing had happened.

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What happened next I am sure of.

I went to Julie's when no one was home and let myself in. Julie always left the back door, the greenhouse door, unlocked. I took a roll of quarters with me and stopped at a pay phone to call her house every ten minutes on my way to make sure no one was home. It was a cold, windy day, and as I stood in the phone booths, I imagined the wind would blow the glass in on me and I would have to go home to Stephen cut and bleeding, possibly disfigured and knowing I deserved it. I came up with a story about why I

was cut in case this happened. My story was logical and I took care not to make it too dramatic. I had spent the past week being vigilant about nearly everything—it was not easy to be as watchful, as detail-conscious, as vigilance required but also to be so broad about it, noticing everything from the chipping paint on the windowsills to the fingerprints on the metal of the toaster to the background voices on Julie's answering machine.

It was two o'clock, and I knew from the e-mails Julie sent me from work that she didn't generally leave until four o'clock.

I knocked on the front door, then the back door to affirm again that no one was home. Then I eased the door open and went inside. I thought, what I'm doing is fine because I know it is not fine. I'm not a bad person if I think I'm a bad person. I decided that Julie was, ultimately, better than me, as I walked through the greenhouse into the kitchen. As I looked again through the cupboards and listened to her answering machine, I repeated to myself that as long as I understood that fundamental difference between us, everything I did remained in the realm of the acceptable.

I started up the stairs to look through their dresser drawers and their bathroom cabinet, then I doubled back to the kitchen and opened the door to the greenhouse. It was hot again inside, and the heaters were churning loudly. At the far end, Angus' desk had been cleared of papers. I went over and stared down at it before opening its top. It was an old-fashioned desk, a large version of a child's school desk. In high school, Julie and I had had desks like these, but they were connected, the seat of each moulded into the desk behind it. Sometimes we rocked aggressively in our chairs, trying to topple the whole row. This was a solid desk, an antique, and the top creaked loudly as I raised it. The inside was a mess. All the papers had been stuffed in and some pieces were half crumpled. It was one of these that I took, smoothed out, and read: "I will always remember the flat underside of your forearms, your sideways smile." This line was written over and over, at different angles all over the page. I put it back and pulled out another. The writing was cramped and difficult to read.

She looks at me through the distance of waves.
She tells me
asking gets us less
and less will never give to more.

It's all liquid in memory:
loving her too much
is the swell through me.
The sound that crests quietly on the surface,
but resounds in the lapping wide deep
far below.

I flipped the page over. On the back, the sentence "I would have allowed you anything" was crossed out and he had written above and below it, "Your long thick hair, your path-worn stare." I stuffed these papers back into the desk and tried to make it look as disorganized as when I started.

I sat on Angus' chair. This was my moment. The pile of evidence that confirmed the theories I had been amassing. Angus was a man with secrets. Julie did not really know him. He was the kind of man a woman could never really know, a man who holds his privacy as privilege. At this moment, I was certain he had drunk from my teacup. I was certain that he had held the tea on his tongue, turning it over like fine wine, possibly even hoping my saliva was in it. I ignored the real smile on his face when he had spun Julie around, the goofy splendour of it. There was nowhere my mind didn't go. I planned that we would have dinner parties when we were together. Although I hated cooking, I imagined that we would invite Julie; we would adopt her and feed her nourishing food as a break from the frozen dinners she would be addicted to. She would be gracious about our efforts and she would entertain us with stories of her hapless loves, the men who stuck around but failed to please. There would be a rich dark library in our house, books piled up against walls everywhere, and we would sit in leather armchairs while Julie cheerfully wallowed and we would pity her the fleeting joys she magnified to get herself through each day.

Did I think the poems were written for me? I do not know. Later, I allowed myself to acknowledge that there had been a framed black-and-white photograph of Julie on top of the desk, and that there was a difference in her smile, something lopsided and unpretty, careless and altogether transformative.

Then, though, walking home, I did not think that I wouldn't talk to Julie again. That I would be besieged by visions of Julie and Angus in bed, images of Angus laughing at me with his arm fixed around Julie's waist. Julie didn't call me for days, and I became convinced that they had a hidden camera in the greenhouse recording all my actions and that they watched it at night in their den, whispering to each other words like unbalanced, congratulating themselves for installing surveillance that rescued their marriage from me. I heard the word *rescued*, its world of protection and companionship, over and over until I crawled under the covers. When the phone did start ringing, I let it ring and ring through the day. I did not know as I walked home that I would feel so virulently that I had no choice other than this course of action. That it would be months before I could even regain enough sense to ask myself who I felt I had lost.

No, that day as I walked home, I felt euphoric. There was even flight in my step. There was an energy in the trees that week, a windiness that was caustic and rowdy. Branches scraped our windows while we slept. A truck

tipped over on the highway. Sometimes the wind was loud, gusty, and we could hear it ripping around outside, whistling like a kettle, banging up against buildings. Sometimes it was quiet, rolling evenly over the city. The day before, Stephen had come home with a cut the length of his cheek—when he was walking home, a branch had snapped off a tree and flown into his face.

As teenagers, Julie and I had loved winds like this. On our way home from school, we would toss aside our knapsacks and stand facing the wind, letting our hair whip around until it was tangled up in knots. It was the only ritual of our friendship, the only thing I could look back on years later, and know that we had shared in invention. Leaning into the dusty currents, we would trudge uphill, chins upright, like young women coaxing older lovers.

We always reached her house first, and I would leave her there, waving, on the doorstep, then make the rest of my way home alone. I would think of how the school day never seemed to be over, as I gathered up its contents and examined them, mapping each hour's grievances and victories, contracts broken, the sullen intimacies, and my peculiar, unmendable mistakes.

Juan Carlos Galeano
translated from the Spanish by Scott Bailey and Rebecca Morgan

The Wait

He who waits watches the landscape through the window
for the one who is not coming.

He who is not coming can be seen very well in the distance.
He can be seen in a solitary boat, in the sky, in the clouds.

Two trees stretch their branches to toast the day's success.

He who waits would be happy if the specks of sun coming into the living room
would turn into the one who is coming.

He who is not coming rides by on the back of a fly without even saying hello.
Even though later, in many places, they always greet each other.

He who waits would like the solitary boat and the clouds to worry.
It wouldn't be bad if the toasting trees showed a little concern, too.

Pasture

Grass grows on houses, on our bodies, our ears, and pockets.

While my father reads his newspaper, two bunnies graze happily on his arms.

The trucks bringing giant trees for the botanical gardens
approach like islands floating through the grass.

Many mothers take advantage of the dew to comb
their children's grass.

Every day butterflies come to take sun baths in our living room,
and a dragonfly on my sister's green blouse resembles a jeweled pin.

Newlyweds cut their green grass wedding cake.

Grass computers smoothly direct parades and funeral processions through
the streets.

In the immense pastureland (before the first shoots come up on his tiny head)
cries one who has just been born.

Contributors

Scott Bailey has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Mississippi and has published poetry in journals such as *The Adirondack Review, Exquisite Corpse, The Cortland Review, The Journal,* and *The Southeast Review.* He conducts poetry workshops at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts, The Forrest County Juvenile Detention Center, and The Harrison County Adult Correctional Facility. He lives in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Krista Bridge's fiction has been published in *Toronto Life's* summer fiction issue, *Descant,* and has been nominated for a National Magazine Award. She has fiction upcoming in *Prairie Fire.* She lives in Toronto, where she recently completed a short story collection entitled *Be Immaculate.*

Rob Desjardins says Hello. He has published poetry in several Canadian magazines and has written seven novels of varying genres, none of which are published. He writes almost a novel a year, but often forgets to send them out. He's been a sunshine boy five times and won the title of Mr. Fantastic at the Stouffville Flea Market once. He lives deep inside Toronto.

Jonny Diamond lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. His fiction has appeared in *Geist* and *Kilometer Zero* and is upcoming in *Exquisite Corpse.*

Anita Dolman is an Ottawa-based freelance writer and editor, and the managing editor of *Poetics.ca.* The 2003 winner of the Writers' Union of Canada Postcard Fiction Competition, her work has most recently appeared in *Grain Magazine, Geist, Utne,* and *The Fiddlehead.* Her first chapbook is due out in fall 2004.

Juan Carlos Galeano, poet, translator and essayist, was born in the Amazon region of Colombia in 1958. His poetry has appeared in anthologies in Latin America and the United States. In the US, his poems have been published in many journals including *The Atlantic Monthly, Field, Partisan Review, Ploughshares,* and *TriQuarterly.* He lives in Tallahassee where he teaches at Florida State University.

Heather Jessup is currently living and studying in Montreal. She now orders her coffee and croissants in French. Heather's work has previously been published in *Grain, Room of One's Own,* and *The Antigonish Review.* This is her first published piece of fiction.

Troy Jollimore, a native of Liverpool, Nova Scotia, teaches philosophy in Northern California. He has published poetry in journals including *The Malahat Review, The Antigonish Review, The Fiddlehead* and *Ploughshares,* and book reviews in *The Boston Book Review, The National Post,* and *The San Francisco Chronicle.*

Roy Kesey was born in California, and currently lives in Beijing with his wife and children. His stories have been or will soon be published in *McSweeney's, Other Voices, The Georgia Review,* and *The Mississippi Review,* among other magazines. His dispatches from China appear regularly on the *McSweeney's* website.

Steven Lautermilch, a poet and photographer, has eight chapbooks of poetry, most recently *What Falls Away* (Bright Hill Press). For the past four years he's traveled in the western United States, exploring the sacred drawings left by the ancient Anasazi. *Spirit Writer,* an artist's book of poems and photographs based on these travels, appeared from Hour Press in 2001.

Rebecca Morgan lives in Valdosta where she teaches Spanish and foreign language education at Valdosta State University. In addition, she teaches Spanish to children in the community. In the United States, her translations of Latin American poets have appeared in *The Atlanta Review* and *The Mississippi Review.*

Sandip Mukherji has published a dozen short stories in Indian magazines. One of his recent stories won a runner-up prize in the F. Scott Fitzerald short story contest. A professor of finance at Howard University, he lives in Rockville, Maryland, with his wife and two daughters.

Margaux Poueymirou left New York City to complete her Master's in Creative Writing at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, where she continues to live. When she is not writing poetry, she is researching for her PhD on physics and the *fin de siècle.*

Jennifer Rathbun completed her doctoral work at the University of Arizona and is currently a Spanish Lecturer at Mount Holyoke, MA. She is a translator and specialist of the US-Mexico border literature. A selection of her translations are forthcoming in journals such as *International Poetry Review, Puerto del Sol,* and *The Bitter Oleander.*

Simon Redekop lives as part of Humanfive, in Vancouver, BC. He is working with lifetime clothing, Capita snowboards and the Recycling Alternative. His work has been exhibited and published internationally. At present, Simon is either sewing owls with his girlfriend Nicole, or drawing jewels and gems with his buddy Jaret. To see more goods from Humanfive, visit www.humanfive.com.

Juan Armando Rojas was born in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico in 1969. He has published two books titled *Lluvia de Lunas* (1999) and *Rio vertebral* (2002). Rojas received his PhD from the University of Arizona and was recently honoured with an Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship at Amherst College, MA.

Johanna Skibsrud is currently completing her MA at Concordia University in English and Creative Writing.

Yasuko Thanh has previously appeared in PRISM *international* (37:2), as well as *Fireweed, Descant*, and *The Fiddlehead.* New work is forthcoming in *Prairie Fire.* Her novel, *Frankie Hates Reno,* recently won an honorable mention in the David Adams Richards Prize for fiction.

James Thomas. Solid birch/birch Victoria veneer with blue Calgary finish, English steel/tempered glass. H188xW91 1/2cm, bmi 14, at 24. BA in FA. Comes in *Versal* (20.04), *This Side of West* (20.03), *The Millennium Book of Canadian Poetry* (19.99); Special order St. Mary's High-school Drama Group (19.97). Actual James may vary from depiction. $40.00.

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Fiction/Poetry/Drama/Translation/Creative Nonfiction

43:1

The painter had run out of blue a mile from the end of the canvas, had used greys instead, but blue is kindness and greys are greed, that's what he'd always heard.

—Roy Kesey, Page 50

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Krista Bridge
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