# PRISM international

49:4 Summer 2011

Fiction & Poetry Contest Winners! Plus new work from Matthea Harvey, Andrew Hood, and Joshua Trotter

**Contemporary Writing from Canada and Around the World**

# PRISM international

## PRISM Short Fiction Contest

**Grand Prize – $2,000**

Erin Frances Fisher
"Bridges"

**First Runner-up – $200**

Robert James Hicks
"Squatters"

**Second Runner-up – $200**

Mark Jacquemain
"The Ghost"

**Fiction Contest Judge**

John K. Samson

**Fiction Contest Manager**

Melissa Sawatsky

**Readers**

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Lester Bergquist
Michelle Deines
Meredith Hambrock
Tariq Hussain
Anna Kaye
Kari Lund-Teigen
Alexis Pooley
Sigal Samuel
Jeff Stautz
Erika Thorkelson
Michelle Turner
Cara Woodruff

# PRISM international

## PRISM Poetry Contest

**Grand Prize – $1,000**

Pamela Porter
"My Father in his garden, depicted in the woodblock print of the Taishō dynasty"

**First Runner-up – $300**

Sheryda Warrener
"Reincarnation Study 1982"

**Second Runner-up – $200**

Scott Ramsay
"Pop Quiz"

**Poetry Contest Judge**

Brad Cran

**Poetry Contest Manager**

Melissa Sawatsky

**Readers**

Jordan Abel
andrea bennett
Kim Fu
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Alexis Pooley
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# Contents

Volume 49, Number 4
Summer 2011

## PRISM Contest Issue

*Interview with Short Fiction Contest Judge John K. Samson* / 7
*Essay by Poetry Contest Judge Brad Cran* / 33

## Short Fiction Grand Prize Winner

**Erin Frances Fisher**
*Bridges* / 9

## Runners-up

**Robert James Hicks**
*Squatters* / 16

**Mark Jacquemain**
*The Ghost* / 22

## Poetry Grand Prize Winner

**Pamela Porter**
*My father in his garden, depicted in the woodblock print of the Taishō Dynasty* / 35

## Runners-up

**Sheryda Warrener**
*Reincarnation Study 1982* / 37

**Scott Ramsay**
*Pop Quiz* / 38

## Fiction

**Andrew Hood**
*Manning* / 53

## Poetry

**Rachel Rose**
*Spectacle & Feast* / 40
*What We Heard About Rain* / 42
*Rain Song* / 45

**Patricia Young**
*Chelonian Princess* / 47
*Lunar Eclipse on Winter Solstice* / 48
*A Question of Syngnathid Sex* / 49
*Duet* / 50

**Joshua Trotter**
*When I Turned X Years Old* / 51

**Kim Goldberg**
*Superette on New Year's Eve* / 52

**Matthea Harvey**
two constellation poems / 63

**Jen Currin**
*Substance* / 65
*A Pair of Shoes* / 66
*Capable* / 67

**Christa Romanosky**
*Prodigal Rainforest, Come Back!* / 68
*Elvis Contemplates a Brave New World* / 69
*Pontius Pilate's Airplane* / 70

**David Swanson**
*Ghazal 5: Lock the Door* / 71

**Contributors** / 72

SHORT FICTION CONTEST

# Interview with John K. Samson

### On What Makes Good Fiction

When I read the shortlisted stories for the contest, I was looking for that rare and sweet moment of real surprise, those times a writer can gently distort the world and make you hear it in a different way. I also looked for strong characters and pacing. Maybe being a songwriter makes me especially interested in the tempo of a story. I'm drawn to characters who seem conventional but serve to show that no one is really that conventional, that we are all weird and unique. I also like to see the ambiguity of personality, the fact that no one is one thing.

### On The Winners

The winning story, "Bridges," actually had me with the first dozen words: "Fenton daydreamed. Her feet dangled over the bathroom counter, kicked breakfast air." The entire story is crafted as tightly as an enduring poem, and is full of fuse-like sentences that fizz and explode in unexpected places. The narrator is pleasingly unclear and unsettling. I'm still not entirely certain who or what it is, though I have some ideas about it that I cherish. The slightly opaque parts of it are actually strangely inviting—it is a story that allows the reader to participate and speculate, and there is something playful about it. I guess that makes sense, as it concerns innocence and childhood. I found it remarkably original.

The images in "Bridges" are rich and insistent. A toothbrush is "gunked with paste" and rain "patted puddles around the truck." Actually, I love that the story almost entirely lacks similes. "Like" and "as" can't really describe childhood. Instead, "the piano-mouth grinned," "a car growled down the street, its lights stretched long arms up the night road." Things for Fenton are, they don't have the safe distance of like. As the narrator says at one point, "That's not a story. It's true."

"Squatters" is a brilliant story: timely and moving and well crafted, and made me wish there were two first prizes. "Squatters" so deftly displays two seemingly terrible people, the dark, grasping impulses that rule their lives, and sort of gently pummels the reader into first understanding, and then grudgingly adoring them. It is a great and funny and

moving accomplishment. The narrator's voice is unusual and oddly detached, which makes his plight all the more interesting. It is rare that the bizarre truths of romantic love are explored so well. All the awful tenderness, hilarity and desperation of a real relationship are here. The ending, I must say, is stunning, hilarious, and heartbreaking, and has stayed with me.

The second runner-up, "The Ghost," is a really evocative piece of writing. There is a pleasing wooliness to this story. It takes its time and is full of spooky dread and beauty, hospitals and closets and shopping malls, and the unique alienation of childhood. It is a smart exploration of a child beginning to comprehend a few pieces of the weird unsettling facts of adulthood. It is unflinching and wise. I think it shows great talent and promise.

### On Your Bookshelf, On Your Stereo, In Your Notebook

I've been reading a lot of poetry, folks like Karen Solie and Jeramy Dodds, and I have a real thing for Louis MacNiece lately. Also, a lovely travel book by Ian Frazier, *Travels in Siberia*, which is a great afternoon-drink-in-the-backyard read.

I know very little about jazz, but a friend just introduced me to Thelonious Monk's solo work, and it is so emotional and wondrous. I love it. The new Mountain Goats and Bill Callahan records are brilliant, as usual.

Also, you know who is really great? Mathias Kom of The Burning Hell. Holy moly. Those are awesome songs. I assume that soon everyone will know.

I'm working on a solo record called *Provincial*, to be released in January 2012, along with a book of lyrics and poems.

**John K. Samson** is the singer and songwriter for The Weakerthans, an acclaimed rock band from Winnipeg, Manitoba. John's poetry and prose has appeared in *Matrix Magazine*, *Geist*, *The Believer*, and *Post-Prairie: an Anthology of New Poetry*. He lives in Winnipeg, where he's also the managing editor and co-founder of a small publishing house, ARP (Arbeiter Ring Publishing).

*Erin Frances Fisher*

# Bridges

Fenton daydreamed. Her feet dangled over the bathroom counter, kicked breakfast air. Coffee, toast, syrup, and eggs steamed from downstairs. She thought:

*A house on a field of thistle—a girl lived there. A wooden bridge crossed over the field to her school and back. Somewhere, in the thistle, lived a thick-skinned troll.*

White soap blotched the sink. Scratched off under Fenton's nail.

*Though she never saw it, the girl told the troll stories so she wouldn't get eaten. Every day. Nights, the stars above her house sparkled.*

"Fenton," I said.

Fenton was six years old and telling herself stories. Her stars always sparkled. Static hair and freckles defined her, and somehow her skin tanned regularly despite her fear of tennis, soccer, street hockey, and anything else to do with balls or sticks. Fenton's toothbrush sat beside her, its handle gunked with paste. Downstairs, the microwave beeped.

"You'll be late, Fenton," I said.

Fenton stretched her feet and splayed her toes. She sighed. I reached for the toothbrush.

Forty minutes later Fenton, bored in the back of her mother's car, pulled a face at her sister. Hannah sat in the front talking to a boy on her cell and didn't notice. A pimple reddened the back of Hannah's neck just under her loose ponytail.

Fenton hugged her backpack:

*Once a girl grew a bump on her neck that exploded and sprayed out a bazillion spider babies.*

"Gross, Fenton." I said. "And you wouldn't touch the toothbrush?" She leaned her forehead against the car window, white on glass. Power poles ran by. Skinny, stealthy. Only Fenton noticed.

At school Fenton laid out brown and grey crayons. She started with burnt umber and light grey: a round, lumped, spotted rock. The spots became eyes. Fenton upturned the crayons onto the table, picked out yellow and angled angry teeth.

"A troll is a type of rock," I said.

Fenton considered this. She added arms.

After school Hannah walked Fenton to her piano lesson. Big trees and happy grass snuggled the sidewalk. Hannah led Fenton across the street, dropped Fenton's hand, then pushed into her jeans and tugged out a rumpled cigarette. Fenton licked her lips. Hannah grabbed Fenton's shoulder and bent until their noses aligned.

"If you tell Mom," she said "I'll send the basement ogre to suck the coloured parts out of your eyes."

Fenton twisted away from Hannah. "There's no ogre."

"Just a troll," I said.

Fenton said nothing; she kicked rocks up the front walk to her lesson.

"Fenton." Her teacher pulled a sheet of music from a pile. "What's this one called?"

"Frogs," read Fenton. The teacher set the score on the stand; a sheet cluttered with small black notes that clustered like tadpoles.

"Start here, Fenton."

Fenton looked at the keys—white and shiny. Toothy. The piano-mouth grinned.

"If you touch it," I said, "it will suck on your fingers." Fenton tucked her hands under her legs.

On the way home Hannah said nothing. Fenton dragged her backpack.

That night in their room, Hannah, who was twelve and slept in the bed next to Fenton, had a mug of juice. "Special juice. Want a sip?"

"Smells like communion." Fenton pulled her pyjamas on.

Hannah clapped her headphones over her ears and lay down. "Whatever."

Fenton flinched. "Okay then."

Hannah nodded her head, but not to Fenton. Her eyes were closed.

"Too late," I said. "Why did you talk church? She hates church."

Hannah's tape clicked off and her breath steadied out. Outside the streetlights zinged. Fenton rolled over and sat up. She spread a circle of jacks around her bed and snuck downstairs. She clicked the fridge open an inch. Light split the kitchen tiles. She pulled further and the light streaked too big, too loud. She grabbed the cooking sherry and ran upstairs without looking back.

"I hope you're grounded until you're thirty," said Hannah the next morning. She rubbed her foot where a jack had bit. "You could have told me." Hannah waved toward the circle of defence. "And Mom could have found it." Grey morning drooped in the window. Fenton picked up the jacks.

"The bottle's gone," I said.

Fenton nodded and leaned towards Hannah's closet.

"What?" said Hannah. She grabbed the jacks.

The next night Fenton placed a sheet of tinfoil beside her bed. Covered up to her nose, she closed her eyes.

*One time the girl in the house left her door open. At 3 am a breeze brushed her face. The fridge buzzed loudly and the next morning all its guts had disappeared.*

"That's not a story. It's true," I said.

Fenton pulled the blanket higher, its trim blinked into her eyes. Street lamps cast through the window; their light, scattered by the tinfoil, collected on the ceiling.

*The girl followed scraps under the bridge until the thistles blocked her way. She waited there a long time, until the stars shone hot.*

"Go to sleep," I said.

Two years went by.

"Go to bed, Fenton." Fenton's mom stood by the living room window, lights off. She watched the street.

Fenton peered around the corner. "I'll wait for Hannah," she said.

"Really, Fenton," said her mom.

Fenton thumped up the stairs, then snuck back down the hall. Outside a car growled down the street, its lights stretched long arms up the night road.

Fenton fell asleep on the stairs.

The next morning Hannah was at breakfast. Fenton's mom whisked eggs to creamy froth. Hannah watched her toast. Fenton sat on a chair in her pyjamas and listened to her bowl of crisped rice. No one else spoke.

A month went by.

"Finish your lunch, Fenton." Fenton's mom stood at the counter chopping heads off carrots. Fenton rubbed her finger along the seeded crust of her sandwich. Hannah grabbed half of it and took a bite.

"Thanks." She slung a sweater over her shoulder and reached for her purse.

"Where are you going?" Fenton's mom kept her back to both girls.

"Out," said Hannah. She paused at the door, one hand on the wall.

"Finish your milk, Fenton," said Fenton's mom. "You need it to grow."

Hannah left and shut the door. Carrot heads thunked off.

Fenton stood in the doorway when Hannah was sixteen.

"Move please," said Hannah. Her dark hair blurred into her clothes and she flowed like smoke. Fenton stepped sideways. Hannah floated past, her travel pack full of music and hair dye.

"Like they don't have hair colour in Vancouver," I said.

Fenton said nothing.

Hannah turned and considered Fenton. She clicked her tongue, then reached into her bag and pulled out a cigarette.

"Off the property," their mom yelled from the kitchen.

Hannah snapped her lighter shut and shouldered the pack. She had just graduated. A year early due to smarts, her mom had said then added: "I wish she would show some now."

"If you forget to visit, I'll get the basement ogre to mail you in a crate."

"There's no ogre," said Fenton.

"I'll make her visit," I said.

"People can't go through the post, probably," said Fenton.

A month later Fenton and her mom had an address. Fenton lined five boxes of Smarties on her bed next to a sheet of bubble wrap. Hannah's side of the room was so tidy it glared. Fenton stepped over her jacks and rubbed Hannah's bedspread. Flat-blue and pilled. The ocean. Water. Rain.

The family had taken a trip to Vancouver last year. It had stormed the entire week, but at night Fenton could see the moon mirrored in tall towering buildings. Hannah would be dark in a glass tower, sheathed with water. Fenton looked at her boxes.

"Smarties to give her smarts?" I said.

Fenton smiled. Bubble-wrap to fend off trolls.

The next day Fenton mailed the parcel on the way to school with her mom.

"Don't drag your pack, Fenton," her mom said.

Fenton stretched her arms under the straps and lifted.

"You know Hannah will visit." Fenton's mom helped her straighten her coat.

Fenton shifted out of reach and stepped on sogged maple leaves. Gross. Like old cornflakes.

"She'll visit," her mom said. She touched the top of Fenton's hair.

Four years went by.

Hannah called in the afternoon. Fenton's mom answered the phone.

"If she wants to, I suppose."

Fenton poked around the kitchen corner.

"I don't know," said her mom. "She isn't doing much here. Why don't you just talk to her?" She pointed the phone at Fenton's ear.

"Hello?" said Fenton.

"Hey," said the phone. "It's Hannah."

Fenton nodded.

Hannah told her to come visit. She had moved, she said. No city shit anymore. Just horse shit. She had a suite on a farm where they grew things, but there were horses too. Come. Don't tell mom she said shit.

"Horses," I said.

"Okay," said Fenton. She hung up.

Fenton's mom dropped her off at the Greyhound station.

"Tell Hannah," she said, then clicked her tongue. "Just call me when you get there."

The bus ride was an overnight one. Cars began as small lights on the horizon and grew past full-sized. Trees scuttled by. Fenton tugged the elastic from her hair, now long, like Hannah's had been when she left. The ride took sixteen hours.

Hannah met Fenton at the station, her hair was cropped short and blond. She wore a grey sweater under a grey rain jacket. The light made her eyes squint and her skin translucent. She grinned big when she saw Fenton.

"I got your Smarties," she said. "Years and years, I know."

Fenton nodded.

"Come on." Hannah picked up Fenton's bags and loaded her vehicle. "You got big. Fourteen?" She put her arm on Fenton's seat as she backed up. "And grew your hair." They changed gears and turned right onto the highway.

Fenton touched her bangs and nodded.

"It's not far."

The drive took twenty minutes. Hannah geared down and felt the two-door Nissan onto a gravel drive, at the top a house sat warm yellow. Hannah clicked off the vehicle and swung the door open.

"Listen to that," she said. Rain patted puddles around the truck.

"Smells like dirt," said Fenton. She stepped outside. "And flowers."

"Petunias," said Hannah. "They're wet." She tugged Fenton's bag from the back of the truck and hiked around the side of the house. Drops snuck down the yellow siding.

"A butter house," I said. "Melting in a cornfield."

Fenton stuck out her tongue and caught the rain.

That evening Fenton lay on the futon. No street lights, no car sounds. Fenton could hear Hannah type in her bedroom, or rain tap the wall.

"This place is lonely," I said.

Fenton pushed her palms into her eyes.

*The bridge: thistles.*

"But it's lonely there too," I said.

Fenton pushed her palms harder. Red red red.

Hannah woke at eleven the next morning and clicked the kettle on. It was so quiet, she said, sometimes she slept all day. It was good here.

Vancouver—in the winter it wilted, became grey and rainy with no snow to cover its dead plants. Trees grew in pots there. She'd managed enough savings to live off them like a battery. For a while. Porridge? Raisins?

Fenton stirred brown sugar into her porridge. She left the raisins. Hannah was out of place here, in her green terry-towel wrap on a farm. Fenton knew it. Hannah must know it.

"What does she do here?" I said.

Hannah looked out the window.

That afternoon Hannah led Fenton around the ranch. Her suite was the lower half of the house, she had a bedroom off the hall to the bathroom, and a kitchen/living room wallpapered with print vegetables: carrots, eggplants, and beets all danced, enthused. French doors opened onto a covered patio and on one of the cornfields where feathered green tips stretched out until they touched a line of miniature trees in the distance. Fenton stayed away from the horses.

In the afternoon Fenton sat on the edge of a folding chair on the deck. Rain dripped from the patio cover onto tufts of grass below the gutters.

"Baby troll hair," I guessed.

Fenton looked at the grass.

"Trolls absolutely grow in the ground."

She sighed, then sat back. Hannah clattered pans inside, and the smell of butter and garlic wafted onto the deck. Fenton covered her eyes with her hands. A field spread out in front of her.

"Wait," I said. "There's a field right here."

Fenton glanced toward the kitchen. Nothing. She sent the girl across the bridge.

*The girl could hear the troll moaning, but when she turned: nothing.*

"What are you doing here?" I said.

A week went by. Afternoons Hannah sat tilted on a deck chair, shoes kicked off, headphones on. Fenton mostly read.

The day before Fenton left, Hannah showed Fenton her room: a computer under the window, empty shelves along the wall.

"Come here," said Hannah.

Fenton stepped inside.

"Listen." Hannah handed Fenton her headphones.

Fenton listened. The train at home.

Hannah nodded. She opened another file. Ambulances wailed birdlike, cars, cyclists, and pedestrians clattered Granville Island. She clicked again: the fuzzy sound of carbonation, someone swearing, dogs barking far away. Fenton looked up.

Hannah crossed her arms and rubbed her shoulders. "I have over three thousand."

"Why?" said Fenton.

"Why stories?" said Hannah.

On the drive to the Greyhound Hannah said nothing.

"I didn't know she was lonely," I said.

"When are you coming home?" said Fenton.

Hannah carried Fenton's bag into the station.

"Say hi to Mom."

Fenton nodded.

"Hey." Hannah grabbed Fenton's shoulders and bent until their eyes met. Fenton looked down. Hannah clicked her tongue.

The bus smelled of wet wool and people, its windows fogged. Fenton waited for it to start.

"Fenton," said Hannah. She stood in the aisle and fiddled with her grey scarf.

"Yes," I said.

Hannah lifted her hands, tassels worked between her fingers, and said nothing.

Fenton ran her palm over her ponytail. "I thought you'd have long hair."

Hannah opened her mouth, then closed it and looked down. When she looked back up her eyes were red. "I thought so too," she said.

The bus coughed and grumbled. The driver asked Hannah if she was coming or going.

"Can I write you a story?" I said as she turned.

Hannah twisted the scarf. "No troll in it?"

"No troll," I said. Fenton reached out. "Just me."

Hannah brushed the tip of Fenton's fingers. "I'd love that." She got off the bus.

Fenton wiped the window with her sleeve. Hannah walked through the rain to her Nissan. Fenton watched her pull out of the lot, then sat back as the Greyhound turned and left the station. Fog closed her window like thick milk.

*Robert James Hicks*

# Squatters

After we opened the final foreclosure letter, she took a midday shower. When the water stopped, I was there to encircle her with a towel. I pinched a corner and dabbed her eyes.

"What," she said, "are you doing?"

I did not make her confess to crying, or to the ambition that consumed all our money and credit; I did not admit that I was angry with her, that I doubted my love, and that my attempts to comfort her were only to show her what I wanted.

The letter didn't mention our basement suite, which we had built, a little too late, to increase the value of the house and secure another loan. We assumed that if found down there, we would only be made to leave: a second eviction. We moved the spare bed, coffee table, two place settings, clothes, towels and toiletries, her laptop, and food from the fridge. She wanted all her furniture and knickknacks, things with which I didn't want to compete, and so I said that leaving stuff in the house would slow the sale.

The footsteps overhead stopped before we decided whether to track them or hide, and then a man peered through the window. He knocked on the door made of metal, which cost too much, which she justified: we would appreciate its security when we joined the suite to the house, and, she said, when I finally agreed to children, to which I said nothing.

"I'm Howie. Local realtor." The man had a big stomach and barrel chest, a round and red face, and white hair combed in neat rows. "Jeez, this is in foreclosure. Didn't the owners tell you?"

"They didn't." Her pitch was wobbly, but, if she was uncertain about her lie, he could only conclude that she was uncertain about the future.

How had she so quickly and convincingly reinvented us as renters?

"I wasn't close," I said, "with either owner."

Her brow collapsed. Her mouth opened and closed.

Howie said, "I better make a call." He crossed the yard and sat on the garden wall. Matching rock around the house topped new, professionally-installed drains. She justified that landscaping by saying that if the basement flooded we would have to spend even more on a hotel for any tenants. We had no plan to become landlords. We had no plan at all beyond our race to an imagined point in time when the whole house would

be complete. Howie patted his pockets and produced a cellphone, which he held for a while but did not dial. He knocked again and said, "I enjoy putting people in homes."

"So we can stay?" she said.

"I could get into trouble."

Behind her, I held her still in our portrait pose: my hands on her waist and my head on her shoulder; her chin would have been pointed skyward, her eyes challenging the horizon.

He said, "I suppose I can try to make you two a feature. Mind me asking what you pay? And your names?"

"Edda." When I learned her middle name, I assumed Scandinavian roots; she picked it from a book and filed the change.

"Will." This nickname came after a high school teacher told the class that Shakespeare's comedies pair all characters in marriage. I had pledged to love every girl who showed an interest in me: from Fannie, who was big and blonde, and who gripped my arm while she spoke, but who saw other boys, when, after a few weeks, I gave her a promise ring; to Terry, who was dark and bird-boned, and who skipped class successfully when I sat behind her in the hall and hid her in my embrace, but who mapped my touch with bruises.

She invented a too-low rent: ignorance or strategy. Had she led us to foreclosure because she was inept or because her desires outmanoeuvred her reason? I hadn't asked, afraid she would withdraw from me.

Howie whistled but did not accuse her of lying, trying to set a better rate.

And yet she said, "I want to nest, not move—recent news."

Howie nodded, encouraging her.

And she told another unsustainable lie. "I'm pregnant."

He clapped his hands in approval, mistaking us for different people. "I'll tell you, I'll do my best to keep you here. At home."

She beamed, daring me to begrudge her what had afforded us the chance to continue as we were a little longer.

Mornings, I hung his-and-her towels. After every meal, I did dishes and staged the place settings on the coffee table. Evenings, we went early to bed.

Despite myself, I slid her hand into my hair and pinned her with my leg.

"You're going to be the perfect father." She winked but studied my face.

By the time Howie returned, we had become Edda and Will, and we were finding peace and pleasure pretending to be at home.

Howie hoisted a basket brimming with bananas, oranges, and straw-

berries. "My wife spoke about folic acid and the first trimester. I'll tell you, though, this is not a proper gift because I'm asking for a hand shuffling all your landlords left behind."

She frowned as though thinking but her bright eyes showed she was only pacing her speech. "We could store whatever's in your way."

"Jeez," Howie said. "Though I suppose I'm already betting on you two."

She said, "Let's move."

"You rest."

She followed his gaze and touched her stomach. Had she forgotten? "Oh, Howie, my doctor suggested exercise." With the authority of this make-believe physician, her voice steadied. "Any risk is an old wives' tale."

Howie said, "I am old."

Upstairs, he admired the renovations. For the kitchen, we'd eaten a sickening amount of takeout. For the bedroom, we'd slept apart on the loveseats. For the bathroom, we'd sought refuge at the Traveller's Inn.

Ahead of Howie, I hurriedly stripped her picture collage: valedictorian at 18; university graduate at 22; bride at 23; homeowner at 25; and two more matching frames, waiting, she said, for the day she became a mother at 27, which was quickly becoming impossible, and again at 30. I slid each picture between a fold of fabric in the nearby linen closet. Angry that we had overlooked something so simple, I pushed them too far, against the back wall, which may have scratched the frames and shattered the glass.

"There were photos there," Howie said. He stood behind me.

Did he watch me scramble? Had he studied the prints and did he recognize us? My confession had to be clear: we never meant to make him a fool.

Howie said, "If I don't report this, I'm even more likely to lose my licence. If I do, I punish the owners for collecting family photos, and I call attention to you two. You'd tell me if you saw or heard anything?"

He had me push the TV against the wall and the loveseats face to face.

"I'll tell you, I don't sell a lifestyle," he said when I asked about his design theme. "I show there's space for people to make a home."

I carried down the ottoman, end table, and her figurines—Precious Moments. She mouthed *thank you.*

Howie stepped into the suite. "There's so much."

I said, "Stuff must have been that woman's stand-in for comfort and confidence."

"What," she said, "do you mean?"

Howie frowned at his fingernails.

He and I later climbed the bare steps to the attic and half-finished

master bedroom. His top teeth slid over his bottom lip. He said, "I suppose it's big."

I had suggested a twin bed in the old laundry room, where we would doze with feet intertwined and heads bowed to touch so that our bodies made the shape of a heart. But she alone decided the site and specifics of our bedtime routine: three times a week, she sat on me and bounced foolishly to a climax announced with bravado, after which I pleaded to be on top of her, where I could push myself into her, and, instead, she finished me in her fist, which she hunched over, as if, without witness, pleasure had no purpose and no place.

The attic dimmed with the day and Howie said, "You hurry home."

He was making a joke or felt genuine concern for my purportedly pregnant wife downstairs alone.

I said, "I'll try not to get lost."

When we again heard footsteps, we walked below to know what the buyers were seeing, touching, and imagining as their own. We were led into walls as though we could pass through them, like ghosts.

"Is that why no one can tell we live here?"

"As ghosts," I said, "we could be together forever."

The first buyers interested enough to disturb us downstairs were expecting a baby. By shifting her weight, she mimicked the arc of that woman, who moved her hands around her belly. I wanted to give her that sense of purpose, but I also marvelled at the man's independence, his focus on a blemished baseboard, and I envied the baby the comfort of the woman's embrace.

The man said, "You know how the school rates?"

She glanced in the direction of the elementary. "It's closing—low enrolment."

This halted the woman's hands. "But babies are being born. It'll reopen, right?"

"The board will sell it—make kids bus to a school beyond the big-box stores."

"You don't know that," the man said.

She said, "My husband works in the education ministry."

Why not: a new career to match my new name. And yet she later teased that surprise had spread across my face in wavy lines.

The next pair wanted a deal to rent or resell.

"What do you pay?" the first man said.

She repeated what she told Howie.

"So you want to stay," the second said.

"No. My allergy has gotten worse here—my mould allergy."

I said, "I've been waking with nosebleeds."

Later, a wisp of a realtor was dwarfed in the doorway by a rotund family: father, mother, son, daughter, and a hunched woman. The realtor, hand extended, said it was wonderful to meet friends of Howie's. We smiled until the old lady entered, straightening the knife pleats in her sari. Her mouth, pink and pursed, resembled the anus of a dog. She inspected the rooms. The others remained just inside the suite, and even the children were quiet, but once that too-big family was in a place of their own, they would compete for love and test the limits of the little they won. They would scrutinize one another, desperate to discover an abundance of everything they lacked. I felt sorry for them and yet I wanted them gone.

She said, "What did you think of upstairs?"

"Very nice," the father said.

"Is this a good location for you?"

"Yes. Very good." The eastern employer sending him to start a satellite office was still negotiating a cheap lease by pitting the owners of two buildings against one another: one downtown; one near the university. "Not knowing, central is best."

"I'm at the university," she said, "finishing law—property law."

"I commute the same distance but to downtown," I said. "I help the government's housing ministry protect tenants."

The father unwittingly imitated his mother or mother-in-law's mouth.

We finished the fruit from Howie's wife because it had begun to attract flies. She groaned and donned my sweats, like maternity pants: held only by the elastic waist, they fell straight, disguising the shape of her legs, even her thighs.

"And next time? We wear bed sheets and vow to haunt buyers?"

"I've always wanted white sheets," she said. "Crisp white sheets."

Howie taped a note to the door: "We've a problem." As though away on holiday, we left that paper in place, along with his next note: "We need to talk." Then, after a few weeks, he peered through the window into where we stood, exposed. His hands were empty and his face unsmiling. He knocked on the door. "Am I in time?"

She palmed a tissue: gathering props to support her mould-allergy story or preparing for a breakdown.

Can those of us who have failed to build confidence and settle into a comfortable way of looking at the world borrow these things from a partner? I thought so once, which is why I married early a woman so driven, but she has been borrowing from her accomplishments and possessions. It felt unfair to discover that she cannot help me and that I love her.

"I wanted to keep you two here so badly I suppose I wasn't being smart. Any buyer was likely to decide to move into this basement while

finishing that attic conversion and personalizing the main floor. The realtor was also clear from the start that these East Indians need a suite for the fellow's mom."

Had that family made the bank an offer? It didn't matter who bought the house: we couldn't afford to pay the rent to anyone; we wouldn't stay in a home we once owned.

Her laptop, on the ottoman, switched to a new screen saver: a photo she found online of an ultrasound.

"I understand why you don't want to go," Howie said, "being pregnant."

"We're not," I said. "We're not having a baby."

She squinted, and then, as though less angry than disoriented, rubbed her eyes while the window behind Howie filled with a puffy-coat parade.

Howie held his big hands palm up. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"No," I said, "it's not that."

I took her tissue, waved in front of my face like a white flag.

And Howie mistook us again for different people. "Jeez." He pulled at his cheeks. "I'll tell you, I don't like that choice but won't judge when you're without a home."

The family filled the doorway. They had sacks on their backs and bags in their arms. The man's hair stood tall, evidence of a restless sleep, while the woman, her eyes seemingly sliding from her face, had not slept at all. The old lady was flanked by the children, each of whom she pinched at the shoulder near the neck, but even these three had their round mouths stretched into grins. The bonds between them were not negotiable or finite. And this new house, our house, would be an equally fine place from which to set out. They had arrived and were home.

*Mark Jacquemain*

# The Ghost

They'd been in the house five weeks before the girl's grandmother moved back from the hospital, and they did what they could to make it home. Taking dinners in the den, for example, which was cozier than the dining room. And keeping the furnace at 25 degrees and the lights on throughout the main floor at least, to stave off the moods anyone but her grandmother would get from the gloom. Their stay was supposed to be short—the doctor said it was imminent—so her mother hadn't forced Kara to go to the school down the block, and because she hadn't, the girl had her days free to explore the house. It was very old. In the closets and on the floor next to the bed in the master bedroom (stripped of sheets because nobody used it anymore) were boxes full of her mother's toys and Reader's Digest books and VHS tapes and old trophies that Kara's uncle had won when he was young. Most of it Kara grew bored of quickly. But she found other things, too. There were more boxes in the basement (though the basement smelled damp and those boxes were fuzzed with green mould). And the dining room cabinet hid china figurines she wasn't allowed to play with but did anyway. And just yesterday she'd discovered the mouse traps under the kitchen sink, each one snapped shut on a victim; the thought had come to her at lunch to drop them down the laundry chute.

All afternoon she prodded the mice, peered down the dark metallic throat of the chute, let them fall. That terrible hush as they went down. It left her a little cold. Hair spiked from the tiny metal bar that held the creatures' imploded necks against the traps, and they smelled like old Band-Aids. Her plan had been to gather the evidence from the laundry room, but dusk had fallen in and furniture threw shadows against the viney wallpaper. She sat awhile on the basement stairs, hungering at the smell of chicken fingers and McCain's fries baking in the oven. Her mother walked in and out of the kitchen without seeing her there, sometimes talking on the phone. She talked inventory with her business partner back home, then said, "Well, he still calls. But he hasn't been back since. He's down south, doing research." She opened the oven and looked inside. "Yes… but I hardly know the man." A long pause and then she said, "Maybe you're right."

After dinner it was time to visit grandma, which they did every eve-

ning at the hospital. They drove through sleet, rode the metal elevator way up, sat in that white room. The curtains and sheets, the tiny hose in her grandmother's arm, and her grandmother's hair, all white. Her grandmother slept, as always, breathing in sudden moans drawn through her mouth. And as always they stayed only a short while; Kara coloured a picture of an elephant one of the nurses gave her.

When bedtime came Kara thought of the dead mice and her grandmother's yawning mouth. She lay waiting for her bedtime story, covers to her chin, but her mother was doing something on her laptop downstairs. Her mother always came up late and when she did paid no attention to the raspy sounds in the attic, the way the closet door swung open. This room had been hers when she was child. Tonight, what brought her mother upstairs, finally, was the ringing phone—she rushed the last few steps and answered the old black phone in the master bedroom. Kara could hear her talking and pacing at the end of the hall.

"No, I'm not even the homeowner. Well, she's not available right now."

The coolness of her mother's voice reassured Kara that she'd not be long. It wasn't the man they'd met at the hospital. When he called, her mother's voice was louder, shriller. She was different when he came over, too. He'd come over twice, weeks ago now, and those nights she rushed through Kara's stories. Sat at the edge of the bed with a wine glass between two fingers, her eyes bright and watery, her cheeks flushed. Then she creaked back downstairs. Murmurs of her happiness crawled up through the floorboards. The abrupt giggles and fawning questions, and now and then his blunt replies like the hum of plumbing. Kara lay listening, gaping up, as she did now, at where the ceiling had bubbled and stained in such a way that it looked like a face.

Their routine of long empty days and evening visits to the hospital had gone on for weeks, and it went on a few more. Until, at the beginning of March, quite unexpectedly, Kara's grandmother woke up. Suddenly grandma could blink and peer and even talk a little. Over the next ten days, to even her doctor's surprise, she managed to sit up in bed, then walk to the bathroom; she remained frail but her pain had dulled. She stayed on at the hospital to be monitored, got to know the nurses' names. Kara thought this was good news, that she and her mother would be able to go home soon. But her mother appeared bewildered and dismayed.

At the end of the month the old woman was sent home. Back into her son's room, where she'd been staying before she fell ill because it was across from the bathroom. Mostly, she slept, but nurses came in the mornings and afternoons to administer her medicine and monitor her vital signs and help her make the hobbling shuffle across the hall to wash

her face and use the toilet. At the tell-tale footsteps above, Kara climbed the back stairs and crouched there to watch, reminded of the hospital gown that showed the veiny flaps of skin that were her grandmother's legs. Sometimes she'd catch just the flutter of that pearl blue nightie disappearing into the doorway, sometimes hear wisps of the crackling voice within. When her mother was there—the old woman clinging to her daughter's arms—Kara snuck even closer, so she could see in the wash of the hall light her grandmother's face. In the hospital, the face was that of a skeleton, teeth gone and eyes sunken, and it remained so. Ugly. Kara hated to look but couldn't help herself. It could blink but not smile, and the terse bewildered words that dribbled from it dribbled in hisses. "Valerie, wait, let me rest. It comes, the pain, *comme une cauchemar.*"

Because they lived far away Kara hadn't known her grandmother well, remembered her in fragments: her cinnamon-powdery scent, the songs she'd hush to Kara at bedtime, words the girl didn't understand. A bullish woman who'd nightly piggy-backed her up the stairs and daily consoled her mother—baked casseroles, cursing him as she chopped—in the weeks after Kara's father left. Was this the same woman? The house declared so: the Christmas decorations and sunken furniture, the patient bookmarks in hardcover books, the recipes affixed to the fridge with a pineapple magnet. But even her mother appeared to doubt; she performed her care-giving duties with abruptness, fatigue, as if the patient were a stranger to her as well. "Valerie, you have shovelled the walk?" The old woman could see from the bathroom window it hadn't been done. And Kara's mother said, "I'll get to it. When I do. This isn't my house anymore, Mom, thank God."

Still, sometimes her mother insisted that Kara help with the chores—carry pillow slips to the laundry chute, fold the towels. The girl did as she was told. But as long she could, Kara put off going into that room. The worry of it sat in her belly, poison berries digesting. Those days all Kara wanted was to leave, to fly home on the plane her mother talked about and let the nurses look after her grandmother. But her mother's face—pulled taut by the severe ponytail, pale without makeup, distracted—was not one easily confided in. And though she resolved to speak each morning at breakfast, something about the hum of the fridge behind her, the sunlight glinting on the tap over the sink—the not-quite-silence—held her mute. Until the morning her mother microwaved a bowl of soup and poured a glass of water and set them on a tray with the plate of saltines to bring upstairs—just as usual—and then found Kara at the dining room window watching the lazy tumble of snow and asked the girl for help. Her mother lowered the tray. "You could carry the crackers."

Kara stared. "I don't want to."

Her mother licked her lips. "Baby. Look, I know you don't like it

here. Neither do I. But we can't just leave her. And maybe if you were a little nicer…"

Kara made a noise like a sneeze.

"Come," her mother said, "take the plate."

The only light in the room was brown haze through the curtains, and the green duvet on the bed lay half in dimness, half in light from the hall. On the bureau in the corner—its bottom drawer open and filled with white socks—stood little orange pill jars, lined in a row against the old-fashioned planes in the wallpaper. All Kara could see of her grandmother was a tuft of thin white hair. Then Kara's mother set down the tray on the beside table and helped the old woman sit up. The half-empty eyes, like water scumming into a drain, rose into view. They wandered as her grandmother asked questions about her son who was in Japan. Then they slid sideways and pried into Kara. *"Chouchou!"* her grandmother croaked. Evidence of effort appeared on the wrinkle-tracked top lip, a sneer of effort, and to Kara's horror a spotted claw craned from beneath the sheets and reached for her. The plate of crackers dropped from her hand. Her mother, in the midst of setting the tray on the old woman's lap, shouted, and Kara hurtled herself from the room. She made it to the top of the stairs before her mother's voice knocked a breath from her chest. "You get back here, young lady, and clean your mess. And then you will apologize to your grandmother." Unable to bear her mother's gaze, Kara turned her head sharply so her braid swung round her neck; the darkness of her reflection blotted the oak banister. When she peeked up the hall was empty.

That evening, Kara's mother talked to her, briefly, coolly. Kara was making her grandmother sad, she said. "Sweetheart, this is hard for everyone, not just you." For dinner they had ravioli from a can, as punishment, Kara thought, and afterwards Kara made a fort by draping a sheet—the worn-thin Scooby-Doo sheet that had been her uncle's—over the two big armchairs in the living room. When her mother was in the bathroom, Kara snuck figurines from the china cabinet and played with them in the fort until bedtime. And for the next few days, because her mother let her keep the fort up, she accumulated books and pillows and more of the figurines, which she hid by the wall under a quilt. She spent hours in the fort, light from the nearest lamp filtering through the sheet, and squinted at her books and drew pictures with markers and fantasized about a place where tigers lived in houses and wore clothes and drank tea, but owned no mirrors. A look into a mirror and all would be lost.

Then, on a still night at the end of March, Kara woke in darkness. A nightmare lingered in her mind: standing at an open cupboard, her mother had produced a felt hat and said, "God, I remember this one." Then glanced quickly behind her as if expecting Kara's grandmother

to appear there. Alone in bed, Kara remembered. So dark she couldn't see her knuckles on the blanket she'd pulled up to her chin. The room heaved with her breathing. Then, through the wall, a noise, then louder... a lingering melodic groan of pain. The girl returned it, unlocked a shriek. Fumbled from bed, into the doorframe, got the door open and ran down the hall after her apple-wide mouth, thudding downstairs to where her mother lay before the late nights shows. Her mother woke, went up blearily on an elbow. "What is it, what is it?"

Kara managed a curt sob.

Her mother touched her hair. "You had a dream, sweetheart. You just had a bad dream."

In the morning, Kara followed her mother everywhere, mute with fear, unwilling to be alone. While her mother peed and showered, she sat on the bathroom floor. She tailed her through the kitchen after breakfast; she hovered when her mother spoke on the phone with her business partner, chiding Kara with hard looks. Then the hospice nurse came and they went to the A&W for hamburgers. While they ate, her mother kept silent, as if waiting for an explanation. So finally Kara hushed: "I hate her!" And her mother's face went cold. She took her daughter by the wrist and marched her back to the car. All afternoon, Kara hid in her fort and drew dolphins, birds. At dinner, her mother kept silent, made noises of her exhales, clattered the dinner plates. And that night she read Kara's bedtime story dully, then closed the book and turned out the light and left. Kara shivered in the wide bed, watched the face on the ceiling for grins.

She'd nearly drifted off when the sharp ring of the old black phone jolted her. She heard her mother creak down the hall. "No, I was in the bath. I'm getting another towel." She laughed. "For my hair! Me, too. It's been so long I wasn't sure..." There was a silence and then she said, "Tomorrow? I would love that."

In the morning her mother made french toast and they ate together at the little table in the kitchen. Something had come over her mother. "Baby, what would you think about going to get our hair done nice?" she said. "Would you like that? There's a place I know about at the mall." She let Kara watch *101 Dalmatians* while she dressed and made phone calls, and by early afternoon they drove to the mall through the rain, an easy silence between them. They held hands as they walked to the hairdresser. And when the loudest hairdresser, the one with purple lips, asked if they wanted their nails done too, her mother glanced at Kara, as at a girlfriend, and asked what she thought. Kara thought yes. "How much extra?" her mother asked.

The purple-lipped hairdresser said that nails were half price when

done with hair.

"Oh, fine. Let's do it."

After, her mother was uncertain about her own haircut—a boyish bowl cut the loud woman had fluffed endlessly with her endless red fingernails—but walking through the mall she said that Kara looked like a little angel and a little princess and how did I ever get such a beautiful girl like you? Then she mentioned to Kara that he had called, and said that he'd surely agree with how nice Kara looked. The girl quavered with happiness. "You know, it really is silly to go and do this," her mother said, contemplating her fingernails, "but I guess it's what you do when you're going out for a nice dinner date. So they tell me, anyway." They ate subway sandwiches in the food court, careful of their nails and Kara let in a vague hope that maybe things would change and maybe he would be the one to change them: take them away or make grandma better. The hope she felt but didn't trust when she thought of her father.

Her mother dragged her from store to store looking for a blouse she'd seen in a magazine. But it took an eternity to find it and the one she bought finally was a size too small. Now they were late and her mother's mood had changed. She drove lurchingly, cursed the rain and the traffic. At a red light near home, the schoolyard shiny in the fading dusk, she said, "Natalie's shift is over at six but I've asked Helen to come for seven. You remember Helen? The lady who watched grandma when we went to the ice dancing? She used to be a nurse herself." The light changed and her mother ran fingertips over the wheel. "But sweetheart, when Joe comes to the door I want you to say hello. Okay? And I asked Helen to make those fish sticks that you like, not the ones you don't like. I told her you could stay up and watch TV until nine. I don't want you telling her—"

Horror had swelled in Kara's throat. "You said I was going out with you, to dinner."

Her mother's eyes narrowed but stayed on the road. "No, sweetheart. Next time, maybe—"

"You said we were getting beautiful to go out for dinner."

"Well, Joe will be at the house to pick me up and he'll see how beautiful you are then."

The betrayal made Kara short of breath. Suburban trees blurred by; her mother seemed to blink with each furious pass of the wipers. The rain fell in cold sheets and her mother hurried from the car, but Kara walked slowly. She stood a moment in the front hall under the lonely orange bulb, the solitary glow in the house's blackness. Then she shed her slicker and crawled into the closet under the stairs, pulled the door shut.

From within, she could hear the stained glass window rattling on the

landing, but the coats at her ears muffled the wheeze of the spring storm. Weeks before, she'd found a flashlight and spent more than an hour in the closet, that recess beneath the stairs where the hardwood gives way to cold cement, finding things: a bent umbrella, two beautiful pearl stilettos, a stack of *Chatelaines*, smiling aproned housewives on each one. But she didn't care about any of that now. The tiny shell of darkness gave some comfort but the smell of shoes oppressed her and she was so cold her teeth chattered. She wrapped herself in a fleece and let her mind dim, used the tip of her braid to paint the dry cleaner's plastic that hung round a dress. Above, through the floorboards, the bathroom door slammed. Then the phone rang and the click-clack of her mother's footsteps crossed the hall above her. The ringing stopped.

After a moment her mother came downstairs. "Kara! You can't leave your..." The click-clack approached the closet and a nut swelled in the girl's chest as the door gave way, a shock of light. Her mother stuck a comb under her arm, took a hanger and wrapped it with Kara's slicker. Kara eyed the silhouette. The wet-dog-flatness of the bowl cut. The red lipstick (only on the top lip). The new blouse, satiny pink and far too tight. Her mother moved aside coats to hang the slicker. Then they met eyes and the comb she held fell, rattled on the hardwood. "Jesus! What are you doing in there?"

Her mother shoved aside the coats. Light washed in over the bent nails and cobwebs and dust mites of the stairs' exposed ribs.

"I'm not doing anything."

Her mother deflated a little. She started to say something, stopped. Then, "Baby. Kara, look at me. Look, I'm sorry about this, okay? Next time we go for dinner you can come."

"I don't believe you!" Kara shrieked, and she lunged to close the closet door but it banged into her mother's foot. So she snatched the comb and threw it into the basket of scarves and mittens. She glanced up to be sure her mother had seen, then turned away and stared fiercely at her own knee. From the corner of her eye, she could see that her mother hesitated in front of her.

Finally, her mother whispered, "Don't do this tonight, Kara, please."

After the slightest pause, her mother walked to the middle of the hall and picked up a wine glass from the floor. The hall light made plain a pinched looked on her mother's face; for a long moment she stood touching the glass to her lips. Finally, she took a long drink, coughing at the end. "That was Helen. On the phone. We're not going out until eight o'clock now, so I want you to be polite to Joe while we're here. Okay?" She bit her bottom lip, exhaled through her teeth. "Now come out of there and tell me how I look. I look nice?" Eyes on her daughter, she yanked half-heartedly at the tight blouse, then did it again, as if this was

a tic, yanked with both hands, her jaw jutting out.

Kara stared at her blankly, coughed out her tongue.

Her mother wagged the empty wine glass, preparing a rebuke, but at that moment the doorbell rang. Her mother gasped. She took a fruitless swig from the empty glass, set it back at her feet, then skipped to the front hall mirror and glared at herself. Kara watched her make several little kissy-kissies, evening out the lipstick; then she scooched back on her bum, caught the edge of the closet door with the toe of her left rain boot and closed it.

The faint growl of wind. A man's voice: "Valerie. The lovely Miss Valerie, hello."

"I didn't even hear you pull up. Look at me, I'm... look at this blouse."

"It's nice, it's lovely."

"But it doesn't fit. And the piece-of-junk washer's frigged up, so... look, it's bumpy!"

"Hmm. I do see bumps... I... "

From her mother, a sharp giggle. Then stumbling towards the closet.

"Jesus, I'll drip all over you!"

A softer giggle. "Joe. Joe, Kara's in the closet."

"Oh. Hello in there, Kara."

Kara bit down on a breath, kept silent.

His voice dropped a notch. "Is she angry about me coming?"

Some of her reply was lost. "... my mother... sleeping." She added, "Helen's going to be late—eight o'clock. Do you mind? I'm sorry. I have a bottle of wine while we wait."

"Sure. It's no trouble." He asked what he should do with his coat and they walked into the living room. Kara strained to hear what they were saying but could only make out the tap-tap rattle of the stained glass window and gave up. For a moment, examining her rain boots in the crack of light under the door, she thought of nothing.

"I have to, it looks ridiculous. But let me get you a drink first."

The click-clack receded into the kitchen then after a moment returned, stopped before the closet door. The door opened and her mother appeared through the coats in its frame, two raised glasses hooked aloft. "You're being rude," she hissed. "Come out of there, please. You can bring Joe his wine." And when Kara dropped her eyes, "Jeez, baby, you're still in your rain boots."

Entreated by her mother's wide eyes, Kara rose glumly to her feet. She took the wine, sniffed it, then clomped the few steps into the living room. Not a single light shone, but her mother had put on the stupid fireplace videotape again and orange flames wavered on the TV. He saw her and with his eyebrows high said, "Hey, hello, Kara." His jeans were too short and showed off an inch of hairy leg above the funny red socks.

His sweater was thick wool, right to the chin. His face was rosy beneath the salt-and-pepper tangle of hair.

"Look, Joe, Kara brought your wine," said her mother. She perched high on the edge of the couch beside him, nodded at her daughter. Kara clomped forward and with two hands carefully thrust the wine at him; he took it in his thick fingers. "Merci, mademoiselle," he said. Kara watched him drop his wrinkled eyes and take a sip. She was aware of his smell: sweat and mint.

With strong accent he said, "Merci mademoiselle! It means, 'Thank you, miss' in French."

"I know that," she said. "You say it funny."

Her mother let out a wild clipped laugh, which made Kara step back. But when he sipped his wine a second time, she observed, "It's black but when you drink it it's red."

He held the glass aloft, examined it, smiled at her. "Quite true."

He was looking at her, smiling at her, and it made her blush. She hesitated, then turned and ran out of the room. His call stopped her just around the corner at the bottom of the stairs. Kara peeked back in. They were murmuring about her—her mother, clutching her wine glass in two hands, saying to just let her go. But Kara now saw that he fumbled with something in his lap. When he looked up he spotted her, and said, "Hey, I got something for you. Now, these are as good as..." He picked a treat from the paper bag in his lap and offered it to her. She approached, cautiously.

"Saltwater taffies. Had them in the car."

Kara checked with her mother, whose smile was dim. She approached and snapped the candy from his hand, as a duckling might have, then tried to untwist its wax paper wrapping.

"Things can be sticky, here." Joe tore the wrapping from the candy, picked at the stuck paper with a big gritty fingernail. He caught himself, puckered his lips, considered. "Here, take a different one." He shoved the first in his mouth and unwrapped a second with less difficulty. "There!"

The second treat was pastel green; eying him, she dropped it in her mouth. For a moment they chewed at each other. "I have a bit of an addiction to these things myself," he said. "Every time I'm down in Raleigh, which hasn't been—"

"My dad's addicted to coffee."

There was a moment of silence. Her mother's lips had pursed. "By the way," Joe said finally, "heard the bad news." Kara waited for him to go on. "Mom's forcing fish sticks on you, I heard."

Her mother laughed, feigning offense. "Don't give her ideas, Joe. They're the kind she likes."

"But, Valerie, get the poor gal a frozen pizza, at least."

Kara fought with all her might against a rising grin, backpedalled a few steps. Her chewing paused as he cleared his throat, picked another candy. Her eyes flicked to his face; she'd forgotten about her mother. "How come your wife's in heaven?"

His puzzlement became a look that was almost stern. He set the wine glass on his chin. Her mother said, "Joe, she asked about—"

"It's fine, it's fine." His tone had changed and as he lifted his face and shadows lengthened in his eye sockets, Kara worried his tired look might turn into a shout. "When she was... you see, hon, Cindy was sick for a long time. And finally she died. This was many years ago, of course."

Kara pulled her braid forward and caressed it, thinking. But before she could speak again her mother said, "All right, that's enough, you. Upstairs to your room, please, until Helen gets here. If she ever does. Okay? Go colour for a while, or work on the schoolwork I put out."

"I did it already."

"Then go colour."

Kara looked to Joe for salvation but he stared at his wine, which swirled in his outstretched hand. "I wear lipstick sometimes, too," she said, and her mother said, "Okay, get going."

Exiled, Kara plodded up to the landing, but she couldn't stand to go further. The stained glass window—an iron and glass jigsaw of a potted rose—whistled now more than rattled; the wind had eased. She dropped cross-legged on the top step, tugged off her rain boots one by one, and listened. But the bits of conversation she heard were warped and whispery. The Buddy Holly song her mother liked came to her and she sang it to herself a moment. Then she went up on her knees and peered over the edge of the floor into the upstairs hall. The bathroom door stood open and dust balls shivered on the quarter round. The one bulb shone through its shade onto the wallpaper—falling oak leaves, torn in gluey strips where her grandmother had peeled it before she fell ill. Kara's mind slid toward the nightmare and she closed her eyes tight against it. Her breath faltered, blood throbbed in her face. She thought with all her might and was soon in a purple room with hundreds of moon-faced dolls she had to name. Names murmured on her lips until she was repeating herself.

A bark of his laughter from below. She opened her eyes on the steep gloom of the stairway down. She'd calmed. And the hope rekindled in her that he would save them somehow. Hope, however, improbable, that she could feel in her back teeth. She slid on her bum back to the landing. No sound from the living room, no murmurs now. Squinting (to hear better), she padded three more steps, then three more. The hardwood creaked where it met the stairs and she stood above the spot con-

sidering what to do. And then a noise from the other side of the wall—a faint hoot, as if her mother had been startled. And when the hoot went again Kara worried that something was happening and risked the floor's groan, stepped lightly on, then past it, and cocked her head round the doorway.

For a ghastly second it appeared that he was devouring her mother's face. He'd curled overtop of her, his hand braced against the couch, and was forcing his mouth down onto hers. Her mother's neck was craned upward, her feet pulled behind her; the muscles of her neck worked in relationship with the seesaw movement of his chin as if gasping for air. Then she hooted once more—from inside the doorway it sounded like a high clipped exhale—and it drew long as he rolled off her and back to the couch. He saw Kara and abruptly wiped his lips with his thumb.

"Kara, hon," he said. "Finished your, your homework already?"

Her mother's chapped mouth fell open but it was empty of words.

"Listen, hon, by the way," he caught his breath, smiled. "Listen, I'm sorry I didn't mention your hair before, how nice it looks. And your nails. Didn't even notice your mother's either. That's how damn observant I am."

His glance tilted sideways and he smoothed a hand down his hair to fix it. Then, with great seriousness, he shifted his stare out the window and Kara's eyes followed. Something hung there, distorted, receding into night behind the house: the room reflected in the black glass. The oblongs of furniture, the fire on the TV and the halves of their faces it touched. The fan-shaped shine of hardwood within which something awful danced.

POETRY CONTEST ESSAY

# Surrealism and the PRISM Poetry Contest

As a visual art, surrealism can be haunting and beautiful: I think of the paintings of Magritte and Max Ernst and I want to like Salvador Dali's art but it has been ruined for me, quite unfairly, by 1970s rock art. When I think of Dali, I don't think of fantastic dream worlds or a freeing of the mind. Instead, I picture a stoner holding a bong and contemplating the cover art of a Whitesnake album. But surrealism comes in many forms, and perhaps it is best suited to an experience of words, where the mind is free to make leaps of logic without the visual proof of campy absurdity.

Last year my twelve-year-old niece, Anna, told me a joke that went something like this:

**Anna:** How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light-bulb?
**Me:** I don't know. How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light-bulb?
**Anna:** Fish!

She delivered the punch line with a drawn out *shhh*, adorned with a fanning of her fingers that invoked the hand gestures I remember from my teenage years when it was popularly (but incorrectly) thought that the movement of fingers in front of someone's face could trip them out. Surrealism's wide acceptance had never been more clear to me—if it was born out of Freudian theory and Dada and had its rock star years in the seventies, then surely the crescendo of its use would be its inclusion in the schoolyard joke of a seventh grader.

The ease with which the mind will follow words into strange places may explain the ubiquity of surrealism in contemporary poetry. At times it seems to be everywhere. And with regard to poetry, there are two important questions we should ask. First, in poetry what is surrealism? This question leads right into the second: in poetry what isn't surrealism? A metaphor by necessity requires a leap of logic, but comparing someone's hair to the colour of wheat is a leap that is too easy for our minds to make and certainly not as enjoyable as the work of a poet like Andre Breton

when he writes, "my wife with the hair of a wood fire."

In the surrealist image we don't see the absence of logic but the greater exploitation of its possibilities. At its best, surrealism succeeds with little reason why it should: damn right she had hair of a wood fire. What the three winners of this year's *PRISM* Poetry Contest share (in very different ways) are their own little nods to the spontaneity of surrealism.

This year's winning poem, "My Father in his garden, depicted in the woodblock print of the Taishō dynasty" by Pamela Porter opens with the wooden latch of a heart and by doing so she begins a pattern of small leaps of logic that both endear us to and distance us from her subject. At the same time, she paints for the reader the portrait of a father who is simultaneously alive in language and caught in the stasis of a woodblock print so that his image is forever preserved for the reader by the poet's loving attention. Porter's beautiful poem is an act of preserving dynamic memory and rendering it in the beauty of two-dimensional art.

Sheryda Warrener's "Reincarnation Study 1982" depends not on the linearity of narrative but associative and elliptical leaps of subject, image, and sound. Where Porter builds a poem that is also a portrait, Warrener contemplates the very nature of being by imagining the multifarious ways she might come back to life after death: the speaker shapeshifts and surprises us line by line. Her confidence as a writer holds the poem together, as she is "rigged taut as a mainsail" and then "kicked/ back alive as the red dirt under horse hooves/at Hastings track."

Scott Ramsay's "Pop Quiz," takes a lighter approach by building a dreamlike world of connectivity and offering a call and response between the clouds and a dog riding shotgun, between a politician and a hyena scavenging meat. Part of the fun is that you get to choose. He's used the form of schoolroom drudgery and made it his own. I encourage you to get a pencil and take his quiz. Enjoy it. After all—fish!

*–Brad Cran*

**Brad Cran** is a poet, essayist and photographer. He has been a longtime contributing editor at *Geist* magazine. In 2004, Cran received the Writing and Publishing commission at the Vancouver Arts Awards, and, in 2009, Cran and his wife Gillian Jerome were nominated for the Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Prize at the B.C. Book Prizes for their book *Hope in Shadows: Stories and Photographs of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside* (Arsenal Pulp Press), which also won the 2009 City of Vancouver Book Award and raised over $50,000 for the people of the Downtown Eastside. He is the current poet laureate of Vancouver (2009–2011).

*Pamela Porter*

# My father in his garden, depicted in the woodblock print of the Taishō Dynasty

For the wooden latch of his heart
that keeps falling open, for the ten thousand thoughts
that turn on the hinges of his mind,

for the shape of him, stranded in the weathered branches
of his bones, for the dark rooted laces of his shoes,
for his fingernails lined with dirt
arched as bridges over the stream,

for his shovels and rakes, for the mudded leather
of his gloves, for leaves
floating on the pond, and bare trees on sky,

for the creaking ship of him, the mainsail of his shirt,
his silvered hair wind-tossed,
his frame tied still to its moorings
this side of darkness,

for the charting of the seasons, compass of immeasurable stars,
the rising and falling of light as of the tide,
and the itinerant clouds mirrored in his eyes,

for the harvest, abundance of petals falling as rain,
for rain on stone, for small
belled flowers rung by the wind,

for his sparrows, common as moss, for the feeders
he fills at dawn,
for the casting forth, the drawing back of heaven
at the gate of his heart,

for webs spun and broken, caught
on the embroidery of air, whose delicacy of lace
he guards, he keeps watch,

for rain on the still waters of his pond, the darting fish,
sun's absence and its breaking forth
as one suddenly emboldened to praise the world

for the small silver music of his voice,
the name of the unnameable etched in his face,
for the pondering silence of moon
hanging over the holiness of his sleep,
for the twin divinities of his nostrils,
the centuries of day and of night,

for letters written and unwritten from the brief, sacred
season, the singular blossom of a man's life,

for the signature in a corner of the composition,
the quiet characters of a name.

*Sheryda Warrener*

# Reincarnation Study 1982

Of the 122 responses, *trapeze*
*artist, aardvark, champion logger* and *Teflon coating*

suffer the least lackluster. Three people claimed
to want to come back as tennis players. A handful

had their assistants type up a note declining
the request: Either too overwhelming

a thought, or no one wanted it bad enough. I'm gunning
for permanence. I want to be rigged

taut as a mainsail, blown out with wind. Cut loose
like a satellite into graveyard orbit. Night-blooming

Saguaro cactus. Gravity. A corner of the sea
in *Landscape with the Fall*

*of Icarus*. Let me be kicked
back alive as the red dirt under horse-hooves

at Hastings track. When I start to think
about it hard, sudden circles of death descend

in layers like a Venn diagram. I don't know
what to make of the space where those circles

overlap. Whatever giant paperweight
tamps us down, it isn't sky.

*Scott Ramsay*

# Pop Quiz

Name:_____
Please choose the best answer(s)

1. When the rainbow comes out
   a) one arch of the rainbow lands on a gorilla at the zoo
   b) a moose spends a few minutes without any bugs in its eye
   c) a boy makes his first attempt at a pop-a-wheelie

2. When the moth escapes the spider's web
   a) the web breaks and is abandoned
   b) the porch light turns off
   c) a student checks her cellphone again

3. When the fly eludes the chameleon's tongue
   a) a frog lunges into the water
   b) a fly swatter is taken off its hook
   c) a window is closed and the blinds are pulled down

4. When the dark clouds pass by
   a) a woman who has just bought cat food comes home and can't find her cat
   b) a dog riding shotgun watches its owner order a triple-triple at a coffee drive-thru
   c) a lightning bolt strikes a tree where a raccoon used to live

5. When the mink whale breaches the surface
   a) a cultural event happens
   b) a scientific study happens
   c) no one sees it

6. When the important political announcement is made
   a) the weakest hyena sneaks off with a huge chunk of meat
   b) a husband calls his wife a cougar; she calls him a sperm whale
   c) a worm comes out of the dirt, bathes in a puddle, and is rolled over by a baby stroller then stepped on by the man pushing it

7. When the Canadian goose enjoys the scenery from the sky
   a) an arctic fox has caught the scent of something unfamiliar
   b) a hummingbird returns to its favourite flower
   c) a child in the backseat sees skid marks leading up to a blood stain

8. When the sea turtle lays its eggs in the sand hole
   a) a rabbit comes out of the blackberry bush to graze
   b) a girl trades a drinking box for a granola bar
   c) a chipmunk discovers the new bird feeder has no seeds

9. When the water in the tub has cooled enough
   a) a skunk retaliates in the face of a Doberman
   b) a man calculates a waiter's tip
   c) a buck collapses from a four-day-old gunshot wound

10. When the man is pulled out of the ocean
   a) an orca pod passes underneath a kayak
   b) a mountain goat slips and falls down a canyon
   c) a person folds a corner of a page and turns off the reading light

*Rachel Rose*

# Spectacle & Feast

One morning we stepped into the garden
to gather dusty golden plums for breakfast.
The sun was already drawing the resins
from the blue-sapped rosemary, the slugs
were already curled around the white strawberries.
The baby pointed out a rat
staggering under the peach trees—drunk on fermented fruit?
No: someone's cat strolled out, stage right,
flashed out a paw and slapped it flat.

With plum juice dripping on the tops of our bare feet,
with sweetness in our mouths,
we followed their pas de deux.
The rat tried to hide in the crack of a trunk,
the cat rolled on the stage of lawn,
with all the time in the world
to play her part. Purring like a beehive,
she let the rat run halfway across the garden
before bringing it back, chewing its naked
tail. Without blinking
the cat acknowledged her audience.
She let the rat escape to a small rock
before she strolled over to lay claim,
languid as honey. Then the rat
lifted its pointed, intelligent face,
and touched its quivering nose to hers.
They smelled each other with great attention.

Whiskers trembling, the rat's face
moved over the cat's face
there on the boulder of morning. A hesitation,
a held, hopeful breath—but no, in the end,
of course not: the cat sprang to feast,
the rat screamed, the baby smashed
his hands together, clapping over my shoulder.
Nearby, a woodpecker clobbered its skull on a pine: encore, encore.

# What We Heard About Rain

*How the rain*
*makes a shelter of wetness, how it gives birth*

*to the river, then rests.*

—Alison Pick

She stopped her life to give birth and then picked it up again,
as women stop to give birth in a flood of river

to the next generation of
words slipping out in a mess of blood

and the river and the love of men, good
or slipping. The private love of a woman

for a woman, and the river that carries them along.
And here is the mystery that never resolves—

something can be born out of nothing,
what was not can become: clouds and storm,

convergence of ether and desire.
This is our time to hunger, our time

of birth, and we are so tired of doing it all
and trying to do it well—diapers in the pail,

chapped breasts and lanolin, crust of strained peas
and unread books in crooked stacks, sweat-grimed breasts

and aching backs. We camp under trees
and dip the bare bottoms in the river. Slippery

we hold them on our laps as long as we can,
watch rain drop with a hiss into the fire, we wash in the lake

with a splash on baby penises, toes, the rain
on our summer skin, soft as apricot

soft as the fingers of a lover on breasts
swollen with milk after a long day, first pushed away

in irritation and then allowed, as a river allows swans,
and our nipples harden into fruit pits

as we allow ourselves to be carried away
with desire, as we allow life to pass through us

to dirty our kitchens, to hijack our thirties,
to sweep us into its undertow

so we can't get our heads out. Feels like the goddamn rain
is a monsoon and we lose them in the supermarket

and walk forty years in the desert, blind with tears, devastated,
before they pop out from behind the cucumbers

and we forget to buy milk, and we forget who we are,
forget the way home, the rain doesn't let up and we can't sleep

pay bills get a job every five minutes the laundry buzzes
we're making lunch looking for the lost ballet slipper

the escaped frog the love we once felt that made us weak
in the knees, in bed all week and sore all over

abraded with love the rain won't quit and we can never
get it all done stretch marks appear on our hips

we are breathless, we wake up middle-aged,
like runoff on a river, channels of silver

in our hair, lines around our mouths
from the moment they are born we succumb to

torrential nostalgia. Soon we'll be swept aside.
We thought, we thought, we thought

what happened to us mattered. Now we know
it's all and only them and we are so full.

Fractured, refracted, all the lives that might have been.
We are so lonely, we are mothers

streaming ink in snow, we give milk
through the curved night, quicksilver sheet,

the rain gives birth to the river.

# Rain Song

I am the drummer of surfaces
the singer of all that's earth. Give me tin!

I'll thrill you, rat-tat-tatting your ears.
Give me stone, I'll sing hard music.

Give me time, and I'll erode you,
beat you softly with ten thousand fingers

until you surrender. Every day, I condense,
bring wrath upon the peach blossoms, I monsoon

your villages, drown your cattle. I am the uninvited guest
at your shotgun wedding, I drench your white veil

and tendril your upswept hair, I wash away the salt on the beach,
become the river. I am the rain, small tongues

fluted like snakes', I am the sound of peace
on flowering dogwood trees, the sound of spores

bursting underground, thrusting gold fingers
to meet my kisses, slick and silver, I am the snail's

companion, trail of drops illuminating the spider's web.
I am the fresh tears of the gods

when they see what they have wrought.
When I do not come, you dance for me.

When I hide myself, you stamp the dust
woo me with gourds and chants.

Your cattle bellow my name without cease.
I fill the cracks of your scorched earth.

I sing the song of cactus blooming
after drought, of headlights sparkling into rainbow.

I am the fall and the resurrection,
the condensation, the evaporation.

I am mist after great pain, the rustle of wet
and tender grass. Ask me about erosion,

the way time blunts mountains with my kiss. I am the rain.
I give birth to the river, then rest.

*Patricia Young*

# Chelonian Princess

*The olive ridley [turtle] has one of the most extraordinary nesting habits in the natural world... all at once, vast numbers... come ashore and nest in what is known as an arribada.*

—NOAA Fisheries, Office of Protected Resources

We lived on the edge of a trailer park.
For fun shoved our heads inside old rubber boots.
My father carried worlds on his back.
My long-necked mother loved a hot-rock massage.
And me, their chelonian princess?
I was born with visions and a bloodhound's nose.
Sipped reptilian milk from old bottles of eau de toilette.
Wandered among the double-wides and souped-up trucks,
content as a carapace in brackish water.
Until my sixteenth birthday, until a voice stirred
deep in my brain, soft and timeless as an offshore wind:

arribada, arribada. I had no choice but to leave.
Leave for where? my parents asked. Leave for what?
I looked around at the junked cars and swing-sets,
the candy wrappers and plastic lawn chairs. Leave for a place
where the sand is black and moonlight falls in lemony
showers, leave for shifting surf lines, plankton beds, leave for...
My mother whipped a busted radiator with her mighty tail.
My father's stumpy legs churned up oil and dust.
Oh the strangeness of life, my parents gnashing beer cans
and hubcaps in their horny mouths. But nothing, not even tears,
could change the mind of their cold-blooded daughter.

# Lunar Eclipse on Winter Solstice

*I wanna be a bonoboooo.*

—Jilla the Killa

If the bonobo were the moon and the moon were made of cheese.
If the bonobo's real name were Red Leicester and Red Leicester
wrote movingly about casual sexual encounters.

On the corner of Faithful and Chapman
a girl named Bonobo riffed the same old same old:
O raucous beauty, please, no chest-thumping alpha males.

Let's form strong girl-alliances and dine on apricots.
Let's play blindman's bluff and part our hair down the middle.
Let's pseudo-copulate while celestial bodies play out in the heavens above.

Look, they're doing it, shamelessly, in total darkness,
in the missionary position, on the back of a truck,
once in a blue moon, mouths open.

If not the bonobo, who'll translate the little bowls
of tapioca pudding, the pelvic rubs, tongue kisses?

Enter the graceful, slim-necked, long-legged, straight-backed,
black-faced, pink-lipped, small-eared, wide-nostriled
chimp. The ultimate social darling.

If you were a bonobo standing on the moon,
you'd see earth as a ring of red light.
You'd observe a rare cosmic happening.
But you're not a bonobo, are you, sweet thing?

# A Question of Syngnathid Sex

*Peer at a seahorse… and you will see a most unlikely creature…*

—The Guardian

Who if not the bizarrely beautiful would mate in a heart-shaped embrace?

And if you held a tiny diurnal fish up to the light
could you unravel the secrets

of the azure waters?
Aristotle observed

a wide stretch of ocean between God's eyes,
but eons would pass before a melancholic scientist

looked close enough
to see. Really see.

Somewhere light pierces a shallow pool
and two seahorses wrap prehensile tails around a single blade

of sea grass. They slough off
camouflage, click like a pair of castanets.

What if not a whimsical night-thought adorned in pink armour
would blush? Who'd don a royal crown,

change colour in the throes of desire?
Who but the foolishly enamoured would surrender

to the strange vernacular of love while predators circle?

# Duet

*Black-crested gibbons are one of the most endangered primates on Earth… and are famous for their melodic yodeling songs.*

—BBC Wildlife Finder

The black-crested gibbons are singing the monogamy song,
hoots and warbles and doo wop doo wop, they are
swinging in booyong trees, not swaying
through rose gardens, white silk does not
pour down their bodies like water.
Moments ago this open-air cathedral did not exist.
Now we sit on foldout lawn chairs,
all eyes on the woman, core of the event.
Thin straps make an X on her back,
his shirt is the colour of wheat.
Blessed with spectacular arms and brachial locomotion,
the newly paired gibbons lift their heads
above a crest of leathery leaves.
Theirs no opera to divorce or betrayal,
no aria to the one-night stand.
Someday the bride and groom might head for the hills
or crawl along the ground tearing up grass with their teeth,
but right now they clink glasses of champagne,
vow eternal love, while somewhere
in the sub-tropical rainforest
the monogamous gibbons are swinging through strangler trees,
belting out warnings: snake on the ground, eagle above,
I am yours, baby baby, you are mine.

*Joshua Trotter*

# When I Turned X Years Old

When I turned x years old
an x appeared
sprayed day-glo orange outside our door.

We were coming back from grandma's with a basket
of "practical objects."
I wore my favourite hooded jacket.

I hadn't noticed x
till father paused, keys in hand.
There was some correlation, I was sure.

My dear, he said, There are things of this world
and there are further worlds...
Three blocks down, pawing the air,

a grey-green helicopter howled
and shuddered, delivering "presents."
That was the year my father started looking old.

He turned the key that slid the bolt
that held the door.
Everything was as it appeared.

*Kim Goldberg*

# Superette on New Year's Eve

1.
You were reaching for
a flawless coconut when I finally saw what
had been beaching itself along the diaphanous shores of
my milky dreams most nights—an opportunity
for two sentence fragments to ultimately complete
each other. The chance, after these seven years, was
more slender than bare branches pressed tight against
the moon's pale participle dangling above our heads.

2.
The moon's pale participle dangling above our heads—
more slender than bare branches pressed tight against
each other. The chance, after these seven years, was
for two sentence fragments to ultimately complete
my milky dreams. Most nights an opportunity
had been beaching itself along the diaphanous shores of
a flawless coconut when I finally saw what
you were reaching for.

*Andrew Hood*

# Manning

"I'm gonna hit the can like it hit me first," my mom says. "Man the booth, Pickle." She squats, ducks under the table, pops back up on the other side, and, jingling her keys, disappears down the aisles of other booths.

"Hit it like it hit me first" is one of my mom's classic phrases. She's been using it since I can remember being embarrassed of her. It's an okay one, as far as go-to phrases go: not quite smart and not quite funny, but just enough of both of those to elicit at least a smirk. Unless you've heard the hell out of it, then your mouth screws up another way. "Night, Pickle. I'm gonna hit the hay like it hit me first. Don't stay up too late." "Buckle up, Pickle, and let's hit the road like it hit us first." "I'm not against you drinking, Pickle, but keep in mind how your dad would hit that bottle like it hit him first." She'll be here all week, folks.

Dad's splitting has inspired a new number in her repertoire. Everything has to be manned all of a sudden. "Man the apartment, Pickle, while I go out for spaghetti sauce." "Man the car, Pickle, while I run in here for a lotto ticket." "Man the basketball, Pickle, while I go see if those two black kids want to play two-on-two." As if this one guy—who was never around much anyway, even when he was around—had his finger stuck into some crack in some hypothetical dam and now that he's hit the road like it hit him first, someone else has to plug that hole so everything doesn't just gush and break through and drown everything else. It's like, "Here, Pickle, man the world while I'm gone, will you?"

While my mom's hitting the can like it hit her first, this big pile of human being comes up to the booth I've been left to man. He's got this mustache on his face, but it doesn't look like a mustache he grew. More like he couldn't grow a beard. What he's got on his face is how I imagine the mustache on the main character in this book I'm reading for school called *A Confederacy of Dunces.*

"What have you got?" the pile of human being wants to know. He looks sad about the boxes that we've got opened on the table, and a little tired about them. The good burgundy tablecloth that's been in the family since before Christ was a cowboy does not, as my mom insists, help.

"There's some baseball," I tell him. "Some basketball, some hockey. Some of everything."

"But what have you *got*?" His eyes look like they've been thumbed into his head, like the sunken eyes of a snowman.

"We've got what we've got," I tell him.

The pile sighs like air escaping from a chair when it gets sat on. This has to be his first time to this card show, to be coming to our booth, let alone asking us what we've got. Every month it's the same junk collectors and sad sacks and single dads who come, and they all know that we don't have anything, and that even if we did have anything, we wouldn't even know we had it. They come to the booth to flirt with mom, maybe buy a card on the off chance that it might improve their chances, but that's about it.

The last Sunday of every month my mom and I pay five dollars to set up our pointless booth at The Arena. This place isn't even really called The Arena, that's just the name it's been given. Where the name was supposed to be, there's just a big blank space. For a while someone had spray painted a weird-looking dick in that spot, but now it's blank again. This is the hockey rink that Corbet's OHL team was supposed to kick ass on. I don't know what goes on, whether they melt the ice or just put a flooring over top of it, but there's always a wet chill here and that sweet chemical smell that all indoor rinks have, folded into the pungency of locker room sweat stink. The team the rink was built for was going to be called The Corbet Combats. Something with a bat was going to be the logo. There was even a competition to design some lame mascot. I don't know if someone forgot to carry a one or what, but the way the math of it worked out, the town had enough money for an OHL team or for a rink, but not for both. So we got the arena for a hockey team, but no hockey team. Now The Arena gets rented out for kids' birthdays, school skating parties, the circus—not the good circus—Neil Diamond that one time, Tom Jones that other, and, every last Sunday of the month, this crap collectors' convention.

The human pile's got a shoulder bag, one of those cheap-ass ones they give away at conventions, and when he adjusts the way it hangs I see that his left hand is a little itty claw. The other one is in okay shape, though something about the little stubby fingers on it makes me think of baby penises. So with his baby penis fingers he goes through every single card in every single box of dad's worthless collection. I guess he needs to find out for himself that we have nothing. And I've got to stand there like I'm listening to someone tell a joke I've heard a million times because this is my booth to man now, these are my worthless cards to man. And the pile is mine to man now, too.

I get the feeling that in life you're rarely lucky enough to know just where the shit has come from that gets cut up and thrown by the blades of your

fan. But I can tell you that all of this is Ben Rooney's fault. Ben Rooney is this guy dad worked nights with at the chainsaw factory who just disappeared one day. Like a bubble that popped, he was there and then he wasn't. What happened was Ben Rooney sold his lifelong baseball card collection for a million dollars and then hit the road like it had hit him first. A wife and daughter were left behind. Claire Rooney went to the same school as me for a few years, though not when her pop popped. She was that girl who in kindergarten would come in from recess during the winter and, starting with her snowsuit, just take all of her clothes off, all the way down to her pointless pink body and get laughed at. Her pop was never heard from again, though I heard of him all the time, because fucking Ben Rooney became like this big hero for my pop. And that's the source of this huge load of elephant dook that got chucked at my fan and got sprayed pretty much all over everything.

"I swear to God," Pop started saying. "A million dollars." Like swearing to God meant anything. Swearing to God for him was just the same as saying "excuse me" after he'd sneak up on me and belch in my ear.

With dollar signs twinkling in his eyes, pop started buying baseball cards like rations before a disaster. In his mind, whatever that mind was, this was as good as buying money. Seriously: like buying fucking money. Like he was going out and paying one dollar for ten dollars. That's what he figured out from that Ben Rooney story. I would never ask my mom what on earth she was doing with such an impressive dope because I have this tickling suspicion that I'm the answer. The other answer is that it takes someone just a bit stupider to be with someone so stupid. So, either way, I just don't ask.

Instead of playing catch or something with me in the backyard we didn't have, or taking my mother out to fancy restaurants this town doesn't have, Pop would be sitting there cross-legged in the basement unwrapping the cards and stuffing them right into the box, the foil packaging glittering around him like fancy garbage. On the off chance there would be a hard, dusty blade of gum included, he'd give it to me if I asked before he stuffed it into his own breathing mouth. Card gum you've got to incubate and soften in the hot wetness of your mouth before you can even threaten to dream of trying to chew it. But in all that time it takes to get soft, you just realize that you don't want it anyway.

By the time he popped, like his hero Ben Rooney, Pop had amassed twenty-nine boxes of sports cards. Unlike Ben Rooney, he left all his cards behind when he left. He must have realized what they were really worth. The drool on his pillow on the couch hadn't even dried when mom packed up those boxes and spirited them to the city and to the first comics and sports memorabilia store she found in the phonebook.

Pop must not have even looked at the cards. He didn't care what they

were or what they were about. The cards went from package to box untouched, unenjoyed. Just money in the bank. Rudy—the owner of Rudy's, where we took Pop's boxes of currency—had to peel the cards off each other. I pretended to browse the stupid store while mom watched Rudy like a hawk that has no idea what a hawk eats.

Rudy, who was dressed entirely in denim—and I mean entirely: a snap-up denim shirt under a fraying denim jacket covered in buttons of all the major league ball teams, and jeans, and a denim hat from the '88 Calgary Olympics, and even his beard was that yellow colour that jeans become when they rot—Rudy offered us $300 for all twenty-nine boxes. Mom lost it like the house keys.

She screamed and all the grown men in the store looked up from their comic books. How dare Rudy try to take advantage of a destitute and heartbroken widow who was selling her beloved husband's beloved collection to afford to take care of her ailing, beloved son, who had contracted AIDS—that's right! Goddamned fucking AIDS, Rudy!—from the blood transfusion he needed after the car crash that had killed her beloved husband? "Fuck you, Rudy!" mom yelled, as if her and Rudy went way, way back, and she stormed out. She sat out in the car and left me, goddamned fucking AIDS and all, to lug the twenty-nine boxes from Rudy's counter back out to the car.

She didn't say it, but I could tell that mom, in her heart of hearts—yes, the heart that she has inside of her heart—I could tell that in there she actually believed that after one look at all those boxes, Rudy would open his register and count out one million dollars for her, bill by bill. Like Rudy would take the top off the first box, and this golden glow would bathe him. The heart inside of your heart is always the dumbest. Ask around.

As he stacked the last few boxes into my arms, Rudy, a bit jittery from having been screamed at, gave me a message to give to my mom. The economy of baseball cards, he said, is just like any other economy: it depends on lack. Not many people collected cards in the 50s, say, or their moms threw all the cards in the trash. The harder a card from the 50s is to come by, the more some guy who's stiff for that stuff is willing to cough up for it. When everyone realized how much some people were willing to pay for these useless things, they started holding on to their cards, dreaming of their own million-dollar payoff. But because everyone is collecting now, nothing is rare, and so a collection like Pop's is barely worth the cardboard it was printed on.

I said thanks to Randy and assured him that I really didn't have AIDS. "Yet," I added, and winked, and the look that he gave me said that being nice time was over and now it was time to get the fuck out of his store and leave him to surf online undisturbed for that rare pair of

denim underwear he needed to complete his look.

I imparted Rudy's wisdom to my mom on the drive home, but telling my mom anything she doesn't want to hear is like trying to give a cat a vitamin. Her fuckbag husband's cards were worth a million dollars and that's all. The next weekend we had a booth at the weird looking dick rink. And that was what? A year or so ago?

This book I'm reading right now was written by this guy who killed himself after no one wanted to read his book. His mom found the manuscript in a drawer after this guy hooked a hose to the ass of his car and she started insisting that it was the best thing anyone had ever written. Luck had it that the book was awesome, but I wonder if this guy's crazy old mom ever actually read the thing, like whether or not she just took the thing out of his drawer and hung it up on the fridge with an A+ on it. Whatever it was that was his, it was the best thing ever because her dead son had written it. You can never tell with crazy women what the value of anything they're trying to sell you is. But I kind of get the feeling that it's the crazy women that always get left to man the things that men leave behind, whatever the things are worth.

From out of twenty-nine boxes and from out of who knows how many cards, the human pile, with his baby penis fingers, plucks out just this one card.

"I'll take this," the pile says, and holds up the card like he's a magician who's just found my card in the deck.

"Okay," I say, and I fix my stare on his deep snowman eyes, but only because I'm trying to ignore the way that his claw has something like a slimy sheen to it.

"So how much?" the pile says. He makes for his fanny pack, which is a NASA fanny pack.

"I don't know." But I'm not thinking about the card, I'm thinking about an astronaut, done up in all his expensive hubbub, wearing one of those crappy fanny packs.

"I'll tell you what: I'll give you five dollars for it. It's not even worth a buck, frankly, but I don't like breaking bills."

"Let's see it," I say, and take the card from him. It's some guy named Rance Davis, a player for Seattle. His baseball card action shot has him in mid-swing. "Who is this guy?"

"He's nobody."

"Nobody's nobody," I say into the pile's eyes, but even against all my best trying, I steal a glance at his sheeny, shiny claw.

"Davis played like two games in the majors before f'ing his knee for good trying to steal home. He might have been somebody before, but now he's nobody."

The pile's good hand is out, his baby penis fingers are squirming, eager to take the card back. He's getting nervous, I can tell. The pile's starting to quiver like there's something alive inside of him that's moving around in there, trying to fit inside him better.

"If this kid's nobody then why do you want the card?"

"I couldn't give a crap about Davis. He's just the last card I need to finish the '03 Upper Deck season." The pile actually makes a little lunge to reclaim the card but I rear back because I'm not done with it.

As much as I think professional athletes are overpaid and just plain old unnecessary, I can still appreciate that what they do's not easy. A guy doesn't just fall into playing major league baseball. The majors are no chainsaw factory. From before you can make decisions about what you like or don't, you've got to be irrevocably committed to this stupid, silly lifestyle. I know these majors-bound kids in school, and they're just as weird and destroyed as the military-bound ones. You live your life with blinders on, and you work so foolishly hard against the foolish odds that all that foolish work will just lead up to nothing because hardly any-fucking-body makes it to the major leagues, and even most of the guys who do make it all the way there end up being these anonymous henchman types like this Rance Davis guy the pile is so hard over.

Maybe the picture on the card is of Rance's first game ever, of his first time at bat. Maybe this is the picture of the first pitch that was ever thrown to Rance, and he's swinging at it. You give all your dumb life to do this one thing, who are you not to swing? And here in the picture, there's no telling what will happen. He might swing and miss, or he might knock the scalp right off that first pitch. But, whatever happens, something will happen. That's what Rance has decided.

T-ball was as far as I played baseball. Hitting a ball in T-ball is just about as easy as punching the air, but there are those kids I remember who just wouldn't or couldn't swing the bat. The ball was elevated and still and unmistakably orange for them to do whatever with, in a choice position for them to be marvelous champions, but so many of those kids would just stand there stock still, their bats on their shoulders, not quite ready to swing. Not quite ready for anything to happen because of something they did.

To know that not long after this first swing Rance will screw up his leg and bring to a halt everything he has been building is just a bit too much. And it's amazing. All of that is here in this card. So I tell the pile it's not for sale.

"Fuck you it's not for sale," the pile screams a little. There's just a glimmer of cry in his snowman eyes. "Fuck you it's not for sale!"

A smile comes up like a burp, and I try to allay the thing by wrapping it up, by curling my bottom lip over my top, but the look you make

trying to keep yourself from smiling is a million dollars worse than an actual smile. Red flowers bloom all over the pile's pear face until it's just one big field of crimson. Little toots of angry breath fart out of his dilated nostrils and he's wobbling and vibrating.

The men that crowd The Arena are basically boys, guarding the crap they have and conniving to steal the crap they want. The crap that they're here after is all that matters in the world. They bicker and they bitch. It's all squirrelly greed and mean loneliness. Sometimes I'll watch them milling and waddling around the rink and imagine their bellies as hatches that open up to reveal some petty, pouting child at the controls of a man. The world that these goons live in is so damned fragile, patched together mostly with opinion, so they're extra careful and possessive of it. I haven't heard the phrase "See with your eyes and not with your hands" so often since I can't even remember when.

The pile tries to collect his huffiness, arrange it into something big and threatening. His little claw looks like it's trying to grip air while his baby-penis-laden other hand keeps adjusting the hang of his shoulder bag. Some sort of panicked dew has settled onto his moustache and makes it glisten.

"I don't know what the hell your deal is, kid. I don't know what kind of crap you're trying to pull, but trust me, I'm not the guy you want to be pulling it with." The pile sputters this out and all I can think of is shit being pulled on one of those taffy-pulling machines.

"I'm not pulling any crap. There's no deal. The card's just not for sale."

"Well why the hell isn't it?"

I take another look at the card, at the mid-swing of Rance Davis.

"Because I want it," I tell the pile without looking at him. I don't know how much more I can stand to look at him. "I like this one."

The pile opens his mouth a few times, like he's imitating someone talking. He stops gulping and puts his good hand into one of the boxes and takes out a wad of cards. "Well what about these ones, smart ass? Huh? You like these ones? Are these ones for sale? Huh?"

"I don't know. I haven't had a look at those ones. Maybe they are."

"Well here: have a look," the pile says, and he winds up and chucks the wad of cards at me.

For an impossible instant, this wad of maybe a hundred or so cards about the thickness of a junior hamburger holds its shape, coming at me like one complete block ready to hit my face like I hit it first. But right in front of me each card catches its own influence of air and they pull apart and go their separate ways. All the cards fall, and flutter, and spin, and swoop down, each of them with some heavy moment on it.

We stare at each other, the pile and me, like we can't believe that

what just happened just happened. As if two other people were doing this, and we were just two guys that watched it. My eyes flit back to the pile's claw and whatever pause button got pushed gets pushed again to make things play. "You're cleaning that up," I say, which I guess presses the pile's own play button, because his mouth opens to say something and his baby penis hand goes to readjust his bag, but before he can say anything, my mom does.

"Pickle!" she yells, and my mom drops to her hands and knees to gather up the scattered cards. They may as well be hundred dollar bills all over the ground. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," she's mumbling.

What can anybody do but watch something like that? The pile and me set our differences aside like soldiers on Christmas and watch my mom scramble around on the ground. But then I get a glimpse down her shirt and that's enough of that.

"Mom," I say. "Get up. Jesus."

She wobbles onto one knee and reaches to the pile for help up. Her hand grabs at the empty air where a person without a deformed hand's hand would be. She looks up and she sees the claw, in all its shine and sheen, so she gets up just fine on her own. Once she's standing, she has that dizzy, frazzled look of someone just spun ceaselessly in a chair.

"So who wants to tell me what the fuck this is?" she says. I can smell on her the cigarettes she doesn't smoke anymore. "Pickle?"

"This is your kid?" the pile wants to know. "These are your cards? This is your table?"

Mom looks at the pile, and then at the mess of cards that she didn't even begin to clean up, and then at the pile's sweaty claw, and then at me, and she seems unsure of whether anything here is actually hers. "And you are?" she asks the pile, maybe to bide some time while she figures out who all this stuff belongs to exactly.

"I'm the guy your kid is trying to screw."

"Pickle?"

"I didn't lay a hand on him, mom, I swear," I say, and though she doesn't, I can tell that my mom wants to smile at that one.

"Listen. Are these cards for sale or aren't they?"

"What? Of course they're for sale."

"Then why won't this kid of yours sell me this card?"

"What card?"

"That one." The pile makes a motion in my direction with his claw, to Rance Davis. "He says it's not for sale because he likes it."

I shoot the pile one hell of a look, as if he's betrayed some confidence.

Mom takes the card and I let her take it. She takes a pointless look at it, stares seriously at it, like someone staring at the engine of a broken-down car they have no idea about, as if seriousness will fix the car.

"I don't get it," she says. She turns to me. "What is there to like about it?"

Not knowing what to say it, I shrug my shoulders. But with my face I do my best to explain about the card, but trying to say anything on purpose with your face is like trying to perform the song you hear in your head on an instrument you just barely know how to play. So who knows what I actually communicate.

It goes to show that you never know what anybody is ever thinking. But you can guess, if you know the person. For all I know, my mom isn't thinking about the card right now at all, but is thinking about whether or not this pile of human being uses his damp claw to cuff his duke or not. But I don't think she's thinking that. It is probably only me who's thinking that. What I think she's thinking about, seeing the way her face gets full and soft from looking at however my face is looking, has to do with pop. I bet dimes to dollars that she's suspecting that I don't want to sell the pile this card, or any of these cards, because they're Pop's. Like this is all I've got left of that bag of dicks, and so to let go of his cards would be to let go of him. I think that's the way the mind of someone who watches too much TV tends to work. So she nods at me, having gleaned all she's gleaned from whatever my face had to say.

My mom turns dramatically to the pile. "I'm sorry," she says, with this weird, fluffy confidence, "The card," she pauses, "is not for sale."

"I'll give you one hundred dollars for the card," the pile says.

She can't even afford me a piteous "I'm sorry" look. "Deal," my mom says. "One hundred dollars for the card."

"Okay: one hundred dollars."

Now, anyone that's spent any time being nine years old knows that you have to see the money before letting someone you're doing a deal with put their meat hooks on what you're selling. Because even if they do take off without paying you, you at least know that they've got the money to make it worth chasing them down and beating it out of them. Without seeing a nickel, my mom hands over the card. As soon as the pile has it clutched in his baby penises he brings the card up to his claw, as if to feed an animal he's got in a headlock, and tears Rance Davis in half and lets the halves flutter stupidly onto the ground with the rest of the mess he's made.

"Fuck you," he says to my mom, pointing an erect baby penis at her.

"Fuck you," he says to me, pegging me with the same baby boner.

"So fuck us both, then?" I ask.

The pile smiles at me, his mustache like an eyebrow over a hideous yellow eye. "That's right." We finally understand each other.

Giving his shoulder bag one final, absolute adjustment, the pile galumphs away.

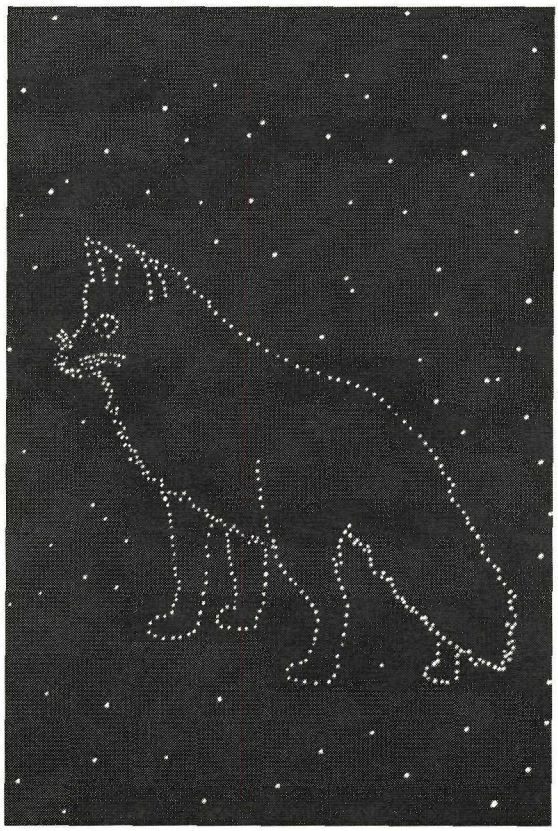
All the other men in all their other fanny packs are staring at us. I'm looking at my mom, trying to decide whether or not I can hate her for the rest of my life because of this, if this one time is enough of a reason. Every last Sunday I come here with her, for her—not that I have anything better to do—and entertain this insane delusion of hers. All this for her, and she's ready to sell me out in an instant. People have hated people for less.

I guess because someone has to say something, my mom turns to me and, instead of "I'm sorry," she makes a gross face and says, "Did you get a load of that asshole's little hand?"

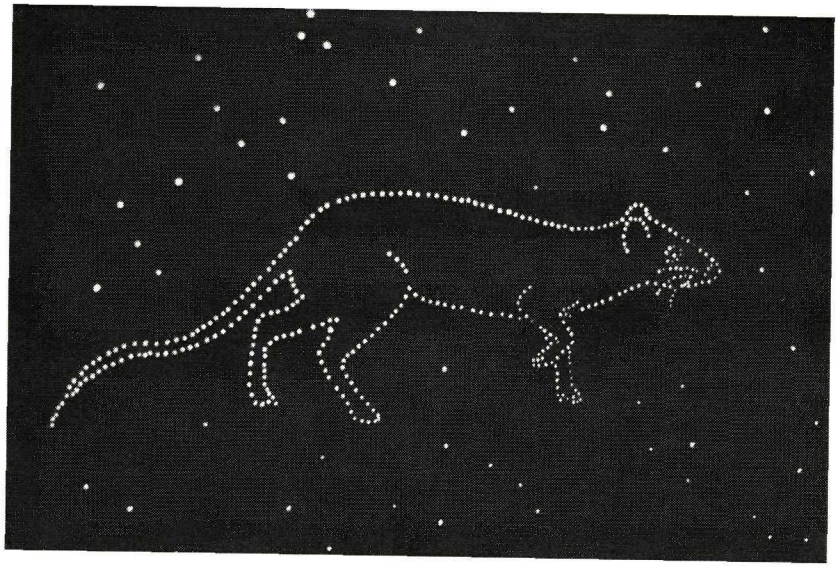
"Yeah," I say. "It was disgusting."

Like we'd rehearsed it before, we both, at the exact same time, screw up our faces and distort our left hands and make this guttural noise—like, "Grarrrrrrrrr"—and this is going to go on to be a shared thing that we do whenever something's disgusting or unreasonable. We make the hand, do the noise, and know exactly where all that came from.

## *Matthea Harvey*



The world is already crowded with instructions—crosswalks, implications, clues. We've projected too much on the moon. Maybe that's why they switched to stars? The No More Suicide Fox constellation looks astonishingly unadmonishing. His face is sweet and a little sad, as if he was copied from some 50s colouring book. Maybe he helps the happy ones go to sleep in their happy beds, no longer needing to make the sad ones promise "I won't, I won't." The children chant, "Star bright, star bright, no one dies tonight," but I'm not convinced. Where is he during the days, the grey days or the ones too bright with sunlight? We need a dog patrol that sniffs out despair and a horde of someones who will ask every single person every single day, "Are you okay?" before another friend is found dead in the bathtub, on the floor. I don't want to talk about that fox. He's pointing at people I know.



The new constellations are spelled out—as if someone has decided we're too dumb to make up new myths and took a didactic pin to our Tyvek sky. These ones have whiskers, eyes, and stories embedded in their very names, which appear in the papers the day after their first sighting. Replacing Casseopoeia, the Retaliation Rat—one foot off the floor and headed to your door. Babies point and say rattattatat. The older children intuitively dislike it—it requires no rigamarole of tents and telescopes, no pointing parent, no connect-the dots—and would like it less if they knew what it will mean to them specifically: one severed dollhead = one violin left out in the rain. Hit me once and I'll hit you again. Does it ease the pain of the survivor hiding in a tree as gunshots ring out and her village turns hazy with flame? If so, it's because she hopes the rat is made of cameras, not fabricated stars, and that their fifty lenses are recording each last atrocity, beaming the images to some central judgement room. There always have been and always will be rooms like this, but no one in them is watching anyone that far away. They're busy. A bomb has landed and a bomb needs to be launched right back.

*Jen Currin*

# Substance

The shampoo tasted like burnt sugar.
I ate it in the back of your truck
as you drove through town.

The storefronts were all glass bakeries.
I was sure a soldier would remember us,
just as I once knew lemons in February.

A crow gave us some black bread.
Thistle stew and the sea smell of your socks.

It was what a soldier would remember:
banjo on the back porch, ponytails,
and people banging pots to get
the beautiful neighbour's attention.

She used to have sex in front of sheer curtains.
Now she sleeps in the room we cannot see.

# A Pair of Shoes

Afternoons we can mime the ditches
and die almost human.
Die hungry, having tasted night.

You're gorgeous and blunt,
telling me to wash my face.

It comes in through every window
like the words buzzing when we're alone.

Nothing is unquestionable.

Sharp pencils and careful study
when we sense something's breaking.

We could all be suddenly honest.
We could all surprise.

That careful other silence.

The death of a mother before we could ever hope
to understand her.

I hear you singing underneath your blanket
and it's so cold out this morning.

# Capable

Once shaman, glittering & poor.

Never speakable enough,
inhaling fools & poisonous forms.

Fully responsible for the inhuman,
fully recognizable.

I am the women we met on the way
elegantly stuttering.

I am the generous but empty-handed,
like coloured bottles glittering, early morning.

For forgetfulness we will.
We will be difficult.
As pity shrinks with thinking.

Clumsily body now,
completely unrecognizable.

.

Honesty can & will. Honestly we will
speak for myself & the sleeping soldiers.

*Christa Romanosky*

# Prodigal Rainforest, Come Back!

I am in drunken bathtubs, tergiversating over bars
of soap, missing the opera, eating wafers

and scrubbing. You and your risky
species, oooh! You scare me sometimes and how

your rivers squander, Amazon flop, I go
perfectly into instinct. You are the baddest

of orphans. Fits of animal, miles
from home. I am going slowly, where have I been?

I have eaten lunch, snipped hair, all of those neat
routines. It seems you grew backwards

into stripes, lashes, those acres, a sky. I miss
your knot of glitter. Some days I don't

even think of you. Piled onto maniac fractal
plots, and naked. What of it?

I am hungry now, in my mid 20s—wild
you bother me. And thinner, and rare.

# Elvis Contemplates a Brave New World

I think my obsession with Aldous Huxley got out of control
the summer I found Ohio, my comeback, my bordello glitter. I travelled,
I showed it off, this second-hand mercury. We went west. Gas stations
stretched together like party decorations. I enjoyed every moment,
the tours, the open space, the 1974 radio, amphetamines—

jacked up like GI Joes. Many people were celebrating in the distant
torpedo sky. Me again, me. Fire, sparklers, caffeinated fields—
things got out of hand. I could see only corn. "Lay low," a man said,
"for a while." I became naked under nearsighted purple angels. I don't know
how it happened. "I am actually very shy," I whispered to the plants.

Bruises in the thighs, gunshots, tight jeans, hyped polyester, many ears
of corn, and song crushed into our bodies. Hotels and occasionally sex
but when no one came, I made questions of the walls. Raucously, if necessary.
Somebody stole my lighter, my decisions—erratic, I wore anything
that fell off the hangers. Heavy, I was so heavy. The invitations never stopped.

Vicodin, amphetamines, panoramic lifeline. Flickers in the minutes
before obsession relaxes, the way hair relaxes with water. I found myself
in a bathroom. The Doors of Perception wavered in the moon-washed tub.
Kennedy's brain varnished to white, aspirin and fluorescents—vanishing
acts are the best kind of magic. I miss the day-glow, I guess there are replacements

for everything. I carry flares in the glove compartment whenever I travel
to unknown locations. We all die alone, I suppose on toilets or cots
staring out. Euphoria only when instigated by bodies or poppies, or the way bodies
hang out and collapse. Lash upon lash. Huxley's last words: LSD, 100 micrograms.
I.M. No matter, August crashes in like a junkie wanting to rev things up.

I ignite blankets and fingers, I pump the blood to continue to breathe.
Euphoria, I chant, and alienation, but it is so pretty—that first gasp, holy gasp.
We are all becoming plants, and quickly. I use chlorophyll daily, anything to take
*the edge away from the disappointment of bodily song.* "*I am actually very filthy,*"
I whisper to the media. I show them my particles—they write everything down.

# Pontius Pilate's Airplane

I wanted it all. Harmonizing
the sky for a video conference
at 4pm sharp, tar-shocked hills

slipped with fits, bags
of heaven. I staple my friends
to their view posts. Vertebrae ropes,

starry organs. Look what we have
done. Flaps of continent
flavoured pink, expiating

wastewater, trolling the slag,
proclaiming verdict: guilty wood
or stitched daylight. I did it,

cleaned up good, dined
for the sake of dinner. Judea
incinerator and the flat

public evening. Neon god factories
blinking open! I go where I know
the light burns claret. Retro-sun

smashing into fields: people set free
their rhododendrons. What we did
stays between us, Yeshu engine

high up demanding afterparty, here
take my battery, chug-a-lug. This
is just how it works: rubber skyline,

a runaway slum, the one
limp wing. The things we contain
and how every one knows it.

*David Swanson*

# Ghazal 5: Lock the Door

On the final page this winter, an ice-river opens a crack. Puddles
occur, and sparrows, and the moonlight that spills across your floor.

Lock the door: lilacs blossom between my toes.
The March wind shuffles the curtains—long ago dreams.

Empty orange buoys dot the bay. A blue heron stands one leg on
the largest stone, counting the kelp's quick shadows, biding its time.

Dog-deaf to all masters, I sniff the bright breeze. I am
the frog prince, waiting: there are no flies on this man's tongue!

In the hotel lobby, the pianist softened, became a white feather
on a black piano. Your fingers stretched over me, under the table.

Each spring brings sly crocuses, determined worms. Porch icicles
stab at the sunlight like wet knives, bending it into rainbows.

I am shifted, shy of all this—a weak verb trying to be strong,
a wrong word tossed in the right direction, looking for a home.

# Contributors

**Jen Currin** was born and raised in Portland, Oregon, and currently lives in Vancouver, B.C., where she teaches writing and literature at Vancouver Community College and creative writing at Kwantlen University and for Simon Fraser University's Writer's Studio. Jen has published three books of poetry: *The Sleep of Four Cites* (Anvil Press, 2005); *Hagiography* (Coach House, 2008); and *The Inquisition Yours* (Coach House, 2010), which is shortlisted for the 2011 Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize (B.C. Book Prizes), the Lambda Literary Award in Poetry, and the Audre Lorde Award.

**Erin Frances Fisher** is a writer, composer, and musician who lives in Victoria. She currently studies poetry and fiction at the University of Victoria, and teaches piano at the Victoria Conservatory of Music.

**Kim Goldberg**'s poetry has appeared in *Geist*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *The Capilano Review* and elsewhere. Her *RED ZONE* collection of poems about homelessness has been taught in literature courses at Vancouver Island University. Her previous collection, *Ride Backwards on Dragon*, was shortlisted for the Gerald Lampert Award. Visit her website at www.pigsquashpress.com.

**Matthea Harvey** is the author of *Of Lamb*, *Modern Life*, *Sad Little Breathing Machine*, *Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form* and a children's book, *The Little General and the Giant Snowflake.*

**Robert James Hicks** earned an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he was a Teaching-Writing Fellow. His stories have appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Quarterly West*, *The New Quarterly*, and *The Fiddlehead.* He recently built a basement suite in his home in Victoria, BC, and he is completing a novel.

**Andrew Hood**'s first book, *Pardon Our Monsters* (Vehicule Press), won the 2008 Danuta Gleed Award. His stories have recently appeared in *Maisonneuve*, *The Rememberer* (Invisible Press), and as a chapbook for Frog Hollow Press. Currently he lives in Halifax, at work on a novel about treasure hunting.

**Mark Jacquemain**, a graduate of the University of New Brunswick's MA in Creative Writing program, is completing his first novel.

**Pamela Porter**'s third collection of poetry, *Cathedral*, was recently published by Ronsdale Press. Her novel in verse, *The Crazy Man*, won the 2005 Governor General's Award for children's literature. She was also the recipient of the 2010 Vallum prize for poetry. Pamela lives on Vancouver Island with her family and a menagerie of rescued horses, dogs, and cats, including a formerly wild mustang.

**Scott Ramsay** is a high school teacher in Vancouver. He writes poems and takes photographs while his family is sleeping. He's grateful to *PRISM* for choosing "Pop Quiz" for its publication. His photography can be found at www.scottworks.ca.

**Christa Romanosky** received her MFA from the University of Virginia. She has read for the *Virginia Quarterly Review* and *Best New Poets 2011*. She has been most recently published in *Drunken Boat*, *Meridian*, and *Fourth River*, and taught the course "Gaga for Gaga; Sex, Identity, and Gender" at the University of Virginia.

**Rachel Rose** has won awards for her poetry, her fiction, and her nonfiction. She has published poems, short stories and essays in Canada, the US, New Zealand and Japan, including *Poetry*, *The Malahat Review*, and *The Best American Poetry*. The author of two books, *Giving My Body to Science* and *Notes on Arrival and Departure*, she teaches at Simon Fraser University and is the founder of the "Cross-Border Pollination" reading series.

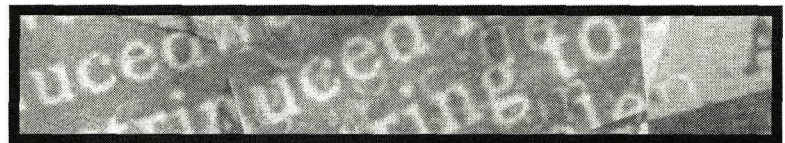
**David Swanson** lives on Gabriola Island. He has been nominated for the National Magazine Awards and shortlisted for the CBC Literary Awards. His work has appeared in publications like *Rocksalt: An Anthology of Contemporary BC Poetry*, *Descant*, *The Malahat Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Grain*, *The New Quarterly*, *The NewWest Review*, *Event*, and *Quarry*.

**Joshua Trotter** writes and cooks in Montreal. His first book of poems, *ALL THIS COULD BE YOURS*, was recently published by Biblioasis.

**Ian John Turner** is an illustrator and artist who was born in Ontario in the autumn. His work often deals with the idea of place, and he tries to approach everything with equal measures of love and cheek. Find him at www.ianturner.ca.

Originally from Grimsby, Ontario, **Sheryda Warrener** has lived in Japan and Sweden, and now calls Vancouver, BC home. Her first book of poetry, *Hard Feelings,* was released by Snare Books in Fall 2010.

**Patricia Young**'s most recent collection, *An Auto-erotic History of Swings*, was published with Sono Nis Press. Chapbooks of her work are forthcoming with Jackpine Press, Leaf Press and The Alfred Gustav Press. A selection of poems from the "animal" series will also be published in the *New Quarterly* and *Arc*'s joint *Quarc* issue.



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**Online Faculty (M.F.A.):**

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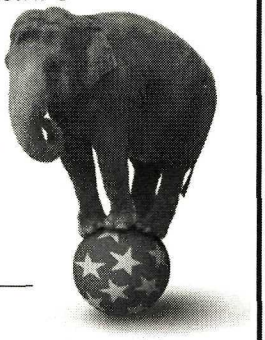
# The FIDDLEHEAD

***In the Centre Ring . . . The Fiddlehead's 21st Annual Literary Contest***



**$1500 Ralph Gustafson Prize for Poetry**
$500 each for the Two Honourable Mentions

**$1500 for Best Short Fiction**
$500 each for the Two Honourable Mentions

---

**Entries** must be original and unpublished elsewhere. No simultaneous submissions.

**Do not put your name and address** on your manuscript. Include a cover page that has on it the entry's title(s), the category your entry goes in, and your name and contact information.

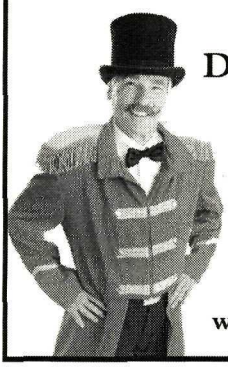
**All entries** must be submitted by mail. No faxed, digital, or emailed submissions are allowed.

**One short-fiction** entry is one story (6,000 words maximum).

**One poetry entry** is up to 3 poems; no more than 100 lines per poem.

**Entry Fee:** $30 for an entry from Canada and $36 for an international entry. The entry fee includes a one-year subscription to *The Fiddlehead.*

**Multiple entries** are allowed; however, each entry must be accompanied by its own cover page and entry fee.



**Deadline: postmarked by 1 Dec. 2011**

**Send entries to:**
The Fiddlehead Contest • Campus House
11 Garland Court • UNB
PO Box 4400 • Fredericton, N.B. • E3B 5A3

**For complete guidelines go to our web site:**
**www.thefiddlehead.ca or email us: fiddlehd@unb.ca**

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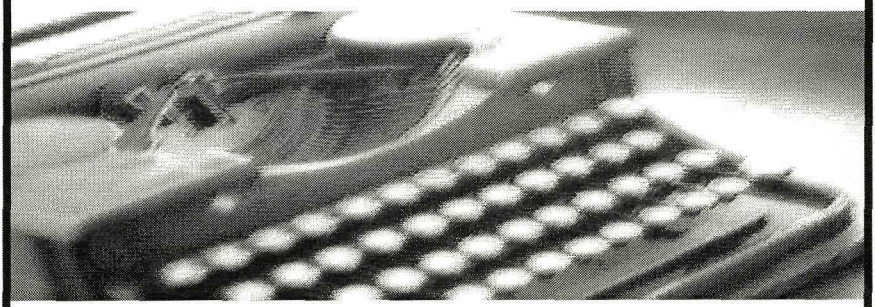
Contemporary Writing from Canada and Around the World



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**DEADLINE: NOVEMBER 30th, 2011**

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**3 Runner up Prizes of $200 each**
Entry fee: $28 for 1 story, plus $7 for each additional piece
**DEADLINE: JANUARY 27, 2012**

**Poetry Contest - 1st Prize $1,000**
**2 Runner up Prizes of $300 and $200**
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**$2250 IN PRIZES ENTRY FEE $30***

## *DEADLINE* JULY 15 2011

*JUDGES* **Amber Dawn** *fiction* **Elizabeth Bachinsky** *poetry*
**Susan Juby** *creative non-fiction*

Visit www.roommagazine.com for complete contest details.
* Entry fee for Canadian entries. Non-Canadian entry fee C$42.
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**49:4**

Short Fiction & Poetry Contest Issue

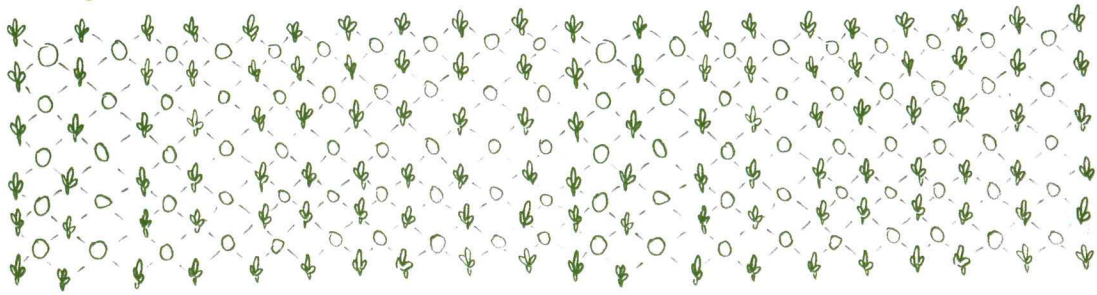
Interview with Fiction Contest Judge John K. Samson

Winning Entry: Erin Frances Fisher

Essay by Poetry Contest Judge Brad Cran

Winning Entry: Pamela Porter

Jen Currin
Kim Goldberg
Matthea Harvey
Robert James Hicks
Andrew Hood
Mark Jacquemain
Pamela Porter
Scott Ramsay
Christa Romanosky
Rachel Rose
David Swanson
Joshua Trotter
Sheryda Warrener
Patricia Young



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