

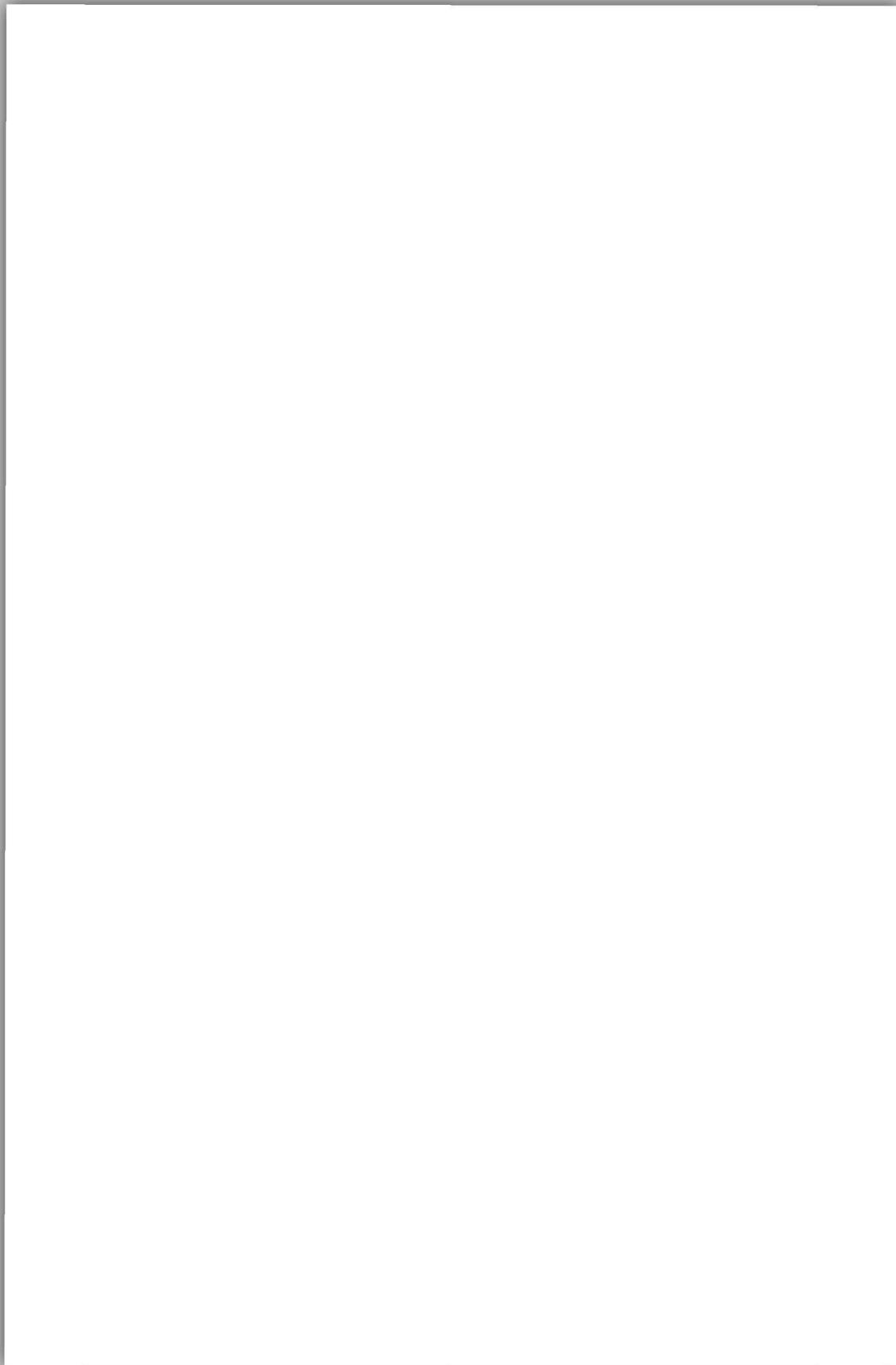
PRISM *international*

Contemporary writing from Canada and around the world

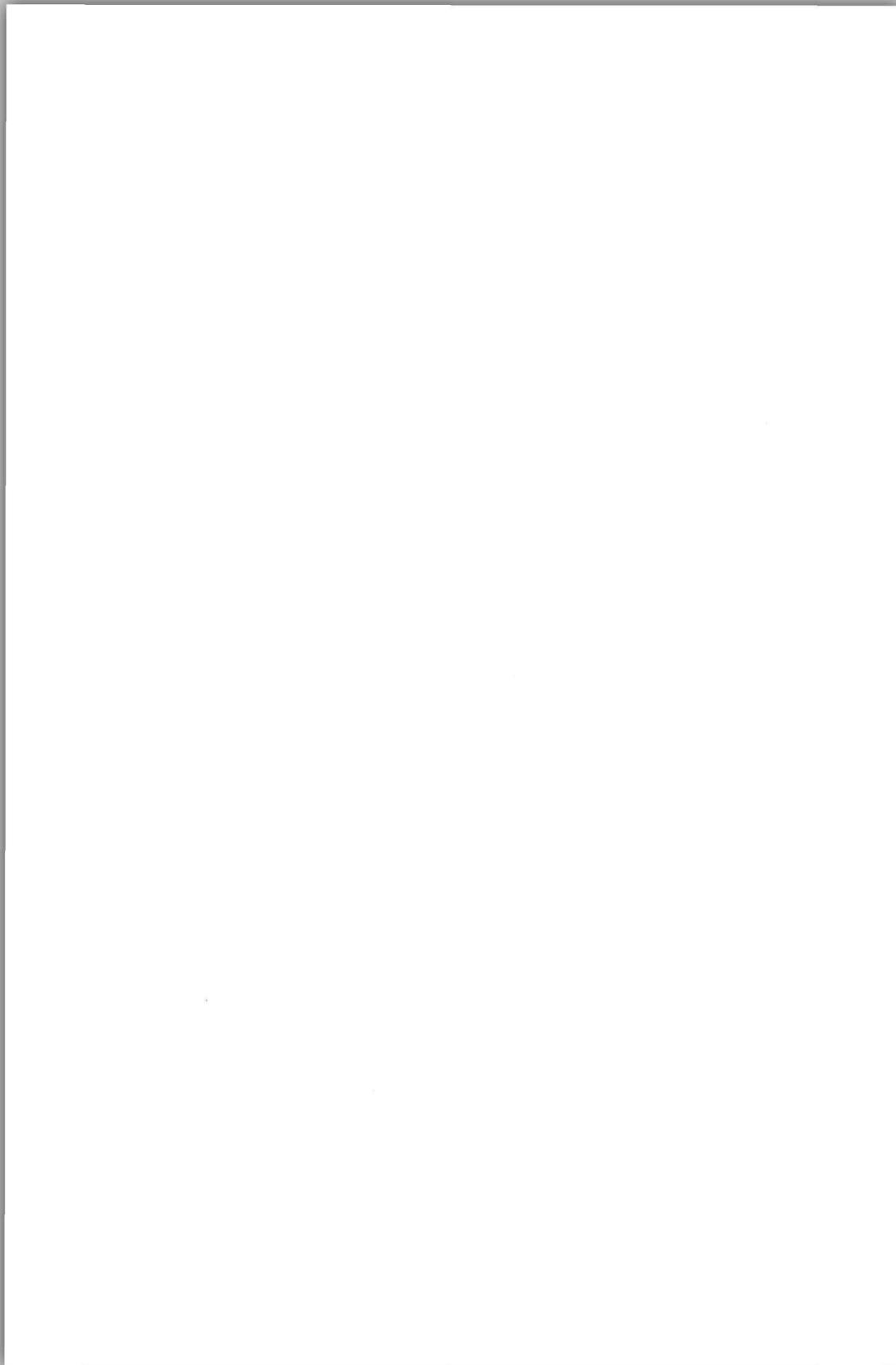
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PRISM *international*



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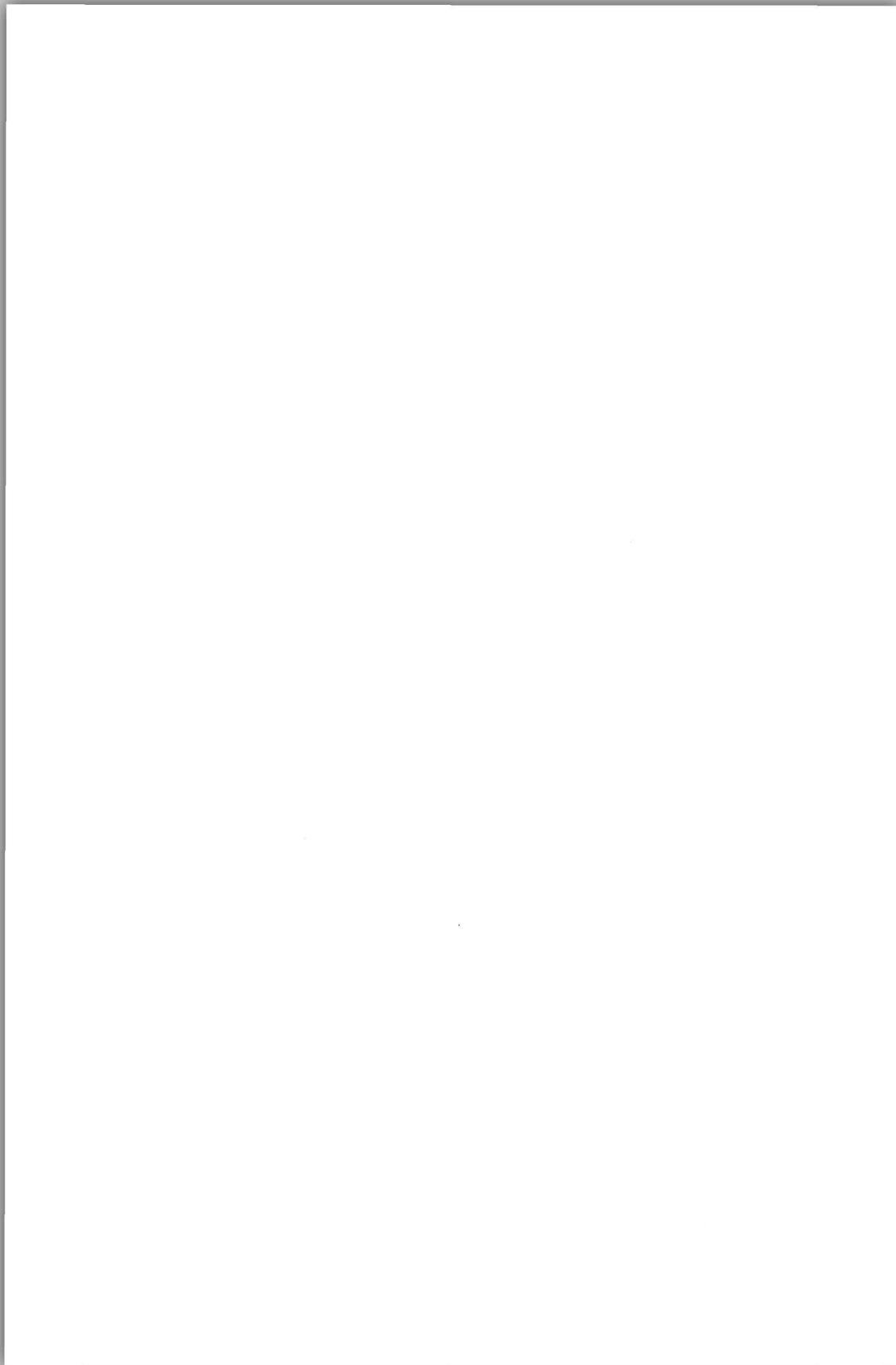
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Noble Fictions

John Isaacs

I was born on Fleckman Street in an orange 1952 firetruck. The story, which changes with each telling, goes something like this: my mother's water broke in front of the Olmstead firehall, while she was being walked by Tiny, her overfed bloodhound, and the men at the station carried her onto the truck, blared the new siren, and headed to the hospital. I made it before they did.

My father joked that the firemen's motives were not altogether altruistic, that my mother spouted more water than any Olmstead hydrant, and that the reason I was not delivered in a hospital room was that the men stopped on Fleckman and used my mother to put out a small fire—or something to this effect. Like my mother, I am not good at repeating jokes. Anyway, all of my father's jokes had to do with some variation of this theme of fire and water. Some of them were amusing. My father persuaded my mother to name me Fleck. That was not amusing.

Tiny died of a heart attack while chasing the orange truck. In their haste to get my mother to Hope General, the firemen forgot about him. But my father didn't; he had Tiny stuffed and mounted as a belated welcome home gift to my mother. The taxidermist found a bandless watch and wax rose petals in the entrails. The watch was still ticking.

My father wrote a poem about that watch, not a very good one, something that had to do with beat and pulse, or the lack of it, in Tiny. It was not a work of lamentation. My father hated that mutt.

The only thing he hated more was routine—white underwear, black socks. He often took sudden trips with his buddies, escaping his househusband duties for a day or two. My mother, who had always been the breadwinner in our family, quietly accepted routine. She worked steady night shift at the plastics factory, casting buttons, working with heat and forceps—a job that required her to wear helmet and goggles. I thought my mother was a beautiful woman, MGM beautiful, a woman with quiet authority, sensible, pensive; a woman who should flaunt her looks rather than hide them behind goggles. I secretly blamed my mother's lot on my dad (he could not hold onto a job), though I never got the impression that my mother did.

When I was thirteen, I told my father he should find a real job, that I

didn't need him to watch me anymore. This happened after he showed up after school one rainy day, his hair in a ponytail, wearing an old set of my mother's goggles and a red and white checked apron. "Let's go, Dad," I said, hoping my friends wouldn't see him, but they formed a circle around him as he jumped around in the rain and sang to the sky. My mother had attributed this dance to the few drops of Indian blood in him, and that's how I explained Dad to my friends, but they didn't get it. Indians don't wear aprons, they said. Indians dance when the weather is *dry*. My friends had dads who did important things, or things that they led me to believe were important, and I let my father know this.

Soon after, he got what I considered his first real job at the *Valley Mirror*, proofreading "big" stories—"Councilman MacCloskey Retires After Thirty-Two Years," "Local Miss Is State Twirling Champion"—writing little ones.

With his first paycheck from the paper, he bought my mother another bloodhound. Mom made a big fuss about it. "You name him, Jim," she said to my father. "You think of a name." While she got acquainted with the mutt, my father took me by the arm and pulled me into the den. He pointed to the bare spot on the wall opposite Tiny. He leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Bookends," he said. "Symmetry."

He wanted me to have a sense of humor.

My father's first obituary was Bernard R. Gumbmeyer. It was a tough one for him to write. The Olmstead *Valley Mirror* allowed only so many agate lines per obituary. "How do you fit a man's life into such a small space?" my father asked me, my mother, and his friend Hal, the mortician. Yet he somehow managed to do it. He saved his first obituary in a folder under his desk blotter. Bernard R. Gumbmeyer became the prototype.

The *Valley Mirror* was a nickel weekly that reported dates of wiener roasts, honour roll lists, and news that some local miss made it big, or close to big, in New York City, or close to New York City. My mother called it parakeet sheets. She believed my father could do better. We knew he had a mind in motion—that's how my mother described it—but my father, for some reason, liked working at the paper. My mother said it wouldn't be long until he got antsy. That was his *nature*, she told me.

My dad's toughest obituary was Frieda M. Platt, not because it was one of his first, but because Frieda apparently had no blood survivors. "Frieda Platt is dead," he told my mother. "The end of a bloodline, and no one gives a damn."

"Who's Frieda M. Platt?" my mother asked, and that seemed to sad-

den him even more. I had rarely seen my father sad. He showed us what he had come up with for next week's edition of the *Valley Mirror*.

FRIEDA M. PLATT, formerly of Nanticoke, on August 30, 1966. Services were held at the Glen-Stover Funeral Home, Olmstead.

He told me to put on my suit and the three of us went to the Glen-Stover funeral parlor. We pretended to be close friends of the deceased. My father explained to me that this was what was known as a "noble fiction."

We met Frieda's priest and mailman and three of the women who had worked with her at the city museum from 1939–1953. The mailman told us Frieda belonged to the Book-of-the-Month-Club. The priest kept calling her Frannie.

The only other person there was the woman who had notified the *Valley Mirror* of Frieda's death, a sallow-skinned woman, the only person who had wept for Frieda M. Platt. On the drive home, my father pulled over on Orlando Avenue and told us that this woman had been Frieda's lover. He leaned over and kissed my mother, softly on her chin, then he laid his head on her chest. My mother held him tight and hummed. "I'm so relieved," my father sighed.

When we got home, my mother called the factory and told her boss she wouldn't be coming in. My parents did not hush their lovemaking that night—well, at least my father didn't. He was a loud giver and receiver. There was a stillness in the house when my parents were done, an emptiness, a quiet that I didn't trust.

Later, after midnight, my father came into my room and sat at the foot of my bed. He was a tall, strong man, and I felt the mattress sink from his weight. He pulled a band and let his hair fall over his neck. I thought he would explain why he took us to Glen-Stover, or why he was relieved Frieda had a lover, but he didn't mention these things. Instead, he asked me softly what I thought about death.

I was thirteen and I told him I hadn't given it much thought, though that was a lie. My answer didn't satisfy him. He crawled up the bed and pressed his thumb against my wrist. His hand was cold and wet. "What do you imagine happens to you when you die?" he persisted.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe nothing."

He let go of my arm and jumped out of bed. He sauntered to the window and drew the curtain. The moonlight caught his eye. It was a bright moon, a full moon, a moon that, if you stared at it long enough, you could see a face, maybe a familiar face.

“Nothing?” he said. “Nothing at all?”

I saw my answer perplexed him. “Well, maybe something,” I said.

“*Something*, you say. *Something*.” He opened the window and stuck his head outside, his hair tangling in the breeze. “Should we agree on that, then?” he asked. “Let’s agree on that. *Something*.”

“All right,” I said.

“All right what?”

“*Something*.”

He took a deep breath of the cool night air. “Something good or something bad—or shouldn’t we discuss this yet?”

“No,” I said.

“For now, then, we’ll just leave it at that. *Something*. That’ll keep us going, eh?”

When he said this, the new bloodhound, four months new yet still unnamed (my father took his time with such things), howled like a wolf. My mother tried to quiet the dog by talking to him. She used words like “mommy” and “consideration” and “reasonable.” My father got a kick out of this. He stuck out his tongue and panted like the mutt, then leaned out the window and barked at the moon.

The next day, my father was gone.

My dad never told my mother or me that he was taking off on one of his trips. He always left a note with the place where he could be reached, if he planned to stay overnight. This is what angered my mother the most—that he didn’t tell us.

Sometimes he went off with one of his buddies; most times he traveled alone. My mother and I had followed him twice: once to Roanoke, where he had entered a bird calling contest; another time we sat two rows behind him in a Doris Day movie marathon right in Olmstead. It had been a while since we followed him—my mother wasn’t suspicious anymore, or if she was, she hid it well. We both came to realize that my father just needed to get away once in a while. Yet it was my mother who worked the hardest, my mother who was always tired.

She was especially concerned about my father’s latest trip, and she told me to get in the car and we followed him to a little town fifty miles from Olmstead. “Pea green soup,” she said, smiling a little.

She was telling a joke, something she did when she seemed nervous, insecure. She once confided in me that she feared she was not fun enough for my father. “Say ‘pea green soup’ after everything I say, OK?”

I nodded.

“What did you have for breakfast, Fleck?”

“Pea green soup.”

“And for lunch?”

“Pea green soup.”

“Dinner?”

“Pea green soup.”

“And then you peed your pants at night.”

“No, Mom,” I said. “You’re supposed to say, ‘And what did you do all night long, Fleck?’ Then I say, ‘Pee green soup.’”

“Oh, darn,” she said.

The joke was for me—she was trying not to appear worried. Between jokes, or attempts at jokes, she asked me things about my father, about his mood, about his humour. Perhaps I should have sensed that my father was ill, but neither he nor my mother told me he *had* been ill, nor did his recent behaviour seem that odd to me. His concern for Frieda M. Platt and our discussion about death were the only symptoms I could recall, signs of seriousness that would wear normal on most other men, but not my father. He usually steered clear of seriousness.

We drove a hundred miles to discover that my father had checked himself into Hope General. My mother brought him home the following morning, after her night shift, and assured me he would be fine. She took me by the hand and led me into their bedroom so I could see for myself that he was fine. My father slept peacefully on his back, his lips upturned, as if he were listening to a new joke, or as if he knew something that we didn’t know. He looked the same to me, just dead—sheet-shackled and uncharacteristically still. My mother had tied back his hair and balméd his lips with white petrolatum. “He’s all right,” she insisted. “Now get rid of the face.” She pushed a strand of hair back off his forehead then led me out of the room.

I decided to come back later to cut his hair while he slept. None of my friends’ dads wore their hair long. Not even their mothers had ponytails.

The following night, while my mother was at the factory, I took her sewing shears, turned on the hall light, and tiptoed into my father’s room. He slept soundly on his back, breathing evenly, his eyelids fluttering a bit. I slid the scissors against the pillow, snipped at his locks, but the blades were dull and his hair would not cut. I walked softly out of the room, and looked for a sharper pair of shears. The only thing I could find were hedge clippers in the garage. I figured they would do.

My shadow entered my father’s room before I did. Two good chops would do it, I told myself. I held the clippers over my father’s head and suddenly, my father’s eyes opened. They stayed open for a full minute before they closed, his eyelids fluttering again. I cut his hair in three chops.

My mother had told me she had seen my father sleep wide-eyed. She

told me this when she explained his illness to me. When I was an infant, she said, she came home from work one day and found me crawling down my father's lap, making the rocker swing. My father sat cold and stiff, eyes open, lips purple. She could not wake him up. "Your father has low adrenalin," she said. "His old pills stopped working, and when he builds a tolerance to the pills, his body slows down. His mood gets low. So the doctor put him on new pills. His mood will swing back up. It'll take a little while for his body to adjust, then he'll be as good as new."

I didn't trust it was as simple as that, putting all that faith in a square adrenalin pill. But sure enough, in a few days, my father was acting up worse than ever. "If you're going to be a barber," he told me, "then be a good one." He handed me a pair of shears and made me finish the job. "Shorter," he said, "close to the scalp." He groaned with each snip—my punishment.

I knew he was back to his old self when he told my mother that, while he slept, he had had a vision—he had seen Tiny, her dumb obese hound—and a voice from above whispered a name in his ear, a name for our new five month old mutt. "M," he said with certainty. "It must be M, after Frieda-the-same-initial-Platt."

My mother took an early vacation week from work to take care of my father. She doted over him, ran when he called, but my father didn't ask for ordinary things like water or *Life* magazine. "What do you want, Jim?" my mother asked.

"The Twist," my father said. "Do The Twist."

My mother rolled her eyes, swung her hips, twisted to the floor, did a quick bump and grind, then walked back to the kitchen to finish whatever she had started. My father could be a contagious man, but whatever he had didn't seem to slow down my mother. She had fun quickly, perfunctorily, as if to get it over with.

My father asked me to read to him while he convalesced. It eased my conscience a bit for the way I chopped his hair. I usually started with the *Valley Mirror* obituaries, and we agreed the man who substituted for my father didn't have his impact or rhythm. After the newspapers, I read from *Year of Decisions*. My father respected Harry Truman—he almost called the dog "S" after him. He made me read slowly, clearly. "Tell me what you just read," he said, testing my comprehension. This all happened about the time I discovered cursing, and I swore at my father regularly. He had the same criticism with my cussing as he had with my reading—that I didn't put enough into it.

After a week or so my father's vision was better. I heard him pecking away at the typewriter late one night. He had a wild, up-to-something

look about him then. Sometimes, while he worked alone in his room, he laughed long and hard. He liked his own company.

My mother, looking fresh and wide-eyed, returned to work. It made me wonder what she was like before she started at the factory, how much of her vigour had been taken by the plastics. I wondered if she ever danced without being asked to. I tried to think of something my father had sacrificed for my mother, but I couldn't come up with anything. I thought my mother was more noble than my father. I wanted to be serious and selfless like her when I grew up.

My father continued to work early into the morning, typing to Strauss in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. After a while he closed the door to be alone with his thoughts. He promised, if I was patient, I'd have a part in this fiction, that I, in fact, would create the character. I had no idea what he was talking about. I just wanted clean laundry and something to eat that I didn't have to thaw, but somehow he captured my imagination, and I couldn't wait until he opened the door and let me in.

I was asleep next to M. on the hall floor when he came out. He shook me awake. I could hear the excitement in his voice.

"Pick a city," he said. "Any U.S. City."

I rubbed my eyes and shrugged. "What for?"

"Any city. Any city you want. But make sure it's far from here."

"Nashville," I said. "Nashville, Tennessee."

"Yes," he said. "That's a good one."

"Now a name. A woman's name. First and last."

"Betsy Ross."

"No. Not a famous woman. Just make up a name."

"Does this woman live in Nashville?"

"She lived there once."

"What does she do?"

"What do you want her to do?"

I thought about this for a while. "She's a hard-working woman," I said. "Her husband works so she can stay at home. She makes sure her son has three warm meals every day and clean laundry. She likes to go to the Grand Ol' Opry and listen to the country stars sing. She herself sings like those country thrushes." This was something my mother said—when she heard pretty music, she compared it to the songs of country thrushes, whatever that meant. These were songs that she remembered from her girlhood days in Tennessee. My mother didn't say much, but what she said always struck me as important.

"What's her name?" my father asked.

"Her name is Pearl. Pearl McNugg."

My father nodded, jumped to his feet, then hurried to the typewriter. "Does Pearl have just one child?" he shouted.

I made up a history and he typed it up quickly. He quietly lip-read the paper, pushed back his chair, and announced it was time to see what *we* had created.

The first thing I read was PEARL Q. McNUGG. "I threw in the "Q.," my father said. He raised his hand, out of habit, to push his hair back. I knew at once what my father was planning, all the more, I think, because I had given Pearl death. My mother had been right: my father was as antsy as a caged bear.

"Next week's paper," my father whispered. "Our secret, eh?"

Pearl McNugg was a girl I liked, not a character of my imagination, and when I told my father this, he seemed disappointed that I had had trouble make-believing. This was the same criticism he had of my mother, that she didn't know how to pretend, that she had too few dreams. I believed my mother had dreams, but she couldn't act on them.

I came up with a new name for my father—Madelyn Q. Schlott, and I redeemed myself with that one, for there was not a single Schlott in our Greater Valley White Pages. The obituary, which appeared in the *Valley Mirror* the day after my fourteenth birthday, read like this:

MADELYN Q. "GABBY" SCHLOTT, formerly of Olmstead, on October 3, 1966, in Nashville, Tennessee; wife of the late Emil X. Schlott; mother of John Z. Schlott of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada; two grandchildren. Services were held at the Fleck-James Funeral Home, Hamilton, Ontario.

My mother immediately recognized my father's fiction, pointing out the namesake funeral parlor and his preoccupation with mysterious middle name initials. She did not consider this fiction noble.

I didn't see how it hurt anyone. In fact, I was intrigued that my father had even thought of it, and bemused that no one else in the Valley questioned it. It made me wonder what I should be questioning. "No," my father said. "Your mother is quite right. We can do better." "We" came up with these for the next edition:

WENDELL "THE HUMAN CANNONBALL"
SCHNOOGERS, formerly of Olmstead, on October 8, 1966,
in flight over Lake Joux, Switzerland.

ALICE ANN ADAMSAPPLE, originally from Olmstead, on October 9, 1966, in Anchorage, Alaska. Survived by three daughters, Bessie Bellyache of Boston, Candy Chromosome of Corpus Christi, and Donna Digitless of Dover.

Soon my father forgot about Madelyn Q. Schott and Wendell Schnoogers and bombarded me with questions about Pearl McNugg. "What does she smell like?" he asked. "Bubble gum? Oranges?"

Oranges? I hadn't got close enough to her to have a clue. I told him little and made up the rest. I started to appreciate this latter option.

It took me a month to get up the nerve to ask Pearl to the Sadie Hawkins' dance. I thought Sadie Hawkins was the name of one of those "good-clean-fun" bands the faculty hired. Pearl was a year ahead of me, six inches taller, and, from the way she walked, I suspected she could dance. She had that toe-iness about her.

During that month, I closed my bedroom door every night and practiced some steps in front of my dresser mirror. I jumped onto the bed once in a while to see what my feet looked like. In the mirror, they looked like they were stomping beetles; in my mind, they were leading Pearl across the dance floor. I was beginning to understand what my father saw in invention. Reality was clumsy, often bleak.

Pearl McNugg said no to the dance. I asked her in the school cafeteria while she was globbing nail polish on her stocking. I figured after everything I went through for a month, I deserved an explanation. She patted me on top of the head. "You're short," she said.

I knew that much about myself. I knew that I had big feet—or feet that appeared big because of my height—thick lips, and dark skin like my father that prompted strangers to question my ancestry. I knew that I had a gap between my front teeth, and that sometimes, when I spoke fast, I spit bubbles. What I didn't know was that someone like Pearl could tell me something I already knew and make me hurt so bad.

My father set me up with the daughter of a man he used to work with at one of the places he was fired from, someone closer to my age and height than Pearl McNugg. "You shouldn't have done that," my mother told him. "Time will take care of things," she said to my father, and to me, and she was probably right, I had thought, but pragmatism was not what I needed then. My mother rarely interfered, and I remembered then once having liked that about her.

The night before the dance, my father heard me watching my feet in the mirror. He knocked on the door, and I jumped off the bed and let him in.

"You're trying too hard," he said. "Don't try so hard." He got on the

bed and stepped to the count of three. "Easy does it," he said. "One-two-three, one-two-three."

I stood between the bed and dresser and watched him in the mirror. He wasn't much better than me; in fact, the way he moved reminded me of the way Injuns were typed in low budget films—white actors, war painted during peacetime scenes, dancing amuck, the precision of the Hopi dance lost to bad history. "We'll figure this out together," my father said. "Something's bound to come of it."

We jumped around for an hour and a half, pretending we were doing something important with our feet, wondering what to do with our arms. I never had had that problem before. I didn't like having to think about my arms.

"Now we're getting somewhere," my father said. "Here we go."

I dropped to my knees. He moved in circles—this way, then that, never deviating from the circle, a look of determination on his face, but I had seen that look before, so many times before. I didn't see him getting anywhere, only believing that he might.

My father called his weekend leaves sabbaticals. My mother called it boredom, but I knew my father wasn't bored with her. He constantly told me how important it was to find that one person who loved you, no matter what. I suspected that's why he was happy Frieda M. Platt had had someone to weep for her.

The last sabbatical note my father left us was stapled over the obituary section in the current edition of *Valley Mirror*. "Off to Nanticoke," he wrote. "Went with Hal. Back in the morning." He had circled an obituary in red—I could tell it was another one of his creations.

What my father was doing in Nanticoke with Hal the mortician, I didn't know. I knew I had read something about that city, but I couldn't remember what, and I couldn't recall where, and the more I tried to forget about it the more it bugged me. My father liked Hal. My mother preferred not to be around him. She said he gave her nightmares when he talked about things like ants crawling out of the nostrils of corpses.

When my father came home the next morning, my parents did a lot of loud discussion. Hal had some casket business in Nanticoke and my father said he went along for the ride, but my father never went along for rides. He got leg cramps sitting that long. He went to Nanticoke for a reason—that much I knew.

My mother never took sabbatical days. She told my father she liked to do things as a family, not alone. So when my father came back from Nanticoke, she said she wanted to go bowling, the three of us, together.

I squawked that I was too old to be seen in public with both of them. My father offered to wear Mom's goggles.

I never liked bowling. What I hated most was renting shoes. Once I stepped into a pair with a fresh bloody Band-Aid in the toe. My mother thought she was a good bowler, and from the way she approached the foul line, it seemed as if she should be. But she was the type of bowler who threw the ball high in the air, and when it finally came down, everyone within five alleys looked to see if the wood cracked.

My father thought he was smooth, not only approaching the foul line, but also at "coaching" my mother and me from the scoring table right in the middle of our delivery. Often he credited himself with an assist when my mother and I got a strike. He liked to make fun of my delivery. He said it was safe, methodical, like my mother's, though I never considered my mother's deadly drop safe. "If you're not happy with your score," he said to me earnestly, "then change your approach. Don't be afraid to try something new."

He took my ball from me and showed me what he meant. He set the ball in front of the foul line then did a handstand, his lucky Hawaiian bowling shirt falling to his chest. He nudged the ball with his chin and fell backwards on his knees. The ball headed right for the gutter.

"See what I mean?" he said to me.

"Shit," I said. "You got nothing."

He shook his head and seemed irritated with the way I saw things. With his second ball, he stood bent over with his back to the foul line, rolling the ball between his legs.

"Another gutter," my mother laughed. "I think I'll stick with my delivery." She wound up and threw a ball to China.

My father covered his ears, then marked her score. "Next frame I'm going to kick it," he said.

"What's the use?" I asked. "Every time you try something new, you never get anywhere. Look at your score."

"The score doesn't matter," he said. "Who's going to remember my score a month from now?"

My mother thought she had a spare. I knew this because every time she thought she hit what she was aiming for she turned away before the ball knocked over the pins. It irked me when she didn't look. She seemed to know when she hit the arrow mark what the result was going to be. Hit the mark, get a mark. Bowling seemed equational for her that way.

My father noticed this too. He whispered something into my mother's ear then she backed away from him, shaking her head. Then he kissed her brow and forehead and ear and whispered something else, and she

stopped shaking her head and ran her fingernails lightly over his arms. Then he kissed her neck and chin and she bit her finger and nodded, then nodded some more, then she looked at me, then at the pins, and sighed.

Before I knew it they took off down the lane, my father first, his feet kicking high, then my mother, holding her stomach, behind him, skipping, clumsy, like she was running into cold water. My father slipped a bit at the foul line, but he built up steam and slid head-first into the one pin like it was the tip of home plate. My mother completed the spare, then rolled over and disappeared in that mysterious place pin setters go to retrieve lost balls.

I walked down the gutter to help them up. It was the longest walk of my life.

My father had written something about Nanticoke. That's why it stuck in my mind so. I couldn't remember what he had written, but I searched his room after school a few days after the bowling incident while my mother slept open-mouthed on the couch and my father was late coming home from work.

I found the obituary for Madelyn Q. Schlott and about two dozen morbid verses he had written when his mood had been low for a greeting card company that eventually canned him. I checked his notepads and folders and his collection of articles and stories that he couldn't sell. In my parents' nightstand drawer, I found some love letters he had written to my mother. They were syrupy and intense, not like anything else he had written.

It was when I checked under his desk blotter that I remembered where I had seen Nanticoke. There, next to Bernard R. Gumbmeyer, was Frieda M. Platt—not just the obituary, but a copy of an old newspaper photograph, an engagement announcement. My father had gone to Nanticoke, the city where Frieda had lived half her life, to check out her history.

I debated whether to tell my mother about this, but before I could make up my mind she came into the room and asked me what I was doing. I showed her what I had found under the blotter.

“Do you think he's getting sick again?” I asked her.

My mother read the engagement announcement aloud: “Frieda M. Platt to Phillip Jennings Brown.” She looked at me as if I had some answers. “Frieda? Engaged? I thought she . . .”

“His mood doesn't seem to be low,” I said.

“I guess she never married him,” my mother said. “She never could go through with it.”

“A May 18, 1930 wedding date.”

"Poor Phillip," my mother said. "I wonder what he did that day."

"And Frieda M. Platt. I bet she had a hell of a day."

My mother patted me on the head. Everyone always patted me on the head. "Don't you worry about your father," she said to me. "And don't you mourn for Frieda. She made the right choice for herself. Why, I bet she did something special that day she was supposed to get married. I bet she bought herself a new dress then had fun getting it all dirty. Or maybe she went to the train station and took the next train, whatever its destination. Maybe she just got to her knees and thanked God that she didn't ruin a good man's life—Phillip was a good man. A war hero. Phillip Jennings Brown. You can hear it in his name."

I hardly recognized her. She was talking like my father, and I wasn't sure I liked that. "Maybe he left her at the altar," I said. "Maybe she was jilted and never got over it. Dad could've made up that thing about Frieda and that woman at the funeral parlor. He'd consider that noble."

"I thought about that," my mother said. "He'd want us to believe that Frieda made her own choices, that she was happy with them." She looked at the newspaper article and smiled. "That's the way I want to think about her too," she said. "Let's leave it at that."

She started to hum. I could tell she was pleased with her invention.

My father was late because he had been fired from the *Valley Mirror*. He said he had had a lot of people to say good-bye to. We didn't even have to ask why he got canned. We had stopped asking him that question a long time ago.

He put his arms around my mother and squeezed her tight. "I'm sorry, schnoogers," he said. "I disappointed you and Fleck again."

My mother looked me over his shoulder. "What are you going on about, Jim?" she said. "We're talking parakeet sheets here." He was quiet the rest of the night. That worried my mother, especially when she found him asleep with his eyes open again. My mother had a hard time shaking him awake, but she finally did. She called for an ambulance while I covered him with sheets and blankets. "Not over my head, Fleck-man," he said. "I'm not going *that* far."

My father had given Hal, the mortician, a letter in a sealed envelope that Hal opened and read to us the day my father died. "Everything's in Tiny," Hal said. "All the papers are in the beast."

I helped Hal dismount Tiny from the wall and sure enough, ten or twelve papers fell to the floor. There was a life insurance policy and a will scribbled on a piece of construction paper, and a bowling pin and sonnets for my mother.

The family, friends and neighbors who came over to the house that day

day to console my mother whispered to each other that she was in shock. I think they said this because they did not see her cry, because she had a wild, up-to-something look in her eyes at the mention of my father's name, a look that made me believe that my father knew something special when he said he wouldn't be going *that* far away.

I spent most of the night sitting at my father's desk. I found a long, black strand of hair in his drawer, a few of my mother's buttons, and a half-finished obituary in his typewriter of some local entrepreneur who had expanded his doughnut business and had stores in seven states. This is the way people scored a life.

I rolled the story out of the typewriter and inserted a clean sheet of paper. I typed my father's name in capital letters. He had an ordinary middle name, John, but I changed this to Zeb. There was so much to tell—how *do* you fit a man's life into such a small space?

My father was related to Harry S. Truman. He was a successful writer; he wrote under a pseudonym that he made me promise never to disclose. He was the nephew of Frieda M. Platt, the much loved librarian. Once Wendell Schnoogers flew by him fresh from the cannon. He was a blur, my father said. Just a blur.

My father is survived by his beautiful wife, MGM beautiful; and by me, his only son.

I was born on Fleckman Street in an orange 1952 firetruck.

Mike Schertzer

i tell her i am a terrible street

i tell her i am a terrible street
where pigeons return to die,
i tell her my mouth is filled with blood and rain
and that the houses and apartments only grow sick and violent
upon my littered body

but as i lie beside her dark and lifeless
she wanders about inside me
setting fires,
a garden of beautiful fires that rage
until morning.

Evelyn Lau

February Dawns

light sliced up roses in the arid morning, light
crawled in through a torn sky
and landed on teacups sour with whiskey and lipstick
a hand shaking in midair.
between a wall of mirrors and the spray of dead roses
you stroked the lilies, they splayed on their stalks
like the folds of genitals, tough and smooth
while twin beds heaved with goosefeathers
and the bathroom door slammed, slammed.
he wouldn't let you take anything of value:
the coffee table with its tiny villagers wading through rice fields,
the hidden butterflies in the English paintings,
the piano with the stuck key.
still, when he called you fled to him as if chased
into the unheated marble elevator that mirrored your panic
and eagerness and your harsh lipstick. you ran
past the lights on the tree in the garden
through the iron gate, into the oval rooms
where you stood all night watching the cabs drive by
the rain dropping down like silver money
where you stood in the morning above the fleshy curves of the sea
watching the cabs turning at the shoreline
and feeling safe in their passing.
you could see the sun struggling through the fog,
weak as a heart.
often though the opening of another day found you
on your hands and knees in the bathroom, while he traced
the slapping patterns your palms made against the tiles,
and smiled, and sipped his cigarette.
his eyes flashed by like steel-blue Cadillacs
the clock in the hallway chimed on and on
you hoped he would wake with the light on the wrong side of the house
car and wallet and keys gone and dressing gown
bunched at the waist, wake to the terrible profusion
of his life, the bedside phone
clumsier with cords and buttons than he had ever recalled it.

you got out of bed only to accommodate the vomiting
that came finally like a gift.
at five AM you tried to leave, your hands pushing away
his kisses like blows, pushing at the buttons to the elevator,
relying on the taxis being there and being compassionate.
the ocean had parted and for an instant you saw
a dozen yellow trunks turned up and one back wheel
desperately spinning on the horizon as the sun rose.

Florence McNeil

Oil Spill

Men and women whose arms
have become gibbets
dangle long silent birds
changed by alchemy
into still serpents
someone holds a package
fastened securely with seaweed wrappings
It's a bird he says
but it is as unidentifiable
as a sunken keel
fattened by barnacles

Up and down the coast they carry corpses

They are part of a battlefield
that does not choose
between animal or man
(the torsos Goya pencilled into history
the soldiers falling from the clouds of gas
without their eyes
their horses receiving them)

And watching this scene I think
it is better to be finished

What sears is what happens at the edge

The limb reaching briefly from the swollen mud

Or this heron coming from the black sea
who walks and falls
walks and falls
like a stiff plastic toy.

How Low Down Is

for Joe Wandler

Ken Rivard

Twice a day for the past three months the woman comes down to the sea and sits in her husband's fishing boat. Always she's dressed in an oversized green sweater, blue jeans and a yellow floppy hat with a chunk missing from its brim. Everyday she chats with her husband as if he were still here on his hands and knees maybe looking for a lost fishing hook on the bottom of his boat. But, he's been dead three months; a storm grabbed him into a fast death and left only his boat unharmed.

Since then, the woman spends time in the morning wishing her husband luck with his fishing and few moments in the evening either celebrating the catch or lamenting his bad luck. And when she's not there, the empty boat remains untouched as the other fishermen know better.

But, each day the green trembles of her body become more and more evident and the widow may soon be forced to end her pretending. Only the boat just sits there, oblivious and rope-tied to the shore with its anchor having all the time in the world to lose itself on the bottom of the sea.

This morning the green trembling takes over her skin. The boat rocks slightly and she yells at it. The anchor unsettles itself. She yells again. And the sun is a silent chant urging her on. Shortly her rage promises to show itself and she appears ready to tell her family how low down is.

Fred Johnston
for Anne and Sinéad

Café Table Song

*"In the ordinary house of love
We move quietly from room to room."*

Theo Dorgan, "Sunday Afternoon"

To solve the tea-time enigma of her coming and going,
to put language on what her hands meant in pure flight
over a geography of dishes and hot oily water
or the drift on occasion of her eyes from the cash register
to where he sat unable to enjoy a cigarette,
she is so close—

These things were more to him than mathematics or logic,
defying both disciplines, creating a new and secret
physics where other laws set up their kingdom—
as evening comes and with it a certain weight of
embarrassment, office-girls and clean-shaved
men in suits—

No time now to negotiate some clear path to where
he might pass an idle yet significant remark about
the new tint she had in her hair; with all the sudden
yet anticipated clatter of cutlery and fuss over menus
he found his contempt for the world and fondled it,
its breath as he imagined her breath might be,
only sweeter.

Michael Crummey

News From Home: Winter

Frost laces the window
with white,
winter's elegant geometry.
 Fingernail traces
a crystal line,
ice crawling down the spine
like panic;
my mother's voice on the telephone,
words falling like intricate
stars of snow,
 spelling out
another human accident in
the green mathematics
of a Labrador forest.

Lost for days probably,
 trudging through the
emptiness of winter
reciting the alphabet
the sanity of the $9 \times$ tables
 till the frost
bleached his mind clean
till he lay beneath the innocent trees,
his mouth a frozen blue vowel
his eyes sewn shut
by the sharp thread of the cold.

David Y. Todd

Descent

Walking near the water, I found
a shell to give, but
nothing for the cordial
unfastening of this evening.

In a time of bright neutrality, the season of
romance can begin without desire. You fall
through adorations, drowsy-eyed, to tolerance, then
wake to negotiations, careful or mean. The talks,

The talks begin the end. My friend
the priest insists, "It is when the bloom
of romance fades that real love begins."
My friend the priest.

With you, I have found your doubts
turn me more ardent, even as you say
you feel what you fear will not transform.
My driving scares you half to death,
my way of talking through the conversation at a party,
of seeming to accelerate exchanges,
of desecrating fertile spaces
you have patiently created. All
is captured in the quick of your
sharp laughter at my jokes.

I would like all you might give.
Thoughtfully you decline, calm, and
do not fade. You have seen

I must halt
before the slow flickering light,
stand in a last unbreathing of desire,
and set this gently down without a word.

Only in a settling of stillnesses
can we unjoin. I am quiet now, quiet
as I move away and watch

the water lapping on the shore.

Patricia Young
two poems

Trumpeter Swan

Let's say the walkway is slippery
and the water deep, that I am
buoyant and flexible

but occasionally considered
the salty brink. I had a swan, once,
milky glass, an ashtray.

When I walked out of your arms
I heard a flock clap through
the mountains, the mighty

applause of wings. That swan
fit in my hand, its smooth weight,
a cold stone. Let's say

I wore musk on my wrists to obliterate
the heady tracks of flight.
As a child I'd search the drawers

for empty packages of *Matinee*.
Open them flat and draw on the insides
trying to perfect

the elegant swoop, unmistakable
trumpet. Almost extinct, these birds
now honk in brazen hundreds.

Down at the gorge they kill
time and wait for Alaska
to lighten up, whistle them home.

If words can migrate continents
yours were airborne, wide-ranging.
Let's say I sang but stopped,

that love is a coming, a going,
a single season of joy
and grief. Say

what you like, anything
that comes to mind, for the first time
I wanted nothing

in return. O I had a swan—
snow-white plumage and nicotine stains.
One black bead and one eye missing.

Martian Wife

And he would always love the way she read
in bed, leaning into it, the book
up close, a small light
on the side table.

A *martian*, he'd laugh taking off
his clothes, *an alien*,
he'd call as he drew
the bath. The way she read
Owl Magazine or *The Manchester
Guardian*. Even the pizza flyers
left in the mailbox.

As though by reading close
and hard, some subtle, some fabulous
truth would explode into
the steamy air.

He'd sink
into the water while she
lit into *Real Estate News*,
eyes burning down a page,
every house in flames.

He'd smile to think of her
concentrating in the eiderdown
cloud as though with a few basic
tips on spring
wardrobe and military
manoeuvres she'd be able to
pass herself off,
comprehend
the incomprehensible.

And he would always love
leaping from bath to bed and
turning out the light. The way
she'd hold onto his heat-drenched body
saying, *I like it here*,
I plan to stay.

Traplines

Eden Robinson

Dad kills a marten.

“Will you look at that,” he says.

It is limp in his hands. A goner.

We tramp through the snow to the end of our trapline. Dad whistles. The goner marten is over his shoulder. From here, it looks like Dad is wearing it. There is nothing else in the other traps. We head back to the truck. The snow crunches. This is the best time for trapping, Dad told me a while ago. This is when the animals are hungry.

Our truck rests by the roadside at an angle. Dad rolls the white marten in a grey canvas cover separate from the others. The marten is flawless, which is rare around here. I put my animals beside his and cover them. We get in the truck. Dad turns the radio on. Country twang fills the cab. We smell like sweat and oil and pine. Dad hums. I stare out the window. Mrs. Smythe would say the trees here are like the trees on Christmas postcards. They are tall and heavy with snow. They crowd close to the road. When the wind blows strong enough, the older trees snap and fall on the power lines.

“Well, there’s our Christmas money,” Dad says, snatching a peek at the rearview mirror.

I look back. The wind ruffles the canvas that covers the martens. Dad is smiling. He sits back, steering with one hand. He does not even mind when we are passed by three cars. The lines in his face are loose now. He sings along with a woman who left her husband. Even that doesn’t make him mad. We have our Christmas money. There will be no shouting in the house for a while. It will take Mom and Dad a while to find something else to fight about.

The drive home is a long one. Dad changes the radio station twice. I search my brain for something to say to him. He watches the road, and looks at the back of the truck. I watch the trees, the road, the cars passing us.

One of the cars has two women in it. The woman that isn’t driving waves her hands around as she talks. She reminds me of Mrs. Smythe. They are behind us, then beside us, then ahead of us and gone.

Tulka is still as we drive into it. The snow drugs it, makes it lazy.

Houses puff cedar smoke and the smell of it gets in everyone's clothes. Sweet and sharp. When I am in school in town, I can close my eyes and tell who is from the village and who isn't just by smelling them.

When we get home, we go straight to the basement. Dad gives me the ratty martens and keeps the good ones. He made me start on squirrels when I was in grade seven. He put the knife in my hand saying, "For Christ's sake, it's just a squirrel. It's dead, you stupid knucklehead. It can't feel anything."

He made the first cut for me. I swallowed and closed my eyes and cut.

"Jesus," Dad muttered. "Are you a sissy? I got a sissy for a son? Look. It's just like cutting up a chicken. See? Pretend you're skinning a chicken." Dad showed me, then put another squirrel in front of me and we didn't leave the basement until I got it right.

Now Dad is skinning the flawless white marten. He is using his best knife. His tongue is sticking out the corner of his mouth. He sits up, and shakes his skinning hand. I quickly start on the next marten. It is perfect except it has been in a fight that left a scar across its back. It isn't a good skin. We won't get much for it. Dad goes back to work. I stop, clench, unclench my hands. They are stiff.

"God damn," Dad says quietly. I look up, tensing. Dad starts to smile. He has finished the marten. It is ready to be dried and sold. I have also finished mine. I look at my hands. They know what to do now without me having to tell them. Dad laughs as we go up the creaking stairs. When we get into the hallway, I breathe in, smelling bread. Fresh baked homemade bread.

Mom is sprawled in front of the TV. Her apron is floured and she is licking her fingers. When she sees us, she stops and puts her hands in her apron pockets.

"Well?" she says.

Dad lifts her up and dances her across the living room.

"Greg! Stop it!" she says, laughing.

Flour gets on Dad and cedar chips get on Mom. They talk and I leave, sneaking into the kitchen. I snatch two buns and take three aspirin and go to my room. I stop in the doorway. Eric is there. He is plugged into his electric guitar. He sees me and looks at the buns. He pulls out an ear-phone.

"Give me one," he says.

I throw him the smaller one, and he finishes it in three bites.

"The other one," he says.

I give him the finger and sit on my bed. I see him thinking about tackling me, but he shrugs and plugs himself back in. I chew on the bun, roll

bits of it around in my mouth. Fresh bread has a taste I have never been able to name. Something that makes it different from day old, or store bought. It is still warm, and I wish I had some honey for it, or some blueberry jam.

Eric gets up and leaves. He comes back with six buns and wolfs them down, cramming them into his mouth. I watch him, then watch the walls. He can't hear himself eat. I plug my ears and glare at him. He looks up. Grins. Opens his mouth so I can see.

Dad comes in. Eric's jaw clenches. Dad pulls himself straight. I leave, go into the kitchen, grabbing a hunk of bread. Mom smacks my hand. We hear Eric and Dad starting to yell. Mom rolls her eyes and puts three more loaves in the oven.

"Back later," I say.

She nods, frowning at her hands, not looking up.

I walk. Think about going to Billy's house. He is seeing Elaine, though, and is getting weird. He wrote her a poem yesterday. We all laughed at him and he didn't even mind. He didn't find anything nice to rhyme with 'Elaine' so he didn't finish the poem.

"Pain," Craig said. "Elaine, you pain."

"Pain Elaine," Jer said.

Billy smacked Jer and they went at it in the snow. Billy gave Jer a face wash and that ended it. We let him sit on the steps and write in peace.

"Elaine in the rain," I say. "Elaine, a flame. Cranes. Danes. Trains." I smile, "My main Elaine." I shake my head. Billy is on his own.

I let my feet take me down the street. It starts to snow, tiny ladybug flakes. It is only four but it is getting dark. Street lights flicker on. No one but me is out walking. Snot in my nose freezes. The air is starting to burn my throat. I turn and head home. Eric and Dad should be tired by now.

Another post card picture. The houses lining the street look snug. I hunch into my jacket. In a few weeks, Christmas lights will go up. We have the same set every year. Dad will put them up two weeks before Christmas. We will get a tree a week before Christmas. Mom will decorate it. She will put our presents under it on Christmas Eve. In the morning, some of the presents will be wrapped in aluminum because she never buys enough wrapping paper. We will eat. Mom and Dad will go out and we will not see them for a few days. Eric will go to a lot of parties and get really stoned. Mom and Dad will go to a lot of parties and get really drunk. Maybe this year I will too. Anything would be better than sitting around with Tony and Craig, listening to them gripe.

I stamp the snow off my sneakers and jeans. I open the door quietly. The TV is on loud. I can tell by the announcer's voice that it is a hockey

game. I take my shoes off. The house is really hot after being outside. I pull off my jacket. My face starts to tingle as the skin thaws. I go into the kitchen. I take a few aspirins and stand near the stove.

The kitchen could use some plants. It gets some good light in the winter. Mrs. Smythe has her kitchen crowded with plants. The cats usually munch on the ferns, so she has them hanging by the window. They have a lot of pictures of places they have been all over their walls. Europe. Africa. Arctic. They have been everywhere. They can afford it, she says, because they don't have kids. They had one, a while ago. On the TV, there is a wallet sized picture of a dark haired boy with three missing teeth. He was their kid, but he disappeared. Mrs. Smythe stares at the picture a lot.

Eric tries to sneak up behind me. His socks make a slithering sound on the floor. I duck just in time and hit him in the stomach.

"Oof," he doubles over, hands over his belly. He has a towel stretched between his hands. His "Choking" game. He punches at me, but I hop out of the way. He hits the stove. Yelling, he jerks his hand back. I race out of the kitchen and go down to the basement. Eric is screaming my name. "Come out, you chicken," he says. "Come on out and fight."

I stay still behind some plywood. Eric still has the towel ready for me. After a while, he goes back upstairs and locks the door behind him.

I stand. Eric turns the TV off. Mom and Dad must have gone out to celebrate. They will find a bootlegger and go on a bender until Monday, when Dad has to go back to work. So. I am alone with Eric. He'll leave the house around ten. I can stay out of his way until then.

The basement door slams open. I scramble under Dad's tool table. Eric must be stoned. He probably has been toking up since Mom and Dad left. Pot always makes him mean.

He laughs. "You baby. You are a fucking baby." He doesn't look for me that hard. He thumps loudly up the stairs, slams the door shut, then tip toes back down and waits. He must think I am really stupid.

We stay like this for a long time. Eric lights up. In a few minutes, the whole basement smell like pot. Dad will be pissed off if it ruins the perfect white marten. I smile, hoping it does. Eric will really get it then.

"Fuck," he says and disappears upstairs, not locking the door. I crawl out. My legs are stiff. The pot is making me dizzy.

The wood stove is cooling. I don't open it. Its door squeals. It will be freezing down here soon. Breathing fast, I go upstairs. I crack the door open. There are no lights on except in our bedroom. Eric must be playing. I pull on my jacket and sneakers. I grab some bread before I hear the bedroom door being opened. I stuff it in my jacket and run for the door. Eric is blocking it, grinning.

“Thought you were sneaky, hey,” he says.

I back into the kitchen. He follows. I wait until he is near before I bend over and ram him. He is slow because of the pot and slips to the floor. He grabs my ankle, but I kick him in the head and am out the door before he can catch me. I take the steps two at a time. Eric stands on the porch and laughs. I can't wait until I'm bigger. I'd like to smear him against a wall. Let him see what it feels like. I'd like to smear him so bad.

I munch on some bread as I head for the village exit to the highway. The snow comes down in thick, large flakes that melt when they touch my skin. I stand at the exit and wait.

I hear One Eye's beat-up Ford a long time before I see it. It clunks down the road and stalls when he stops it beside me.

“You again. What you doing out here?” One Eye yells at me.

“Waiting for Princess fucking Di,” I say.

“Smart mouth. You keep it up and you can stay out here.”

The back door opens anyway. Snooker and Jim are there. One Eye and Pete Wilson are in the front. They all have the same silver lunch buckets at their feet.

When we come into town I say, “Could you drop me off here?”

One Eye looks up, surprised. He has forgotten I am here. He frowns. “Where you going?”

“Disneyland,” I say.

“Smart mouth,” he says. “Don't be like your brother. You stay out of trouble.”

I laugh. One Eye slows the car and pulls over. It chokes and sputters. I get out and thank him for the ride. One Eye grunts. They pull away and I walk to Mrs. Smythe's.

The first time I saw her house was last spring when she invited all her English classes there for a barbecue. Their lawn was neat and green and I only saw one dandelion. They had rose bushes in the front and raspberry bushes in the back. I went with Tony and Craig, who got high before we got there. Mrs. Smythe noticed right away. She took them aside and talked to them. They stayed in the pool room downstairs until the high wore off.

I wandered around. There weren't any other kids from the village there. Only townies. Kids that Dad says will never get their pink hands dirty. They were split into little groups. They talked and ate and laughed and I was walking around, feeling like a dork. I was going to go downstairs to Tony and Craig when Mrs. Smythe came up to me. It's funny, I never noticed how nice her smile was until then. Her blue sundress swayed as she came up to me, carrying a hotdog.

"You weren't in class yesterday," she said, smiling.

"Uh, stomach ache."

"I was going to tell you how much I liked your essay. You must have done a lot of work on it."

I tried to remember what I had written. "Yeah."

"Which part was the hardest?" she said.

I cleared my throat. "Starting it."

She gave me a funny look. "I walked right into that one," she said, laughing. I kept smiling.

A tall man came up and hugged her. She kissed him. "Sam," she said. "This is the student I was telling you about."

"Well, hello," Mr. Smythe said. "Great paper."

"Thanks," I said, trying hard to remember what I'd written about.

"Is it William or Will?" Mr. Smythe said.

"Will," I said. He held out his hand. We shook.

"Did you ever find out what happened to him?" Mrs. Smythe asked.

Oh no, I thought, remembering what I'd written. I had a dog in grade three that I named Stinky who got lost. We had to write about a real life experience and it was the night before the deadline and that was all I could think of. I blushed and shook my head. I was glad Tony and Craig weren't here.

"Karen tells me you've written a lot about fishing, too," Mr. Smythe said, sounding really cheerful.

"Excuse me," Mrs. Smythe said. "That's my cue to leave. If you're smart, you'll do the same. Once you get Sam going about his stupid fish stories you can't get a wor—"

Mr. Smythe goosed her. She hit him with her hotdog and left quickly. Mr. Smythe put his arm around my shoulder, shaking his head. He asked if I'd ever done any real fishing. We sat down on the patio. He told me about the time he caught a marlin, and about scuba diving in the Great Barrier Reef. He went down in a shark cage once, to try film a Great White eating. I told him about the halibut I caught on Uncle Bernie's gill-netter. He wanted to know if Uncle Bernie would take him out. I gave him Old Marty Gladstone's number, because he takes charters. He asked me what gear he was going to need. We ended up in the kitchen, me using a flounder to show him how to clean a halibut.

I finally looked at the clock around ten. Dad had said he would pick me and Tony and Craig up around eight. I didn't even know where Tony and Craig were anymore. I couldn't believe it had gotten this late without me noticing it. Mr. Smythe said he would drive me home. I said no, that's okay, I'll hitch.

He snorted. "Karen would kill me. No, I'll drive you. Let's phone your

parents and tell them you're coming home."

No one answered the phone. I said they were probably asleep. He dialed again. Still no answer.

"Looks like you've got the spare bedroom tonight," he said.

"Let me try," I said, picking up the phone. There was no answer but after six rings, I pretended Dad was on the other end. I didn't want to spend the night at my English teacher's house. Tony and Craig would never shut up about it.

"Hi, Dad," I said. "How come . . . oh. I see. Car trouble. No problem. Mr. Smythe is going to drive me home. What? Sure, I—"

"Let me talk to him," Mr. Smythe said, snatching the phone. "Hello! Mr. Bolton! How are you! My, my, my. Your son is a lousy liar, isn't he?" He hung up. "It's amazing how much your father sounds like a dial tone."

I grabbed the phone. "They're sleeping, that's all," I said. I dialed again. Mr. Smythe watched me. There wasn't any answer.

"Why'd you lie?" he said quietly.

We were alone in the kitchen. I swallowed. He was a lot bigger than me. When he reached for me, I put my hands up and covered my face. He stopped then took the phone out of my hands.

"It's okay," he said. "I won't hurt you. It's okay."

I put my hands down. He looked sad. That annoyed me. I shrugged, backing away. "I'll hitch," said.

Mr. Smythe shook his head. "Karen would kill me, then she'd go after you. Come on. We'll be safer if you sleep in the spare room."

In the morning, Mr. Smythe was up before I could sneak out. He was making bacon and pancakes. He asked if I'd ever done any fresh water fishing. I said no. He started talking about fishing in the Black Sea and I sat and listened to him, eating slowly. He is a good cook.

Mrs. Smythe came into the kitchen dressed in some sweats and a t-shirt. She ate without saying anything and didn't look awake until she finished her coffee. Mr. Smythe phoned home, but no one answered. He asked if I wanted to go up to Old Timer's Lake and try my hand at his new Sona Reel. I didn't have anything better to do.

Mr. Smythe has a great speedboat. He let me drive it around the lake a few times. We even went water-skiing. Mrs. Smythe looked great in her bathing suit. We lazed around the beach in the afternoon, watching the people go by. Sipping their beers, they argued about who was going to drive back. We rode around the lake some more and roasted hotdogs for dinner.

Their porch light is on. I go up the walk and ring the bell. Mrs. Smythe has said to just come in, don't bother knocking, but I can't do that. It

doesn't feel right. She opens the door, smiling when she sees me. She is wearing her favourite jeans and a fluffy pink sweater. "Hi, Will. He says he's going to beat you this time."

"Dream on," I say.

She laughs. "Go right in. He's waiting." She goes down the hall to the washroom.

I go into the livingroom. Mr. Smythe is not there. The TV is on loud, some documentary about whales.

I find him in the kitchen, scrunched over a game of solitaire. His new glasses are sliding off. With his glasses like that, he looks more like a teacher than Mrs. Smythe. He scratches the beard that he is trying to grow and looks up.

"Come on doooown," he says, patting the chair beside him.

I take a seat and watch him finish the game. He wrinkles his nose and pushes his glasses up. "What's your pleasure?" he says.

"Pool," I say.

"Feeling lucky, huh?" We go down to the pool room. "How about a little extra this week?" he says, not looking at me.

I shrug. "Sure. Dishes?"

He shakes his head. "Bigger."

"I'm not shovelling the walk," I say.

He shakes his head again. "Bigger."

I frown. "Money?"

"Bigger."

"What?"

He racks up the balls. Sets the cue ball. Wipes his hands on his jeans.

"What?" I say again.

Mr. Smythe takes out a quarter. "Heads or tails?" he says, tossing it.

"Heads," I say.

He slaps the quarter on the back of his hand. "I break."

"Where, let me see that," I say, laughing. He holds it up. The quarter is tails.

He breaks. "How'd you like to stay with us?" he says, very quietly.

"Sure," I say. "But I got to go back on Tuesday. We got to check the traplines again."

He is quiet. The balls make clunking sounds as they bounce around the table. "Do you like it here?"

"Sure," I say.

"Enough to live here?"

I am not sure I heard him right. Maybe he is asking a different question from the one I think he is asking. I blink, opening my mouth. I don't know what to say. I say nothing.

"Those are the stakes, then," he says. "I win, you stay. You win, you stay."

He is joking. I laugh. "You serious?"

He stands up straight. "I don't think I've ever been more serious."

The room is suddenly very small.

"Your turn," he says. "Stripes."

I scratch and miss the ball by a mile.

"We don't want to push you," he says. He leans over the table, squints at a ball. "We just think that you'd be safer here. Hell, you practically live here already." I watch my sneakers. He keeps playing. "We aren't rich. We aren't perfect. We—" He looks at me, looks down. "We thought maybe you'd like to try it for a few weeks, first."

"I can't," I say.

"You don't have to decide right now," he says. "Think about it. Take a few days."

It's my turn again, but I don't feel like playing anymore. Mr. Smythe is waiting though. I stare at the table, and pick a ball. Aim. Shoot. Miss.

The game goes on in silence. Mr. Smythe wins easy. He smiles. "Well. I win. You stay."

If I wanted to get out of this room, there is only one door and Mr. Smythe is blocking it. He is watching me. He takes a deep breath. "Let's go upstairs."

Mrs. Smythe has shut off the TV. She stands up when we come into the living room. "Will—"

"I asked him already," Mr. Smythe says.

Her head snaps around and she glares at him. "You what?"

"I asked him."

Her hands fist at her sides. "We were supposed to do it together, Sam." Her voice is flat. She looks at me. "You said no."

I can't look at her. I look at the walls, at the floor, at her slippers. She stands in front of me. Her hands are warm on my face. "Look at me," she says. "Will? Look at me."

She is trying to smile. I shouldn't have come tonight. I should have waited for Eric to leave. "Hungry?" she says.

I nod. She makes a motion with her head for Mr. Smythe to follow her into the kitchen. When they are gone I sit down. It should be easy. It should be easy. I watch TV without watching it. Faces, words, names, places, cars all flash by. In wonder what they are saying about me in the kitchen.

It is almost seven and my ribs hurt. Mostly, I can ignore it, but Eric hit me pretty hard and they are bruised. Eric got hit pretty hard by Dad, so we're even, I guess. I can't wait until Eric moves out. The rate he is go-

ing, he will be busted soon anyway. Tony says the police are starting to ask questions.

It is a strange night. We all pretend nothing happened and Mrs. Smythe fixes some nachos. Mr. Smythe beats me at Monopoly, then at poker, then at speed. Mrs. Smythe gets out a pack of Uno cards and we play a few rounds and watch Sixty Minutes. Mrs. Smythe wins. We go to bed.

I lie awake. My room. This could be my room. I already have most of my books here. It's hard to study with Eric around. I have a headache now, too. I couldn't get away from them long enough to sneak into the kitchen to get an aspirin. I wait for a few minutes then sit up. I pull my t-shirt up and take a look. There is a long bruise under my ribs and five smaller ones over it. I think he was trying to hit my stomach but he was so wasted he kept missing. It isn't bad. Tony's Dad broke three of his ribs once. Craig got a concussion a couple of weeks ago. My Dad is pretty easy. It's only Eric that is bothering me. Mr. and Mrs. Smythe get mad and fussy when they see bruises though. You have to keep quiet about it or they will start talking your head off and won't shut up until you're bored half to death.

The keep the aspirin by the spices. I grab six, three for now and three for the morning. I am swallowing the last one when Mr. Smythe grabs my hand. I didn't even hear him come in. I must be sleepy.

"Where'd they hit you this time," he says.

"I got a headache," I say. "A bad one."

He opens the hand that has the aspirins in it. "How many do you plan on taking?"

"These are for later," I say.

He sighs. I get ready for a lecture. "Go back to bed," he says. He sounds very tired. I wish I could say something. I don't think they will want me around after this. I don't know why they let me come in the first place. I guess it's okay. Tony and Craig and the rest were starting to bug me about it anyway.

"Will," he says. I look up. He smiles. "It'll be okay."

"Sure," I say. "It'll be okay."

I leave around five. I leave a note saying I have a really bad headache. I catch a ride back home with some guys coming off the graveyard shift.

No one is home. Eric had a party here last night. I am glad I wasn't here. They have wrecked the coffee table and the rug smells like stale beer and cigarettes. Our bedroom is worse. Someone puked all over Eric's bed and there are two used condoms on mine. At least none of the windows are broken this time. I start to clean my side of the room then stop. I sit on my bed. Mr. Smythe will be getting up soon. It is Sunday,

so he will make waffles or french toast. He will make a plate of crispy bacon and eat it before Mrs. Smythe wakes up. He thinks she doesn't know that he does this. She will wake up around ten or eleven and will not talk to anyone until noon or until she's had about three coffees. She starts to wake up around one or two. They will argue about something. Who took out the garbage or who did the dishes or the laundry last. Mrs. Smythe will read the paper.

I crawl into bed. The aspirin are not working. I try to go to sleep but it really reeks in here. I have a biology test tomorrow. I forgot to get the book from their place. I yawn. Our truck pulls into the driveway. Mom and Dad are arguing. I close my eyes. They sound plastered. Mom is bitching about something. Dad is not saying anything. Doors slam.

Mom comes in first. She doesn't notice the house is a mess. She goes straight to bed. Dad comes up the stairs a lot slower.

"What the—Eric!" he yells. "Eric!"

I pretend to sleep. The door bangs open.

"Eric, you little bastard," Dad says, looking around. He pulls me up. "Where's Eric?"

His breath is lethal. You can tell he likes his rye and vodka straight.

"How should I know?"

"Where the fuck is he?" Dad says. "I want to talk to him."

I say I don't know. Dad gets up and rips Eric's amplifiers out of the walls. He throws them down and gives them a good kick. He tips Eric's bed over. Eric is smart. He won't come home for awhile. Then Dad will have cooled off, and Eric can give him some money without Dad getting pissed off at him. I don't move. I wait until Dad is out of the room before I put on a sweater. I can hear him down in the basement, chopping wood. It should be around eight by now. The RinkyDink will be open in an hour. Billy will be there because Elaine is there.

Mom is up. She is looking behind the stove. She sees me and makes a shushing motion with her hands. She pulls out a bottle from behind the stove and sits down at the kitchen table.

"You're a good boy," she says, giggling. "You're a good boy. Help your old old mother into bed, hey."

"Sure," I say, putting an arm around her. She stands, holding the bottle with one hand and me with the other. "This way, my lady."

"You making fun of me?" she says, her eyes going small. "You laughing at me?" Then she laughs and we go to their room. She flops onto the bed. She takes a long drink. "You're fucking laughing at me, aren't you?"

"Mom," I say, annoyed. "You're paranoid. I was making a joke."

"Yeah, you are reeeally funny. Really funny. You are a laugh a minute," she says, giggling again. "Real comedian."

"Yeah, that's me," I say.

She throws the bottle at me. I duck. She rolls over and starts to cry. I throw the blanket over her and leave. The floor is sticky now and stinks. Dad is still chopping wood. They wouldn't notice if I wasn't here. Maybe people would talk for a week or two, but after a while, they wouldn't notice. Only people that would notice is Tony and Craig and Billy and maybe Eric, who would miss me when he got toked up and didn't have anything for target practice.

Billy is playing Pac-man at the RinkyDink. He is chain-smoking. When I walk up to him, he turns around quickly.

"Oh. It's you," he says turning back to the game.

"Hi to you too," I say.

"You seen Elaine?" he says.

"Nope," I say.

He crushes out another cigarette in the ashtray beside him. He plays for a while, loses a pac-man, then shakes a cigarette out one handed. He sticks it in his mouth, loses another man, then lights up. He sucks deep. He looks at me. "Relax," I say. "She'll be here. Her majesty's limo is probably stuck in traffic."

He glares at me. "Shut up."

I laugh and go play pool with Craig. Craig has decided that he is James Dean. He is wearing a white t-shirt, jeans and a black leather jacket that I think is his brother's. He has his hair slicked back. A cigarette is dangling from the corner of his mouth.

"What a loser," he says.

"Who you calling a loser?" I say.

"Billy. What a loser." He struts down to the other side of the pool table.

"He's okay."

"That chick," he says. "What's her face. Ellen? Erma?"

"Elaine."

"Yeah, that's the one. She going out with him cause she's got a bet."

I look at him. "What?"

"She's got to go out with him a month, and her friend will give her some coke."

"Billy's already giving her coke."

"Yeah. He's a loser."

I look at Billy. He is lighting up another cigarette.

"Can you imagine a townie wanting anything to do with him?" Craig says. "She's just doing it as a joke. She's going to dump him in a week. She's going to put all his stupid poems in the newspaper."

I see it now. There is a space around Billy. No one is going near him.

He doesn't notice. I look around me. I catch some guys I used to hang out with grinning at me. When they see me looking at them, they look away.

Craig wins the game. I am losing a lot this week.

Elaine gets to the RinkyDink after lunch. She's got some townie friends with her that are staring around the RinkyDink like they are going to get jumped. Elaine leads them right up to Billy. Everyone is watching them without seeming like they are watching them. Billy gives her his latest poem. I wonder what he got to rhyme with Elaine.

They leave. Billy holds the door open for her. She gives her friends a look. They giggle. The same guys that were watching me start to howl. They are laughing so hard they are crying. I feel sick. I think about telling Billy but I know he won't listen.

I leave the RinkyDink and go for a walk. I walk and walk and walk and end up back in front of the RinkyDink. There isn't anywhere else to go. I hang out with Craig, who hasn't left the pool table.

I spend the night on Craig's floor. Craig's parents are Jehovah's Witness and preach at me before I go to bed. I sit and listen because I need a place to sleep. I am not going home until tomorrow when Mom and Dad are sober. His Mom get us up two hours before the buses come to take the village kids to school. They pray before we eat. Craig looks at me and rolls his eyes. People are always making fun of Craig because his parents stand on the corner downtown every Friday and hold up the Watchtower mags. When his parents start to bug him, he says he will take up Devil worship or astrology if they don't lay off. I think I'll ask him if he wants to hang out with me on Christmas. His parents don't believe in it.

I see Mrs. Smythe in the hall between classes. Craig nudges me. "Go on," he says, making sucking noises. "Go get your 'A'."

"Fuck off," I say, pushing him back.

She is talking to a girl and doesn't see me. I think about skipping English today but know that she will phone home and ask where I am. It isn't fair. She doesn't do that for anyone else. Craig can skip as many times as he wants and all she does is make a note of it, and sends it to the principal's office.

At lunch, no one talks to me. I can't find Craig or Tony or Billy. The village guys at the science wing doors snicker as I go by. I don't stop. I keep going until I get to the headbanger's doors in the shop wing. I don't have any money and I don't have a lunch so I bum a cigarette off this girl with really tight jeans and to get my mind off my stomach I try and get her to go out with me. She smiles, but doesn't say anything. When she walks away, the fringe on her leather jacket swings.

I flunk my biology test. It would have been easy if I studied. It is multiple choice. I stare at the paper and kick myself. I know I could have

passed if I had read the chapter. Mr. Kellerman reads out the marks from lowest to the highest. My name is called out third.

"Mr. Bolton," he says, raising an eyebrow. "Three out of thirty."

"All-riiight," Craig says, slapping my back.

"Mr. Duncan," he says to Craig, his voice becoming resigned. "Three and a half out of thirty."

Craig stands up and bows. The guys in the back clap. The kids in the front laugh. Mr. Kellerman reads out the rest of the marks. Craig turns to me. "Looks like I beat the Brain," he says.

"Yeah," I say. "Pretty soon you're going to be getting the Nobel Prize."

The bell rings. Last class. English. I go to my locker and take out my jacket. If she phones, no one's going to answer.

I go downtown. I don't have any money so I walk. The snow is starting to slack off and it is even sunning a bit. My stomach growls. I haven't eaten since breakfast. I wish I had gone to English. Mrs. Smythe would have given me something to eat. She always has something left over from her lunch. I hunch down into my jacket. I guess it isn't right to mooch off her now that she doesn't want to see me anymore. I am glad I didn't mooch off her, but I am still hungry.

Downtown, I go to the Paradise Arcade. All the heads hang out there. *Maybe I will find Eric. Maybe he'll give me some money. More like a belt.* It's worth a try. I look around for him, but he isn't there. No one much is here. Just some burn-outs by the pin ball machines. I see Mitch. I go over to him, but he is soaring. He is laughing at the ball going around and around the machine. I turn and walk away. There is no one here I can mooch off. I head for the highway and hitch home. Mom should be passed out by now and Dad is at work.

Sure enough, Mom is passed out. She is on the livingroom floor. I get a blanket for her. The stove has gone out and it is freezing in here. I go into the kitchen and look through the fridge. There is a bottle of pickles and some really pathetic looking celery. There is also some milk, but it is so old it smells like cheese. There is no bread left from what Mom made this Saturday. I find some Rice-a-roni and make it. Mom wakes up and asks for some water. I bring her some and give her some Rice-a-roni. She makes a face but eats it slowly.

At six, Dad comes home. Eric comes home with him. They have made up. Eric has bought Dad a six-pack and they watch a hockey game together. I stay in my room. Eric has cleaned his bed by dumping his mattress outside and stealing mine. We have a grammar test this Friday. I

know Mrs. Smythe will be unhappy if she has to fail me. I read the chapters on 'nouns', 'verbs', and get through 'the parts of speech' before Eric comes into the room and kicks me off the bed.

He tries to take the mattress but I kick him in the side. Eric turns. He grabs me by the hair. "This," he says. "Is my bed. Understand?"

"Fuck you," I say. "You had the party. Your fucked up friends trashed your bed. You sleep on the floor."

Dad comes in. He sees Eric push me against a wall and hit me. He yells at Eric, who turns around, his fist frozen in front of my face. Eric lets me go. Dad rolls his sleeves up.

"You always take his side!" Eric yells. "You never take my side!"

"You pick on someone your own size," Dad says. "Unless you want me to pick on you."

Eric gives me a look that says he will make this up to me later when Dad isn't here. I pick up my book and get out. I go for a walk. I keep walking around the village, staying away from the RinkyDink. That is the first place that Eric will look.

I am at the village exit. The sky is clear and the stars are popping out. Mr. Smythe will take out his telescope and he will try to take a picture of the Pleidies. Mrs. Smythe will be marking papers while she watches TV.

"Do you need a ride?" this guy says. There is a blue pick-up in front of me. The driver is wearing a hunting cap.

I take my hand out of my mouth. I have been chewing my knuckle like some baby. I shake my head. "I'm waiting for someone," I say.

He shrugs and takes off. I stand there and watch his headlights disappear.

They didn't really mean it. They would get bored of me quick when they found out what I am. It should be easy. I should have just said yes and then stayed until they got bored and then come home when Eric cooled off.

Two cars pass me as I walk back to the village. I can hide out in Tony's until Eric goes out with his friends and forgets this afternoon. My feet are frozen when I get to the RinkyDink. Tony is there.

He says. "So. I heard Craig beat you in biology."

I roll my eyes. "Didn't it just impress you?"

"A whole half a point. Way to go," he says, grinning. "For a while there we thought you were getting townie."

"Yeah, right," I say. "Listen, I pissed Eric off—"

"Surprise, surprise," he says.

"—and I need a place to crash. Can I sleep over?"

"Sure," he says.

Mitch wanders in the RinkyDink and a crowd of kids slowly drift over to him. He looks around, eyeing everybody. Then he pulls out something and starts giving it away. Tony gets curious and we go over.

"Wow," Tony says, after Mitch gives him something.

"What?"

We go outside and behind the RinkyDink where a crowd of kids is gathered. "Fucking all-riiight," I hear Craig say, even though I can't see him.

"What?" I say. Tony lifts up his hand. He is holding up a little vial with small white crystals in it.

"Crack," Tony says. "Man, he is stupid. He could have made a fortune and he's just giving it away."

We don't have a pipe, and Tony wants to do this right the first time. No one will share with us though, so Tony decides to do it tomorrow, after he buys the right equipment. I am hungry again. I am about to tell him that I am going to Billy's when I see Eric.

"Shit," I say and hide behind him.

Tony looks over and sees Eric. "Someone's in trou-ble," he sings.

Eric is looking for me. I hunch down. Tony tries to look innocent. Eric spots him and starts to come over. "Better run for it," Tony whispers.

I sneak behind some other people but Eric sees me and I have to run for it anyway. Tony starts to cheer and the kids behind the RinkyDink join in. Some of the guys follow us so that they will see what happens when Eric catches up with me. I don't want to find out so I ignore everyone behind me and start pumping hard so I can get home before Eric catches me.

Eric used to be fast. I am glad he is a head now because he can't run that far anymore. He used to always beat me in the races we had. I am panting now, and my legs are cramping. I run up the stairs to our house.

The door is locked.

I stand there, hand on the knob. Eric rounds the corner to our block and starts to smile. There is no one behind him anymore. I knock on the door but now I see that our truck is gone. I run around the house to the back but the basement door is locked too. Even the windows are locked.

Eric pops his head around the corner of the house. He grins when he sees me. He disappears. I grit my teeth. Start running across our back yard. Head for Billy's. Eric lets out a hoot. He has someone with him. I think it is Brent. I duck behind our neighbour's house. There is snow in my sneakers and all the way up my leg. I am sweating. I rest for a while. I can't hear Eric. I hope I have lost him, but Eric is pissed off and when he's pissed off he doesn't let go. I look down. My footprints are clear in the snow. I start to run again, but I hit a thick spot and have to wade through some thigh deep snow. I look behind me. Eric is nowhere. I keep

slogging. I make it to the road again and run down to the exit.

I have lost him. I am shaking because it is cold. I can feel the sweat cooling on my skin. My breath goes back to normal. I wait for a car to come by. I have missed the night shift and the graveyard shift won't be by until near midnight. It is too cold to wait that long.

A car, a red car. A little Toyota. I start to run again. Brent's car. I run off the road and head into a clump of trees. The Toyota pulls over and Eric gets out of the car and starts yelling. I reach the trees and rest. They are waiting by the side of the road. Eric is peering at the trees, trying to see me. Brent is smoking in the car. Eric crosses his arms over his chest and blows into his hands. My legs are frozen.

After a long time, a cop car cruises to a stop beside Eric and Brent. I wade out and wave at the policeman. He looks startled. Then he looks at Eric and Brent and asks them something. Eric shrugs. It takes me a while to get to them because my legs are slow.

The cop is watching me. I swear I will never call them pigs ever again. I swear. He turns to Brent, who digs around the glove compartment. Eric glares at me. The cop says something to his partner. I scramble up the embankment.

Eric has no marks on his face. Dad probably hit him on the back and stomach. Ever since the social worker came, Dad has been careful. Eric suddenly smiles at me. He holds an arm out and moves to me. I move behind the police car. Eric is still smiling. The policeman comes over to us.

"Is there a problem here?" he says.

"No," Eric says. "No probulum. Li'le misunnerstan'nin'." He grins.

Oh shit. He is as high as a kite. The police man looks hard at Eric. I look at the car. Brent is glaring at me. He is high, too.

Eric tries again to get to me. I put the police car between us. The policeman grabs Eric by the arm and his partner goes and gets Brent. The policeman says something about driving under the influence but none of us are listening. Eric is watching me. His eyes are very clear. I am not going to get away with this. I am going to pay for it. Brent is swearing. He wants a lawyer. He stumbles out of his car and slips on the road.

Brent and Eric are put in the back seat. The policeman comes up to me and says, "Can you make it home?"

I nod. He says, "Good. Go."

His partner says something to him, but I don't understand what it is because it is numbers. The policeman looks at me.

"My partner wants to know if you're going to press charges."

I look at Eric. He is flushed. I shake my head. It would only make him madder and he would only be in jail a few weeks. It would only make things worse. The policeman shakes his head and says, "I told you so."

They drive away and I go home. I walk around the house, trying to figure a way to break in. I find a small screwdriver and jimmy the basement door open. Just in case Eric gets out tonight, I make a bed under the tool table and go to sleep.

No one is home when I wake up. I scramble an egg and get ready for school. I sit beside Tony on the bus.

"I was expecting to see you with blackeyes," he says.

I shake my head. My legs are still raw from last night. Freezer burn? I rub my head and sigh. I have something due today but I can't remember what. If Eric is in the drunk tank, they will let him out today.

The village guys are talking to me again. I skip gym. I skip history. I hang out with Craig and Tony in the Paradise Arcade. I am not sure if I want to be friends with them after they cheered last night, but it is better to have them on my side than not, so I am friends with them again. A couple of guys get a two-for-one pizza special for lunch and I am glad I am friends with them because I am starved. They have some five finger specials from Safeway. Tony is proud because he got a couple of bags of chips and Pepsi and no one even noticed.

Mitch comes up to me when I go to the bathroom.

"That was a really cheap thing to do," he says.

"What?" I say, frowning. I haven't done anything to him.

"What? What? Getting your brother thrown in jail. Pretty crumby."

I laugh. "He got himself thrown in jail. He got caught when he was high. Him and Bre—"

"That's not what he says." Mitch frowns. "He says you set him up."

"Fuck." I run a hand through my hair. "When'd he tell you this?"

"This morning," he says. "He's waiting for you at school."

"I didn't set him up. How could I?"

Mitch nods. He hands me some crack and says, hey, I'm sorry, and leaves. I look at it, but know it will make me sick. I can't smoke anything. I'll give it to Tony.

Billy comes into the Paradise with Elaine and her friends. He is getting some smug looks but he doesn't notice. He holds the chair out for Elaine, who sits down without looking at him. I don't want to be around when he finds out he is a joke. I go over to Tony.

"I'm leaving," I say.

Tony shushes me. "Watch," he says.

Elaine orders a beer. Frankie shakes his head and points to the sign that says We Do NOT Serve Minors. Elaine frowns. She says something to Billy. He shrugs. She orders a coke. Billy pays. When their cokes come, Elaine dumps it over Billy's head. Billy stares at her like she has gone stark crazy. Her friends start to laugh, and I get up and walk out.

I lean against the wall of the Paradise. Billy comes out a few minutes later. His face is still and pale. Elaine and her friends follow him, reciting lines from the poems he wrote her. Tony and the rest just laugh. I go back inside, and trade the crack for some quarters for the video games. I keep remembering how Billy's face looked, and I keep losing the games I play. Tony says let's go, and we hitch back to the village. We raid his fridge and have chocolate ice cream coconut sundaes. Angela comes in with Di and says that Eric is looking for me. I look at Tony and he looks at me.

"Boy, are you in for it," Tony says. "You'd better stay here tonight."

When everyone is asleep, Tony pulls out a weird looking pipe and does the crack. His face goes very dreamy and far away. A few minutes later he says, "Christ, that was great. I wonder how much Mitch has?"

I turn over and go to sleep.

The next morning Billy is alone on the bus. No one wants to sit with him so there are empty seats all around him. He does not look like he has slept. Tony goes up to him and punches his arm. Billy looks at him, then looks out the window. Tony says, "So how's Shakespeare this morning?"

The guys in the back of the bus laugh, but a lot of the girls don't. I don't want to watch it, so I look out my window too. I hope Eric isn't at the school. I don't know where else I can hide.

Mrs. Smythe is waiting at the school bus stop. I sneak out the back door of the bus, with Tony and the guys making enough noise and pretending to fight to cover me.

We head down to the Paradise again in Binky's car. I am starting to smell bad. I haven't had a shower for days. I wish I had some clean clothes. I wish I had some money so I could buy a toothbrush. I hate the scummy feeling on my teeth. I wish I had enough for a taco, or a hamburger. I wish I had a Pepsi.

Eric is at the Paradise, so I hide in the mall. I find Dad in Safeway, looking for Eric.

"Let's go to the Dairy Queen," he says.

Dad orders a coffee, a chocolate milkshake and a cheeseburger. We take the coffee and milkshake to a back table, and I take the order slip. We sit there. Dad stares at his hands.

"One of your teachers called," he says.

I sigh. "Mrs. Smythe?"

"Yeah," he looks up. "Says she'd like you to stay there."

I try to read his face. It is very still. His eyes are bloodshot and red rimmed. He must have a big hangover.

I shrug.

The cashier calls out our number. I go up and get the cheeseburger and we split it. Dad always eats slow to make it last longer.

"Did you tell her you wanted to?"

"No," I say. "They asked me, but I said I couldn't."

Dad nods. "Did you tell them anything?"

"Like what?"

"Don't get smart," he says, sounding beat.

"I didn't say anything."

He stops chewing. "Then why'd they ask you?"

"Don't know."

"You must have told them something."

"Nope. Just asked."

"Did Eric tell them?"

I snort. "Eric? No way. They wou—He wouldn't go anywhere near them. They're okay, Dad. They won't tell anybody."

"So you did tell them."

"I didn't. I swear I didn't. Look, Eric got me on the face a couple of times and they figured it out. They aren't go—"

"You're lying."

I finished my half of the cheeseburger. "I am not lying. I didn't say anything. And they won't say anything."

"I never touched you."

"Yeah, Eric took care of that," I say, smiling. Dad doesn't smile back. "You seen him?"

Dad nods. "I kicked him out."

"You what?"

"Party. Ruined the basement," Dad says grimly. "He's old enough. Had to leave sooner or later."

He finishes his cheeseburger. Eric will be really pissed now. I'll have to lie really low for a while. We go check the trapline, and get some more martens, and even get a little lynx. Dad is happy. We go home. The basement is ripped apart. I wonder if he was looking for me.

Next day at school, I spend most of the day ducking from Eric and Mrs. Smythe before I finally get sick of it and go down to the Paradise Arcade. Tony is there with Billy, who asks me if I want to go to Vancouver with him until Eric cools off.

"Now?"

"No better time," he says.

I think about it. "When you leaving?"

"Tonight."

"I don't know. I don't have any money."

"Me neither," he says.

"Shit," I say. "How we going to get there? It's a thousand miles at least."

"Hitch to town, hitch down to Smithers, then hitch to Prince George, hitch to—"

"Yeah, yeah, but how are we going to eat?"

He wiggles his finger. Five finger special. I laugh.

"You change your mind," he says. "I'll be behind Rinkydink around seven. Get some thick boots."

We are about to hitch home when I see Mrs. Smythe peer into the Paradise Arcade. It is too-late to hide because she turns and sees me. Her face becomes stiff. She walks over to us, and the guys start to laugh. Mrs. Smythe looks at them, then at me.

"Will?" she says. "Can I talk to you outside?"

She stares around like the guys are going to jump her. I look at them and try see what she is nervous about. Tony is grabbing his crotch. Billy is cleaning his nails. The other guys are snickering. I suddenly see them the way she must see them. They all have long, greasy hair, combed straight back. All of us have jeans on, t-shirts, sneakers. They don't look nice.

I look back at her. She has on her 'school uniform' as she call it. Dark skirt, white shirt, low black heels, glasses. She is watching me like she hasn't seen me before. I hope she never sees my house.

"Later?" I say. "I'm kind of busy."

She blushes, and the guys laugh hard. She takes a step back, and I want to take the words back. "Are you sure?" she says.

Tony nudges my arm. "Why don't you introduce us to your *girl* friend," he says. "Maybe she'd like—"

"Shut up," I say. Mrs. Smythe has no expression now. She pulls herself up.

"I'll talk to you later, then," she says, and turns around and walks out without looking back. If I could, I would follow her out.

Billy claps me on the shoulder. "Stay away from them," he says. "It's not worth it."

It doesn't matter. She practically said she didn't want to see me again. I don't blame her. I wouldn't want to see me either.

She will get into her car now and go home. She will honk when she pulls into the driveway so Mr. Smythe will come out and help her with the groceries. She always gets groceries today. The basics and sardines. Peanut butter. I lick my lips. Diamante frozen pizzas. Insta-oodles-o'-noodles. Eggo waffles. Captain Crunch.

Mr. Smythe will come out of the house, wave, come down the driveway. They will take the groceries into the house after they kiss. They

will kick the snow off their shoes. Throw something in the microwave. Watch *Cheers* re-runs on channel eight. Mr. Smythe will tell her what happened in his day. I wonder what she will say happened in her day.

On the way home with Billy, I wonder what Christmas in Vancouver will be like. Billy yabbers about how great it's going to be, the two of us, no one to boss us around, no one to bother us, going anywhere we want to go. I smile. Turn away from him. Watch the trees blur past. I guess anything will be better than sitting around, listening to Tony and Craig gripe.

Thuong Vuong-Riddick

Two Poems

This infinite tenderness

At night when you awake
You always re-cover me
With the blanket.
And in the morning you do the same.
During the first months
You often talked to me
When you thought that I was still sleeping.

You said, "I am not the strong man
you believe, but you give me confidence."

And sitting by our bed you said,
"I always thought that happiness was reserved
for some privileged people, until I knew you."

Morning Aikido lesson

Linh is standing in the middle of the dojo

Ichi (1) she raises her arms, stretches to the right.

The summer light springs through the trees.

Ni (2) she raises her arms to the left.

The camp remains still.

San (3) she bends her arms to the right.

She sees the path to the sea.

Chi (4), she bends her arms to the left.

A bunch of birds are twittering.

Go (5), her arms and hands spread out.

The shore is bare as the tide lays low.

Roku (6), arms and hands on the reverse side.

Here are the rocks, where crabs and starfish hide.

Shichi (7), she rolls in a swift move.

From far away the tide is coming.

Hachi (8), here she is rolling back.

The waves running in the ocean.

Ku (9), she looks for a partner.

She becomes this wave rolling.

Ju (10), she faces her partner.

She looks at him in the full light.

Nakamura Kusatao

four haikus translated from the Japanese by Masaya Saito

Morning mist—
cows and horses awake
on four legs

*

Under the blazing sky
let a horse be red
and a skeleton white

*

A lizard embracing
a stone; a woman embracing
a secret mirror

*

Things without memories—
new fallen snow
and bounding squirrels

The Intruder

Yves Thériault

Translated from the French by M. G. Hesse

Sometimes the dust was yellow. A fine, dry, irritating dust which slipped under one's clothing and chafed the skin. On all mountain roads, every time a draught animal or a truck lifted it up, a cloud could be seen rising up and spreading out like a long tablecloth that no wind swept away but that instead fell down again softly on the shrubs, on the grass.

The tree leaves were covered with the dust and now they looked grey in the hot August sun.

A heat wave hung over everything, blocked the vision, looked like a mass which had settled on the mountains that could be touched and pushed back.

Everything slept, everything had fled the heat. The only music heard on this summer day was the song of the crickets in the willows bordering the road.

In the valley below, ordinarily one could still have seen traces of the sudden storm that had dumped tons of water that very morning, turning the dried-up brook into a torrent whose course had disappeared almost as soon as the flooding had passed.

The clay was already hard and cracked up. Digging, one could find the water again near the surface, but the man's weight by itself wasn't enough. Ambroise Leclerc kicked the clay with his heel. He felt the mass that was already baked by the sun.

As he climbed the slope to Callibran's house, Ambroise Leclerc heard the old man's cow mooing sadly while her muzzle rested on the fence. When he drew close to her, Ambroise easily saw from the side of her udder that she hadn't been milked this morning. The old man wasn't usually that negligent. As a rule he never missed milking his cow in the morning, once the sun was up.

He reached Callibran's house.

It was hardly more than a hut, this house with the rickety roof and its walls of disjointed boards. It was situated right on the slope; with the forest just behind it and in front of it the winding road going from the village below to the other crest, right up to the top of the mountains where it

then went down again to the other valley. That one was rich, prosperous, fertile, where the fruit trees of ten large commercial orchards grow.

In Callibran's kitchen, now the confrontation.

Ambroise expected to find the old man there. He always found the old man there. It was understood. Callibran never needed to know somebody was coming.

Instead—a young man with red hair, freckles, uneasy eyes, stood up, his fists clenched.

"Who are you?" asked Ambroise.

It wasn't his business to act like the police. And yet, just by being a regular, by belonging to this village and this region, he sometimes suddenly had an urge to know everything that went on, a desire to have every law respected. Especially the law that was vastly important in a sparsely populated countryside—the right of ownership.

What was this intruder doing in Callibran's kitchen?

A visiting relative?

A stranger passing by on the road would have been reported. So?

"Who are you?" he asked again. Then, as if to complete the question, so to speak, he added: "Where do you come from?"

The young man didn't move. He was tall and thin, but he was young. Ambroise guessed he was hardly twenty years old. Perhaps less. And the eyes had that wayward look of people who travel day after day. This detachment from permanent things.

"I'm Ronald Kerwin."

The stranger had hesitated before answering.

"I've never seen you," Ambroise coldly pointed out.

"So what?"

Ambroise silently laughed so that he was shaking for a moment.

"You think that's not important?" he asked the young man.

The intruder didn't move, nor did he express an opinion. He was still standing on the same spot, his face was rigid, all his muscles were tensed up and ready to relax instantly.

Ambroise put his hands in his pockets and pretended to look nonchalant.

"Why are you here?" he asked. "I came to see Callibran. Where is he?"

Ronald Kerwin—if indeed that was his name—took a deep, long breath which raised his shoulders. In a flat voice he recited: "I'm the new hired man. The old man took me on yesterday. My room and board and a bit of pay."

"Ah?" said Ambroise. "He hired you yesterday. Well, well. . . ."

A cart came down the hill with the hellish noise of wheels grating on

the road's loose stones. A dog, which was probably accompanying the team, began to bark as it approached Callibran's house. Then, as its challenge was not answered, the dog pounced toward the house and began to bark, with all its teeth bared, right up at the kitchen door. Then it turned back as quickly as it had come.

"That's a brave dog, that one," said Ambroise. "A very good dog. Where is Callibran's old yellow dog?"

A scarcely noticeable trembling shook the young man. He made a vague gesture toward the door.

"Callibran sent it away at noon. He told it to get lost in the wood. The dog went away. It hasn't come back yet."

"Well," said Ambroise again. "Well, well! The dog left and it hasn't come back."

"That's what I said."

The young man looked stealthily toward Ambroise. He changed his position a bit and in turn put his hands in his pockets.

"Where is Callibran?" asked Ambroise again. "I came to see him."

"He left about noon," answered the intruder. "He went up the road. He said he'd be gone for the day. He asked me to stay here and mind the house. He'd have work for me tomorrow."

Ambroise went up slowly to the stove where a bright fire was burning in spite of the day's heat. In front was a covered pot where something was cooking. Ambroise lifted the cover. Meat was cooking there in water.

From the middle of the room, Ronald Kerwin declared in a voice that was a bit too firm to be sincere: "The old man put the meat on for cooking before he left. He told me it's for supper. He asked me to watch the cooking, and to keep the fire well lit in the stove."

"Oh, yes," noted Ambroise. "The dog is gone, the old man is gone, there's meat cooking on the stove. How strange life is!"

He moved back toward the intruder and examined him from head to toe. He shook his head in surprise.

"That's so," he said, "that's so. . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm saying that it's so, and nothing more. . . . You've torn your pants?" He pointed his finger to a long tear in the leg of the intruder's pants. Blood could be seen on his skin. "And you hurt yourself?" he concluded.

"I jumped a fence. Barbed wire. I caught myself on it, that's all. No need to make a fuss." Ambroise remained silent and the intruder too. But each for his own reasons. Ambroise knew that silence is sometimes as valuable as a weapon being pointed at someone. As to the intruder. . . .

"You could have come in here and killed Callibran," Ambroise said sud-

denly. "Killed Callibran and killed the dog too. The old man is probably dead; somewhere in the house. I'd say he is there, in the bedroom. . . ."

"You're crazy!"

"No. . . no, I'm not crazy. I've got my reasons to be suspicious. I get around in these parts. I know everybody's habits. Especially old Callibran's. . . . You tell me he hired you to work. You're lying. The old man owns barely the land around the house. He never needed a hired man for that. That's your first stupid lie. The second is that his dog was blind and never would have left the house. Besides, it's a vicious, terribly snarling dog. If he were still alive, do you think that other dog could have come leaping and barking right up to the kitchen door? Callibran didn't go to the top of the slope. He limped, he was old and he was the laziest man in the world. Besides, he didn't have any friends, and certainly no place, no house to visit in the hills. The meat on the stove. It's obvious you've never seen Callibran alive. He didn't have any teeth, and as long as anybody can remember he's never been seen chewing, much less cooking meat to feed himself. This meat is for the dog and why have it cooked? The tear in your pants doesn't come from a bad jump across a fence. You're too young for that kind of accident. The dog did that. . . ."

"It was the fence. I'm not lying. You're crazy! I didn't kill Callibran!"

"Why do you wander about like a tramp? Have you got something to hide? Are you running away from the police? Nothing like the sky and the wind and the road for running away to hide your wrongdoings, your mistakes, your fears or your weaknesses."

"I'm a tramp because I like it!"

Ambrose went to the door and stayed there for a while, looking at the heat of the day rising up.

"Listen," he said after a while, "everything could have been worse. . . ."

He sighed, went back to the middle of the room.

"You've got some time, but very little. . . . There's work to be had in the other valley. It's fruit-picking time. A fellow named Leblanc hires men these days. The pay is good and there's work for about two weeks. I'd advise you to go there."

"But. . . ?"

"What?"

"You just accused me of killing the old man!"

"Your looks are against you. Let that be a lesson to you. A policeman would have come in here and within five minutes he'd have enough against you to have you hanged!"

"I didn't kill the old man!"

"Me, I know."

“Ah!”

“Yes. . . . It’s a question of . . . of knowing my people here well. . . . You knew the old man was dead, didn’t you?”

The intruder nodded.

“The reason I guessed it,” continued Ambroise, “is because the door of that room has always been open. Now it’s closed. You went in, you found the old man. And because you’re brave . . . no, not brave, a bit stupid . . . let’s say, the foolhardiness of youth . . . so, you decided to stay a while, to cook the meat that was on the cupboard. Then you heard me coming, and you panicked. . . .”

“What do you want from me, now?”

“Nothing. . . . Leave, I’ll open the door for you. You can run away, you’re not guilty. . . . Callibran’s cow hasn’t been milked since early this morning. They saw you in the village, about ten o’clock, during the down-pour. To come here, you had to pass through the valley. The valley is of red clay. You don’t have that clay on your boots. So you must have passed well after the storm when everything was dry. Callibran must have been killed during the night since he didn’t milk his cow at 6 o’clock, as usual. . . . You’d better leave, disappear, before others who know less about Callibran’s doings accuse you. Leave, go away.”

When the young man had left the house, Ambroise Leclerc opened the bedroom door and looked for a moment at Callibran’s body, as he had left it on the bed the night before.

He smiled sadly and for a moment he regretted not letting Ronald Kerwin be accused of this murder. But right away he pulled himself together and murmured in the silence of the house: “With my soft heart, I’ll end up getting myself hanged. . . .”

Then he gently shrugged his shoulders. “After all,” he concluded, “I’ll really have deserved it.”

Tom Wayman

Return to the Heart

The sound of the river had not changed:
the glacial torrent cutting between
black rock piled on rock
scattered down this valley one season
when water poured over the mountain barrier.
I crouched to drink
in the midst of the icy spray
and the throbbing
of the river pushing among these stones.

Where the stream widens
to form islands of
alder and cottonwood
the water is fast, but not deep
and it is possible to cross
cautiously balancing from rock to rock.
Twenty-five years ago
I came alone once to this place
a boy near the edge of adulthood
carrying my heart.

Or is this not
memory, but a dream
or reverie? Yet I recall
how for most of a morning
I built a structure of poles and stones.
I took a small bag from my pack
and mixed concrete at the pebbled edge of the island
then took my heart
and set it
at the centre of what I had constructed
and sealed it in
and turned away.

For I had decided I did not need
whatever uses the organ served.
For years after, I worked at my life.
I had what I thought were good friends
and lovers, walked in fire
and deep cold, laughed much and
felt sharp pain.

But in the cavity in my chest
where the heart was absent
a fluid unknown to medicine
began to collect. At the start the liquid seemed benign
a sort of protective secretion
but after more than two decades
the fluid now
shifts
throwing me off balance
when I bend too abruptly toward or
back from another person. Also the liquid
has become acidic
searing the tissue that contains it.

When I described my symptoms
my doctors made notes
and referred me to other physicians.
At last, though, I remembered
my heart.

So I have returned to this wood
with a new pack on my shoulders
and with sledge hammer and shovel.
After the hike in from the old road
I located the islands
more densely treed than I remembered.
I left my gear on the beach where I crossed
and began to search for
a small mound of cement.

For hours I dodged branches
forcing my way amid the alder trunks and bushes.
Sometimes I crawled across a likely spot
feeling with my hand through high grass
or scrabbling amid roots and stones.
At lunchtime, I found a clearing in the undergrowth
and retrieved my pack and equipment
and sat to eat
watching birds and a squirrel in the leaves above me
and the play of light
where the river leapt and fell back.
Near the finish of my meal
I reached to place the cup of my thermos
on a rocky outcrop
and was aware that under moss
this was my heart's grave.

My hands began to shake.
What would be left of my heart
after this long in the dark:
a crumble of dust, or
a desiccated leather bag
or could the organ be
somehow undamaged
by its stay within an airtight space
far from blood and breath?

I scrape off moss
baring grey concrete
and heft the sledge.
Each time the head falls
it bounces once
on the surface
and subsides. I lift my arms
over my right shoulder
and smash the sledge down.
In my ears
is the deafening ring
of steel on stone.

Dayv James-French

MVA: Casualties, Two

1.

In Hatha Yoga there is a posture
Savasana
which means 'The Corpse Position.'

Peter is very good at it.

Inert, assuming death with
a mobile consciousness,
he is prone, passive,
at peace with the All.

He is long and lean, hungry;
he lies as though embalmed.

His waking comes full force:
Chest rises, air circulates,
cleanses system poisons.

He dons bow-tie and pressed slacks
to drive a taxi. So high.

2.

Then, come the night,
Peter in leather jacket
and protective helmet.

We ride the Kaw as though making love
until a blind of car lights, image
of broadside, orgasm of bone-shattering

dimension. Old men already,
snapping and cracking,
ready to pop open
the blossom of a heart.

3.

One cannot see the finality
of the act. Like the woman pregnant
putting away her diaphragm,

Just for a while,

finding it years of stretch marks
later and having it crumble to dust.

One cannot see

4.

All of this is pools:
the light for reading;
the circles of pain,
the office for typing only.

The knees clamp shut, prissy
as a half-stop.
This posture—irrevocable.

Line-Doggie and the Turnaround Double-Pump Off the Rat and In

Dennis Trudell

The small basketball hoop with suction cups and the foam ball had been carefully, lovingly packed in a box with styrofoam pellets. When the soldier finally tore past wire-reinforced tape and brown paper to open the box, he had a bad moment of hating his folks for sending it.

Not just for assuming he had a place in the middle of Nam to put up the hoop and the desire to hop around playing like at home—but for having bought whatever item they'd saved the styrofoam from. For being able to drive down paved streets shaded by elms and enter an air-conditioned store with products that had nothing to do with death. For having wrapped the box in their cool parlour with drapes and carpet and television-laughter.

"Next time send some fuckin' cookies," he murmured to urge the moment past. It had been a day of bad moments. He tossed the hoop and ball on the cot by his helmet and M-16. He took off his cartridge belt and dropped it there too.

The others in the hootch were also opening mail. Except for Rawlins—on a hospital ship if he was lucky, or ashes among other ashes if the Medevac hadn't made it out of the valley . . . or zipped in a green bag if it had, but too late. And in any case who wouldn't be opening things for awhile.

"So how'd you do?" asked Sloe Gin from the next rack. "Anybody still love you?"

When the soldier couldn't answer—could not arrange thoughts bumping past into words—he knew he was in trouble. Knew how much trouble he was in. All the way back to the LZ from the bush, the air had seemed a

tissue he was about to rip with his face and body. The feeling had stayed while the platoon was lifted back to base camp. He'd sat silent because it seemed words might move him through the tissue to somewhere worse than he was. And with Rawlins' open guts still stinging his eyes, he couldn't imagine such a place.

Sloe Gin eyed him from among torn envelopes, waiting for an answer. The soldier tried to shrug. But he couldn't remember how—and he *really* felt in the shit. *This is it, this is losing it. Oh, Jesus.* Then he heard himself say: "Just my folks. They sent me a damn. . ."

The voice didn't sound like his. He finished the statement by nodding at the hoop.

Sloe Gin gazed fiercely at the orange plastic and foam. The reds and pinks of Rawlins' wound had gleamed much brighter, seemed to shriek at them.

"Happy birthday or what the fuck," said Sloe Gin who'd ordered that drink his first night in-country and been mocked and named. And sprayed with the Filipino beer that was their only booze. "I got lucky, too," he said. "Got news clippings on how the Cougars are doing."

The soldier felt the colours of Rawlins' wound draw his eyes against the tissue.

But Gin's voice pulled the other way: "Parker City Cougars. My high school football team. Varsity's three wins, four losses."

"How about that?" the soldier managed.

"Yeah, but the J.V.'s five and two. And Terri Strickland is Homecoming Queen. That's a fuckin'-i Terri—not y. The theme is 'Pennies From Heaven.' Toss that hoopball shit over here."

As he did, the soldier heard words from the rack beyond Gin's; it took several seconds to understand them. When he did—"I got some *real* news. Ma says the leaves are pretty this fall"—he realized the others in the hootch had been talking all along.

Honda, Beatleman, North Philly. Their worn faces came into focus.

"Here's some fuckin' news. Linda says the new TV season eats dick. Spells it 'uninteresting'," Honda said.

"Pa says they're hiring at the shampoo plant," said Philly.

"Linda went to see *The Green Berets*. Says now she knows better what it's like over here."

They swore at the John Wayne film. Meanwhile, the soldier's other senses cleared; the hootch smells of canvas and earth and body-stink filled him. The smell of heat, of burning shit out by the wire. His flesh again bore bites and scratches from the bush.

"What the fuck's that, Gin? Your folks send you a toy?"

"It's this doggie's, not mine," Gin told Honda.

"Plastic hoop? Let's see it."

Gin flipped it to Philly—who then wanted the net as well. After getting it, he sat pressing it into tiny rings around the rim. The soldier stood watching with hands curled in fists. Inside he was trembling again, like when Doc had tried to wrap Rawlins' wound, and he wanted to keep it from showing. He was just barely on the tissue's sane side. It seemed impossible to do the six months he had left without tearing through.

"No fucking way," he whispered, and felt a chill move his blood.

Then he heard another sound. He didn't know if it just started or had been there awhile: Beatleman's tape player, with "Hey Jude" of course. And now another smell: Thai stick from Honda's R&R in Bangkok. No, *two* others. Philly was handing a joint of Montagnard weed to Gin. By just holding out a hand, the soldier could toke either but instead he turned away. If dope didn't bring him some slack from the tissue, it might just nudge him through.

If they can't give you a war to believe in—should fucking issue a guaranteed friendly high. He'd pass for now, but did that mean he had to do the six months straight? "Never happen," he breathed.

"Hey, doggie, ease up before you squeeze them hands outta shape," Gin said. "Take a hit, man. You look shit-green."

"Doggie?" said the soldier's new voice. "I got a name, man. I'm more than just a goddamn—"

"At ease. We all got names and war names—and we're all doggies on line for the Cause. Except we're off the line now, so get wasted and be AWOL."

The soldier made a sort of smile but waved off the joint. It returned to Philly, and Honda's pipe with the Thai stick went to Honda. The dope's sweet smells entered the soldier. For some moments he felt they were about to shove him through the tissue. It seemed to have shifted down under his boots, the exact texture of the dirt there, so he sat on his cot. Then felt a new panic. Wouldn't the cot's legs pierce the tissue? Plunge him down to madness, or hell?

Can't take much more of this . . .

"Okay, we got ourselves a b-ball hoop," said Philly, holding it up. "Let's play some two-on-three. Winners ship out tomorrow, back to the World. Orders of General Westmoreshit. But how we gonna suction this on wood?"

"Count me out," said Beatleman, lying with the tape player for a pillow. He was grinning, yet the grin looked too stiff. Rawlins was his best friend.

A scratching from a corner turned all five of their heads. The soldier felt a familiar scrotum-tensing at it.

"Guess our mascots ain't deserted us," said Gin.

"Lifers," said Honda. And the soldier saw Philly, who feared and hated rats more than the rest, stare like he had at the one they killed last month the size of a kitten.

The Philly took the hoop to a wall—sandbags piled six feet high to some two-by-fours. Above that was just canvas.

"Come *on*, dudes. I'm jumpy as fuck from that mortar bullshit." Philly paused, and the others could *feel* him keep his brown face from looking at Rawlins' empty cot. None of them had looked there since entering the hootch.

Philly was asking for help, asking the only way he could—and the soldier felt a wave of gratitude. A wave of love. For making him know he wasn't the only one fucked up. He risked putting boots on the dirt again.

"Let's do it," he said carefully. "You ghetto types got nothin' but flash. All show and tell."

"Right, man," said Honda. "Where I come from, we shut up and just rock-an'-roll the damn ball into the damn—"

"Ho!" called Gin, face softening from the dope. "You talkin' hoops, studs, you're talkin' my youth. Talkin' leading the Cougars in assists and personal fouls, 1967–68."

"You fuckers are talkin'," Honda said, "power forward for the '68 I.M. champs, Altoona West High. 'Bout a hundred rebounds in the title game we won in O.T."

"Power forward?" said Gin. "What happened since? You can't even lift my jock."

The soldier managed to smile at Honda giving Gin the finger and joining Philly trying to get suction cups to stick on a two-by-four. He took a step there, too. . . . and when he didn't plunge through the dirt, he took another. He could maybe do this: walk the three yards to Philly and Honda. But that brought a new despair. If he had to wonder about three yards, what chance did he have to do the clicks he had to walk—up hills and down, in mud and shit and blood, the next month? And the next? The one after that?

Honda took the foam ball from Philly as the hoop was again stuck on the two-by-four. He passed it to the soldier, who almost cried out when he couldn't raise a hand to catch it. His arms wouldn't *move*. The ball hit his chest, and for the hundredth bad moment that day, he looked down and expected to see himself torn like Rawlins.

"Sure you don't want no tokes, dude? Your face looks like puke," Gin said.

"Am fine."

They ended up pounding nails in the suction cups to keep the hoop up.

“Hey Jude” played yet again—the whacks of Honda’s entrenching tool seeming to fit its rhythm. The sounds calmed the soldier and he wondered if the dope smoke was making him high. Beatleman was still smiling, eyes closed, and his smile looked less strained. Philly told him to play some other tape, but Beatleman didn’t move.

“Please man, *anything*,” Philly whined. “Even redneck crap. Waylon Jackoff, Kris Krisofershit . . .”

The soldier didn’t want another song, though. Because as they practised—took turns shooting the foam ball—it seemed to thaw something inside him. And he saw that Philly, throwing exaggerated fakes to its beat before making dunks, was into the music. For some minutes the four of them shooting said nothing, their boot-scoffs and breathing seeming a new refrain to “Hey Jude”. The soldier stopped mentally instructing himself to move arms and legs.

“Ain’t no big thing,” he or Honda sang into a pause between “Hey Jude” and “Hey Jude” when the longest shot so far—Philly’s jumper from twenty feet—hit nothing but the dope-sweet air.

“There it is,” Philly murmured, like it was the song’s next line.

They heard Baker’s squad pass toward the showers, which would have run out of warm water halfway through Big Dog’s and be just a cold trickle. The soldier decided he’d wash in the morning and was pleased to assume his mind would be intact then. But he feared such arrogance might return the tissue near his body. He held the foam ball, thinking: *Don’t know the rules . . . what’s allowed and not.*

“Let’s go—your shot,” Honda said.

“Fuck the warm up. Let’s play,” said Philly.

The soldier felt ashamed at wanting to cry again—like when the Medevac had left with Rawlins—while the rest argued about teams. He wondered why today did him, when other patrols, firefights and hit buddies, only scared him shitless. For another bad moment he hated Radical, hated another doggie last seen borne to a dust-off. Rad had made things harder by telling about the French here and about imperialism, even though the soldier hadn’t understood it all. But that they were wasting and being wasted for no good reason came through loud and clear.

But he couldn’t hate Rad any more than he could his folks. Rad only confirmed what the soldiers saw in eyes on roads and in villes. He wasn’t wanted here. *Uncle wasn’t appreciated for this crap.* Rad finally took out his out foot in a firefight, and who could hate the memory of his peace sign from the the dust-off door?

“Play ball!” Sloe Gin called.

The soldier saw the others ready to play. Beatleman had joined them—“Hey Jude” still playing—and apparently the teams were decided. Honda stood ready to pass to someone.

"My man here keeps zombying out," said Gin, nodding at the soldier.

"No prob," he replied. "Get ready for my jumper blowin' your ass away."

"I'm on *your team*, stud. You, me, Beatle against the two big guys. Their ball. This is Nam, 1969—planet Earth."

"Gotcha," the soldier said, raising his arms to guard Honda.

The game began as the ball went to Philly cutting for the hoop. But Gin slapped it away, outscrambled Philly for it and passed over to Beatleman. Beatle's eyes were shut again, about five feet nine from the ground but twice that in Thai-stick distance. The ball hit his cheek, bounced back to Gin. He tried a shot that missed everything but sandbag. Honda grabbed it, tossed to Philly—who dribbled once and slammed his dunk.

"Two-zip," he said. "You in this thing, Beatle, or off humpin' with ol' Jude?"

"Third down and eight," said Beatleman.

This made the rest shrug, and the game continued. The soldier realized it was near sunset. The hootch door with its sandbags was closed, but he could *sense* the crazy reddening of air beyond. Soon would come dusk-calls of birds too dumb not to leave a war zone.

Or too weary of searching for places in Nam without war. He and the other four were missing chow now. But Honda or Philly would have got food from home, and besides no one had much appetite after Rawlins. Gin took a pass from the soldier, passed to himself off Beatleman's hip, sank a ten-footer.

"*Oh—right!*" he yelled, loud enough for Big Don's squad to hear in their hootch.

Beatleman went and turned up the music, and they played for another three "Hey Judes" before taking a break. No one called for it. The score was 10–10, Honda tying it with a drive Gin claimed was a charge. Honda said anyone not man enough to play Altoona-style should stay out of his way.

"Bullshit! This ain't no football. Ain't you lovin' up the Princess of Altoona. Beatle, what you say? I get fouled or no?"

"Three balls, two strikes," Beatle said. So far he'd touched the ball with several parts of his body but not his hands.

So they laughed and took the break. The soldier hadn't scored yet, but scuffling after Honda and Philly, setting picks for Gin and avoiding Beatle, had kept the tissue at bay. The way they paused to rest—let the whackiness of playing hoops two hours from war sink in—was like sensing one another's intent in the bush.

Now they made another decision without words, or hardly any. Philly began it—and once he did, the soldier, Honda, Gin, even Beatle nodded that they agreed. Rawlins' cot and duffel and little shelf of possessions

was like a pit they'd avoided going near. Now Philly walked over to the cot and lifted one end.

"Won't be comin' back," he said, so softly it merged with yet another "Na na na na" of "Hey Jude".

The rest moved at the music's rhythm to help him with it. Gin took the cot's other end, and they carried it outside. The soldier and Beatle put the things on Rawlins' shelf—paperbacks, framed photos, Hong Kong ashtray, etc.—in the duffel bag. It was placed by the door, where it would be taken and sent after Rawlins tomorrow. Or shipped home to his folks.

Philly and Gin would leave the cot at an edge of the company area. Any lifer would know not to come raising hell about it. The soldier, Honda, and Beatle shifted the other cots around to fill the space. Philly and Gin returned. Nothing had been spoken since Philly's four words. The Beatles' song seemed more like a hymn than usual.

They avoided each other's eyes. The soldier didn't even want to look at anyone's boots—didn't want to wonder which might be missing next time a duffel was sent after a Medevac. Once again he couldn't imagine doing the six months: twenty-five weeks of days and hours and minutes.

Where do I look right now? What do I do with my eyes when Gin's cot disappears? Or Philly's . . .

A spider scuttled in view between their boots. Honda was closest, so he moved and squashed it.

"Right," Gin said. "That's a confirmed."

Honda stomped again, *hard*, as if more than a bug was being crushed. When he kicked it away, the others seemed free to turn minds from where Rawlins' cot had been.

"Score's even," said Honda. "You guys' ball. Beatle, you gotta stop this crazy bobbin' and weavin'. Gonna lose it keepin' up with you."

Beatle had returned to his spot two yards from the hoop. "Eight-nineteen . . . all around my goal's It," he announced.

The sense of weeks lurking ahead—in the heat and rain, feverish or hungry or both, with shits or shakes or under arty so loud his skull seemed changing shape—moved with the soldier back to the game. He gritted his teeth, but twenty-five weeks wouldn't back off that easy. He felt them near his throat as he passed to Gin and cut around Beatle. Gin's return pass hit his arm and stung.

As Philly beat Gin to the ball, he stood trembling again in his veins or bones. *Now it's a sting instead of a tissue. Can't handle this shit!* Philly leaped with the ball in one hand, shifted to the other, threw up a shot that dropped through.

If there was a reason I could believe. For bearing this—for Rawlins fucked up . . . Gin passed to himself off Beatle, passed to the soldier—

who managed to slap a return pass. Gin shot, and the ball ran around the rim and fell out.

"Number ten," Gin called over the song.

The soldier's palm tingled warmly from the slap pass, and moments later his other did as he jumped and blocked Honda's ten-footer. He saw Philly's grin seem to brighten several yards of the hootch. He still hadn't scored, but his trembling was fading into this familiar pattern: turning, jumping, faking one way and moving another.

"Hey Jude" grew louder, though no one touched the volume. So did their breaths and grunts and boot-scoffs. The score kept changing, and then didn't for more scoffs and grunting, and then did. When Gin tried bouncing in a shot off Beatle's head, the soldier saw that somewhere in the past minutes they'd all taken off shirts. The air was denser with sweat, old sweat and new, and it didn't smell foul. The ball looped off Beatle—and fell short.

"*Al-most!*" Sloe Gin shouted. "Let me try that again, the Beatleman Headbop. Gonna replace jumpers as number-one weapon."

Beatleman nodded, eyes closed, and grinned wider as Gin tried the shot again. It missed badly. Then Philly tried and Honda did, and the two-on-three game was forgotten. Philly showed them his "Dippy-Do Under-Overhand" he claimed had never been seen outside Philadelphia. It missed everything but canvas. Honda showed them his "Retriever Fetch-shot," leaping up with the ball in his mouth and dropping it through.

The others made gagging-sounds, saying they didn't want to touch the ball. But they did, and the soldier found himself in a short line waiting to invent some weird shot. He remembered playing in his room at home, working out restlessness after watching the varsity from bleachers, easing tension after phoning a girl. He'd perfected one that angled off both ceiling and wall: his "Off-Twice and Swish".

But there was no ceiling here, and he didn't know what to do for his turn. Philly took off from five yards, seemed to float in the dimming air—to hang there as Baker's squad returned past the hootch—but maybe the soldier was seeing wrong. He was suddenly tired in every cell, weary enough to maybe not lie awake all night and do tomorrow with a brain like sandpaper. Gin wouldn't give up on headbops, threw the ball at his own forehead while jumping for a lay-up.

It bounced off the rim and went out to Beatle as Gin's momentum crashed him into sandbags. The thud was like a man's body shot off his feet—and the soldier felt the tissue approach again from a corner's shadows. But Gin stood back up, and "Hey Jude" grew still more clear and tender as Beatle held the ball for the first time.

"Field goal," he pronounced slowly, dropped it and tried to kick in a

shot. His boot got nothing but air; he teetered on one leg before falling on his ass. They all laughed, Beatle the loudest.

The soldier second loudest because the tissue had slid back away. The ball was passed to him—and he moved forward to the music and another, scratched sound ahead.

“Turnaround Double-Pump,” he called, spinning in the air to fake a shot as the hoop swung in view—pulling it back to arc one just before he came down.

When the ball hit the rat crossing the two-by-four from wherever Gin’s crash had scared it, the soldier’s eyes widened. So did the others’. When it bounced off the rat into the hoop, the soldier laughed hardest and deepest. Because if he made a shot like that, anything could happen.

Any damn thing at all. . . He rolled laughing on the dirt under his friend’s laughter.

Notes On Contributors

Michael Crummey, originally from Newfoundland, now lives in Kingston, Ontario. He has published previously in *TickleAce*, *The Fiddlehead*, *The Antigonish Review*, and *Event*.

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Dayv James-French has recently published a collection of short stories—*Victims of Gravity*—with the Porcupine's Quill. He lives in Ottawa.

Fred Johnston was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1951. He was educated there and in Toronto. His publications include one novel and three collections of poems. In Canada, his work has been published in *PRISM*, *Event*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Descant* among others. He lives in Galway, where he initiated Galway's annual poetry festival.

Nakamura Kusatao, 1901–1983. Although he respected some traditional haiku characteristics such as the use of 'season words', he was one of the great innovators who tried to modernize haiku by including in it a human element, in keeping with his keen and conscientious awareness of the nature of human life. Along with Katoh Shuson and Ishida Hakyo, he comprised the 'Human Search School' (Ningen-tankyu-ha).

Evelyn Lau is the author of *RUNAWAY: Diary Of A Street Kid* (Harper Collins) and *You Are Not Who You Claim* (Porcepic Books). Her poetry has appeared in literary magazines including *Queen's Quarterly*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *The New Quarterly*.

Florence McNeil has written eight books of poetry, the ninth due out this fall, children's novels, a play, and has just completed a novel for adults. She has also edited two books of poetry and written a book on poetry writing. She is a UBC Creative Writing Graduate, and has been a teacher. She now writes full time.

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