PRISM international

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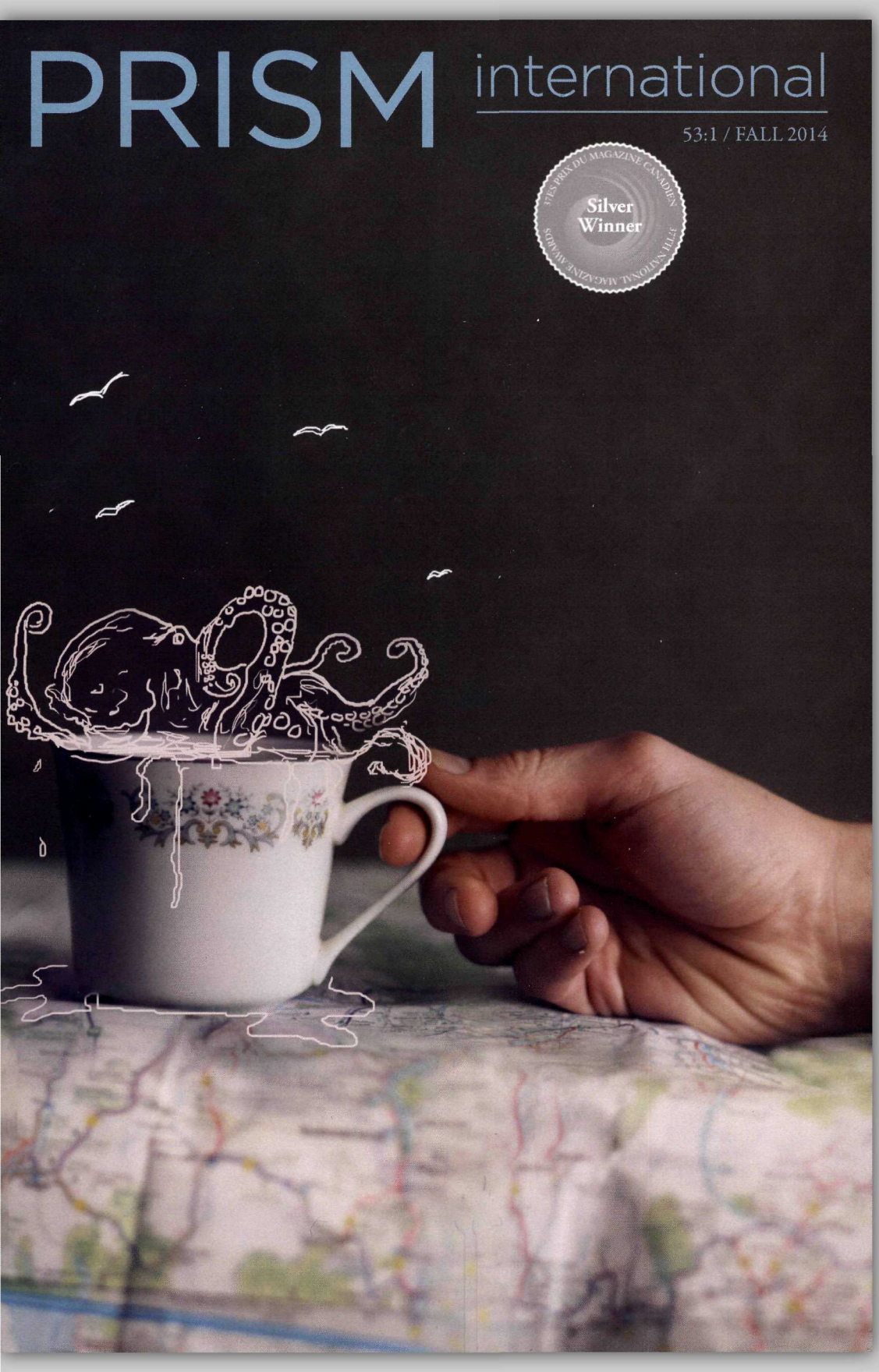

PRISM international

2014 EARLE BIRNEY PRIZE FOR POETRY

PRISM international is proud to announce the 2014 Earle Birney Prize for Poetry. This prize is presented annually to one outstanding poet selected from our outgoing Poetry Editor's volume. This year's winner is Carla Drysdale for her poem "Inheritance," which first appeared in *PRISM* 52:3.

Earle Birney established UBC's MFA Program in Creative Writing in 1965—the first university writing program in Canada. The Earle Birney prize, awarded annually and worth $500, is *PRISM*'s only in-house prize. Special thanks to Mme. Justice Wailan Low for her generous ongoing support.

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a place of mind
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Amy Jones

EVERYTHING HERE REMINDS ME OF YOU

In retrospect, Allison, I guess I would have to say that crashing your grandmother's funeral was probably a mistake on my part. But in my defence, I would like to say that if it had been someone else's funeral, your sister's or your mother's or your best friend's, say, I would have left you alone in your grief. I'm not a monster, Allison. But grandparents die, we all know that. Yours was ninety-two when she finally kicked the bucket. You couldn't have been all that surprised.

But the thing is, Allie—can I call you Allie?—it was the only place I knew I could find you. That cold church, a few blue-haired old people sprinkled sparsely throughout the pews—mostly ladies because the men always die first—walkers clogging the aisles, tea and sandwiches and date squares in the stale-air reception hall with the minister. You were only in town for three days, and while I could speculate as to the things you might do—glasses of wine at Tom's with your friends, lunch with your sister at that sushi place on Spring Garden, walking your mother's basset hound at the park—it's not like I expected you to invite me along for a girls' night out or anything. Three o'clock Friday afternoon at St. Andrew's United Church was the one appointment, so thoughtfully published in the local paper, that I knew you would keep. And I had to see you, Allie. After all these things that I'd done, I had to.

In case you were wondering, Jay did actually get your text. It was the middle of the night, and I was awake because I had been having this dream about lobsters. I had never thought of myself as having much of a conscience when it came to eating animals, Allie, but in this dream the life partner of the lobster I had cooked the weekend before showed up at our house looking for her. I don't know how he rang the doorbell but when I opened the door he was sitting on our front step looking all green and fishy and he said, "Excuse me, I'm looking for Molly, my wife. The gentleman at the supermarket said the last time he saw her she was with you." And I felt this huge sorrow in my stomach, like Molly was still in there and I could taste her in the back of my throat. I woke up and I could swear my mouth tasted like garlic butter even though it had been three nights since the lobster, three nights since Jay said, "You do it. I can't watch," and I said, "It's no big deal, they're just lobsters. Who cares?"

So I was awake when Jay's phone vibrated. He was still asleep, his jaw clicking away, dreaming about shooting people or flying or having sex with a porn star, whatever things guys dream about, I don't know. I'm still not sure why I looked at the message. I was so careful, when Jay and I first met, to avoid anything that might catch me off guard, might fuck with my head. You could

do that to me back then, Allie. I'd get out of the shower at my apartment all wet and smelling like coconuts and Jay would be on the phone with you, arranging a time to pick you up at the airport, and it was like the coconut just rotted on my skin. He'd leave a wad of crumpled receipts on my kitchen counter and in among them would be a grocery list written in your confident, feminine writing, with stupid little exclamation marks at the end of everything: milk! broccoli! wax paper! like you were so excited to get these groceries home and introduce them to each other. I didn't want to know what you ate. I didn't want to know what your handwriting looked like. I didn't want to know what colour bikini you wore when you and Jay went to Jamaica for your second anniversary, or that your boobs weren't bigger than mine, but that you had a nicer ass.

But you know how it goes, Allie. It's been three years since your divorce. I got comfortable. And I checked Jay's text message, which was from you, of course. Your grandmother had died. You were coming back to Halifax for the funeral. You would really like to see him. "The ball is in your court," you said.

My first thought was, stupidly, the screen so incredibly bright in the darkness of our bedroom, that you were a writer, you should be able to do better than idiotic clichés. "The ball is in your court." What did you even mean by that? Had the ball been in your court before that? Was this your serve, or your return? Was the message the ball, or was your relationship the ball? What were the rackets, then? Why would you say something so stupid? *It didn't even make any sense.*

My second thought, well, it wasn't really a thought, even. Just delete. Delete. Delete. Delete.

People always say, "They never leave the wife." And I told those people, "Maybe *they* never do, but *Jay* did." It wasn't until later that I realized it had nothing to do with me, that you had given Jay no choice, that you took that job in Montreal and he couldn't speak French, that he wanted a baby and you didn't. That you said, "We can make this work," but didn't really mean it. That every other weekend turned into once every couple of months, that you sounded so distant on the phone, so unlike his wife, talking about these people he had never met, and it drove him crazy, hearing about how all these Jean-Pierres and Marie-Josées got to have drinks with you or eat dinner with you, that these ghostly outlines, these caricatures of stylish Francophone journalists got to watch you cut your chicken with a knife and fork while he, your husband, could only imagine it as he sat on the couch with his cold cereal in a bowl, staring at the place where you used to sit, your feet tucked under you, flipping through a magazine or checking your BlackBerry while he watched sports highlights. That even though he was the one who finally ended it, who finally had the balls to call time of death on your marriage, you were the one who had stuck the knife in its back to begin with.

And even though you were so effortlessly *good* at all that wronged-wife stuff—so brave and beautiful at the divorce hearing, so magnanimous in the division of property, so charitable in your characterization of me, always referring to me by name while your friends just called me "The Whore"—you knew that, really, I had nothing to do with the end of your marriage. I won only by default. He

was so sad, so blatantly heartbroken, that it was hard for me to feel any kind of triumph. So I just sat there and waited, bringing him sandwiches at work and watching his favourite movies and being very enthusiastic about blow jobs and trying to make him laugh. And one day maybe he just finally got sick of being alone in the dark, and he flicked the lights back on and there I was, still, with this big dumb hopeful smile on my face, and he decided to just go with it. After all, he had gotten so used to looking over to the other side of the couch and seeing me there instead of you, that your shape in his life had slowly started to morph into my shape. He had gotten so used to the sounds I made while I slept, or the way I spread cream cheese on his bagel, or the smell of my shampoo, because really, it wasn't all that different from yours.

Two days later, during breakfast, Jay saw the obituary in the paper. "Oh no," he said. His spoon hovered in mid-air, dripping milk back into the bowl. Jay was obsessed with Fruit Loops. You might not remember this from when you were living together, because Jay said you were never around much during mealtimes. But if I wasn't there to cook for him, Allie, he would have eaten Fruit Loops for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

"What?" I asked. I had already forgotten about the text message. I was drinking coffee and reading *Get Fuzzy*. My obsession, in case you were wondering, is the comics.

"Allison's grandmother died." My coffee suddenly felt very hot in the back of my throat. I put it down and looked at Jay. He seemed genuinely sad. "She was a nice lady. Really nice. She bought us that vase as a wedding present." He pointed to a hunk of glass gathering dust on the shelf above the refrigerator. "It's real crystal."

"That's too bad," I said. "But you know, she was probably old." Then I laughed. It really was an accident—I don't want to seem callous. I'm sure you loved your grandmother very much. But on the page in front of me, Bucky was talking about a book he was writing. It was about a giant white bird that ate people in the park, and he called it *Moby Duck*. It was funny.

"Yeah. Ninety-two." Jay was staring at the picture. "You know something about the women in that family? They all live forever." He paused. "I wonder if Allie's coming home for the funeral."

After the divorce, you had always been "Allison." Still, I kept breathing. "I don't know," I said.

"Of course you don't, Lauren," Jay said absently. I wanted to throw up, but I managed to keep it together for a little bit, at least until Jay left for work. The women in my family all have very weak stomachs, Allie. And now you know something about me, too.

You're probably wondering how, if I was so careful to avoid pieces of you, I could possibly live in your house. It wasn't easy. Mostly I just didn't ask questions. If I did find out the story behind something—a piece of furniture you had picked out, a knick-knack you had found at a garage sale, your favourite book on the shelf, your favourite blanket to curl up under on the couch—I found a way to

get rid of it. Small things, I slipped into the garbage and then offered to take it out. A girl who takes out the garbage! Jay thought he had hit the jackpot. Larger things, I would find a reason to move to the garage, like that chest of drawers you had found at some antique store in Wolfville that I accidentally-on-purpose spilled nail polish on. It was ugly anyway, I'm sure you know that.

Some things, I'm not proud of. One time, Jay left his email open and I saw a message that he had sent you from before the divorce, where he told you about the first time he knew he was in love with you, that time you came over and he had to take a work phone call and when he came back you had fallen asleep on the couch spooning with his Great Dane, Ralph. The next day, while Jay was at work, I put that couch in the back of his truck and drove out to my mom's house on the lake. I dragged the couch out onto the dock and then pushed it over the edge into the water, where the bottom sloped gently for a few feet and then dropped off abruptly into a murky black abyss. Except, the couch didn't quite make it over the drop-off, it just kind of hovered there on the ledge and even though it was October I had to strip down to my underwear and get in the water and push. Finally, it tipped over the brink and I watched it sink, slowly, the cushions ballooning out with lake water. I went back to the city and bought a new couch, a much better couch, so that Jay wouldn't miss the old one. Now when I'm swimming at the lake I picture that couch you spooned on with Ralph somewhere beneath me, half-buried in sludge. I also wonder, in my darker moments, what I might have done had Ralph still been alive.

Jay didn't really seem to notice if I replaced your things with mine. Or maybe he just never said anything. He was like that, he wanted things to be peaceful. But you know, Allie, in the end, it didn't matter. I could have taken every fucking thing out of that house and scrubbed it clean. I could have ripped up the floorboards, torn down the walls, peeled away the insulation, chipped away at the foundation. It wouldn't have made any difference. Everything here reminds me of you.

What I did do, though, was take that vase, the one your dead grandmother gave you on your wedding day, and smash it against the concrete wall behind the garage. It took me two tries because the first time it just cracked, a sliver of white running up the side. The second time, it shattered. I didn't even clean up the pieces. I just left them there, sparkling in the snow.

Halifax felt different with you in it. Maybe just because I was paying closer attention. I wore lipstick to go to the bank. I shovelled off the front steps in three-inch heels. I thought about what I would do if you showed up at the door looking for your vase. I would be in my silk dressing gown and my hair would be curled. I would be casual but gorgeous. "I remember that vase," I'd say. "It was beautiful. I wonder what happened to it?" Then we'd search the house together, and you would see how much nicer everything looked now that you were gone, how I had opened the curtains and let the light in, how I had rearranged the cupboards in the kitchen. You'd pause in the living room next to the pictures I had placed on the mantle: me and Jay at the beach, smiling and sandy and freckled from the sun; me and Jay and Jay's parents out for dinner, Jay's dad with

his arm casually around my shoulders, like I was already part of the family; me and Jay at Rob and Whitney's wedding. (Were you asked to give a reading at their wedding, Allie? Were you even invited? Wasn't Whitney *your* high school friend?) You'd see his face in those pictures, smiling, relaxed, alive, and you'd remember how you'd left him for dead.

I'd offer you tea. You'd decline. You had to get back. Later, on the plane, you'd think about it. What were you getting back to?

I hadn't planned on fucking your husband, just so you know. Sometimes a girl just wants a fancy sandwich. The coffee shop next door to our office had these ones with roasted chicken and red pepper pesto on some kind of crusty bread with seeds in it. I didn't buy one every day or anything, because they were really expensive and I'm just a receptionist at a record label, I'm not a renowned photojournalist and bestselling author such as yourself. You probably don't even look at the prices of sandwiches in restaurants. You probably don't even *order* sandwiches in restaurants.

The point is, Allie, I don't have a lot of money but sometimes I like to treat myself. And Jay always looked so lonely at work. He'd be in his office with his laptop open and he would be furiously typing, I mean his fingers were literally a *blur* over that keyboard, and I would stand in the hall outside his door pretending to water a plant or talk to Valerie, the PR chick—who as you know is the only other person at Robie Street Records who has an office—and just watch him and those crazy fingers flying all over those keys and feel a little weird about it, like I was watching someone washing themselves in the shower or singing along with the radio in their car. I admire that kind of intensity because I don't have it. I'm a receptionist, I already told you.

So, what, then? Usually I would go to this coffee shop next door and sit at a table alone with a copy of *The Coast* and a big giant mug of tea and I would eat one of those fancy sandwiches. It felt sad though, Allie. Like getting dressed up and doing your hair and putting on eye shadow and everything, and then sitting on your couch watching *Friends* reruns. So I bought two sandwiches and two bottles of Orangina, which is my favourite fancy drink to have with fancy sandwiches, and I went back to the office. Valerie was out at some important meeting with some investors and Gerard was in the studio with the band we had just signed that was supposed to be the new hotness, with a singer who sounded like Shirley Bassey and looked like Penelope Cruz and who had been in a commercial for Mic Mac Mall when she was a kid. "I'll be the best dressed girl at school!" she'd said in the commercial, while the hallway of her school turned into a runway and the other kids standing by their lockers turned into paparazzi, snapping pictures and calling her name as she strutted past them in her khakis. Now she just says, "Tell the boys I'm here," like they have been just sitting around waiting for her all day. Which they have, but she doesn't have to know that. They could have been busy with other things.

Well, the point is, Allie, Jay was the only other person in the office. And so I gave him a sandwich. That's all. He seemed kind of annoyed at first but then he asked me to sit down and when he unwrapped it he ran his tongue around

the outside, licking up all the red pepper pesto that was slopping out the sides. When I looked at him he just said, "I don't like my food to be messy," and I fell in love with him right there.

You probably don't want to hear the rest. How one sandwich turned into many sandwiches, turned into Lunch Days every Tuesday and Friday, how we always had the same thing and neither of us ever made a mess and afterwards we would walk down to the store in the basement and we would take turns buying gum—the five-cent kind, with the little comic in it, that loses its flavour after one or two chews. How I would read him the comic out loud in the elevator as we rode back up to Robie Street Records, and I would laugh and laugh and he would stay straight-faced and shake his head at me while I laughed. He was like that. And then, this—

I said, "Okay, Zena dreams she is on a date with Johnny Depp. Johnny Depp says, 'Will I see you pretty soon?' and Zena says, 'What's the matter? Don't you think I'm pretty *now*?' Ha ha! That one's funny. Don't you think it's funny?"

Jay said, "Uh huh."

I said, "Oh, and your fortune says, 'If a tree falls in the forest, get out of the way.'"

Jay said, "That's good advice." And then I said something about how fortunes and advice weren't the same thing, that advice was universal and just good sense whereas fortunes were supposed to give you insight into what was going to happen to specifically you, in the future, and then, while I was somewhere in-between "specifically you" and "in the future," Jay kissed me. Then the elevator doors opened. Then Jay said, "I'm married."

I said, "It's okay." What I meant was, it's okay, you're perfect, no one will ever love you as much as I do.

And that's enough, Allie. Like I said, I'm not a monster.

I decided to wear black, like an appropriate mourner. And not even bombshell black, like I had been planning: tight dress, patent leather heels, large sunglasses, a scarf loosely draped over my hair. You remember. I kept it simple. I buttoned up. I wore flats. I faded into the background.

I sat next to a wide-shouldered, brassy-haired woman in a beige pantsuit who told me she was your second cousin. She brought a cushion to sit on in the wooden pew, and just before the service started she brought out a bag of knitting. "It helps calm my nerves," she whispered to me when I looked at her, but she didn't seem nervous at all. I told her I was a friend of your sister's, and she sniffed in what I assumed was a judgmental kind of way—no offense to you, Allie, but I've heard that Maddie is kind of trashy. I sat in the silent church and waited, listening to the *clack clack* of the knitting needles and secretly begrudging your cousin her seat cushion. I had never been to church before. I didn't realize how uncomfortable the pews could be.

When the funeral started, I watched your family enter and walk down the aisle like it was a wedding—your mom and dad in the front, then some people who I presumed were aunts and uncles and cousins, all in various states of grief, from the wailing woman leaning on your father to the man whispering and

laughing to the child next to him, to your mother, pale and delicate, who allowed one elegant tear to slide down her cheek. Behind the older crowd I spotted Maddie, with some pretty boy on her arm looking itchy and uncomfortable in his suit, and behind them, you.

You were walking with your head down, your hair a golden curtain drawn across your profile. I tried to look at you but I couldn't. My throat closed. Your cousin's knitting needles sped up to match the *clack clack* of my jackhammer of a heart. You turned your head.

Do you remember, Allie, that time we saw each other at the airport? I was on my way back from Edmonton, where I had been visiting my brother and his wife and their new baby, all three of them sleepless and cranky, zombies propelled through their day by coffee and the necessity of clean diapers. I was so grateful to leave I hadn't even washed my hair, and somewhere over Saskatchewan I realized there was baby vomit all over my hoodie. And then I was in Montreal changing planes and the planets aligned and the earth turned on its axis and suddenly I was face to face with you and Jay—him on his way to New York for a conference, you on your way home. It was only a few months before your divorce, nearly a year into my relationship with Jay. You were wearing a grey trench coat even though it was summer, and you pulled a little suitcase on wheels behind you. You looked like you smelled good. You both came toward me. I shifted my weight on my feet and my backpack straps dug into the tops of my shoulders, and Jay and I stared at each other and it felt like the room was spinning around the stillpoint of our stare. We stared and stared for what felt like an hour, people streaming past us from both directions in slow motion, until you touched his arm and broke the spell.

"I'm going to Starbucks," I heard you say. "Do you want anything?" My stomach churned, and all I could think was how could you drink coffee when the world was spinning like that? Then I realized you didn't recognize me, that you didn't even know who I was, that this was just another moment for you, getting off the plane with your husband, it had no significance for you at all, not like your whole life was ending and beginning all at once in that exact minute.

When you turned your head toward me from the aisle during your grandmother's funeral, it was just like that. You looked right through me. And I was a tree falling in the forest.

Timber.

Here's something I could never understand, Allie.

Back in the days before your divorce, Jay would sometimes come over to my apartment and we would order food from the Thai place around the corner and eat out on the balcony overlooking the city. For such a dump, that place had pretty nice views.

One time, Jay decided he wanted to try to make his own Thai food. He bought fish sauce and tamarind paste and made the rice noodles in the microwave because I only had one pot. But he cooked the noodles too long and they turned to mush, and the sauce was too thick and it congealed in our bowls and turned the whole thing into a leaden mess. So we called for takeout, and while we

waited for it to be delivered, we played a game with Jay's noodles where we threw them off the balcony and tried to see who could get them the closest to the chimney of the house below. It was me, in case you were wondering. I flung my noodle and it went right in, as though the chimney had slurped it up, and we laughed about the people who might be in there, quietly reading a book by the fireplace when the noodle splatted down into a cloud of ash.

It was a week later that you found out about us, that slip of the tongue in a phone conversation, followed by the awkward confession. By then, the divorce was already in motion. But still. I can't figure it out. You never called and hung up on me, you never showed up at the office with some lame excuse, never waited outside my building for me to come out. Why didn't you want to know about me, Allie? What kind of woman isn't just a little bit curious about the person who her husband was throwing noodles off of a balcony with?

It was far from the outcome I expected. Even after I left your grandmother's funeral, slipping out past your second cousin while your family was being seated and driving away, I imagined myself turning around, driving back, sitting in my car and waiting around after the funeral was over, and then joining the blue-haired ladies in the church hall for the reception. You'd walk in, dry-eyed but a little bit softened around the edges, a radiant example of dignified sadness. I'd walk over to you. "Allison. We haven't met," I'd say, holding out my hand. "I'm Lauren. I'm so sorry for your loss." You would blink your eyes as recognition set in. The room would suddenly turn freezing cold.

"Lauren," you'd say. You'd remain composed, in front of the funeral guests, your parents, your grandmother's friends. "Nice to meet you," you'd say, even though it really wasn't nice, it was torture, it was like having your hairs plucked out of your head, one by one, then having them matted up and shoved into one of those date squares baked by the Ladies Auxiliary and being forced to eat them—it was just like that. You'd look at me and smile and shake my hand and you'd try not to think about Jay touching my face before he kissed me goodnight, about him coming up behind me in the morning while I was making coffee and ruffling my hair, about him calling me on his cell phone when he left work to tell me about the kid in the parking lot wearing one of his band's t-shirts, about him getting home from work and seeing me in the kitchen—*your* kitchen, Allie—chopping garlic for dinner and not being able to take it and just grabbing me and fucking me right there against the counter with my underwear still clinging to one ankle and the smell of garlic on my fingers. You'd try not to think about it but you would, you'd think about it and think about it until it was the only fucking thought in your brain, until you were blind with rage, until you lost control of your body, gripping me around my throat and choking me, choking me, until your father and your beige-suited second cousin were able to pull you off of me, wrenching your spindly hands from my neck, your claw marks left on my flesh, you still kicking and screaming and spitting in my face as they dragged you out of the room.

You are the one who is supposed to be thinking these things, Allie. You are.

Obviously I didn't turn around. Instead I drove back to work, thinking about the things I always think about: the smell of you in the upholstery of our furniture, your skin sloughed off against the handle of the lawnmower, your invisible handprints all over our walls. When I got back to the office Jay was on a conference call. I sat in the chair opposite his desk and watched him, the way he tapped his pen against the side of his head, the way he leaned back so far in his chair it looked like he was going to tip over. I wished I had brought him a sandwich, a piece of gum, something. Outside the office, I could hear Valerie talking to someone in the lobby, complaining that I hadn't been there to sign for a package. Through the window, a truck rumbled by. Sometime in the next few days, you would get on a plane and fly back to Montreal. And someday I would be able to let you go.

Raoul Fernandes

MELTING GLACIER, BURNING FOREST

Melting glacier, to be honest, I only skimmed your letter.
Rising ocean, I poured all my savings into bad cinema. Gathering storm,
I did not consider the narrative of my coffee beans. I settled
on lazy automatics, I ate the messenger animals.

Calving iceberg, you asked a beautiful question. I faltered.
Fevered sea, my blood thickens with jellyfish. Can I take something for this?
Can I use the heat of this for any practical use? Approaching hurricane,

I am apologizing too late. They kept telling me to stay in the moment.
So here is the moment. I drove a million cars down a million highways
to clear my head. I drove and drove, burning forest, I drove and drove
and drove and drove and drove.

YOU WERE DEPRESSED. THERE WERE MORE BIRDS.

You were depressed. There were more birds
in the yard.

Rising from the chair was difficult. The yard
was overgrown.

The lawnmower was in the shed. The weeds
were flowering.

You couldn't get to the lawnmower. The grass
was as tall as your shoulders.

You were unable to summon the strength. The yard
was audible with insects.

You touched the window pane's glass. The outside world
thrummed with hidden creatures.

You were depressed. There were swallows, finches,
flickers, and wrens.

LIFE WITH TIGERS

A rooftop will do in a town
with no cliffs. A Friday night
with cheap merlot and a cheaper
radio will do. The wind
stirs, faint skunk then honeysuckle.
She tucks her arms and head into
the front of her t-shirt to light
the joint. I picture a cloud of smoke
between her small breasts.
Her shirt, stretched and faded,
says *Save the Tigers* across it. But
there are no more tigers left
on this earth. We smoke on the edge
of the roof, sneakers dangling. Crackling
music from a time and place
we've never been. It will do. The day's
heat still holds to the shingles.
She's lying on her back, looking up,
saving tigers. *Don't tell her* repeats
in my goddamn head. Don't tell her.

BOOKS FOR THE NEW CHILD

A book where a mountain appears overnight next to a village and all the villagers are too afraid to climb it except for the animals and the children.

A book where your father and mother are planets and you are a moon orbiting each of them in turn and sometimes you comet away into space, a slight angle in your trajectory.

A book of the world that existed before you. A man's hat blows off in a gust of wind before you. A woman washes her face in a stream before you. A cat holds a goldfinch in its mouth before you.

A book on how to responsibly operate and maintain your alphabet.

A book that runs on solar power. Or runs on your mother playing the piano in the other room. Or on your own breathing. Or on your own eyes upon the pages.

A book that's folded into an origami crane. You don't want to open it up. No—you want to, but know it would never fold back into the same bird.

A book where no mention is made of money.

A book where the stars are reachable with an ordinary stepladder and the ocean is a postman who comes right up to your front gate and no mention is made of money.

A book about animals that are so kind they do not eat each other and live on sunlight and flowers in a meadow but they are always hungry and the book is small enough to fit in your chest pocket and the book is thick enough to absorb a bullet.

A book that explains the stages of the earth's water cycle in detail and what that teaches us about love.

A book about an elephant that wants to live at the bottom of the ocean and what that teaches us about love.

A dream dictionary that won't ever be read but whose pages are fed into the fireplace through the winter.

A book about you that I'm holding in my hands right now this late evening, pages blank as the moon sailing across the whole length of our window.

SUSPENSION

Playground with interlocking tunnels. Willows worry
their reflections in the frog pond. Small gods throw spheres,
miss as often as they catch. Coins flicker in the fountain bed,
worth exactly the feeling of wishing. Leaves in circulation.
Runners in circulation. A young girl in the shade scratches
at a scratch-n-win. Grown men with dream journals in their
back pockets wander among the birch trees. Dolphin on a spring.
Rabbit on a spring. Swings used in inventive ways. Sweethearts.
A tall woman walks an oracular greyhound. A Beetle-child
hums his way home from his cello lesson. Some bright flapping
memory is caught in a tree and is also an actual thing: a kite.
What happens in real life is absorbed into dream journals.
Flocks of young soccer players, aligning, dispersing. A small
god pops an empty juice box under his sneaker. Another
laughs and shouts *Angel! Angel!* as his dog pulls him
by the leash through a flower bed. Frisbee-sliced air.
Pale moon on a string. A maple drops a leaf into your hair
to get your attention. Ok, sweetheart, you've got it.
Then more leaves drift down toward the earth.

Gwen Hart

ONLY YOU

I'm drawn to the man in the TV commercial
who can't cook a hot dog because he can't
boil water, but now, with a special microwavable
pouch, he can zap as many hot dogs as he wants
and have dinner ready just like that. And the boy who tries
to take out the garbage but the contents spill down
because his mother didn't buy the trash bags
with the diamond-stretch design—he could be my twin.

My mother said I should marry some other man—
someone like the one I'd picked. Any knock-off
brand with similar packaging would do. She didn't understand
how our hands fit together, left no space between
the fingers, and how our voices matched, off-key.
"What good is that?" she said. All this from a woman
who'd get home from the store and realize she'd
bought mild salsa, not red hot, because
she pulled jars off the shelves without looking,
the thing she really wanted always a little bit above
and to the left of what she got.

Anne Trooper-Holbrook

THE TROUBLES OF NORTH LAPORTE

IN SEPTEMBER the alternator goes on North LaPorte's island beater. He gets a two-day suspension from school for drinking behind the gym and learns his girlfriend is seven weeks pregnant. She is only sixteen. They grew up here, chasing sea birds, plucking starfish from the water, stealing onto harbour yachts. There has never been a time that North can remember not being with Francie. But now she wants to keep the baby, and he is avoiding her like a red tide. She emerges into the teeming hallway at school, calling to him, turning heads. "At least talk to me!" She looks small and pale standing there just outside the girls' room. North's eyes shift to the high, prison-like windows, then, in a shot, he is off around the corner.

Like the deer on the island, Francie seems to show up everywhere. He sees her at Harmon's Market in the frozen food section, and ducks down the cereal aisle. After he replaces the alternator in his car and is back on the road, there she is again, hitchhiking into the village. He speeds past and in the rearview mirror catches her giving him the finger, which is something her mother, Jean, would do. Not Francie. He wonders if the pregnancy has changed her. She's always been so sweet. All the badness is in him and he doesn't know how to turn it around. If he could, he'd go back to that day on Madrona Beach and use a condom.

IN OCTOBER North goes to school so hung-over he throws up into the backseat of the superintendent's convertible as he's walking past it in the parking lot. Someone rats him out and the superintendent tells him to go home and not to bother coming back. Ever.

North doesn't really have a place he calls home. He drives down to the ferry landing and sits inside his car. A flock of blue herons are gathered around one of the pylons, like a pack of gossipy teenagers. The Washington State Ferry isn't due in for another hour. Where would he even go once he got to the mainland? How would he ever be able to afford a ticket back?

He turns the car around and drives toward the marina where his father lives on his troller, The Susie Q. His father is probably still passed out after last night's taco eating and beer drinking contest down at Cedar's Saloon. It's the second year in a row that Guy LaPorte has won. North can imagine the smell of The Susie Q right about now, like fish and piss and vomit, and it doesn't seem appealing to him. Even if his father is conscious, he might want to start in drinking for the day, ask North to join him, and North doesn't think he's up for that.

He's always gone to Francie when he feels down. As a kid, on winter nights, he and Guy would stay with Francie and her mother. Francie's father walked out on them when Francie was six, and Guy has been hanging around Jean ever since. When an arctic wind would rattle the cheap pressboard walls of the cabin, and their parents were comatose on her mother's bed, North would stand in

Francie's doorway, and she'd lift her covers and let him in.

As North pulls into his mother's driveway, he thinks he won't really miss school. He's not sure what he wants to do with his life, but he is pretty sure they aren't helping him figure that out at school. He is fascinated with the migration of birds: wintering on the island, following the same route, the Pacific Flyway, back to their arctic breeding grounds in the spring. Geese are his favourite, taking care of one another like family. After they get their new flight feathers, the parents teach their young to fly. North knows endless facts about geese. He keeps a collection of small wooden birds he carved on Francie's windowsill because she likes them there. That is something else he is good at, woodworking. But he doesn't think he can make much of a living out of birds and wood.

When he walks into his mother's house, North learns she has a new boyfriend. Holding one finger to her lips, she points to a man sitting in the living room, his back toward them, and whispers, "We have to keep it down. Cliff is channelling."

Following her into the kitchen, North takes in the familiar scent of candles and sage, which sometimes smells like pot, and maybe is. Minnie has on one of her long shapeless dresses; today's is a dark crimson. Her hair is piled on top of her head into a bun, stuck with what looks like a pair of chopsticks. Tiny wind chimes sway back and forth from her earlobes as she moves around the kitchen. "I was just going to have some tea."

"What is he doing?" North asks, looking over his shoulder toward the living room.

"Communicating with Thoth, an Egyptian god." She takes two china cups down from her cabinet. "Cliff is writing spiritual manuals through Thoth. He's on book four. I'm his assistant."

North sits at the kitchen table. "What do you do?"

"The proofreading, and I take care of Cliff, so he can save his energy to interpret the word of Thoth. It's my higher purpose. I knew it the moment I saw him down at the Angel Food."

North's mother has been trying out different careers since he was a toddler: astrologist, crystal healer, feng shui consultant. She's got the attention span of a fish. Minnie hands North a cup of steaming liquid that looks and smells like mud. He pushes the cup away, and she stares at him as if she has just realized he's in the room. "What are you doing out of school in the middle of the day? Is it a half day?"

"That's right. A half day."

There is a noise coming from the living room, a high-pitched bawling like a dying cow. North looks to his mother.

"He's coming out of his trance."

The bawling grows louder then stops, abruptly. The cow is dead.

In a moment Cliff is in the kitchen, pouring himself some of the muddy drink. He's a squirrel of a man, wearing a fringed buckskin vest and one of those safari-style hats the kayakers wear, only his hat has eagle feathers hanging off it. Silver hair juts out from underneath. "Cliff," Minnie says, "This is North."

Cliff sits down at the table, next to Minnie. "You're beautiful, North." He

smiles, baring yellowed teeth. North notices a scar along Cliff's left cheekbone and wonders if he got it in a bar fight. It makes him look mean.

Taking Cliff's hand, Minnie says, "Cliff is new to the island. He won at blackjack in Las Vegas. He was out of work at the time—"

"Soul searching, Minerva." He has the kind of whiny voice that carries a lifetime of disappointment.

"He won enough money to move up here," Minnie says. "Isn't that lucky? He's always wanted to come to the island."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. Thoth told me to come here. He told me Nettle Island is a landing zone, a hub for souls waiting to be reincarnated." North almost laughs, but Cliff's squirrel eyes are too intense for this to be a joke. "We were all put on this planet for a reason. Do you know what it is you want, North, right at this moment?"

To be anywhere but here, North thinks.

IN NOVEMBER North's car still isn't starting well. He can't find a job and he's convinced that Francie is sleeping with his best friend, Curt McGrath. Curt is a few years older than North, buys North beer and sometimes lets him crash at his painting studio. North hears, through island gossip, that Curt has painted a portrait of Francie and it is hanging in the Blackfish Gallery. After his car sputters and stalls twice, North gets it going and heads straight there. He knows for a fact that Curt sleeps with his models. At the gallery, a tiny old woman, who is a volunteer, leads him to the back room. She points up to a life-size oil painting of Francie, baby-doll pouty lips, eyes that seem to want something, pregnant belly, breasts bigger than they really are and hard nipples pushing against a see-through shawl.

"She looks like a pregnant whore," North says.

"Oh, no, honey," the old woman says. "That would be pornography." She waves her hand through the air. "And this is art."

Later that night, North finds Curt in the parking lot outside The Tipsy Turtle, bums beer off of him, then punches him and takes his truck. He drives past Francie's house but the windows are dark. He heads aimlessly across the island over rutted, loopy roads, slows when he sees Francie's mother's truck at the pull-off on Inlet Road. He knows it's not Jean, because she is down at The Turtle, getting hammered for the night with his dad. Francie often takes the truck when she can't sleep even though she only has her permit. Half the people on the island are driving around illegally one way or the other, in unregistered cars or beaters that haven't passed inspection.

He pulls over. It's almost dawn and he can just make out the shadows of other islands in the distance. By habit, he checks the night sky for the northern lights. The name on his birth certificate is Northernlights LaPorte. His mother's doing, of course. His dad thinks the name is ridiculous. North thinks it is just something else he'll never live up to.

He gets out of Curt's truck and sees Francie sitting on the stonewall looking out across Obstruction Pass. She has on an oversized wool sweater, her belly starting to show now. For a moment he thinks about the baby growing inside

and wonders if it will be a girl or a boy. This baby will be better off looking like Francie with her straight blond hair. His is dark and unruly and he usually squashes it down with a hat.

North walks up to her, hands in his pockets, head lowered.

"What are you doing here?" She sounds bitter. He's not surprised. At the same time, he is. When he does finally meet her eyes, they are as cold as the Puget Sound. She doesn't seem like the same Francie, the girl that has always loved him for reasons he can't figure.

"I was looking for you."

She screws up her face, unconvinced.

"Sorry I haven't been around," he says.

"Haven't been around? Is that all you can say? I haven't seen you in months."

"Fuck. I was stupid scared."

"Stupid is right. You think *you're* scared?"

"I don't know what kind of father I'd be, Francie. Mine didn't give me much to go on." Surprised to hear a quiver in his voice at the mention of his dad, he shifts his weight from one foot to the other, trying to distract himself.

She looks beyond him, noticing something. "Why do you have Curt's truck?"

"I sort of borrowed it. After I beat him up."

She smiles, just a tiny smile, but he takes this opening to sit down beside her.

"I saw that painting he did of you. Are you sleeping with him?"

She rears back. "Is that what you think?"

"Wouldn't blame you if you were."

Francie wraps her arms around herself. "He painted it without my permission."

North wants to press for details but he can see her lips are wobbling.

"I never posed for him," she says. "I don't know why he did it."

She is really crying now. He's not sure if he should put his arm around her, notices she is still wearing the abalone necklace he made for her years ago, thinks this is a good sign.

"I dropped out of school," she says.

"Me too, sort of."

"The kids were so mean to me about the baby." She wipes her nose on the sleeve of her sweater. A cold wind blows up off the sound. "I heard you're with Mary Womack now."

"Who told you that?"

"I just heard it."

"A fuckin' lie. She's not... I can talk to you."

"You haven't talked to me since the day I told you about the baby, and you're not talking very well right now."

He nods his head in agreement.

"Is Curt gonna be alright?"

"Yeah, I guess. I don't give a fuck. I thought...Well... I lost my best friend. I don't mean Curt."

"That what you want? You want to be friends again?"

"Not just friends. I want to be with you. You and..." He nods his head toward her belly. "I know I messed things up, but if you could give me another chance."

"I shouldn't have anything to do with you," she starts crying again. This time he puts his arm around her.

"Did you think I could have an abortion? I couldn't get rid of something that's you and me. Even if I wanted to, it's too late now."

"Don't you want it?"

"Not without you."

He pulls her to him. He's missed the feel of her lips, chapped and dry from a nervous habit she has of chewing on them. Their kissing is soft and shy at first, but then they kiss like lovers who have been away from each other for too long.

"Can we? With the baby?" he asks.

"Where?"

"Curt's truck. He's got a mattress."

"I don't know. I don't want to be in the place where Curt has probably been with twenty other girls."

"Come on," North pleads. "It'll be okay."

It isn't easy in the back of the truck, it's cramped, and North worries he is hurting the baby.

Afterward, they sit on the tailgate, watching the sunrise turn the sea and sky violet like the cheap-looking oil paintings Curt peddles to tourists. They listen to the low honking of brant geese. It's as if no time has passed where they weren't together.

North follows Francie back to her house to make sure she's alright, but when they get there, they want each other again, this time in a bed. He follows her up the long stairs to the small porch that overlooks the sound. When they reach the top they see that Jean and Guy are drunk and sprawled in the doorway, laughing, arms and legs akimbo, a pair of clowns. Francie looks down at the two of them. "Apparently you fell down."

"Apparently we did!" her mom cackles.

"We can't get up," Guy says, bleary-eyed, his sun-weathered face grinning. "Give us a hand would ya?"

North takes Francie's hand instead, and they step over Guy and Jean.

Before they go into Francie's bedroom, she turns to North. "Let's never be like them, okay?"

IN DECEMBER the fuel pump goes on North's car. He gets a job with Olympic Builders and Francie moves in with him at Minnie's. North tries to save money so he and Francie can get a place of their own, but first he has to pay for the new fuel pump and Minnie's electric bill, which is what she is charging him in place of rent. When he comes home tired at night, all he wants to do is watch TV, but Cliff won't let Minnie put the TV on when he's in the house because television lays down synaptic patterns in the brain and promotes violence. On the back of his van he has a bumper sticker that says *Kill Your Television.*

Francie can't find a job, because no one wants to hire a pregnant teenager.

His single bed is too small for them and North offers to sleep on the floor. The one night he drinks with the guys after work, she smells it on him and lectures him about wasting money and how they'll never get out of his mom's house. She is scared because they have nothing for the baby, not even a cradle. When he tries to comfort her, she pushes him away, and he says, "Fuck it all," and rolls to the floor.

Later, he wakes from a dream yelling, "We can't sleep in a car!"

IN JANUARY North's hours at work are cut in half. Since he has some free time he accompanies Francie to one of her doctor's visits. The doctor tells them Francie is anemic and gives them a list of iron-rich foods. The word anemic scares North. He blames Cliff, who won't let them cook meat in the house. He makes some kind of fake meat that has a name that sounds like Satan and smells like something the devil would eat. With his next paycheque, North goes out and buys steak and potatoes and kale. He's never eaten kale, but it is something that is on Francie's list. When he gets home he and Francie have the place to themselves. She makes dinner and lights candles and they eat, as a light snow falls outside. There is no bickering, and he thinks this is what it will be like when they have their own place.

After dinner, they settle on the couch and watch TV, and when Cliff and Minnie get in, Cliff walks straight to the kitchen and yells, "What is going on here? I feel the vibrations of a dead animal."

No one answers him.

"Minerva!" he wails. "My cast iron pan. They've poisoned it!"

Minnie has her eyes on the TV, sucked into the police drama Francie and North have been watching. Cliff stands in the doorway, holding the pan out for her to notice.

"We can run it through the dishwasher, honey," she says.

"For Christ's sake, Minerva, you don't put cast iron in a dishwasher."

He walks to the front door and swings the heavy pan out into the yard. Then he throws open all the windows, letting in the cold damp air, switches off the television and stares at North, every tendon poking out of his neck. "Don't pollute my environment with toxins again."

North looks at Minnie, ignoring Cliff. "Francie hasn't been getting enough to eat. The doctor said so."

"I'm supposed to have more iron, that's all," Francie says.

"Cliff and I cook beautiful meals," Minnie says to North. "She won't eat with us. You're never home, like your father when I was pregnant with you. If Francie is hungry, it's an emotional hunger."

"The hell? I'm out working, not running around like—"

"I'll be okay," Francie says, getting up. "It isn't North's fault."

"If you need iron," Cliff says to Francie. "It could be a manifestation of chakra dysfunction or a lack of self-worth."

"She needs meat, you idiot!" North bucks up off the couch.

"Minerva, there's too much negative energy in this house," Cliff says. Minnie takes Cliff's hand, pats it and makes a cooing noise, like a mother bird.

Trembling, North says to Cliff, "It's not your house."

"North," Minnie says. "My house is Cliff's house. You and Francie are my guests and if—"

"I'm not your... I'm your... the fuck." North grabs his coat by the front door. He hears a plaintive, "North, wait," from Francie, just before he slams out. The light snow has turned to freezing rain. He tries twice to start his car, tires slipping on the ice, finally tearing off, feeling a little bad that he left Francie there, knowing he won't be back.

IN FEBRUARY North moves onto The Susie Q, and Francie moves back in with her mother. North gets drunk every night, and Francie breaks up with him.

IN MARCH North gets so drunk he smashes into the sheriff's car that is parked in the village. He spends a night in jail, gets his license suspended and loses his job.

IN APRIL North gets another job doing detail work at Al's Automotive. Without his license, he has to bum rides off of Lourdes Lopez, a neighbour who works in the village. Lourdes brings her huge Saint Bernard, Wompity, with her wherever she goes. North has to fight him for the passenger seat. Wompity won't move all the way to the back, sitting between the front seats with his jowls resting on North's head, drooling into his hair.

After work, on a rainy afternoon, North hitchhikes to Francie's house. He has flowers for her that he bought at Harmon's. They look a little sickly, but he's never brought her flowers before. She puts them in a vase with water, while he waits outside the door in his muddy boots.

"I miss you, France."

"So?"

"Don't be like that. I know I fucked up. Give me another chance."

"I already did that."

"It'll be the last time. I promise."

"North, you can't do this when we have a baby. Disappear, get drunk, *go to jail*."

"It'll be different when we have our own place."

She folds her arms across her chest. "Get us a place then."

"Right now? Could I come in first?" He smiles, and she finally opens the door. They sit on the couch and in a moment his hand is on her belly, touching softly.

"I think I'm going to have it soon," she says.

He snatches his hand back. "How? I mean, how do you know?"

"I get these contractions. Not the real ones, though."

"Are you scared?"

She nods her head and looks as if she might cry. Seems to cry all the time now.

"I'm afraid you won't be there when I have it. I don't even know if Mom will come. What if something goes wrong?"

"I'll be there," he tells her. "I swear. We'll be a family. A really good family."

Putting her arms around his neck, she is ready to forgive him. They kiss until he gets excited. Then he goes to the fridge and gets a beer out for him and a pop for Francie.

"Do you have to have that?" she asks.

He hands her the pop and sits back down. "It's just one beer. To cool me down."

North is still there when Francie's mom comes home. "LaPorte? What are you doing here?" she yells at him.

"Umm, sitting."

"Yeah, I can see that. Are you with her or not with her?" She's pointing at Francie.

"With her."

"Not in my goddamn house you're not!" She grabs his jacket off the kitchen table and tosses it across the room. It lands on the floor by his feet. "Go on, get the hell out of here."

North gets up, picks his jacket up off the floor.

"Mom—" Francie tries.

"I don't want to hear one word. He's not freeloading off me."

"Why not? Dad does." North says this when he's close enough to the door to escape.

"Oh, really?" Jean—green-eyed, bottle blonde, plunging neckline—cocks a hip. "I'm gettin' some from your dad. So unless you're planning on fucking me too, you better move." North hesitates, Francie looking at him shocked, as if she thinks he is actually considering this.

"I'll call you," he says to Francie, and slips out the door.

From the porch he hears her mom say, "Heh, scared him off. Last time he drinks one of my beers."

Al at Al's Automotive lets North use the garage at night, after work, to build a cradle for the baby. He uses Douglas fir, cuts hearts out at each end of the headboards, sands, stains, and varnishes the wood and surprises Francie with it. She is happier than he has seen her since before they made the baby.

The same night, after he leaves Francie's house, North goes back to the boat to find Guy mending gear, readying The Susie Q for her next fishing season, even though Guy has confessed that this time he's going to be returning from Canada with drugs instead of fish. North is worried sick about it, but Guy needs the extra cash and tries to convince him everything will be alright. They get drunk together and then, sometime around two in the morning, North goes back to Francie's and taps on her bedroom window. When she lets him in, he knocks down all the little wooden birds he made and falls to the floor with a thud.

"Guy's leaving," he says, squinting up at her.

"He always leaves right after the summer beach party. You know that." She stands above him, wearing something silky that drapes over her belly.

"I'm not moving back in with Cliff and Sloth."

"It's Thoth. Come on, get up. We'll figure something out."

He reaches, tries to hold onto her legs, drops back to the floor. "I'm just gonna sleep here, baby."

IN MAY North is already drunk when he attends Nettle Island's beginning of summer beach party. He is supposed to meet Francie. There is a steel drum band playing, a salmon bake, and eight beer kegs. He sees Guy and Jean together. Jean runs across the sand barefoot toward the kegs yelling back over her shoulder to Guy, "Come on, baby! I'm thirsty!"

North walks down to the water at an angle. Pat the pyro has one of his bonfires going. The smells of marijuana and the salmon bake blow across the beach. For a moment, North stands just at the edge of the crowd looking for Francie. He has memories of running around at these parties when they were kids, getting under people's feet, dancing crazy to the live music.

He makes his way to the kegs and drinks till he can barely see. People he has known his whole life come in and out of focus. Lourdes is tossing something in the air for Wompity. The dog buries whatever it is in the sand, lifts his head and glares at North. Cliff is walking up the beach in his buckskin, smoking a fat joint and talking to himself. North wonders for a second where his mother is.

Next thing he knows, he is walking down the beach with Mary Womack and sitting with her in the damp sand. He tries to undo her sundress, but is too drunk. Her hand slides between his legs, and he falls backwards. He can't be sure, but he thinks he sees Francie upside-down, standing on the edge of the fire watching him with Mary. Christ, he thinks, What have I done?

At some point North loses consciousness.

The following morning, Guy fishes North off the beach. North's hair is sticking up, there is sand in his mouth and he stinks. Guy tells him to get in his truck, Francie is having the baby. She is being airlifted by helicopter, because the ferry ran into the landing again, third time this year. North's head is pounding. He leans it against the cool glass of the window.

"Drink some coffee," Guy says, handing him a Styrofoam cup. "You look de-boned there, pal."

"Pull over. I'm gonna hurl."

After he gets back in the truck, North's head clears. "Can you drive any faster? I promised her I'd be with her. She's scared."

"Think she's scared now, wait till she sees all those shitty diapers."

Guy speeds down the road, swerving around the potholes. The motion makes North sick, and they have to pull over again.

By the time they arrive at the airport, the helicopter is just lifting off the ground. North jumps out of the truck but is too weak to run down the runway, and it wouldn't make any difference, she's already gone.

As abrupt as a giant bird of prey, the helicopter sweeps into the sky, passing over the sheltered inlets and moving beyond the islands toward a future that North can't even imagine.

Jasmina Odor

POSTCARD FROM THE ADRIATIC

In the summer of 1992, Ivana and Melita tanned themselves mercilessly. They were young, and uncertain and determined at once. Ivana was naturally darker, olive-skinned and dark-haired, and Melita blue-eyed and freckled, but both burned, peeled, and burned again. That summer, the four hotels of the beach complex Luna on the Dalmatian side of the Adriatic coast were filled with refugees. The girls, though also displaced, were not staying in any of the hotels; they had to walk for over an hour to get to the beach. That it was worth it was a given: the beach stretched for kilometres; it was sand and rock and concrete and forest and picnic tables and waterless swimming pools and endless possibility. They had both turned thirteen that year and had boyfriends, of a sort, who lived in the hotels; these boyfriends were a recent, start-of-summer development. Ivana and her boyfriend Marko would swim out far and hug and grope in the water, or walk off into obscure, wooded parts of the beach, to squeeze each other tightly on a bed of pine needles and inhale the scents of lavender and sweaty, sunned skin. Melita and Johnny had their places too: one, a room with a small window through which the sun shone with the sharply outlined intensity of light seen through a tunnel's opening. The possibilities of the beach were grand.

The girls were cousins; their mothers were sisters. Since the previous fall they had been settled in a small cabin with Ivana's mother and grandmother. Melita's mother was in Austria, scrubbing toilets and polishing armoires, and sending German marks to the cabin's address every month. Ivana's father was on the front, and Melita's father had not existed for her, not as a tangible physical shape, since the beginning of her memory. The cabin was in a tiny factory town on the outskirts of a Dalmatian city; it was the summer house of a distant relative, and the lock on it had needed to be broken. That much the girls did know, but the reason they had ended up here in particular was a gap in their understanding, something vague and complicated. It was one of many things that the adults (either carelessly or deliberately, it was hard to tell), did not explain to them.

At home, seeing their deep reds, Ivana's mother, Mrs. Vela, would say, "Melita, dear. Someone with your complexion can't take that much sun." The name followed by endearment, period, was Mrs. Vela's introduction to chastisement, advice, or lessons: "Ivana, love. Don't create a feast for the ants on the floor." Or, "Melita, honey. The water has to boil before you put the pasta in." Mrs. Vela, dark-skinned naturally, believed the sun healthy only in small doses and hardly ever went to the beach.

On the beach, Melita wore a second-hand bathing suit, a one-piece that connected the top part (aqua-coloured) and the bottom part (black) with a large silver ring, leaving the sides of the stomach and back exposed. Such bathing suits, fashionable in the 1980s, were hardly to be seen any longer in 1992. Ivana had

a bikini passed down from her mother, black with vertical red stripes, too large for Ivana, since the material was stretched and thinning. Her mother had helped her to sew foam into the inside of the cups to avoid transparency. There was a photograph, black and white, of Ivana's mother in this same bikini—reclining on her elbows, wearing large cat's-eye sunglasses and a pursed little smile—that Ivana kept among her things and periodically took out for examination.

Today was an ordinary weekday in early August. The girls lay in their usual spot near the defunct blue water slide, Melita glistening with oil and sweat, Ivana fingering the bikini knots that stuck out from her hips. But when Ivana saw her boyfriend Marko approaching, she did not wave at him with their characteristic exaggerated wave.

"Village boy," Melita said, spotting Marko walking toward them through the wavy haze of the hot sun. She was sweating between her breasts, between her legs, at the back of the knees and neck. She wiped at the sweat with a small towel. "You deaf?" she said to Ivana.

Ivana frowned, without moving. When Marko came up he crouched next to Ivana's legs and ran a finger upward on her thigh, upsetting the bleached fuzzy hairs there. He had thick, curly dark locks that she loved, but at the moment his curious, probing, benevolent brown eyes only irritated her.

"Want to go for a walk?" he said.

"I can't now. Melita was just telling me something important."

He looked silently at her for a few moments, unprepared for refusal. "Going for a walk" was what they did every time they saw each other. He was a muscular and almost stocky boy, and watching him walk away in a moment's time, Ivana was disgusted by his slight bow-leggedness. Melita raised herself up on her elbows and saw that Ivana's chin was trembling.

"Hey," Melita said, and moved Ivana's raised knee back and forth like a swing, "He-ey, hee-eey, heeeeeey."

"Stupid idiot ass," Ivana sniffed out, meaning the boy. She explained: yesterday afternoon she and the boy had been in a little grove of olive trees and low shrubs, when he had put his hand inside her shorts and inside her bathing suit. He tried to pull her shorts down; he put his fingers in places. From where she had lain under him she could see, over a low stone wall, people's thighs and torsos and lazy, curious heads. It made her ashamed—before that it had been all tingly, teasing, fluttering, clothed touching. Though, he had touched her breasts before that afternoon, had kissed the middle of her chest where the ribcage meets and said she had the most phenomenal breasts he had seen on the entire beach. (Melita and Ivana had both already agreed that Ivana's breasts surpassed all standards, so perfectly full and firm were they, and it was Ivana herself who, on a whim of vanity, had offered to take her top off for him.)

Having heard the story, Melita was uncertain. She looked out at a calm, aqua-coloured sea, her view obscured in part by a large male belly a few feet in front of her, then down at her cousin. All day she had been wanting to tell Ivana about the splendid time she had had, also yesterday afternoon, with Johnny, but her enthusiasm now seemed inappropriate. She waited a little while. Then said, trying not to sound overly happy, "Well, it's funny, you know, um, you know

Johnny?"

Ivana said, "Yeah, I know, you probably love him, yeah, I know."

Melita edged closer on her towel and began to whisper. The girls put their towels down on this less glamourous side of the slide because here entry into the sea was slow and the floor of the sea pebbled; just on the other side were rocks, slippery and dangerous with sea urchins, teenagers diving off them constantly. The girls were not the proudest swimmers. The man with the big belly and his wife turned toward the loud static of their whispering and the lady could be heard saying *youth*, in an amicable, indulgent tone.

As Ivana listened to Melita's story, her hand went over her mouth; with her other hand she squeezed Melita's forearm.

Melita said, "So what?" She looked flushed and possibly even smug. Johnny was popular on the beach, even though his face was pockmarked and he had a slight limp. He was older than the girls; he had told them he was nineteen. Why did he have his eye on Melita, skinny and small, definitely less well-breasted? But he did, and it had been clear to Ivana from the day he had walked up to them near this very spot, a long time ago now, at the start of summer.

To prevent herself from tearing up again, Ivana offered to oil Melita's back. The older couple near them was eating apples and arguing a point. "No, no, no," the man was saying emphatically as the woman waved him away. Nothing about them, about the way their body language suggested both intimacy and indifference to each other, helped Ivana understand why Melita had enjoyed herself and she hadn't. Melita's posture was erect as Ivana vigorously rubbed her shoulders.

"A straight back is supposed to make you seem tall, and, you know, dignified," Melita said.

Not this posture, either, nor the way Melita enunciated the word *dignified*, suggested any answers to Ivana. Merely, Melita's finely cut shoulder blades made her think of her mother, how graceful her mother seemed in any ordinary situation. The way she sliced a nectarine in half with a precise and gentle stroke, and seemed to take an eternity eating just the one half, chewing slowly. Ivana didn't consider that eating fruit in the summer was partly a matter of pragmatism for her mother, because a number of fruits were in season and cheap, and others were right there in the cabin's yard: cherries and figs. Mrs. Vela kept herself a fruit slice, a half-sandwich, away from hunger, which had only a little bit to do with keeping a naturally thin and angular figure.

A cloud from some far corner of the sky crept up to the sun and drew a shadow over the girls. They groaned. But the cloud would pass, they knew. They sometimes almost thought that it would never not be summer again. They sometimes felt as if they had been here, in the cabin and on the beach, forever, and that nothing before this needed to be remembered. But on occasion they yearned for their old school friends, scattered in other places, for their neighbourhood and the shadowy urban alleyways and entryways that had been their kingdom: the basketball court, the crumbling and graffittied concrete that bore the names of their first crushes.

To walk home from the beach the girls took a shortcut up the hill, way at

the very end of the civilized part of the beach, where nudists made their home on dark grey sand and weeds flailed in the water. It was a steep footpath, and they were halfway to the top where the highway was when they turned to see a naked man with a hand around his penis, waving to them with his underwear in the other hand. They started to rush to the top, both stubbing their toes, Ivana getting ahead with long strides. They turned once to find him in pursuit. Once on top of the hill, and safe—Ivana having to wait at the top as Melita tried hard to catch up—they stood and watched as he, no longer running, waved wildly and laughed. Ivana was so unnerved by this mysterious laughing cartoon (so he appeared from a distance) that she wanted to tell her mother about him. But Melita made her swear on her grave to never do that.

Taking an oath on a grave was the sort of thing Melita's mother might have said—earnest and overly dramatic. Melita at least had a sense of humour about it. Though Mrs. Vela and Melita's mother were sisters, their blood relation guaranteed only that they would not leave each other behind in a burning building. Melita's mother called on the phone when she could, which was not often. During these conversations, Mrs. Vela would periodically remove the phone receiver from her ear and let it dangle in her hand. The girls, Grandma, everyone had seen her do this. Ivana knew there were things her mother could not bear. When she was ready to leave the supermarket, neither Ivana nor Melita could so much as run back for a bag of chips.

Mrs. Vela's cousin's arrival was the most unexpected, exciting thing their household had seen in weeks. The cabin was in a cul-de-sac at the end of a street and any car coming into the cul-de-sac could not go unnoticed. Mrs. Vela came into the yard to see her cousin unfurl his tall frame from a loud white Golf. The cousin, Darko, was naked to the waist and unshaven, and carried a watermelon under his arm. She knew he had just been at the front (though she didn't know exactly where), and must now be on leave. When she hugged him, Mrs. Vela smelled his sweat and his cigarettes, Walter Wolf. She thought, What has he done with his shirt. Just the sort of thing she had often had to wonder about him.

When the girls returned from the beach, he was at the kitchen table slicing into the watermelon.

"Young ladies!" he nearly bellowed, as they left behind their beach slippers in the hallway.

"You're not being shy, are you?" he said as they stood waiting for a signal from him as to what the appropriate way of greeting might be.

After they had hugged him, loosely, Ivana asked when he had arrived.

"I've been here all afternoon waiting for you princesses to get home."

"Did Dad come with you?"

"Soon, he'll come soon." As he was saying it he was putting the knife to the melon, and seemed already to be thinking of something else.

When Mrs. Vela had the chance to talk to her friends on the phone, she found that their voices sometimes reached her as stark and as startling as scent—so it was now seeing her cousin. His presence was like a car engine idling in an otherwise silent night: she could hardly focus on anything else. They were born a month

apart and were the first grandchildren of the family. There was a family legend told ad nauseum about how Mrs. Vela—Marija—four years old, had abandoned Darko and not let him play with the puppy she had received for her birthday. Darko had locked himself up in the pantry of his parents' house and howled for hours. They were reconciled within the week, but legend of her fickleness and his devotion lived on. The truth was that jealous four-year-old Darko had tried to twist the puppy's leg—a thing no one but she had seen or believed. She could never correct this story later, couldn't muddle it with the truth.

While they ate supper on the terrace at the back of the cabin, Melita was brave enough to ask, "How are things out there?"

"Melita, sweetheart, don't pester," said Mrs. Vela.

"Beautiful, Melita, you just take an interest, that's what I like to see," Darko said, and formed his thumb and forefinger into an "o" as a gesture of excellence. And with that he kept eating his pasta with no further attention to the question. Mrs. Vela could see his suppressed laughter. She found it repulsive how much she and he were beginning to look alike. They both had long faces that looked old before their time—not because they were weathered, exactly, but because of their structure and expressiveness. The two lines under her eyes, where cheekbone met cheek, she had had even as a child. In some of the childhood photographs that had caught her when she was sad, she looked as worn and oppressed as a prisoner of war.

Ivana observed her mother strumming her fingers on the table and humming, tunelessly, a vague melody. Ivana thought it meant she was cheerful. Her mother's moods were familiar but difficult to predict. Grandma beamed a smile at her daughter-in-law and patted her strumming hand. Mrs. Vela beamed one back.

"How long will you stay?" Ivana asked with a glance at her uncle.

"Christ, how curious children are. Aren't you?" He peered at Ivana. Ivana looked to her mother for help, and saw that her mother's face was clouding over.

"But they're not children," she said. "By the age of twelve they're already fully formed. I'm not 'raising' them anymore. At best, I can be a mentor, an—"

"Example," he finished for her, looking at her now and continuing. "Mirror. Guiding light."

"What 'mirror'?" she said. "Shut up."

Ivana then looked at her Grandma, who sat with her hands clasped on her round belly, with eyes closed and a wide smile. What Grandma enjoyed most was sitting silently near other people's conversations—ideally the conversations of people close to her, people she loved. She interjected when peacemaking was warranted; not now, for there was her favourite sound, laughter. Ivana was still looking for clues to help solve her problem, but she found none in her Grandma's squat pumpkin of a body. She found it impossible to imagine that Grandma had ever had anything to do with any of that—as if fifty years ago the methods, the body parts, the brains the body parts were connected to, were all of an entirely different nature.

Since she had started taking walks with the boy, Marko, Ivana had collected a number of things from him—earnest and rather clever love notes written on pages torn out of school notebooks, random postcards and other pictures of

his village in Bosnia (a peasant leaning on his hoe in a field of wheat; a café during the mid-day rush), matchboxes with special meanings, a flower he had made for her out of the paper that lines cigarette packs, a school photograph of himself. Last night she threw some of them in the garbage and felt a creeping exultation—at freedom from this bond? At her own cruelty? What stopped her from destroying all of the things was remembering what he had said when she had taken off her bikini top for him: that her white breasts were scoops of vanilla ice cream and the tanned skin around them a sugar cone.

Uncle Darko, passing Ivana in the hallway on his way out, said to her, "Your mother is in her uncommunicative mode. I'll see you later." He let the door slam behind him. The cabin, which lacked a solid foundation, shook and echoed with the force of it.

Later, the women watched soaps on a small beige-framed television, Grandma with her knitting—a tablecloth with red and white checkers, now that there was no more need for the scarves with red and white checkers that had become her specialty—and Mrs. Vela with her battered copy of *Anna Karenina* that she read and re-read. According to her own definition of herself she was not a person interested in soap operas, and so it was necessary, while sitting in front of a television screen showing *Santa Barbara*, to have the book near—an alibi.

"Mom, did you hear, did you catch what he just said before she slammed the door?" Ivana asked.

"Oh, I wasn't really watching," and then some minutes later, as if guilty, "He said that the experience in the cave changed him and he could never love her again, I think."

Mrs. Vela had first read *Anna Karenina* in Grade 7 and written a book report on it. When would her daughter, her niece, read it? In a few weeks they would be starting Grade 8. At the same school, she hoped, but couldn't be certain; the Swiss relative who owned the house was unhappy with the arrangement and spoke of visiting and sorting things out at the end of summer. She had never spoken to him and news of his displeasure reached her obliquely and with delay. Now Darko was trying to talk to the man—what precise relation the Swiss relative was, Mrs. Vela could not figure out, being unclear on matters of first and second cousins, the degrees of removal. It's possible they had been hasty with breaking the locks on the place. Had they not, she sometimes thought, they may have actually ended up in a better place—it was that possibility that she had begun to daydream about more than about her real home, the apartment she had left behind in a hurry. Since the occupation, it was likely being lived in by someone else. You have to make clear to them that I have no money to pay for living here, she had told Darko. It was he, not her husband on the front, or she herself, who was in charge of contact with the relative. Another thing the girls were not expected to understand.

Santa Barbara was heading for its climactic conclusion. The girls watched unblinkingly, inhaling chocolate candy for sustenance through the drama. Considering first *Santa Barbara*, then *Anna Karenina*, Mrs. Vela thought—all that for the love of a man, the love of a woman, the most ordinary of passions?

"Better than all that passion is closing the balcony door whenever you want

to," she said aloud, and indeed got up to close the door of the terrace. The girls looked at her. It was getting dark out and the mosquitoes would be drawn inside soon; they always closed the terrace door at this time. The word "balcony" belonged to the past, the uniform balconies of the apartment buildings back home. The way Mrs. Vela said "passion," mockingly, made Melita feel sorry for her. Her skinny dark aunt must never have felt the transgression of fingertips on her back, the force of a man's want. Ivana considered the statement and ended up feeling like she had been given a corner piece of a puzzle, the whole picture of which could have been anything—a horse at pasture, a Dutch windmill, a field of violets even.

The show finished and the girls looked sadly let down, their chocolate candy gone and their appetites unquenched. They all sat around subdued but alert, as if something else mildly interesting might yet happen. They listened to the sounds of the neighbour's children returning home and bickering, the other neighbour's late night watering of the garden. That was all. Ivana got up and turned down the television. She was tall for her age, and lean, but had those astonishing breasts. It shocked Mrs. Vela to see her looking so completely formed.

Ivana had not given the boy a picture of herself. There were simply no good ones. The photograph of himself he had lent her for keeping was an official grade school portrait. His mother, unlike hers, had not had time to pack photo albums, and this was one of the few photographs of himself he had left. (Ivana's mother wouldn't have packed the photo albums when they were leaving home, either; but her husband had frightened her by saying, Bring the photos you want to keep, a coat, boots, doctor's records.) Melita, taking the picture from Ivana's hands, said, "He's cute. Look at that cowlick."

"I wish he had nicer teeth," Ivana said, then snatched the picture back, and flicked it into the garbage.

Later, waking up in the night, stifled by heat on the lower bunk of the bed, Ivana tried to remember her dream. She let her head dangle from the mattress and felt a breeze from the large window, heard her grandma's light snoring, and then heard, distantly, her uncle's voice. The door of the bedroom was open. She got out of bed quietly and, realizing her mother and uncle were on the terrace, sat inside the frame of the bedroom door.

"There's as many mosquitoes as that May first weekend," her uncle was saying. "You remember that one?"

"Of course. Like the plague, we kept saying. We couldn't figure it out, there had been no rain."

"The river," he said.

"Lake," she said. "You are mixing it up. He's told me three times he's coming the next week and each time it turned out not to be the truth. What do you think of that?"

Ivana thought there was a pause, then Uncle Darko saying, "You and him, disappearing without warning. All the time. Everyone knew, but you acted as if you had just come back from filling the water bottles at the well pump. I was jealous of how much time you devoted to him, the way you picked up and folded his shirts."

"I did no such thing. Did I? That was another time. Now I daydream about good books. Glasses of wine in a café, long leisurely conversation. A big window with a view, to sit at, alone," she said.

"But when I think of how you had begged me to take you along to places where he would be. When I first introduced you, those precious manners, politeness. Then later, imploring that I get the keys to Grandma's house when she went away. A switch-up from the back seat."

"Oh, that's not true," she said. This bit of story astonished her; she would not have called it begging. But a film, like gauze, seemed to be draped over most of her memories. What she did remember concretely was the chafing of the seats. She was thinking of the way everything was funny then, the mosquitoes were funny, the car breaking down on the way to the lake made for great adventure. As if she had been saying it aloud, she continued, "It must be like that for the girls now."

"I could tell you right now which of the two girls will give you more trouble," he said.

"Why do people talk like that?" she said. "A girl gets to be a certain age and suddenly she becomes collateral. Risky business."

"I am only saying you should take some of the responsibility. She is your responsibility now." Ivana heard a chair scrape and hurried back into bed, promising herself to remember everything in the morning. "She" was Melita, and "he" was Ivana's father.

An overnight rain made mud out of the rust-coloured earth and parts of the gravel roads; the girls kept forgetting to take their sandals off in the house and left red footprints on the white linoleum. Darko collected three buckets of pebbles at the nearest beach and spread them around the perimeter of the house, to keep the rain from splattering dirt onto the white stucco. The sun, which had been direct and insistent for days, now hid and re-emerged from behind large clouds. Mrs. Vela and her cousin stood leaning against the terrace railing and watched older Mrs. Vela in the yard, cleaning the concrete top of the septic tank with a wet broom.

Despite the sloppy earth and the slightly odd look of the crooked line of pebbles, the day carried a neat, new freshness. The leaves of the fig tree, the ripe cherries, the roof of the neighbour's old car, all glistened with raindrops. Darko twirled a row of ammunition and it sounded like a game of marbles. Mrs. Vela held in her hands a bowl of cherries that she would later bring over to the neighbour's.

The girls were flipping a coin to decide if a trip to the beach was worth it. Their uncle snatched the coin, threw it high into the air, and without showing them whether it was heads or tails, said, "Go."

They did. The sea was calm after the rain, and the girls stayed in the water a long time. There was an advantage to being alone: they could climb on each other's shoulders and dive off, swim underwater between each other's legs, eyes open for direction, without embarrassment at their lack of skills. Even so, they had scanned every group of boys, without admitting even to each other that they

were doing so, hoping to see Marko and Johnny. Five days had passed since they last saw the boys and they wanted—well, each a somewhat different thing. Ivana had rescued certain of Marko's mementos from the garbage. Melita had seen her do it but they did not speak of it. Melita did not say what she wanted from Johnny. The girls would often look at each other and then look away.

When the guys spotted them as they were getting out of the water, everyone's enthusiasm at this meeting suggested a joyous, unexpected reunion. Soon, with the girls arranged comfortably but carefully on their towels, the guys smoking cigarettes, they could look left and see the incomprehensible distance of the sea, shapes of mountains so far that they took on the bluish-grey tint of all very distant things. To the right there were run-down but comforting proofs of civilization: the sagging grey hotel, the paved walkway, the now-defunct ice cream cabins.

When it started to rain again, with tiny drops felt seconds apart, Melita stood up, straightened the clip of her bathing suit, and said, "We should swim, it's supposed to be the best while it rains."

Johnny stubbed out his cigarette, lifted her up and ran with her into the sea till the water was past his knees, and threw her in. In the overcast light her kicking limbs looked shiny and unreal to Ivana. Ivana and Marko followed and the four of them then swam for a long time, as far as the other leg of the u shape that the coastline made, and there they got out. They lay stretched out on rocks, quieted by exhaustion. From above, their bodies might have looked like a few loose cards, strewn at different angles to each other.

Johnny said, "One day we'll swim all the way across to the island. Not from here," he added, expecting the girls to be confused, "but from the part out by the camp. I wonder how long it would take us." The persistent rain and the sudden coolness had startled Ivana. For the first time since the start of summer, she thought about its end.

"When we get there we'll take a boat back," Marko said.

"What else is there on the island?" Melita asked.

"Oh, everything," said Johnny. "Fig trees and old folk sitting in front of their houses. A few row boats anchored at the shore." The rain had stopped and they were looking up into a slowly darkening sky. Marko reached out a hand toward Ivana and got the thing closest to it, her left shin. Melita and Johnny got up; Ivana wondered how they had communicated this intention.

"But we have to go back," Ivana said. "It's almost dark. I don't even know how we'll get to the cabin."

"It won't be dark for another hour at least!" Melita said.

"We'll borrow some motorbikes and drive you home. You'll be home before you know it," Johnny said. Marko was silently twirling one of his curls around a forefinger. Ivana felt like her mother at the supermarket: she had to leave right now.

"Uncle Darko will give us grief," she tried.

Johnny laughed. "You're so afraid," he said.

"You don't care," Ivana said, addressing her cousin only. "She's not your mother so you don't care."

"I don't worship her, if that's what you mean," Melita said, blushing.

Ivana was shamed by her own outburst, especially because it had not helped; they were walking away, already holding hands.

"I'm cold," she said. She was also weary, and afraid. "Let's go back to our towels on the other side," she said.

Marko laughed. "They'll be wet anyway."

"Oh, I'm so stupid." Waves could be heard nudging at the rocks beyond their feet, and there were the crickets. Still a few people around too, though so many seemed to have cleared out that Ivana wondered how she hadn't noticed. She wished she was in the hot darkness of her bunk bed. She pulled herself closer to Marko, testing the feel of it. Then she slowly arranged his hands on her body, as if he were a Ken doll and she a Barbie. He let her. She put one of his hands on the back of her neck, the other just above her hip.

"Just like those hills over there," he said, while running a hand over the curve of her hip. It was just how she wanted things to be—warm hugging and pleasant words she could mull over dreamily in her mind. She dipped her head into his neck. She left things up to fate, choosing to trust Marko, Melita, Johnny, all of them; they fell asleep.

In an old-fashioned café and ice cream shop on the main square, Mrs. Vela and her cousin ordered ice cream dishes that were pictured opulent on the menu, but arrived at their table small and melting. Darko asked for a little umbrella for decoration, and the waiter, not caring for the joke, said the state was at war and who had time to care for little umbrellas and other crap. From the café they could see the slippery polished stones of the square, that common postcard image, the imposing building of the National Theatre, and other canopied cafés, nearly empty. The fifteenth-century church was in the farthest corner of their field of vision. It had been months since air raids were heard here and only some mortar damage suggested there ever were any. Mrs. Vela thought Darko looked anxious. She would not have been shocked to see him unravel in some wholly unremarkable way.

"I'd spend my whole budget for the month if I wanted to take the girls out for a play and ice cream afterwards," she said.

"Isn't that a library there?" he said, pointing to a door with a plaque above it on the side of a shorter building next to the theatre.

"Oh, I don't think there are any good plays there anyway."

He continued pointing at the library and said, "Why don't you get your good books there?"

"I—it's only that when I'm there, I can't seem to—I pick up a book, but it is not—I can't seem to find the right book."

"Everything will be alright," he said. She could smell his breath across the table, warm and stale and as familiar as her own. He continued, talking about her husband, "He has that terrible integrity. He carries a picture of Ivana with him everywhere." She could remember her husband leaving the cabin one time last winter during a blackout. He had bathed and showered before heading out and when he leaned in to hug her, the outline of his neck and jaw made him

seem vulnerable and in danger and it was a task for her, then, not to whimper and beg him to stay.

"I could have left him once, do you know? He had been away, two months in London. Before he left we fought, and while away he hardly called. It was a beautiful time. I painted the garage. I read three, four books a week. I easily decided what I would keep and what he could have. I separated everything, so that it would be easy for him to take what was his. Such relief. Ivana was seven, eight maybe. But when he got home he seemed so happy, so enthusiastic to see us. I didn't leave. I could have read everything I ever wanted. Renovated the entire apartment. I could have been somewhere else right now."

He reached over and took her hand, then created a minor scene by leaning over to kiss her mouth. His chair scraped and clanked and people turned to look. She didn't bother wiping her lips. The setting sun shining between walls and canopies and foliage created a pattern on the stone tiles of the square and they both stared at it. He patted the front pocket of his shirt for his wallet, took out a couple of photos, put one back.

"Some of the guys started shaving their heads, but leaving hair at the back, like—like half a Mohawk, see? One guy did it and everyone thought it was a hoot. You think I should do it?" Short of being honest there was nothing she could think of to say to that. On the small photo were young men, naked to the waist, hugging, their faces smudged with tar, smiles wide. They all looked bald, except for one smudge of hair on a guy turned partly sideways. She felt like whimpering, like that terrible winter night during the blackout.

"It's a nasty picture," she said quietly.

"You don't understand what it's like."

"You never sleep," she said. Their ice cream sat in puddles at the bottom of the glass dishes.

He said, again, "It'll work out," and put a hand on her shoulder. "But try looking at ads, just in case, for someone willing to take in a family. If it were just you and Ivana."

The rain started to fall again, drop by slow drop. Her husband had said, "Pack the photo albums."

She tried to make a deal with the same power that made the sunlight tremble on the tiles of the square. As her part of the deal she offered all the small good things she had done in the course of her life and would continue to do. But that was not much; they really were small and she wondered what they added up to.

He put the picture carefully back into his pocket. The waiter passed by their table with a tray of empty glasses.

"That punk wouldn't have talked to me so if I hadn't dressed as a civilian," Darko said. The waiter was at least fifty years old. Darko continued, "I might go across the border. I mean I might volunteer to fight. We're needed."

That was what they were always doing to each other: raising the stakes. She should have played along and said, Yes, well, why don't you. She didn't look at him when he pulled her wrist to him, held it.

Then he let go, stood up, and left the table. She had expected a sudden departure. She counted out bills to pay for the ice cream, while the waiter

watched, hostile and, she thought, intentionally so, as if it were important that she understand his contempt for her. Then it was still afternoon, not late, and she stood just outside the café, could not get on the bus to go back to the cabin. She crossed the square, and continued on. The city had a beautiful core. Hilly, with stone staircases, winding alleys, so much more charm because of the different elevations. Those lovely shutters and balconies. The insides of those tall houses, built in the last century, were stinky with mould; she would never want to live in one. But from where she stood everything looked pretty.

She sat down at another café, this one along the harbour front, and let a man buy her a drink. He was just an ordinary man. They had both sat alone and happened to glance at each other at the same time. She was thin and perpetually stricken-looking, but still it was hardly the first time a man had started talking to her out of the blue. She found herself telling him, I haven't worked in almost a year, that might be the worst thing of all. Sorting cans and underwear at the Red Cross office did not count, not at all. He was older than her, late forties, early fifties maybe, and quite grey. I'm not a healthy man, he said, they wouldn't have let me on the front even if I'd wanted to go. Truth is, he said, I wouldn't have wanted to go. She found she didn't mind his company at all. Before leaving he handed her a number, should she ever need some kind of help. I would never want to go to the front either, she had told him. I would escape in the dead of night as quietly as a hypocrite if I had to.

By the evening she was back at the cabin, and found Darko there. Grandma said, I thought the girls would be home by now. Are they not? They are not. After eight o'clock Grandma walked out to the road outside of the cul-de-sac to wait for them. When it got to be after nine, Darko and Mrs. Vela got into the car, the same white Golf Darko had rolled out of such a long time ago, to look for the girls, see if they might spot them walking back. They knew it was a long walk, and not a pleasant one after dark, and though it was not yet fully dark, the cloudy sky coated the world in a dense blue-greyness. Darko had the windows rolled all the way down and was smoking; a strong and cool wind gushed through the car. Mrs. Vela could hardly have been heard even had she wanted to say something. She thought of how he had said, "She is your responsibility now."

"I've *always* assumed my responsibilities," she shouted at him then in the wind tunnel. He turned to her, but did not hear what she had said. She kept shouting. It's understandable, he thought, that she would shout. She should have been more careful, but he would certainly not say that to her now. She thought, I'm thirty-seven years old and I don't know what I have left to risk in this game: no doubt, though he is trying to appear indifferent, he is waiting for me to move.

Ivana was on the back of a bicycle pedalled by Marko; he was taking her back to the cabin. She didn't know what time it was. Fate had let her down; she didn't know where Melita was either. The boy was pedalling hard. Cars whooshed by them on the highway and Ivana held on tightly. The bike didn't have a night light and the boy had woken up his mother while digging around the hotel room before he finally found a fluorescent-striped pencil case which he attached to a handlebar. There was no telling how useful that was. She could remember

large fluorescent triangles that had been handed out in school to be tacked onto a shirt or jacket for just this kind of purpose, she even knew where in the room they were, under the bed. They were so close in her mind's eye, but that was of absolutely no use now.

The restaurants along the highway were emptied, their terraces covered, only here and there a warm light glowing in the distant interior, a few heads visible near a lamp. When they turned off the highway onto a gravel road, they stopped to rest. Even the bike ride itself felt to Ivana as if it lasted an eternity. They had to do the whole roundabout loop, couldn't take the bike on the shortcut. "You have to ease up on the ribs," the boy said, breathing somewhat hard, because the last stretch had been uphill. Ivana thought she had failed, in some new and unprecedented way. This stretch of gravel would be unlit, she knew, until they reached the factory properties. The unrelieved darkness was like nothing she had known in her town. They walked alongside the bike, trying to open their eyes wide so any subtle light might reach them. The boy stopped keeping up conversation. The bike was not his, he had taken it without permission, and he would have to return it before morning. He would have to clean it too. The air was cool. They were thirsty.

Ivana let the boy take her all the way to the corner near the cabin, at which point she sent him back so as not to risk having her mother see him. He kissed her near the mouth, his parched lips rough on her cheek. She said nothing. She had displaced Melita as easily as a favourite pencil; she was a mother who let herself be amused by a squirrel while her toddler waddled out of sight.

She was turning to go when they saw a white Golf coming toward them from the direction of the main street.

"Go, hurry up," she said to the boy, and he raised himself back up onto the bike seat and started to ride away. In a few moments the car pulled up to Ivana and her mother got out of the passenger side. Staticky dark hair made a halo around her head. She was neither yelling nor swearing. She only stared at Ivana.

"You don't know where Melita is," her mother then said, with finality, in a tone as if she were answering a riddle. They were standing under a lamp, and in its light they could see grasshopper corpses strewn all about their feet. Mrs. Vela looked off in the direction the boy had ridden away. He was still visible in the distance. She called out to him and saw the bike hesitate, then slow down and turn around.

Not long after, they were all sitting on the terrace—Ivana, Mrs. Vela and Darko, and Marko. The older Mrs. Vela retired to bed without a word; Ivana saw only a glimpse of her braided grey hair at the door. Marko was eating a piece of cherry cake, and peeling a fig for himself. He had just explained to her mother about the meals at the hotel: twice a day, fish-beans-stew in rotation. Ivana ate as if it would save her: the cherry cake was soggy and sour, but the figs were delicious. Her mother kept refilling Marko's glass with juice until he said, politely, "Just water, please, if you don't mind," and her mother fetched a bottle of water that was kept chilled in the fridge. He had already finished telling her about where he was from and how they had ended up at the hotel; he had told her all his friends were very nice and that one of them or one of their mothers

was surely bringing Melita home.

Then a car was heard. Ivana's uncle and mother were quick to run to the yard, their steps as if practiced, her mother clutching a fistful of t-shirt at Uncle Darko's back. Jealous of how you picked up his shirts, Ivana remembered. Her throat burned with a sour sweetness. The car stopped and Melita's foot emerged, then a shoulder, then a head that started low and slowly—as if painfully, as if there was something to be gained by delay—straightened itself out. Marko looked at Ivana, kicked her leg under the table. Rolled his eyes as if to say, Look at all the trouble they've caused. She could not stomach him at this table; he could not be this chatty, comfortable boy, and that enamoured eloquent lover, all at the same time. Ivana knew how it looked to the adults: men, and Melita's sleepy eyes, and separate arrivals. The car would have pulled away but her uncle smacked the driver-side window with an open palm, lightly. Perhaps nothing was as terrible to Ivana as the sight of Johnny, disoriented and vaguely frightened, ugly, walking across the yard between her mother and uncle. Ivana thought, Why did stupid Melita not even think to have him drop her off down the street?

But her mother—she was as dark and unpleasantly shocking as the weeds at the bottom of the sea. She made Melita and Johnny sit down at the table too. She pretended to be only miffed by the whole situation. She said, "The lack of public lighting in this town is what really appalls me. You can see how it adds to a mother's worry. Where we're from it would not be tolerated."

Marko said, "You know, I've heard that people have written petitions."

"Yes," Johnny added, finding a hoarse, dull voice. Darko sat perched on the corner of the terrace railing, in army boots and army fatigues, periodically looking at Johnny but not speaking.

Marko said, "I hope you don't mind, but I think I better get back. I have to return the bike before it gets too late. But thank you for the cake, and the juice."

"Of course," Mrs. Vela said. "It was kind of you to borrow the bike and take Ivana. I can just imagine," and here a throaty chuckle escaped her, and she continued, to Ivana's horror, "how she suffocated you on the way. She clings like a crab." And then Ivana's mother rose out of her chair.

"Goodnight then," she said. "Johnny will take you back, won't he? The bike can fit in the back seat. Otherwise we'll take you in our car." Everyone else rose swiftly, and once they wedged the bike in the trunk, not the back seat, the car reversed and turned around slowly, as if trying to be respectful.

Mrs. Vela was frightened. She knew that her sister was a different sort of mother, and Melita had looked so small next to that man, and Mrs. Vela had to wonder how much her niece understood. Perhaps a lot, perhaps only a few pieces disconnected from each other; there was as yet no telling. Her sister lived poorly where she was and there were not even schools nearby. Still, she would fetch Melita if Mrs. Vela said a few right words. They were clearing the table when Ivana said, "I tried to tell her we have to go home." From the way the two of them weren't looking at each other, Mrs. Vela thought this was probably true.

"I wouldn't care if I never saw this place again. There are creeps everywhere and..." Ivana stopped, because Melita was looking at her.

"Ivana," her mother said, dropping the endearment, "how could you have tried to send that boy away, without so much as a glass of water? You—both of you girls," and here her mother took in a small slice of the entire universe with the sweep of her hand, "only want your fun. You only want what you want." And mysteriously, unbelievably, that was all the trouble they got for that night. They were not long in their beds before Mrs. Vela could hear their whispering. She thought, It is a small war between them that will blow over.

Later, Darko said, "I told you which one was trouble, didn't I? Did you notice how old that asshole is?" Melita was already asleep by then, but Ivana, stomach heavy and bloodstream racing with sugar, wasn't.

"I wish you hadn't sat there like a gargoyle. Sizing them up like that." Ivana was amazed to hear the crisp, resonant laughter issuing from these keepers of her destiny.

When the laughter quieted, her uncle said, "Your husband might try to tell you to call your sister."

"I don't intend to tell him. In the event I see him anytime soon. Will I see him anytime soon?"

"*He* is the tree blocking your window view. He doesn't understand you. Being loved in the morning, shunned in the afternoon. But I—"

"He was more like the light inside the room preventing you from seeing what's outside. But you—I don't know what it's like, so you said."

A gust of wind shook the shutters, lifted the tablecloth on the terrace. Ivana worried that she was missing what was being said next. Then she heard Uncle Darko saying, "When you're out there it is... there is something like an intimacy, merely because you're in danger—in danger together. Because otherwise some of these people are just assholes."

"And this?" her mother said.

Ivana tried to line everything up and start over again: she had the best breasts, but Melita was the one in danger of getting pregnant. Her uncle understood this, understood her mother's mysterious moods. But still the puzzle did not become whole. What kind of light was her father? She was ashamed that she could hardly remember anything precise about him. Her mother had once begged for him, and now... But Melita was safe with her. Her mother wouldn't let anyone separate them. She could be kind, her mother; Marko too was kind. Her breasts were scoops of beautiful vanilla ice cream. What if I love Marko, she thought, but then the thought made her nearly sicker than she already was. In the other bed, old Mrs. Vela wept quietly. Later, no one heard younger Mrs. Vela say, while dreaming, Some bastards are living in my house.

Michael Lockett

VAVUNIYA VIA ANURADHAPURA

After the third checkpoint
Ranjit retrieves an *arrack* bottle
from a bag beneath his feet.
The bottle is filled with sand.
He gives it a gentle tap.
A city of ants scurry within.

From a bag beneath my feet
I retrieve an *arrack* bottle.
It's filled with *arrack.*
A terrarium of a different sort.
A latent city. We toast our travel,
our being underway.

Ranjit is a civil engineer.
He tells me about his island.

I learn that Parakramabahu,
a twelfth-century king,
was also a water architect
of unsurpassed greatness:
165 dams, 3910 canals,
2376 minor tanks
and 163 major tanks
over a thirty-year reign.

I listen to readings from the *Dhammapada*'s
twenty-first chapter, the chapter of miscellaneous verse:
there is a curriculum that trains the heart
to bow at the sound of the teacher's approach.

I try to imagine the depth, the tranquility
of eighty-four thousand *yojanas*,
especially the middle four thousand,
the region unaffected by wind or fish.

I am told to avoid the fish roti at V's
because it tastes like compost.

We pass a roadside pitch.
Ranjit tells me his son,
a cricketer of local renown,
hit the morning fast bus
back in the summer of ninety-three.

From calm to clatter to hush in a second,
the tension of glass transferred to travellers.

Half the passengers hid beneath their seats.
The other half had been watching the play,
knew the ball to be a ball.

We reach another checkpoint and wait
and watch dug-dragging battle-dogs
scrap below our window.

I transcribe a billboard advertising a turf accountant,
marvel at the tire store made of tires, list sundries
for sale at the drive-thru blessing-booth—
garlands, incense, compact discs.

Ranjit smuggles a smile my way,
winks, points to his upper lip.

The officer boarding our bus
has a bald spot in his mustache.
Not a scar or a pimple, as though
by design. A nod to asymmetry,
a conflict-zone-single-earring thing.

He points at seven people,
directs them to the exit.

His Sinhalese is smooth then harsh,
like a wave and its break,
or a slug of rum.

Soldiers lead the passengers through
a cobble of corrugate and chicken fence.

The officer exits the bus. We wait
in silence. Two passengers return.
And then two more and then we depart.

K.A. MacKinnon

CHARACTER SKETCH

Name: Xima, short for Joaquima. Call her by her full name at your peril.

I meet her in my first week working on tour with Cirque du Soleil when my supervisor in the admin department hands me a stack of invoices. "Kat, can you take these to Xima?"

I blink at her. "What's Xima?" A man? A woman? A title?

"Office at the end of the hall."

Down the hall, I poke my head into the specified office. "I'm looking for 'Xima'?"

A woman stands up and smiles. "That's me."

Complexion: Olive, warmed with a thousand ochre freckles. Everything about her comes in earth tones.

Eyes: Brown. Chocolate brown. Olive brown. And they crinkle around the edges as she smiles.

Hair: Rust red, silky, shoulder length with loose curls.

"It used to be blond," she tells me one day. "But the rock-and-roll guys I work with, they don' take me serious. So I shave my head."

It grew back darker. I can't picture her blond, but I would love to see a photo of her bald.

Accent: English is her third language after Catalan and Spanish. She has a good grasp of English idiom and slang, but often mangles her conjugations.

Height: 5'11"

She's taller than me, which I find incredibly sexy. And yet I wear heels when I know she's going to be around. I'm the youngest person in the production office, and Xima has such amazing self-confidence—the extra height makes me feel less like a child in her presence.

Age: I am almost 23 and she is 28.

Dress Style: I stand beside Xima at the bar, tongue-tied, and try not to stare. We're at a party in a gay club in Antwerp. The whole circus was invited. The place is a converted warehouse, complete with scantily clad men dancing to the throbbing disco beat in cages suspended from the ceiling. But it's not the dancers I'm staring at.

Xima's style is casual. A little funky. I'm used to seeing her in dark jeans and close-fitting shirts. Sneakers or tall boots. A down-filled ochre vest that suits her

colouring. Sometimes a bandana or big earrings, a long scarf or a hat. Tonight, she's wearing a short black dress and huge silver hoop earrings. Her hair is swept up, her freckles tamed beneath a dusting of foundation. Her eyes are dark and smoky.

My heart pounds in my chest and I realize that if I'm not very, very careful, I could fall in love with her.

Reputation: Superhero.

"I was on the metro in Barcelona. Two guys on the platform, they take the camera from a Japanese tourist," Xima says. We're sitting in the hotel bar after work with half a dozen colleagues, the table between us littered with half-empty glasses. She's not bragging, has to be goaded into telling the story. "So I get off the metro and grab the camera from the guy and give it back to the tourist. The tourist run away and the two guys start yelling at me, so I yell back at them and pretend like I'm calling the police. They run off and I get back on the metro. And the people, they all staring at me. Like I'm crazy." Xima laughs, but there's an undercurrent of anger, still, from the memory. "I got so mad. I yell at them, 'How you just sit there!? What's wrong with you?'"

Occupation: Before she ran away with the circus, Xima worked publicity for huge rock concerts in Spain. Now she's part of the communications department on tour. Xima is a people person.

Used to being two among two hundred in the circus, our first week in Amsterdam is a shock. Xima and I are now two of only six people from the tour in the city. We work out of the head office while all the others are sent home until the tents and trailers arrive. Even I—shy and introverted—feel the loss.

I am Xima's only buffer against the loneliness, and for a week, I have all her attention. It is glorious. We eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner together. We ride the tram together to and from head office. On Saturday, we do our laundry together, and she helps me drag my heavy bag up the steep, narrow Dutch stairs to the laundry room on the second floor.

That evening, we go to the movies together at the Pathé cinema on Vijzelstraat. She buys me a Spa Blauw—still mineral water—at the concession stand, and we take our seats. The movie is called *The Others*, a psychological thriller. The characters are trapped in an old country house, surrounded by fog and by pieces of a puzzle that don't quite fit. The movie is a study in the slow build of tension, and halfway through I glance at Xima to find she has knotted her right hand in the fabric at her collar. Each time the tension ratchets up, her fingers clutch a little tighter.

At this rate, she'll strangle herself before the end of the movie. I lay my hand on her arm. She glances at me and offers a tight smile, but her fingers loosen their death grip. Her left hand comes down over mine, and we both return our attention to the movie.

Well, I try to.

Favourite Food: In my imagination, it's chocolate-covered strawberries.

Part of her job is organizing the circus's premiere parties in every new city—a reception in the entrance tent for local VIPs and an after-party for circus employees at a local club. She forgets to eat when she's stressed, so I make it my job on those days to make sure she eats something. I want to take care of her.

The kitchen makes chocolate-covered strawberries as a treat for Premiere and I track her down at intermission to bring her some. The hug I get in return is more than worth the effort.

Hands: Long-fingered and strong, the backs of them as freckled as her face.

A colleague comes back from London with the most recent season of *Sex and the City* and invites most of the production office to his hotel room to watch it with him. Xima sits cross-legged on his bed and I sit on the floor just beside her. So I can be close to her.

Between episodes, I let my head fall back on the bed, frustrated with myself. Close is not close enough.

"What's wrong?" Xima asks.

"I have a headache," I lie.

She rests her hand on my head, fingers threading through my hair, to massage my scalp. To cure the headache for me.

I go absolutely still, afraid to move, afraid to breathe, in case it breaks the spell.

Favourite Music: Country and Western. Garth Brooks is a particular favourite.

We're standing on the platform at the Bijlmer ArenA station on the outskirts of Amsterdam, shivering in a damp March wind, when this unfortunate fact comes up in conversation. We've just finished work for the day and we're on our way out to dinner to celebrate my birthday. She brought me flowers this morning as a present, a dense bouquet of bright reds and oranges and yellows, cheerful enough to counter the dismal weather. I still clutch the fat bundle of their stems in one hand, unwilling to let them go.

Still... Garth Brooks. I may need to rethink this.

I know already, though, that it's far too late for that.

Sexual Orientation: Straight.

I'm sitting in my dreary brown hotel room, trying to read a book, trying to watch television. It's Sunday, my first day off after that birthday dinner, and I'm spending the day alone.

The phone sits on the bedside table, dingy cream plastic with sharp-edged brown buttons. I have to force myself not to pick up the receiver, not to call and invite her on the boat tour of the canals we talked about as we wandered down the shopping street after dinner, looking into darkened windows at frilly polyester blouses that neither of us would ever wear.

When I can't stand it anymore, I take myself for a walk down the Nieuwendijk, through Dam Square, to distract myself, and to keep myself away

from the telephone. I end up once again staring through the shop windows at those frilly tops.

I know I'm being foolish. I asked her at a club, a couple of weeks ago when we were all out dancing. Under cover of dim light and pounding music I asked her, as casually as I could manage, about her sexuality. And I got my answer. The hopeless answer.

It starts to rain in the afternoon, and I ride the tram back to my hotel instead of walking. I stare out the window, not really seeing the grey streets of a wet March day. This isn't a game anymore. I have to work with her tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. I've had my birthday indulgence, but enough is enough.

A few blocks from the hotel, a jacket emblazoned with Cirque du Soleil's bright logo catches my eye. It's Xima, cycling alongside the tram in the rain like a crazy woman, appearing just then as though my thoughts have conjured her. My chest contracts at the sight of her.

If this were a movie, I think, this would be the beginning of something. The scene runs itself out in my head. She will look up and notice me, I'll get off at the next stop, and we'll walk home through the rain together. And finally I can run my fingers through that hair, finally I can return her touches without fear of betraying myself, finally I can have all her attention, back like it was in that first week in Amsterdam when there were just a few of us.

Somehow, this coincidence should mean we will end up together.

The traffic lights change, and the glow streaking the raindrops on the tram's windows shifts from red to green. Xima turns off the main road at the next intersection, and the tram trundles on along its tracks. I get off at my stop, and walk through the rain to the hotel by myself.

Toni Hiatt

WITCHING HOUR

You always carried a knife in your pocket. Skirts don't have pockets, especially not the kind you wore—dark shapeless things that fell to your ankles—so you hand-stitched squares of whatever scrap fabric you could find to the insides. Secret pockets. The knife's blade was eternally sharp and unfolded quietly from a rosewood handle. It was always with you. You cut bread and spread jelly with that knife, took it on walks through the forest behind our house, slicing fungi from tree trunks, carving circles in the earth to loosen the roots you collected.

I remember once, playing in our yard that overlooks the lake, stalking our mutt-dog—who was then a puppy—trying to make him bite his own tail, and you shelling peas on the back stairs, watching. A dark cloud crossed the sky, came to rest over the sun. I said I was cold and you called me over, opening your knife and placing it in my palm. I must have been very small, because I remember it was so heavy then.

"Hold the knife to the sky, Thea," you said, "and cut the cloud away." So I did. I lifted it to the cobwebs above, to the glowing yolk in the centre, and cut. And this is where—I know—the trance of childhood has warped my memory. Because in this scene the clouds split open, disintegrate just like that. I know that's not what happened. You must have put a sweater on me, I must have played more, too distracted by the lands in my mind to realize time was passing, that eventually a breeze came and blew the clouds away. But that's not how I remember it, I can't help it.

You believed names were the most important things in the world. That day we found our puppy shivering beneath a garbage bin in town, wrapped him in towels and brought him home to tweeze his fleas and bathe him in the kitchen sink, at the end of that day you gave me the task of naming him.

"When you name something, Thea," you said, "you breathe a destiny into it, what it's going to be for the rest of its life, do you understand?" I had just turned five, I remember because the fall algae was blooming on the lake surface and there was leftover birthday cake in the fridge. I recall the task's resonance, how much it weighed on me even at that age. I lay awake in bed for nights, pulse syncopated to my mind's rhythm as it searched, trying to find the perfect name. On those evenings I know you couldn't sleep either. In the dark, still hours of night, when the moon had snuck from the sky but the sun had not yet risen, I heard your travelling footsteps creak from room to room. You rattled doors and drawers of cutlery, though eventually you slipped outside because the creaking stopped. I didn't have to peek out the attic window to know you were in our canoe, crossing the nighttime waters toward the forest, the only place that ever calmed your thoughts.

I settled on the name Blacky, because the dog was mostly black save for a

flopped grey ear and a few light sprinkles around his neck. The morning I made my decision I awoke to the smell of baking bread and nettles, and ran to the kitchen to tell you. You hadn't slept. I know, because there was a pan of rye on the counter which required two rounds of kneading—one every four hours—between sets of rising, and you hadn't even started it when you put me to bed. And there were sacs beneath your eyes, like the plump larvae of the ghost moths that bred in our floorboards. You looked at me with bloodshot whites, eyes void of light though sunbeams splintered across the kitchen.

"That's a terrible name," you said, handing me a slice cut an inch thick on one side, thinning into oblivion on the other. "Didn't you listen to anything I told you, Thea? You've made a big mistake. Take your bread and go." I ran to my attic room, and heaved my bed across the floor to barricade the staircase latch. Just looking at the bread knotted my stomach, and I let it grow brittle on the windowsill (it sat there for many days after) as I shut my eyes and willed myself to disappear. I had failed the most important task I'd ever been given.

It was during a weekend when Dad had come home from the mainland, from the logging camp where he spent weeks sleeping and eating and hauling throngs of felled trees down the mountainside, and it was his gentle knocking that awoke me hours later from a damp, salty sleep. I let him enter my room and lie across my quilt. His cheeks were always rosy then, and he had a thick chestnut beard stretching from ear to ear. His voice was somehow rosier too, lighter, still free from the wear of logger chat-radio and nicotine smoke. His face prickled into mine.

"Are you going to tell me why you're crying?"

So I whispered in his ear what you said. I was so ashamed of failing the task you'd given me that I felt even speaking it aloud would somehow make it worse. After I finished, Dad's brows furrowed and his nostrils flared as if spewing with exhaust. He almost looked like he could hurt me but he didn't.

"You didn't make a mistake, Thea, you didn't do anything wrong. Stay here." He slid out from the attic and shut the latch, his feet pounding down the stairs until he got to you. I pressed my ear to the floorboards. Then I heard his yelling, and your shrieking responses.

"Why wouldn't you just let her pick a name..."

"I'm just trying to..."

"She's a fucking child... what's the matter with you?"

"Go to hell."

This continued, the rise and fall of voices, then hushed, muffled sobs, sobs to whispers and finally,

"I'm sorry... I never wanted..."

"...I'm just worried..."

"I know, I..."

"...Selin..."

I didn't tell you any more of my names after that. But your name was Selin.

You picked me up from my first day of kindergarten, in our rusting Jetta with the missing windshield wipers that was always dying but never quite dead.

I remember because you showed up late and the other children had already squeezed into gumboots and paired off with parents while my teacher handed back crowns made of paper and caked in glitter glue. You appeared in the hallway, eyes darting with uncertainty, face sprinkled with rain, but then you saw me and relaxed.

"Hello, my love," you said. I ran into your arms, strands of your wet hair spooling into mine, your down jacket engulfing me. Your embraces—unlike Dad's bear hugs with their constricting, protective heaviness, or Blacky's pounces of overwhelmed affection—felt fragile. Like a pressed flower or a hornet's nest, I was scared of breaking you.

Some of the parents—mostly fathers but some mothers too—stared, which happened sometimes. I didn't realize it but you must have looked younger, only in your late twenties, and even then appearing youthful for your age. A pale, unmarred complexion, heart-shaped face carved out by pouty lips, camel lashes and untamed brows.

While you greeted my teacher—smiling meekly, speaking softly—one of my classmates sauntered over. I forget his name, but I remember the crown he wore, diamond cut-outs lined in icy-blue glitter.

"Thea," he giggled, "is your mom a witch?" *Witch*. The term conjured images of cannibals and crones, old women with warts and missing teeth, shedding snakeskin as they limped about. What made him say that? Was it your laugh, soft and resonant like the first thaw of water babbling over pebbles? Your clothes? You disappeared beneath billows of kaleidoscopic scarf, a puffy orange jacket and my father's sweatshirts, bright and vibrant against the other mothers in trench coats and blazers cut to showcase certain curves and hide others. Or was it your hair? (At the time I still called it by that name, *hair*.) The black tangles tumbled effortlessly to your waist, standing out like a scorched tree in a thicket of school mom haircuts, of roots streaked and bangs blunted. You were always fidgeting with your hair, running your fingers through it, twisting it, clipping it into a swirl on top of your head, then releasing it moments later, always complaining, "It's so heavy, it weighs me down, but... I love it still." Rinse, repeat.

A combination of all these features perhaps did make you magical, but that you were a witch, the thought had never occurred to me before.

"No!" I yelled at the boy. I was so upset I knocked the crown from his head. It crumpled to the floor, leaving a smear of not-yet-dried glitter on the tiles. He smiled and picked it up.

"I don't believe you."

I told you on the ride back home what he said and you laughed.

"A witch?"

"Yes."

"Well that's not so bad is it?"

I didn't know.

It's a twenty-minute paddle to the forest behind our house. In summer and fall, in the weeks after the first algal bloom, the water is clear. The bottom is visible, flecks of minerals glitter like daggers in the silty floor and slimy weeds shoot up

and fan out like fingers. After summer the weeds die, disintegrate to particles and sink to the bottom, and so the water clouds again.

Most days I went with you, crouched on the floor of our yellow canoe as you paddled. On a windless day the lake was so still it appeared we were crossing the sky. You hummed songs to the beats of your strokes, always the same group of melodies, though I'll never know the words because you never sang them. They were the same songs—I'm certain—that haunted you on nights you paced our house.

A few metres from the forest shore the water grew shallow and the canoe became wedged in mud. You slid off your shoes and skirt and plunged into the water, ivory legs reflecting like spilled milk on the lake surface. Stumbling along, you clutched the canoe's rope with one fist, dragging us as your other hand probed the air for balance. Finally ashore we flipped the boat, and you cinched your skirt back on but left your shoes tucked beneath the yellow wood. The forest floor was soft enough, you said, to walk barefoot. Floury earth, moss and hemlock needles carpeted the trails, and you knew all the danger spots, where upturned roots threatened to trip and patches of stinging nettle and devil's club waited to ensnare loose clothing and prickle ankles.

Here is where we played our games.

"What is my name?" you said, holding up a fallen leaf or a handful of dry needles or a twig with some berries. I'd answer. Things like Juniper, Yew, Choke Cherry, and so on.

The forest is also where you taught me to listen.

"Shhh, Thea, be silent with me. Can't you hear it?" From miles away, the sound of a hummingbird's zoom, a crow's glottal click, or a robin's trilling.

"I can't."

"It's because you're not listening. Close your eyes." I obeyed. I shut my lids so the world disappeared and soon the memory of my surroundings faded too. I lost sense of where the house and lake were, where the horizon ended and sky began, and how much space lay between our bodies. There was only darkness in my mind, and soon my ears peeled from my skull and journeyed, listening to the sounds of rodents scampering along branches, or the pinprick ripples of the lake. Even fainter still, in the depths of the forest, the songbird cried.

But I didn't always go to the forest with you. Some days I watched a shadow—like a freak storm—crawl across your face, transforming you instantly to someone else.

"I don't want to be around you today," you'd say, your voice faint and cold. I cried. I collapsed to my knees and wrapped my arms around your ankles, begging for you to take me. "You're being a brat and I don't want to have a bratty daughter today."

So you made me promise I'd stay put in the yard. I was told to sit cross-legged on the damp ground, while you took out your knife and notched a ring in the earth around me.

"Stay in the circle."

Some days, the circle was big and I could take running leaps from one end

to the other. Other days, when you were especially cross—when I was especially bratty—I had to huddle in a ball just to stay in the perimeter. You said the circle was magic and as long as I stayed inside, nothing could hurt me or get me. I bawled, I shrieked at the top of my voice, watching you clamber into the canoe, hearing your hum traverse the water. I tore out the grass, pulled at my hair and lashes, and hated you. I hated you, but I stayed put. Even though some days hunger pains contorted my stomach, or rain tore from the sky and turned my bones to ice, or my bladder was so full I felt nauseous, and had to pee right there on the grass where I sat. Sometimes it even happened when we were in the forest. The shadow crossed your face and you shrieked at me to stop following you, and said to wait below a tree or on the edge of the path.

"There are monsters in the woods and if you leave they'll find you and eat you. Stay in the circle and learn to be quiet." So I waited. I listened to trees groan and leaves crunch, the noises filtering through my fear into hooves of monsters, hungry panting. I began to think my classmate was right, that inside you dwelled a witch.

And this is where—I remember—the magic worked. After long affairs of crying, something happened. Like I had fought my way through a dark web, and burst out on the other side. A spell. A shift. My fear and loneliness and hatred of you subsided. My aching belly and thirst were gone, replaced by a feeling like floating, like filling up with helium. I no longer cared how long I had been waiting. A deep sense of peace washed over me, and with docility I surrendered.

Eventually you returned and freed me. Sometimes as the witch, other times as you, my mother, your smile mild and serene. And it didn't matter who you were, because I always let you take me home, slurped your soup, let your fingers fold me into bed and smiled as your kiss grazed my cheek.

Part of the magic of your circles was this: they taught me quietness. My brain, after so many hours of fighting, switched off—I could not speak. My voice did eventually return when I was finally granted escape from your circles, but every time took longer than the last. And when it did come back, it was always a bit stunted, always smaller than before. After some time I saw your circles carved everywhere, floating inches above my head. Like our canoe through mud, I dragged them with me.

It was on a day you left me locked at home in a circle, a few months after the naming of Blacky, that I named something again, your hair. It must have been early winter because the days are always shorter then, and the sun had set by the time you returned from the forest. I sat in my circle playing fetch with Blacky, tossing an old soup bone across the yard for him to retrieve. The increasing darkness and Blacky's refusal to willingly return to me made the game challenging. With the bone lodged in his mouth, he took to scrambling across the lawn toward the lake, to splash in the edges and drag his nose through washed-up weeds. When you arrived I was calling for him, and didn't even notice the boat pull up in the darkness until the sound of pebbles grated beneath its belly. Your silhouette glided along the shore in my direction. Even from a distance I could see the thing in your hair, a small chalky oval, glowing like an embryonic

moon in the dusk.

"Look, my love, I found a treasure," you said, reaching to your head and floating the object in front of me. It was a hollowed songbird egg, intact except for a chip in the top where a small beak would have broken through and squeezed its sticky body out into the world. The naming wasn't intentional; it just sort of slipped out (inside my head of course). Nest. As I said the word, one-by-one the letters materialized across my blank mind, then transformed to a vision of you alone in the forest, hair spilling from your skull at river speed in all directions. Clouds of birds swooped from the sky, burying themselves and their eggs in it, your nest. It was only after the naming—I'm sure of it—that I saw the change in your strands. Their buoyancy dissipating as they grew brittle and twig-like, the shine dulled from their surface.

By daylight the egg was white-blue with grainy flecks at its base. It only emitted its altered glow after sundown; though it was never quite as bright as that first night I saw it. We placed it on the mantel—alongside other found feathers, tiny bones, and musty leaves from years gone by—where it sat until the day it broke.

You showed me your belly in late February—I'm certain—because the warblers had returned from the South and were crooning outside, and melting snow beaded from pine cones, drum-rolling the earth. I lay in the attic with Blacky curled at my feet, swirling oil pastels in a book with my fingers. I had the coloured sticks lined up on my windowsill: *baby blue*, *butter yellow*, *holly-berry red*. Wood rattled as your feet ascended the stairs below and seconds later you floated through my floor and sat down beside me. You let down your nest, and cinched up your shirt with your hair clip just above your belly button.

"Thea, I have a surprise. Come place your hand on my tummy." Clutching my hands in yours, you guided us to your belly—warmer, softer than usual—pouched above your skirt. Red pastel coated my fingertips, leaving faint streaks on your belly and we both laughed. Seconds passed. I grew restless.

"Just wait, be patient," you cooed. So I did. Minutes later I felt a thing, like the beat of a wing inside you. A foot. "Darling, that's a baby. Soon you'll be an older sister."

"A baby?" I whispered.

"Yes."

"What'll you name it?"

"I'm not sure yet. But the name will come. It'll come to me one day when I'm walking in the forest."

"Is that what happened with me?"

"Yes."

"Why is my name Thea?" I asked you often, selfishly, because I loved hearing the answer.

"Because you are a gift, and a reminder that life is a gift."

Before I came along, you said, your life was different. You moved around making friends, falling in love, charming your way into towns you visited, but you never

stayed. You couldn't. You were plagued by a restlessness that never settled, a deep heaviness that always caught up, weighing on you and telling you to keep moving. Then you met Dad, and discovered soon after that I was coming. I was the gift you needed, a reason to stay put.

"Before you, Thea," you'd sometimes say, clutching me to you, petting me with slender fingers, your bird-bone touch, "I was sad. There was so much darkness in my life, but you brought me light."

Soon meant five and a half months, twenty-four weeks, or one hundred and sixty-seven days until the baby came. I know because I counted that number aloud as we gathered pebbles along the shore. It was an exercise my teacher had given me to encourage speaking in class. *Count things, vocalize.* We placed one hundred and twenty-one stones in a pail—one for each passing day—and set the collection on the mantle. Each morning at breakfast you made me select a pebble, then run to the shore to cast it in the water. One hundred sixty-seven days till the baby comes... one hundred sixty-three... one hundred sixty...

With the baby on its way, Dad tried coming home more often, almost every weekend, but back-and-forth journeys are long and he was always tired when he arrived. And he brought accusations, his argument always the same.

"You look worn..."

"I'm fine... just tiredness."

"Selin..."

He said you were pale, that you weren't eating enough, and brought bottles of vitamins, tinctures and oils, even threatened you with the doctor's office. These comments started the real fighting, and for hours the two of you tore at each other's throats like wolves, barking insults that shook the whole house. He got angry about things like Blacky's fleas, the dust coating the walls, the mothballs still yet to be placed in the floors. Your responses were always the same.

"You try staying here day after day and see what it's like."

But nights Dad came home were also a feast: baked vegetables from the garden, nettle teas and chanterelles soaked in wine and cream, barley soups or tomato bisques, crisp loaves of rosemary bread, sponge cakes dripping with honey. A spell fell over me as I watched you prepare these meals. The careful incisions with which your knife traced out pasta and sliced, diced onions, garlic, and squash. Floating on your elf feet, cradling your dough and raw ingredients as if they were the child swelling in your stomach. At the end of an evening, Dad poured himself a glass of wine, stoked the fireplace and brought out his fiddle, a battered cherry relic of a thing. You would sing with a wavering water voice that flowed through the house, mending the cracks and dissipating the dust. Your face gleamed with so much light when you sang, and Dad stared at you like you were a shrine, the most beautiful thing in the world. And you were.

"Do you worry about your mother?" Dad asked one night as he tucked me into bed. I shook my head no. By this time it was late spring. Almost a full year of school had passed, and I had developed a full-on speech impediment, though no one really knew what to name it. At first—my teachers thought—the beginnings

of a stutter. They placed me in noon-hour classes with other children, those who were slow readers, or bad listeners, and asked me to say words off recipe cards displaying awful stick drawings. *Dog, Car, Egg.* But it wasn't a stutter. It waxed and waned over courses of weeks between adequate dialogue to complete muteness. With polarities so severe, what could they possibly call it?

I remember these months because a single crease had formed across Dad's forehead, half an inch above and parallel to his brows. It never went away, and was the first of many furrows which spread along his skin like roots below ground; your lasting, continuous mark on him. The heaviness which ran through you ran through him, and left furrows and frown lines, skin receding into scalp, causing his hair to thin, to grey, and years later, to disappear. If my curse was my circles then my father's was his lines, though not all creases were cursed. There were other markings—fainter, but still there, yes—Dad's dimples deepening with his smile, or the crow's feet rimming his eyes, which twinkled to your songs, your kisses, and liquid laugh.

"Take care of each other," he would say, when he had to leave again, pulling us both into a whiskery bear-hug. He seemed pained, even worried, whenever he left, always returning with more lines, more lines.

One hundred thirty stones... one hundred twenty-seven... one hundred twenty-one...

At first it was only your stomach that changed. But even I began to notice shifts in the following weeks, a slow disintegration as spring trickled into summer. The sag in your face, skin weighing off cheekbones and chin as tree buds burst and coated the air in nectar sweetness. Your fair glow faded, soon accompanied by dark patches forming below your eyes, souvenirs from the night that didn't go away. Though your stomach ballooned, the rest of you diminished, as if life drained from all corners of your body only to pool in the centre. The bones in your fingers and elbows became jagged and defined. You wilted even further into your billowing clothes, and your wiry nest left fallen threads throughout the house. You fidgeted with it more. Up and down, balling it in your fists, swishing it like a fly from your face. You forgot to pick me up from school and forgot to feed the dog. And you cried and cried, continuing during those strange dark hours to wander the house, a witch possessed. Some mornings you never woke from the spell, sleepwalking into the day.

One morning, I skipped into the kitchen to find you beneath the window, brittle legs curled and shivering on the cold stone, staring out at the lake with an unfocused gaze. The kettle whistled but you didn't flinch or get up. I tried to speak, but my words caught in my throat as they often did in those days. A circle hovered above me, so I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and willed it to disappear.

"M-mama!" You clutched your belly, lips opening and closing, muttering words I'll never know. The kettle cried louder, and rattled as flames flared and water spilled over its edges. You turned to me, but like you could see right through me, like I was a ghost, your eyes didn't settle.

"S-Selin!"

"Oh." You got up, twisted the element.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Thea, I'm listening to the birds. Go outside."

I didn't want to. Instead I knelt down beside you, and listened like you taught me. I left my body and entered that dark world where there was only sound. But I couldn't hear the birds, not even a little bit.

I began to loathe the thing inside of you, the way it made you vanish even when you were right in front of me, and the mornings I had to show you my pebble and throw it in the lake with brute force. It occurred to me that perhaps in your stomach wasn't a child at all, but the witch you sometimes were, taking over your insides. Dad brought you to the doctors who gave you pills for sleeping and to make you smile again. I remember them because there were three, and I lined them up on the counter for you. *Electric blue, neon yellow, fire engine red.* But you only swallowed the medicine when he was home.

"It's poison," you said, and on the mornings he left for camp you made me play a game of slipping the pills into my pastel box, into the slots with matching shades. Still, the night grew silent. I stopped hearing your footsteps creep.

Ninety stones and the dog left. Dad was on the mainland and you had gone to the forest to think of names alone. I watched it happen, watched Blacky approach the gate, sniffing then pawing it slowly open, revealing our gravel drive and beyond that, the road into town. You hadn't closed it. For a moment he froze and looked up at me (he had the soup bone in his mouth), then bounded swiftly away.

I couldn't do anything; my circle was small that day.

The next thing to go was your nest, as you glided back from the forest on the afternoon I threw my eighty-second stone. The day was bright and hot, I remember because you had dressed me in a thick wool sweater with overalls beneath, and a heat rash coated my skin for days after. Your body—a distant shadow lined in sunlight—for a moment ceased dipping the paddle into water and laid it across the canoe. You raised something shiny to the sky. The sun reflecting on the knife's blade—even from where I sat—burned my eyes. I had to look away, though only for a moment, and when I looked back your nest was gone.

"Hello, my love," you said, smiling, as you skidded onto the land. The blade peeked out from the top of your skirt.

Like the bread you cut, your nest was hacked off in crooked fashion. The left side rested on your shoulder while the right frayed behind your ear. The next day you took scissors to it and softened the ends.

"Much better."

Dad came home and he sprouted a few new lines but you said it was fine. "I feel lighter now, that's all."

I didn't want the baby to come. I thought perhaps if I stopped throwing stones, it wouldn't. On the June morning of my sixty-sixth stone, I didn't throw it. Instead I took the songbird egg. Approaching the lake, I crushed the egg in my palms and sprinkled it along the water, then closed my eyes and silently named my last name. The letters flipped like shutters across my mind. Though the broken egg had been planned, the name wasn't—it just happened. The only name I could ever call this baby. A word you had taught me.

Mistake. Mistakemistakemistake. It was the last thing I named, but the first destiny to come full circle. Eggshell shards floated on the surface, so I sprinkled sand over them, waited for them to sink, then ran back inside.

The next day was the last day of school and Dad was off for a week to take us camping. He gathered me at noon from kindergarten and on the way home we stopped for ice cream. It was so hot in the car, even with every window rolled down, and chocolate-mint slop drizzled down my hands. I was sticky and happy and I hummed in my head as we drove because the car radio had stopped working months before. The song was—I think—a song you'd hummed in our canoe rides, but that may not be true, it may have only been a nursery rhyme from school.

We bumped down our winding driveway, parked beside the house. Dad took his axe from the trunk and said he was going to chop some wood, and told me to go find you. I was so excited because I had my report card, a manila envelope—soggy and mint-scented, the top corner bent—and wanted to show you. I ran into the house and the kitchen air stung my throat and eyes. From its sides, the oven spewed black smoke, so I tried calling for you but my voice was feeble that day and you were nowhere to be seen. I tilted the oven door open as more blackness poured out, scalding my face. I couldn't breathe or see anything. Shutting the door, I stood on my tiptoes with eyes clamped shut and reached for a switch I knew was there, on the oven, somewhere. I couldn't find it so I ran back outside. Dad was strolling to the house, a stack of logs in his arms, but he dropped them when he saw me, when he saw smoke curling from the windows. He jogged into the kitchen, flicked off the oven and ran outside with the smoking pan of burnt bread. I followed him, watched him cast it into the lake, watched its ashes spread across the water.

"Selin!"

Then he saw your footprints, your bare toes in the mud, a scattered, staggered pattern—like diagrams to a ballroom dance—big toes touching, skipping, hopping, a foot sloshed to the side. There was blood too, tiny sprinkles at first, turning to splotches as your feet danced along, and we saw you in the distance, knees sunk in water, facing the forest across the lake. You were crying. Dad ran ahead. He pried your limbs from the lake, and you collapsed in his arms, wailing, screaming. Where you had been kneeling was a pool of darker water, a thick stripe that snaked outwards, each algae bloom in its path tinted red. Your skin was white, your lids fluttering open, shut, as your blueing lips searched for words.

"My baby, my baby," was all you could say, between moans and shaking. Dad turned to me, his eyes wide, forehead fragmenting into a million creases.

"Run home and call an ambulance and tell them to come here, right now, do you understand, Thea?" I did as he said, bolted back to the house and dialled 9-1-1, but delayed the operator when she answered.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency? Hello? ...hello?"

It took all my concentration to finally blurt out, after some moments, "My mother."

After that, Dad stayed home for the next few weeks. He fried my eggs in the morning, weeded the garden, and folded our laundry. You didn't make bread, and didn't sing, and you didn't paddle the canoe to the forest or leave the house. You spent your days gazing out the window. The ghost moths finally hatched, and their white wings escaped from every floorboard crack. In the evening, clouds of them thrashed their paper bodies against the light bulbs like they couldn't help it. We kept the kitchen lights on through the night, because as soon as we flicked them off the moths scattered in the dark, and we awoke with their crumpled wings in our hair and clothes. Dad yelled at you for lying about laying out the mothballs like you said you had.

"I forgot," you said. It was the first time you smiled in weeks.

The next name to become its destiny was your nest. Clumps of it washed ashore and the songbirds pecked at it. For the rest of summer I spotted bits of it patched in their homes like black downing, cemented in the twigs and mud.

And finally, the first name I ever named. We received a phone call. Blacky had been hit and killed one night by a truck coming down the highway. His coat blended into the darkness so well, the driver hadn't seen him in time to stop.

The last night I saw you, I awoke to the sound of your footsteps. In the dead of night I heard the door creak as you pattered outside. I didn't have to watch you get into the canoe, but I did. Watched it drift across the water till I couldn't see you anymore. Three colours were missing from my pastel box that morning, and we found the yellow canoe floating upside-down in the weeds near the other side of the lake. Dad and the police searched the water, thinking you had fallen asleep and toppled in. They searched the forest too but never found your body or any footprints, though months later when the algae cleared I spotted your knife glimmering at the bottom of the lake, unfolded and half-buried in silt. You had freed yourself from it.

I bring the knife on walks through the forest where I use it to slice fungi from trees and loosen roots from the earth. Sometimes I stop walking, sit, and close my eyes and travel to a dark place where I lose myself in sound. The forest is laughing.

Emily Tuszynska

THE BONESUIT

Beneath his skin's thin cloth
his own bones guide me.
Over a white-sponged base

I smudge two black rectangles,
rounding them up to the brow rim,
out to the eye socket's arch—

then rub shadow into the temples
and beneath the cheekbones' slope.
Leaning close, I grease-pencil

fractures onto his forehead
and bared teeth over his lips.
When I stand him to the dark

glass of the window, his image
blurs enough to look like
the real thing—gaunt death's grin

on his soft, solemn face.
I'm there too, hesitant shade
touching his shoulder. Black deep

in the reflected hollows of our eyes.
Leaves of the backyard holly
stirring in that blackness.

What is this wilderness
we carry? Something more
than death. Of which death

is only a part. A world, lost
in a swarm of stars.
World he goes out into, this boy

whose time and space of living
overlap my own. Walking
from one lit door to the next,

bells ringing, voices and footfalls
twining through shadow.
Turning at last toward home,

his bag grown heavy
with sweetness. He comes
back into these familiar rooms

to shuck bright wrappers and eat,
wiping his lips on his black,
boned sleeve until the cloth

glows faintly with paint
and, in the lamplight,
his own warm mouth emerges.

THE WAY IT BEGAN

At the end of our walking there was a ghost town,
though there was nothing left really, just a curious

geometry to the forest. Soil had laid itself down over everything
but each tree with its spare garland of leaves

was a breath, a spirit hovering. The grass was vibrating
in the wind coursing down from the ridge, the light

was humming with what went out from that place.
An invisible engine seemed to churn the air between us.

Everything was in motion there—spangled, dancing—
a low thrumming I could feel in the ground...

I reached for you then—didn't I? Wasn't that the way it began?

Mark Parlette

AFTER

After rain, birdsong. Birds in the trees,
in the wet grass, filching worms and insects

from damp earth. After love, terror in its small shapes,
calling out from air vents, from

the pages of unopened books, from the pockets
of pants hanging in the closet. Then, after terror,

forgetfulness. The neighbour's dog barking
through fence slats

at the birds, at the sky and the grass—
the same sharp noise cast like light

across each shape, into each passage,
telling itself like a story, receiving itself

like an immaculately dressed
and desperate audience.

Michael LaPointe

FLIGHT SIMULATOR

Angelo could not find his past. He felt it hadn't occurred, like a dream that goes running out into the day. To his surprise, many of his friends, even those who boasted sharp and flexible minds, complained of a similar absence. Obvious memories eluded them, things that should be important. Angelo and his friends were alike in that they were young and living in the city and not broke, and so he thought perhaps these characteristics were at fault: perhaps they were too young to have perspective, perhaps the city was too loud or polluted for memory, perhaps one needed the clarity of poverty to properly cherish the past, for that would be all one had.

But because Angelo did not want to change his life, he hoped for another way back, and entertained any technique that might retrieve something of that most essential self. During his leisure hours he experimented with meditation, and this was successful in guiding him somewhat indolently toward things he'd long ignored—how he'd once seen a snake uncurl among some tomato plants, and screamed. He booked a series of deep-tissue massages, which released the latent stores of his flesh—how that fallen shingle's nail had once slipped through his heel. And he was on constant alert for olfactory signals—a waft of lilac, fresh rain on dusty roads—that sent him soaring back to himself in time.

None of these methods provided what he sought, however, which was nothing short of a skeleton key, a master code, a cracked genome. He wanted the extraordinary self-knowledge of his own most authentic identity. Through every setback and frustration, Angelo retained faith in the existence of his memories. They were not gone entirely, they were only inaccessible, like ancient markings for which one lacks a lexicon.

Of course he'd heard of the old French book in which the taste of some cookie sends the author flying through thousands and thousands of pages of time. One of his girlfriends had read those giant books as if their memories were her own—which after reading them, he supposed, they sort of were—and she'd explained the author's famous rush of recollection, the flavour unlocking everything. Angelo had observed this trope in many books and films, and he impatiently sought his own little cookie, despairing at the idea of going an entire lifetime without ever encountering that magic taste again. But Angelo's diet was already virtually identical to what he'd eaten as a boy, his mother's recipes being so nourishing and satisfying that he'd adopted them wholesale. Time was unlikely to come back through food for Angelo.

His only successful retrievals resulted from a technique he discovered for himself. Rather than chasing after events, he focused on specific objects that had figured in many separate memories. For example, he recalled the carousel horse his mother had bought from an antique shop and installed in the foyer.

Angelo found he could best visualize the horse in the minutes before sleep, his face pushed into Egyptian cotton, his mind sinking and relinquishing. He could stroke the horse's wooden mane, sense its seat between his legs, see the floor through the hole drilled into the horse's throat—and in this way, the horse pointed toward a network of other memories. But this network was always limited, and at its farthest reaches he was already asleep.

One day while untagging himself from some displeasing photographs, it occurred to Angelo that he was drastically misinterpreting his life, and therefore dooming his recovery mission to failure. He realized that much of his time, and certainly most of his private childhood hours, had been spent on the computer. The snake in the garden, the shingle on the path, the lilac and the dust—these were anomalies, colourful natural spots of memory spaced like parks throughout the concrete city of himself. His identity was somewhere in that duller space, somewhere in a computer.

The recognition, valuable as it was, posed a problem for Angelo. He was nostalgic for a homepage, but how could he revisit that world? Virtually all the sites he'd frequented as a child were long since overwritten, and what he turned up in an archaeological dig of the Google cache was changed by the modern interface. There was nothing truly mechanical about this slender knife of a laptop, so unlike the boxy, overheating units of his youth.

Angelo did not tell his friends about the steps he now undertook to retrieve his past, for while they had a lively, conversational interest in the subjects of memory and identity, he knew this had developed for him into a kind of spiritual calling that was taking him ever further from the city and from them. His old girlfriend had said that the French author, having accessed himself completely, lived in a room soundproofed with cork, and this was beginning to make sense to Angelo.

He spent not a little money on a still-operational Macintosh desktop precisely like the one his father had once brought home, a seatbelt across the white box in the back seat, as proud as if he were chauffeuring a beauty queen. He rearranged his study to suggest the dimensions of his childhood family room, then hooked up the Mac and modem and mouse, and pushed the power button.

No sooner had the desktop loaded than Angelo realized it wasn't the internet he sought. As if being guided across a Ouija board, the single-buttoned mouse moved across the screen to where he would have found his games. Again he'd misunderstood himself, applying what he used computers for now to what he'd used them for then, as if everything were as consistent as his mother's recipes.

This insight set Angelo back considerably, for finding the right games was no simple task. He'd once downloaded a documentary about men who'd been obsessed with arcade games as boys, and many of them now owned vintage gaming consoles, such as Pac-Man and Space Invaders, which were convenient acquisitions compared to what faced Angelo. The games that had mattered most to him, the games into which his childhood had flowed, were not famous—they were the rudimentary software games found in batches of fifty on inexpensive CD-ROMs.

He would need a stroke of luck. Having cancelled several appointments, Angelo took a ferry across the channel and paid a surprise visit to his mother, who set about preparing the very same meal he'd cooked the night before. Over

dinner, he sketched out some idea of his journey into the past, which prompted his mother to dig out photo albums, souvenirs, school assignments, trophies—an array of the material objects he'd already determined were useless. But he indulged her help, which was really her own way of journeying. She became visibly elsewhere when speaking of his father, and there was something sweetly conventional about her methods of remembrance.

After his mother had gone to bed, Angelo went to the basement in search of CD-ROMs. His father had welcomed every new technology with unwavering belief in progress: the basement contained his music collection in several formats, as he'd repurchased everything on tape when records fell out of fashion, and he'd repurchased everything on CD when tapes became obsolete, at the end of his life using just an iPod, having repurchased everything on MP3. Angelo searched through dozens of boxes, encouraged by the discovery of floppy disks and a zip drive, until toward dawn he found them—at the bottom of a half-empty box, a clutter of CD-ROMs in thin, cracked cases. He transferred them into a bag, and in the morning he took leave of his mother and crossed back into the city.

Angelo ignored the calls he'd received from those eager to attend to unresolved business, and isolated himself in his study. He'd brought back many discs but was instantly attracted to one. In a kind of premonition, which was really a hunch toward things that had long since passed, Angelo knew this was the game in which his secret self was imprisoned.

It was a less sophisticated version of the flight simulators that had, at the time, hinted at the incredible potential of computer gaming. The loading screen—a silver jet soaring above the Sphinx, the Eiffel Tower, and the World Trade Center—brought Angelo to the verge of the sought-for sensation, that of being no longer present, of being totally returned. With every passing second he was escaping into himself; the touch of the keys that were more like buttons, the tug of the mouse cord, the omnipresent hum of the Macintosh fan: all abstracted him into the sensory world that comprised his authenticity.

Angelo selected his plane, and found himself on the runway of the most familiar world of all, a nondescript, hilly landscape beneath a cloudless sky—perfect flight conditions. Inhabiting himself completely, he took off without issue, gained an even altitude, bent the plane to the west—a view of vacant country swept across the cockpit window—and maintained into the steadily lowering sun. A peace born of total self-command encompassed Angelo, his essence unfolding like the distant peaks that loaded as he flew, now just a blotch of pixels, now a smooth and verdant green.

It was joy—authentic joy—and Angelo pulled back on the controls, thrusting the plane high into the endless blue, nothing but the rapidly climbing numbers signalling ascent. He pushed himself higher and higher, joyfully higher—and without warning the numbers seized, the craft levelled out, suspended, stuck, dangling. From a tremendous height, Angelo saw the planet below, and he suddenly recalled the constraint of the game. He'd hit the map's invisible wall, past which nothing loaded, and the plane could only swivel about. He could not even fall from the sky. Angelo sat back from the controls. He'd returned to the limit. There was no choice but to restart.

Peter Norman

ASHFALL

after Margaret Avison's "First"

Ash of my smoke's tip sprinkles the city's breadth. Drag,
tap, observe grey rain descend again. Its fallout, uncircumferenced,
exceeds the globe. My ash flecks drift in space. My ash, sublime
as a gilded statue shifting legs to kneel contrite
atop a pompous column, flexes and extends. My ash repents.

God's at his dice again. He cannot hear
my ash's mouthings over his mathematics.

God's raised creation's hood. He's got a wrench
and tinkers for millennia. My ash entwines with Saturn's rings, is one
with every particle whose ending has begun.

Elise Partridge

BEFORE THE FALL

No mountain deities
that flattered cows
or flash-froze girls into trees.

Cross-species confabs in lairs—
a landscape giddy with fellowship.
Dormice groomed a bear.

And each crop a loyal perennial.
That infinite stash of pippins,
cores shied over a wall!

THE ALPHABET

Aligned by a keyboard
into parade-band precisions,
or squeezed and ballooned
—addled-looking
as in drunken wedding-shots—
from blunting tips of crayons.

They change partners nimbly
for human callers,
shape-shift between
capital and lowercase.

Thickly Gothic, honed Danish-modern,
they'll tilt for the italic wand,
deepen haberdashery
when summoned to be "bold."

One-liners, testaments,
inventories, chants,
condolences, mattress labels,
they keep flocking to Anonymous's hand,
assembling without reproach
even for those who can't spell.

In Babel, they also lay down and wept.

IF CLOUDS HAD STRINGS

There's one tied to a fence
by a rancher yearning for shade.
Lashed to a mall's arch,
two shift dolorous
haunches, chained elephants.

Not just bits of scenery
towed by deity-fingers
deft, abstracted as typists',
their management praised
in Wesleyan homilies—

but flocks nabbed for sets
by producers, tugged
down the coast, Burbanked
for cameos, wrangled
to shroud a turret.

A cloud's birthright: drifting.
But they'd be baled, surely—
sweatshop bolsters on pallets;
or bartered, resort-backlog
dragged over ski-lifts;

parade-effigies corralled
toward sooty boulevards;
stockpiled by Defense,
crammed into silos
for a hurricane arsenal.

If hoarded for personal grief
or rich children's kites,
perhaps a grass-roots co-op
could assemble thousands
for launching—relief

during tar-melt Julys
to cool barrio alleys,
stack above parched corn,
refresh a threatened pampa's
bellwether fly.

Here, one is the only décor
snagged by the truck stop
where the waitress pauses,
admiring its mauves
from a booth by the door

as she dabs at a mustard smear.
When her shift ends,
she strides through the parking lot
and snips its soiled tether
with the night-cook's shears.

CONTRIBUTORS

Raoul Fernandes' poems have been previously published in *The Malahat Review*, *CV2*, *Poetry is Dead*, among others. In 2010 he was a finalist for the Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging Writers, and he was a runner-up for *subTerrain*'s 2013 Lush Triumphant Award. He is an editor for the online poetry journal *The Maynard* (themaynard.org). His first collection is forthcoming in 2015 from Nightwood Editions.

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Joel Robison is a Canadian photographer based out of Cranbrook, British Columbia. He focuses his work on conceptual portraiture and telling stories through photographs. In his work he plays with the idea of creating surreal environments in the real world and challenging our idea of what can happen in our real world.

Anne Trooper-Holbrook's work has received honourable mention for The Ledge Fiction Award. She was awarded fellowships to the Summer Literary Seminars, was short-listed for the Fish Short Story Prize, and was a finalist for the Santa Fe Writers Project Literary Awards. Anne is currently working on a story collection and a novel.

Emily Tuszynska's poems have appeared in a number of journals including *Center*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Poet Lore*, and *Sou'wester*.

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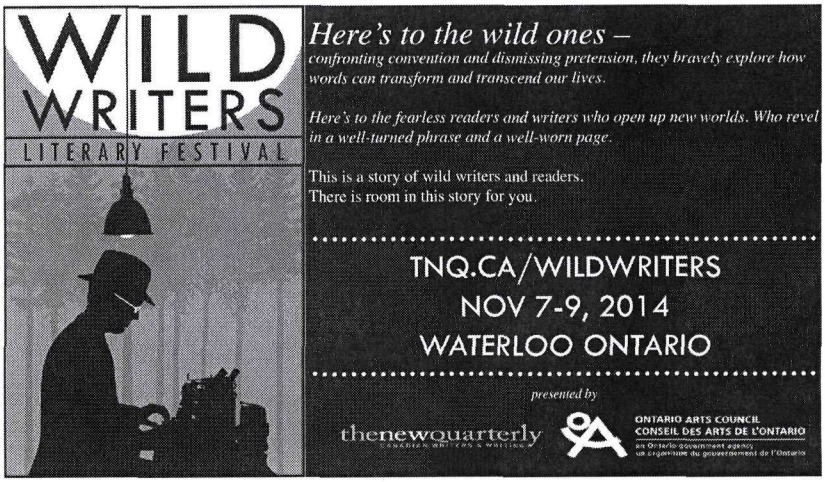
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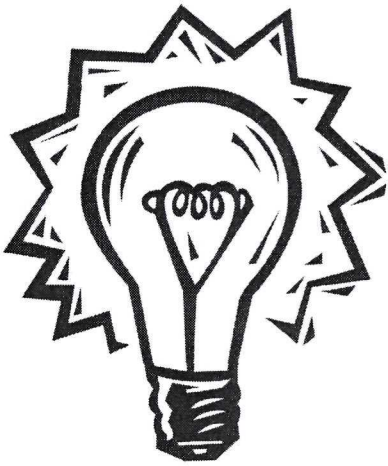

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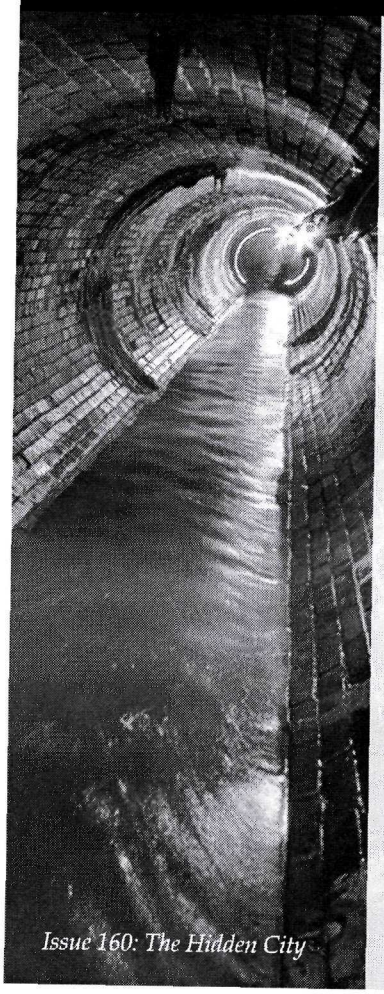

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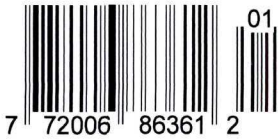

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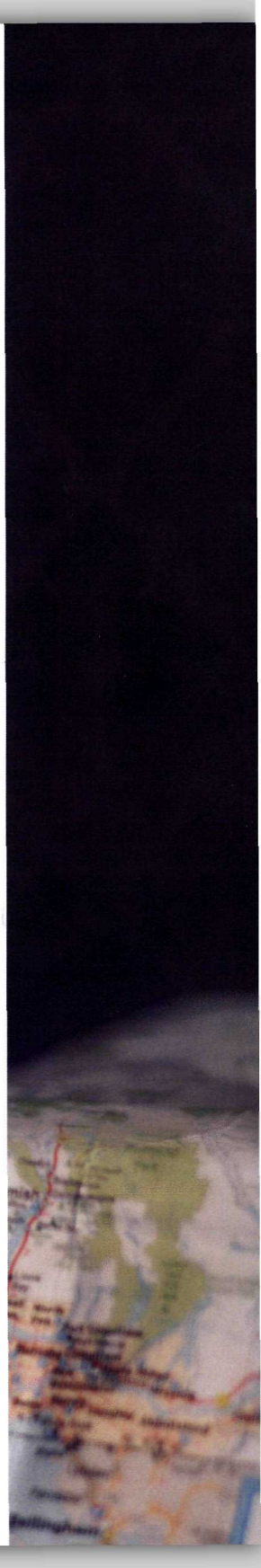
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