

# PRISM international

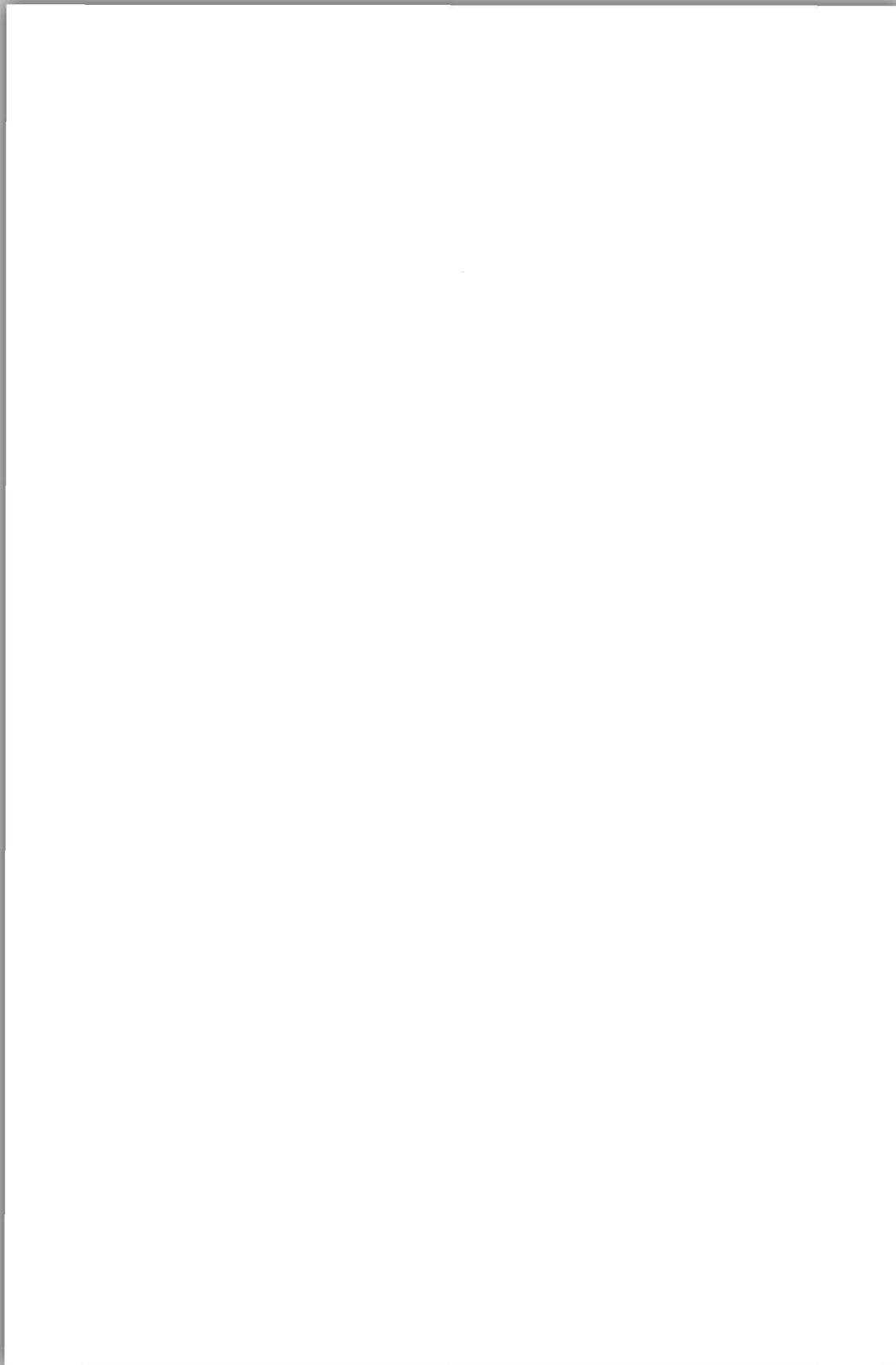
Summer 2005

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Contemporary Writing from Canada and around the World





# PRISM international

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## 2004 PRISM Short Fiction Contest

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### **Grand Prize – \$2,000**

"Wrestling"  
**Melanie Little**  
Ottawa, Ontario

### **Runners-up – \$200 each**

"God Spends the Day Everywhere"  
**Naomi Benaron**  
Los Angeles, California

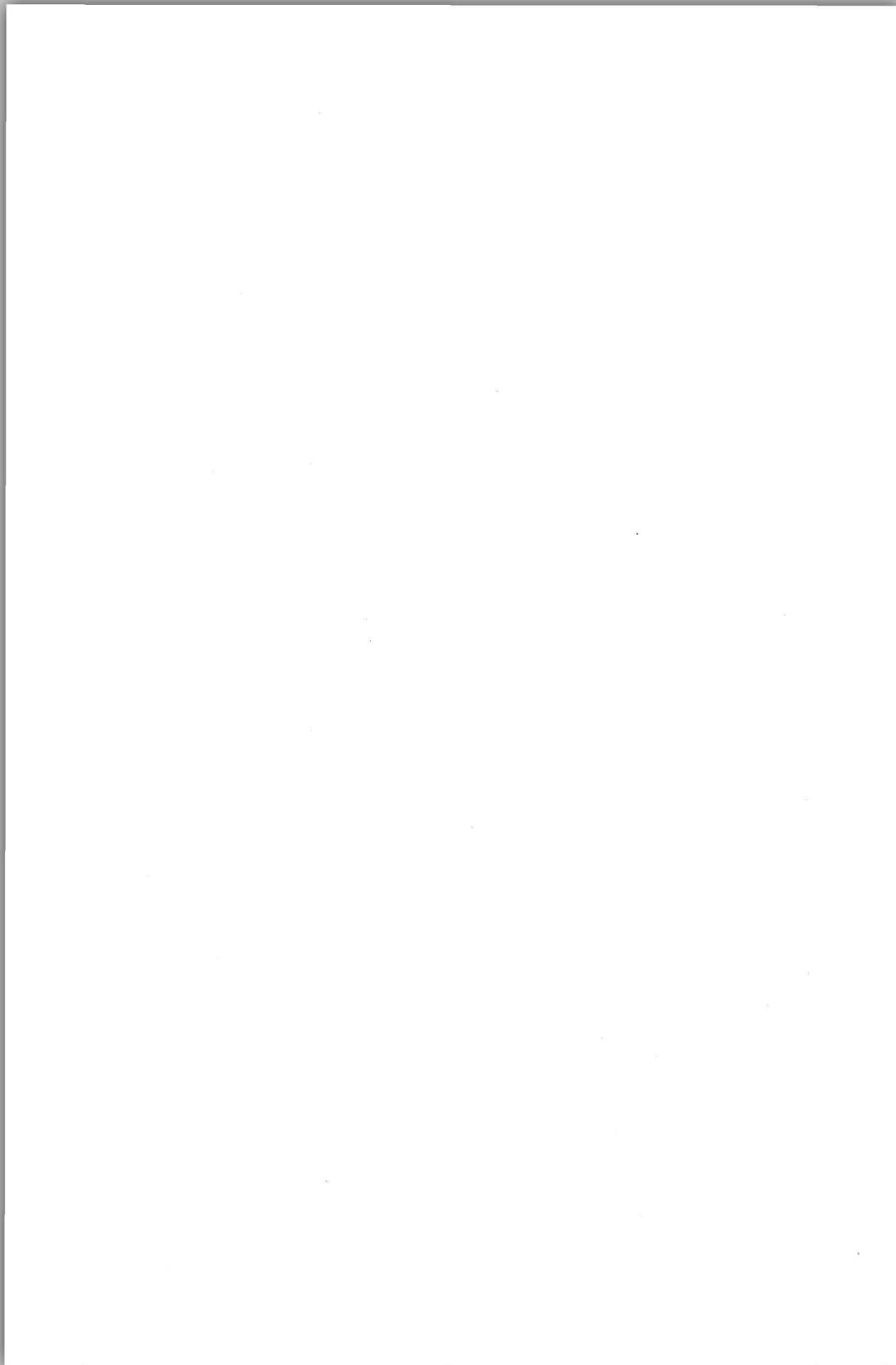
"Quiet Rain"  
**Bill Stenson**  
Victoria, British Columbia

"The Non-Babylonians"  
**Wayde Compton**  
Vancouver, British Columbia

**Fiction Contest Manager**  
Clea Young

### **Readers**

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Terry Dove • Harmony Ho • Emma K  
Patty Kelly • Cathleen Kirkwood • Arlene Kroeker  
Sarah Lane • Christina Lovelidge • Judy McFarlane  
Terry Miles • Susan Olding • Kathy Para  
Leah Rae • Lianne Scott • Amanda Sun  
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# Contents

Volume 43, Number 4  
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## 2004 PRISM Short Fiction Contest

### Judge's Essay

Annabel Lyon  
*Civil* / 7

### Grand Prize Winner

Melanie Little  
*Wrestling* / 9

### Runners-up

Naomi Benaron  
*God Spends the Day Everywhere* / 21

Bill Stenson  
*Quiet Rain* / 36

Wayde Compton  
*The Non-Babylonians* / 50

### Nonfiction

Michael Martone  
*16 Postcards from Terra Incognita* / 80

## Poetry

**matt robinson**

*the fore-check / 64*

*psalm for an old goalie / 65*

**Esther Mazakian**

*Capital Gain / 66*

*Yates, She Could Have Been a Poet or*

*She Could Have Been a Fool / 67*

*Some Nerve / 68*

*Death Drive / 70*

*With Moses Parting Her Red Watery Robe Again She*

*Pinched Her Nose Inhaled Went Under and But / 71*

**Michael Trussler**

*Aubade / 72*

**Tim Bowling**

*In Starbucks / 74*

*Growing Older / 75*

*One of the Last Years I Worked With a Knife / 76*

**rob mclennan**

*December 16 / 78*

*K.I. Press' Book / 79*

**Contributors / 85**

## Civil

“**F**or Christmas last year, my grandmother gave my mother a T-shirt picturing an impossible poker hand. Five queens, all hearts. She’d hand-written “We’re Even Better Than A Full House!” on the back, in glitter glue. My mother was civil about it,” begins this year’s winning entry, “Wrestling,” by Melanie Little. That word, “civil,” was the first in a series of small detonations of linguistic pleasure that made this story stand out. There was something ticklish about that word in that place, something that lingered in my mind for days after I read the story and brought a smile to my face every time I heard it. (My fear is great that it is now linked forever in my mind to the words “glitter glue,” but that is part of the fun.) I was caught off guard, struck anew, smitten even, by a word I’d previously taken for granted.

The short story is my favourite genre because only there does the pacing of the language permit this peculiarly literary, particularly delicious kind of shock: the shock of the familiar. Poetry claims this mantle, but can wear it a little too tightly, often reading as (to use JD Salinger’s phrase from *Franny and Zooey*) “terribly fascinating, syntaxy *droppings*.” The novel, by contrast, can wear it too slackly; think of Henry James’s description of the novel (in Tolstoy’s hands) as a “loose, baggy monster.”

I sound grumpy. Perhaps a kinder, gentler metaphor would convey better what I mean. Imagine travelling in a cruise ship, ten or fifteen storeys up, trying to observe the play of light on water. That’s the novel: too often you’re just too far away and you’re moving too fast to lose yourself in the pure joy of the prose. Next imagine you’re scuba diving, looking up at the surface. A more intimate experience, but also a more airless one, more willfully artificial; that’s poetry, for me. The short story offers the happiest medium, something like a kayak skimming along the surface at a distance and speed that permit close observation as well as a longer view. Short story prose offers meditation without alienation or claustrophobia.

My love of the short story form is so great, in fact, that it leads me to a certain ambivalence about short story contests, which necessarily compare apples and oranges and hustle many equally worthy fruits into obscurity for the sake of prize-giving. The reader is right to distrust that impossible poker hand adorned with glitter glue that constitutes contest success: the celebration of one utterly subjective choice at the expense of so many

other worthies.

Grumpy, grumpy again! But balanced against my innate suspicion of contests is the keen pleasure of discovery, and the larger pleasure in the persistence—indeed, the survival—of a genre whose demise seems increasingly imminent. After all, most mainstream magazines no longer publish short fiction with any regularity, and book publishers pick at short story collections like week-old salads, preferring to sink their teeth into those fattier first novels or books of nonfiction.

How heartening, then, to know that all across the country (and beyond), writers are eschewing economics for passion and producing short fiction that burns and dazzles, instructs and entertains in ways poetry, novels, and nonfiction cannot quite match. Naomi Benaron's "God Spends the Day Everywhere," about a nun caught up in the Rwandan genocide in the early nineties, bravely drags a monstrous issue down to eye level and makes the reader take a close, unblinking look. The writing, like one of the characters' faces, is "sculpted from ironwood with a delicate blade." Wayde Compton's "The Non-Babylonians" features a different collision of the personal and the political: a young man on the edge of both drug addiction and love pursues a woman who may or may not have arrived in Vancouver in a shipping container, and ends on September 11, 2001, with the young man escaping through an open window while the world falls down around him. A child's perspective on the scars inflicted by the Second World War is the business of Bill Stenson's "Quiet Rain," which features a shell-shocked father, a mother wound tight with loneliness, and a boy struggling to understand them both. If these stories' diversity and accomplishment are anything to go by, there's a lot of life in the short story form yet.

Melanie Little's "Wrestling" looks at first to be the quirkiest of the bunch. I won't try to summarize it, but will tantalize by saying it features a pair of grandmothers and a fridge full of condiments; a hotel maid tormented by the couple in room 317; a behind-the-scenes tour of the silverware in a Heritage Museum; and a father who claims his daughter thinks he's the Son of God, despite that daughter's vehement denials. "You may have noticed that I don't ask my gram about wait a minute aren't there any Good Men," the narrator says. Hear the teen's lament in that line, the worldliness and innocence, the underlying sadness in the humour. Again, the language pops like corn, making you blink and startle and laugh and think all at once. It's that thinking I prize, the way sheer invention in language can push you through the language itself to a new understanding of the world, to unexpected emotional depths. It's that fizzing, goading, thinking prose that makes "Wrestling" this year's winner, and makes me glad I agreed to be this year's judge; glad, when PRISM's editors asked me, that I was civil about it.

*Melanie Little*

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## Wrestling

*“Out of the tree of life, I just picked the plum...”*

—from Gram’s favourite Sinatra song

**F**or Christmas last year, my grandmother gave my mother a T-shirt picturing an impossible poker hand. Five queens, all hearts. She’d hand-written “We’re Even Better Than A Full House!” on the back, in glitter glue. My mother was civil about it, stretching her bottom lip into her standard shorthand for near-pleasure (her most blissful state). But Sally, my sister, who snoops around when my mother and I are at work, told me that the T-shirt sits in a folded square at the bottom of our mom’s least-used drawer, untouched.

My gram lives with her own mother, my great-grandmother, in three rooms in our basement. They even have their own kitchen. The house has always belonged to us women, according to Gram, and it’s been passed down from one to the other—it’ll be mine and Sally’s next, I guess—though none of the women have ever left it.

The two of them keep that basement so sweltering we don’t need to heat the rest of the place except in the very coldest days of January. In their kitchen, especially, the temperature always seems to be at least a hundred degrees and rising. Gram and Great-gram sit there at their table, stewing, slurping at the red tea they sift through the Morning Glory coffee maker from dawn till practically dawn again. We all know, though she pretends to hide it, that Great-gram smokes two-dollar cigars and swigs chasers of sherry from her Santa Claus shot glass. Gram (also known as Gram Gram, when distinction is a problem) prefers to suck candied ladybugs down to nothing and poke away at a never-ending series of needlepoint creations on black velvet backing. The kitchen was converted, at great expense (says my mother), from a bedroom, and the Grams decided that the door should stay. Unless someone knocks—not likely, especially when I’m already in there—their two sets of false teeth sit centrepiecing the table in matching plain water glasses, ones from the hotel with “Topniche” brailled on the bottom. When I’m not at work but my mother is, which means she isn’t around to deter me, you’ll find me there with my toothless Grams, sweating in between the two of them.

The Grams' kitchen has three separate refrigerators. Maybe this is because the heat would spoil whatever was in the cupboard or the pantry, canned food included. Or maybe canned food can't spoil, and there is another, loopier reason, like occult powders requiring storage below certain temperatures, a secret sperm donor business, preserved corpses of keened-over cats. What do I know? The mysteries belonging to the Grams are kept locked fast in the crazy helix of likemindedness that binds them. The rest of us—well, those of us that care, namely me, I—can only sit there, enchanted and apart.

What I do know is that the first refrigerator—the one that's a normal, eggshell shade, not dark brown like the other, off-limits two—is a culinary Valhalla for a person whose mother's idea of an after-dinner treat is a cup of cottage cheese. Behind Door #1 you'll find every kind of condiment, seasoning, and all-around food accessory imaginable, even by me. Any chance I get sees me at the Grams' table, spooning from a bowl of straight corn syrup, garlic-flavoured breadcrumbs, neon purple plum jelly, or another such food-group-defying delight. My sister, a health-head who spends three hours a day at the gym, stays away.

Sometimes, I'm there when my grandfather comes home. We hear his truck park beside the house and then, seconds later, see his feet pass the one basement window. This is what Gram calls a beeline, and it leads directly to his own little corner of our queendom: the shed. He can't abide heat; ergo, he can't abide the basement, or in fact, any part of the house. When Gram wants to do It she has to put two coats over her nightie and go out to Granddad among the saws, never believing that children (her word) should be sheltered from These Things; Gram told me that herself. Anyway, it's common knowledge that Gram and Granddad have a Very Healthy Relationship.

Everybody knows that Granddad is Hard, has spent much of his life being a Bad Man—though the exact nature of this badness has never been defined, at least to me. But Gram says that his heart is solid, evidenced by the fact that he loves her. "There are two kinds of men in this world, Muffin," she's often told me. "Don't listen to your Grandmother, she's a sack of wind," my mother will say, but as far as I can tell, Gram is about the only one around who takes me seriously. So I return the courtesy and listen to her like she's the nightly news—as delivered by the Pope. Strapped to a polygraph.

"There are Bad Men, and there are bad men who have fits of wishing they were Good Men. You can sift and sift until your fingers bleed, but I guarantee you won't find any other kinds."

What about men who Just Don't Care? I know from rare conversations with my mother that my dad is one of these.

"A Don't Care Man is a lazy idiot," says Gram, "like someone who

can't even be bothered to stand up and pull a stray hair out of his arsehole. Heaps more heartache than they're worth, the Don't Cares. Stay away from them." But she knows who I'm talking about. She knows I can't stay away from someone who has himself made staying away into an art, a science, a full-time job.

You may have noticed that I don't ask my gram about wait a minute aren't there any Good Men. I've been working lots of overtime lately and frankly you don't see too many of that type in my line of employment. It's not that our guests are any seedier than most people in most hotels in most armpit places on earth. Middle of the Road in the Middle of Nowhere, that's us to a T, I figure. In fact, I've been trying to sell Topniche head office in the States on the less snarky half of this slogan—maybe *Middle of Your Road*—to go along with my new name: "Crossroads Hotels Incorporated." "Topniche" has got to be just about the feeblest name in the whole world. Nobody can say "niche" without sounding like some kind of hill-billy CEO so everybody ends up calling us "that Top-whatever place." But we're owned by so many different companies now, I can't figure out who it is I really need to talk to. This is what I do on my breaks when I'm on the night shift. I let myself into the Front Desk Manager's office with my master key and I use her directories to call all the different company managers around North America. I leave messages in their voice mailboxes with these and other observations and ideas, identifying myself as a "freelance marketing consultant." I give my home phone number but since I'm working so much these days, the machine must get their return calls (both my sister, all business, and the Grams, "none of our business," have their own lines). My mother has a habit of picking up our messages from outside when we're both on shift and then erasing them all. Whenever I bump into her in the course of a work day, in one of the hallways or down in the laundry room, she always says "No messages" before I can even say hello. And generally, that's the extent of our conversation. My mom is Head Housekeeper—a.k.a. my immediate boss—and when we're at the hotel she uses this as an excuse not to talk to me, the same way she uses my preference for the Grams when we're at home.

In hotels, the bad things always come when you're least equipped for them. For instance, there was a fire last year during the exact five minutes in which the entire staff had run down to the basement bar to toast a waitress's last day. She'd been at the hotel for twenty years; she deserved at least a drink, you know? The guests were all standing out on the sidewalk, freezing and outraged, when we got back to our posts. Six people were trapped in the elevator, glued somewhere between the sixth and seventh floors. No one was hurt or even canned, because you can't fire an entire staff, but we were all docked a painful chunk of pay at the end of the

month. That's just one example.

My mother's best friend from college stayed with us last night, in town for one full day only. When I saw my mom writing a goodbye note to this woman at five o'clock this morning, on flimsy pink paper I'd had no idea she even possessed, I told her to go back to bed, get up at a moderately sane hour, and spend the day with her pal. I expected her to click her tongue and ignore me like she always does when I make a perfectly reasonable suggestion, but this time she came and put her arms around me, the note crumpling softly in her fist. So I've had to clean double the rooms I normally would today, and I haven't eaten a single thing in six hours besides about twenty of the repulsive strawberry soymilk kisses we have to leave on the pillows as our "Goodnight Wish."

When I've finally finished both my floors, I call down to the desk from a Vacant. Just one unplanned Stayover to investigate: not bad. I should be sitting down to a cheeseburger—no mother to order me a salad—in no time. I pound on the door and yell "Housekeeping" in my biggest voice. I do this three times. These people, 317, were due to vacate at noon but they haven't checked out with the front desk and they still owe \$33.54 in movie charges (divisible by \$11.18, the price of an Adult Movie, hence my from-unfortunate-experience knowledge that it's safest to give *lots* of warning). Most likely they've skipped out without paying but I knock once more just to be sure, then yell "I'm coming in!" as loudly as it is possible to yell while still maintaining the sanctioned Topniche tone of gleeful subservience. I'm out of drinking glasses, which I would normally press my ear to at this stage.

I swipe the key card and push. There's a cold feeling in my hand the second it's in the room, like there are eyes in the pads of my fingertips and they're trying desperately to squeeze themselves shut. A very small female and a very, very large male are on the bed, going at it. At least I think it is what they're at because I don't see clothes and they're in some way wrapped around each other and they're both suddenly screaming like they're in the throes of something pretty extreme. The woman is on top (wisely), and although she doesn't swivel her head to look at me when she yells "Christ! Christ! Christ!" I'm sure I can hear a challenge there. I'm out the door and I'm running and there is laughter chasing me down the hall. I slam past the elevator and into the stairwell, utterly convinced that they are in hot pursuit, closing in, just a room's-length after me.

Down three flights of stairs flying and I'm telling Rosie, at the front desk, all about it. Her eyes go really big, practically eat up her face. "That's her kid," she whispers, her stagy smoker's voice a monster truck trying to sneak along a gravel road. We go into the back to confirm this with the Front Desk Manager, Mrs. Mills. "Three-seventeen? Yup," she says. She hardly bats a lash. "Mother and son. Says here it's a hospital outpatient

rate—the mother, I think.” This is nothing new; we’re the only real hotel close to the only real hospital in the whole area. People get flown in from all over—we hear the Health Ministry’s helicopter at all hours of the day and night, and make ready to receive another stricken, bleary-eyed family of the sick.

“They were sitting down here for an hour yesterday while everyone else was on lunch,” Mrs. Mills says. “Telling me all about their budding family wrestling empire. I did think it was a little odd they were holding hands—the kid must be what, fourteen? And guess what? I just got off the phone with them. They called down to extend.”

“Were they laughing?” It’s the most I’ve ever said to her. I was hoping she’d think I was like the other housekeepers, made mute by fear or language or resentment. If managers figure out you can communicate, for some reason all the panicked pager requests—for extra towels, a kumquat-flavoured tea bag, a cleaner set of curtains, a plunged toilet, a painting above the bed that doesn’t contain tulips—start coming to you. She looks at me funny, like she’s seeing me for the first time.

“Laughing?”

“I think they might have been playing a joke on me. I mean, on us.”

“Really amusing, hunh? Don’t worry about it right now, Wilhemina. Are you okay? Do you want a glass of water or something? Want to go lie down in one of the Vacants? Did you tell your mother what happened?”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Mills.”

Later, after I eat my lunch—proving once and for all that my appetite brooks absolutely no opposition—and once Rosie swears three times on her dead dog’s grave that 317 have gone out, that she herself called their lazy asses a taxi to the hospital (it’s a block away)—I have to go back up there and clean their room. It’s my responsibility, my floor—well, my mom’s—and anyway, the other maids have all heard about the whole side-show by now and there’s no way any of them will trade with me. And what do you know? The 317s have left me a present. A heart. A gigantic, junior-kindergarten-crude heart, lovingly smeared in fat streaks of brown—two different shades of it—on the wall beside the door. I don’t think I have to spell it out any further than to tell you that it wasn’t done in finger paint.

I clean it up, yes I do, and I clean the bathroom and vacuum the rug too; but I refuse to even go near the bed. Nor will I, I decide, pick up any of the junk they’ve got strewn all over the floor; but then I make an exception. There are suitcases, at least eight, lined up along the heart-wall. Full of what? Wrestling costumes? Enema equipment? Porno tapes? Some terrifying combination of all three? I take a case, still zippered, horribly heavy, in both arms and I walk out the sliding doors—wide open, these people’s one act of mercy—onto the balcony. The room faces the alley, and there’s no one down there but a few demented squirrels. First I take a

gasp of much-needed air and then I start to count to three, for courage. But right after two, I let the suitcase go. I hear the echoing *whap* as I step back in and then I push my cart out of the room, calmly, like I've just finished any normal clean. But I let myself into a Vacant two doors down and I throw up and throw up, and too soon, so it's all over the gleaming bathroom floor. And then I have to clean that up, too.

When I tell Gram this whole story she says joke or no joke, it sure is a dirty job I have. Or maybe had, because I tell her about the suitcase too. "Don't worry about it," she says. "They're all a bunch of shit-disturbers and motherfuckers at that hotel anyway." I actually have to laugh. That's Gram all over. I wish I could fold her like a piece of tissue, take her in my pocket to work. Gram could ward off anything.

It's the second Sunday of the month, time for my visit with my dad. It's not like it's of incredible urgency that I have him in my life at this point. I'm practically an adult now, almost ready to move on to a whole pageant of Bad Men of my own. What do I need with him? But every second Sunday, we keep trying. Or I do.

This morning, he's the one who calls me. "I'll meet you at Eureka Park, under the big dome," he says. Immediately, this causes me stress. Which big dome? I swear I'm not going to let him elude me this way. Eureka Park is the biggest thing in town. It'll be all too easy for him to say he was lost, to lie that he must have—no, *I* must have—been waiting at the wrong dome. But before I can pin him down, he has to get off the phone. "You'll find it, Baby," he says. "Don't forget to be there," he adds, in what he must think is a teasing, fatherly-admonishing tone, as if I'm the one who's stiffed him the last seven times. And then he hangs up. I try to call him back but the voice says, "The customer you are calling is unavailable."

I wait for two hours at the park, speed-pacing back and forth from one dome to the other, and then I walk back to the hotel. I don't want to go home because I hate the smug hurt on my mother's face whenever I tell her he's stood me up. So before long I'm at the front desk again, keeping Rosie company.

"Heather, I know this is you," Rosie is saying into the phone. Not that I understand what my mom calls the "nuances" of any of the union stuff, but everyone says there's going to be a strike in July, peak month; the managers are getting really nervous and trying, secretly, to recruit scabs. So the girls from the bar and the restaurant have taken to calling up and attempting, very badly, to disguise their voices, asking if there are any jobs coming up. For some reason they think the desk clerks and the management are on the same side, which Rosie says is sheer folly. "This isn't grade one," she tells me. "Just because I'm next-door neighbours with someone doesn't make me their best friend." The managers have their

offices right behind the front desk area, and this makes the girls in the restaurant, way at the other end of the hotel, twitchy. You can tell by the way their bodies vibrate when they come behind the desk to punch in, Rosie says. Their shoulders up around their ears. Friendly, but not. I'd like to ask my mom about this, but I know better than to talk work around the house. I even made Gram swear secrecy over the motherfucker thing—especially the part about the suitcase. Mom keeps saying lately that it was a big mistake to bring me in there in the first place.

So what about Bad Women, Gram? I mean, that mother in the room—surely she's one? Are there two categories of woman, too? This is the question I want to ask her, but she's like a cat who'll jump into your lap and stay there for two hours but who hates, refuses, to be picked up: she has to initiate things herself. I'm feasting on one of my favourite dishes, dry-roasted peanuts swimming in red wine vinegar. It's been an okay day. The Motherfuckers are still around but they kept the Do Not Disturb sign on their door all day, thank something. And no one's said a thing to me about the suitcase, although I have this chilly feeling that everybody knows.

A week later, alas, I'm back on the third floor—another favour for my mother who, though this is a separate story entirely, is not exactly unravelling but definitely shedding a few threads. I'm waiting in vain for the relic of an elevator, more commonly called the Night Bus because of how long it takes to come. I've got the cart, so I'm at its stingy mercy—I can't exactly use the stairs. I jam at the down button for the fifth time and then go over to the window to calm myself. It's good to look out over the city from here; I like to remind myself that there's a semi-normal world out there, people who've never even heard of the freaks in this hotel, people who've never stolen table lamps or asked for seven extra pillows or drawn on walls with excrement in their lives. But there's a huge crack in the window I haven't noticed before, top to bottom, a rip in the uneasy peace I was starting to make with this day.

A voice behind me. "You should have seen the blood," it says.

It's Mr. Big, the hotel's General Manager. A dangerously stupid man, hated and feared by us all.

He voice is oddly relaxed. I try to let his nonchalance infect me, can in fact feel it crawling through the pores in my throat and into my esophagus when I say, "Um, what happened?"

"A maid. Not much older than you. A scab, actually, during the last strike. Nineteen-ninety-six. Something someone out on the line said to her, I guess."

"She—" I don't get it. "What happened?" I ask again.

"She ran into this window. Face-first. A guest coming out of his room saw her do it. Broke her nose in two places. So much blood we had to

replace the carpet.”

“But not the window,” I say. I think I detect a red spot or two on the pane.

“There was a strike on,” he grimace-grins.

“But she was okay, then,” I say, because much as I want to get away from him, I want to clarify this. “She lived, and all.”

“Oh, yeah. Yes, she did. Live. But we had to let her go, of course.” Like that was the main thing.

I sneak a look at the elevator; the flickering numbers admit that it is yet again on its way down to Parking. Since Mr. Big shows no sign of leaving his leering post at my side, I go backwards and let myself and my cart into the room I just finished, 322, muttering that I forgot to leave the Wish on the pillow.

The phone rings and I just about paint myself all over the ceiling. “Oh, good, you’re still in there,” says Rosie. “Got a call for you. Want me to put it through?”

“If it’s about three-seventeen, I’m somewhere in the basement,” I say. “Or dead.”

“It’s not. Here you go.” A click.

“Baby,” says my Dad. I mouth the words along to his next thing: “I am sooo sorry.”

I grunt, waiting. Though I really have zero interest in what might come next.

“I was in a car accident.”

That would make four, or maybe five, this year. I actually laugh. Well, it’s more of a snort than a laugh. But the point is taken.

“I’m not lying, Baby. Aren’t you worried about me? Don’t you want to know if I’m okay?”

The difference between men and women, Gram has told me, is all in the will. Both have it. But maybe men have too much of it.

“Just a few scratches, that’s all.”

All this will, she says, it fills and fills up their brains, their balls, their days, so there’s not enough room for doing.

“It wasn’t me driving, though, my record’s still clean, ha ha.”

So in the end you can only judge them by their intentions. By whom they love.

“I love you, Baby. Let’s do next weekend, okay?”

But I’m not anyone yet, not anything. So loving me doesn’t count.

“I should be all healed up by then, I hope,” he adds, laying it on real thick.

“I’m not a marathon you have to run.”

“Ha, ha, uh—no, I promise, it’s next weekend. Tell your mother that I promise, okay? Sally, too. How is she, anyway?”

“A week is forever. It’s the same.”

“Ha, ha, I know, I miss you, too—OW! Sorry, nothing major, just a muscle spasm....”

“I’m going now.”

Below me on the street, the mother-and-son wrestling team is crossing toward the hotel, hand in hand. The boy’s eyes are sunk into the mounds of his face; he has to swerve his entire body around just to look beside him. But the mother is focussed. She burns toward the entrance, a taut network of wires and will. I step onto the balcony. For only the third floor, it’s surprisingly high. “Hey!” I yell. They both look up, the boy searching, she zooming right in. “I’m gonna jump!”

They keep right on going.

After work I hike over to the Heritage Museum, my secret haunt of haunts. Once, a short-lived boyfriend of my mom’s who worked there gave us a behind-the-scenes tour and we got to see the room where they keep what’s not out on display: aisles and aisles of ancient and indefinable objects, some damaged or filthy, some unwanted, some just waiting. There was a painting that’d been slashed from one corner of the canvas to the other. “Some angry kid,” the friend had said. He moved away, back to Toronto, a year ago.

What I really liked about that room was the shelf crammed with silver: knives, spoons, teapots, cups, steins, and even some religious stuff, like censers and chalices and other things I was sure I’d never even heard the words for. The friend told us that someone goes in there at least once a week and polishes every single silver artifact; there must be at least a hundred. When things get too crazy at the hotel, I close my eyes and I think of this person, alone down in those aisles, the only sound the whispery kiss of her cloth. On its best days, the ones when I can actually get my mind to shut up for a while, my work in the rooms can have moments like that, too. Of that kind of quiet.

When I go to the museum now I can only see what’s out on exhibition, of course, but still I love to press my forehead up against the cool glass and stare. I do this until the security guard, sighing (he knows me), shuffles over and puts his hand on my shoulder. I like even this part, that although this guy is giving me shit, sort of, he has to be polite about it. And he’s pretty considerate, too; his voice stays low, despite the fact that, as usual, I’m the only non-staff person in the place.

Today, after I’ve done my staring, I climb the creaky stairs to the tiny gift shop and I buy a postcard with a silver chalice on it, one that’s currently on show. There’s something satisfying about being able to hold in your hands even a mere picture of what you’ve just seen without being able to touch. I stamp it first—I always carry stamps—and then I address it to the post office box my father uses, leaving the message side blank.

Dad needs to see me urgently, he says. His tone suggests that I have been impossible to reach. Whereas I'd bet a cosmic Get Out of Hell Free card that this is only the second time he's called me in the last five years.

I meet him, of course. It's down in the restaurant, between meals. The only person around is the busboy, Jimmy, who never seems to take his chin out from between his pudgy little breasts. Some of the staff are convinced that his face is joined to his chest by a skein of skin, that he has special holes in the fronts of his shirts to accommodate it. Once, between meals, a bunch of us tried to hold him down and get his shirt off, but Jimmy screamed such bloody murder the guests from the rooms above the kitchen called the front desk in a froth and we had to free him. I think even Mrs. Mills, who came to break things up, had wanted to find out the truth, and secretly wished we'd worked faster.

There is, I am informed, a reason for my dad's urgency. It is, you see, in the direct interest of my apparently incredibly fragile mental health.

I'll come right out and tell this: my father, my own flesh and blood — though by what act of bad timing and judgement on my mother's part *that's* the case I don't like to contemplate—thinks that *I* think he is the earthly incarnation of Jesus. I mean, he is really convinced that I believe this. He says I got the idea when he told me, during one of those sad, excuse-glutted phone conversations, that he turned thirty-three in the year 2000, the very age Christ was when he died, and he regrets telling me because ever since he did I've been obsessed with this idea and in fact that's why he's been avoiding me. I don't know if this all means that he actually thinks he *is* some sort of saviour and is just scared I don't share his opinion, or that he might actually be right—I mean about *me* thinking it—and I'm somehow completely in the dark as to my own sad, sad delusions. "Nobody knows what they really believe." That's a direct quote from Gram Gram.

But come on, I do not. "You do," he says.

"I do bloody well *not!*" He smiles, shakes his head. "Denial is a river in Egypt, right?" he says.

"See!" I yell. "What kind of Jesus would spew sorry-ass clichés like that?"

"Who are you trying to unconvince?"

"Dad, why are you doing this? If you want to break up with us for good, just say so." He is silent, the smile of a melancholy saint tugging at his lips. I shout, "Are you trying to drive me crazy?" I don't care who hears us now.

"You see everything in checkerboard colours of good and evil."

"I don't believe this."

"Oh, you believe in me, that's the whole problem. You believe too much *into* me."

"You're insane!"

"Why did you take my gym towel, then?" He is glowing with right-

eousness now.

"You mean—"

"Your mother told me, Baby. She sent my agent an e-mail."

"You mean, like you think I think it's the shroud of Turin, or something?" I say. "Hey, good idea! I'm starting to like this idea. Maybe I can take your funky towel, which for your information I took because the goddamn cat missed you, and sell it to the lonely old priests over at Holy Family and make some money off your cheapskate ass for once."

"I can't see you any more, Baby. I love you but I can't. I've been praying on it and I've come to see that it's doing you no good."

"Wait a minute—"

"I know this breaks your heart, but it will be made whole again. The sooner I'm out of your life, the better. I've already mailed a letter to your mother and the courts explaining the situation."

"—you've been *praying* on it?"

"What?"

"Since when do you pray? You said you've been praying on it!"

"I didn't say that, Baby, you see how you've become, you know I've never been religious and you're just projecting your fantasies onto me—"

"Oh my GOD!"

"You see? This is really destructive, Bay—"

"No shit, asshole."

"And now I really do have to go."

"I don't suppose you'll start sending money to Mom or anything."

"I can't perform miracles, Baby." The smile more Cheshire than martyr now.

"Because good. I never want to hear from or about you again. And neither does Sally." As if she ever did.

"You won't. Regardless of what you may want to believe, there will be no recursion, or resurrection, if you prefer—as I'm sure you do—of me into your lives. Please, let's go in peace."

"Okay, stop. This is a ridiculous conversation. It's terrible in every way. I'm embarrassed to be having it with you."

But I wasn't having it, because he was gone.

Jimmy the busboy was there by the entrance, his head lifted up, watching him go.

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On the strike line, my mother talks to me like I'm an adult, doesn't tell me what to do or not to do, what factions to associate with or which people not to believe. In fact, on the line, barriers of all kinds seem to fall down: waitresses share smokes with the front desk staff; cooks from different shifts, normally at perpetual war, exchange recipes (though they themselves would never use such a frilly word); housekeepers bend over the

daily *Sun* crossword with the big, burly doormen from the bar, tickling the men's bare scalps with their long, bleached-out hairs. Even Jimmy is relaxing into it, took off his shirt one day when it was thirty-five degrees out and everyone else was baking their skins. The hotel is on the sunny side of the street, and Mr. Big had all the awnings removed when the strike started so we wouldn't have any shade to picket in.

The 317s, unfortunately, are still around. Apparently, she has bone cancer, is here for regular treatments, and he has to be with her because the father is not available. It's true that she's looking even more frail of late, as if every night she gets stretched over a longer rack. We have plenty of chances to notice; we see them going in and out of the hotel every day, though unlike most of the guests, they never say hello or give us a thumbs up.

Mr. Big, with the help of the head accountant (she has five kids to feed), is trying to run the whole hotel himself. At dinnertime Mr. Big leaves in his red convertible—no waving or honking from him, either—and returns an hour later with two girls in jeans and big hair, his daughters. The girls are in there until at least eleven every night, when we're almost done our last line shift. They clean rooms, do laundry, cook and deliver the meals for room service—all this even though they're both in summer school the whole day. We know because the accountant still talks to us, gives us the skinny whenever she comes out to make the bank deposit. This woman used to be famous for her beautiful nails, bitterly ridiculed for it, to be honest. But now her fingers are full of paper cuts, the nails tattered and bitten down, the polish chipped as if nibbled by mice.

When Mr. Big's daughters are finished their work they have to wait for the Night Bus; their dad, who gets up at five to handle the early checkouts, will already be snoring in one of the empty king-sizers. The older girl sometimes comes to the curb and sits with us. Mostly she doesn't say anything, just smokes. But one night a cook slips her a mickey and she opens up, starts telling us how the guests are mostly doing their own laundry now, making their own beds, ordering takeout from the places in the area instead of calling down for food, even though their medical insurance gives them a certain room service allotment per day. "There are some good people in there," she says, narrowing her eyes and looking up at the hotel. Lights are on in most of the windows. It looks just like a fully-functioning, unremarkable way station.

The girl takes another swig from the mickey, hands it back to the cook with a nod. "And then there are some real motherfuckers." She tugs her skirt over her knees as she stands up, flagging the approaching bus, her middle finger ever-so-slightly extended. The younger one walks over to meet her, throws us a sympathetic look. They remind me of Gram and Great-gram, united by their quick, cool judgements of others, by the separateness from one another that is real but so superficially slight, its exact code known only to themselves.

Naomi Benaron

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## God Spends the Day Everywhere

*Ibye ejo bibara abejo*  
*The things of tomorrow will be recounted by the people of tomorrow*

—Rwandan saying

**L**ake Kivu, the ancients told, was formed on the hot, dry plains of northwestern Rwanda when a selfish and deceitful wife squatted down in her fields to relieve herself. As punishment for her bad behavior, Imana made her waters flow until her fields were covered and she drowned. Her gourds and sleeping mat broke apart and became islands in the new, sweet lake. Fish leapt from the waves, and the unforgiving land became soft and fertile.

Sister Josephine recalls this legend when she walks along the shores, picking her way across the slippery ledges of rock, the scent of coffee blossoms a breath on her skin. Sometimes, when it is early morning and only the fishermen and young children are awake, she takes off her shoes and probes the yielding sand with her toes. She picks up handfuls of sand and watches the sun glint from flecks of volcanic rock sifting through her fingers.

*Rwanda*, she thinks then, *is my home*. She can't say the moment—or even the year—when this happened. When the chaos of spray and waves and sea-slicked cliffs that form the western coast of Brittany were tucked into a corner of her heart, and the warm current of Africa began to flow through her veins, became the pulse that rang in her ears from the time she awoke to the moment she lay down to sleep. Until last year, when the politics of hate opened a chasm in her calm and steady belief, Rwanda was the place where she could touch the face of God.

It is April now, the rainy season. This year Easter was early—it has come and gone. Sister Josephine adorned the children in the orphanage with bright scarves and garlands of flowers. She decorated the church and the orphanage chapel with bouquets of lilies from her gardens. She prayed with her hands clasped tightly together and her eyes shut against the *abazimu*

that wandered among the pews, restless and angry in death. With her face tilted toward the sky she waited for the slightest whisper of God's voice, but He was holding His breath.

The weather is as fickle as Sister Josephine's faith. Some days rain bursts from the clouds in a fury, slashing paths through the terraced hill-sides of Gisenyi, sending streams of red earth spilling into the lake. On these days the vegetables in her garden lift their leaves to the heavens, stretch roots into the softening soil. On these days Sister Josephine once again feels the touch of God's finger on her forehead. But when the rains dry up and bean blossoms shudder and fall to the ground, Sister Josephine has to dig in the dirt to find God, dig with her bare hands until they are scraped and bleeding.

The Banyarwanda have a saying: if you look into the eyes of a puppy before they are open, your child will be born blind. It was said that as a young girl, Enata's mother squatted in the sand on the shore of Lake Kivu to watch a bitch give birth beneath an overturned pirogue. Neither Enata nor her sister are blind, nor have they had any injuries to the eyes.

Every morning Enata watches Mount Nyiragongo from inside the orphanage gate, its teeth of fire and ash turning pale as the first flames of sun lick the surface of the lake, and light spreads across the waves in mercurial shivers. She sees the young boys run laughing into the water while their fathers wade out to the pirogues, empty water from the bilges with pails made of plastic bottles, unfasten the long poles that sway from the bows.

Every day Enata sees the soldiers stumble out from the barracks to begin their morning run, guns slung from shoulders, shaking sleep like a blanket from their bodies. The young Hutu boys, Clement among them, fall in singing behind the men, their feet sending up clouds of red dust. If she were to follow the procession she would come to a checkpoint, and the soldiers leaning against dusty jeeps would wave and call, perhaps raise their weapons into the air. If she were close enough she could smell the strong coffee on their breaths, watch beads of sweat form a necklace around the throats of the Tutsi as they proffered their identity cards.

When Enata was ten, she saw the soldiers from the Rwandan Patriotic Front swoop into the town of Ruhengeri. She saw the Rwandan army fighting back, everyone running and shooting through the streets. She saw her father and mother pulled from a bus, dragged through the dirt. A gun butt to the head. The shudder of the machine gun against the soldier's body. The twist and fall of her father as he tried to protect his wife. Her brother—only four—wrenching free of her arms, running toward their parents, a cry like a bird flying from his throat, rising into the air as the bullets struck him. Her own voice fluttered against the cave of her ribs, fleeing forever into her fingertips. The Banyarwanda have no saying concerning the

affliction of silence.

Sister Josephine has finished her morning prayers. She steps onto the path and the breath of flowers greets her. Flowers she shipped from her convent in Brittany: lavender, alstroemeria, orchids, roses. Borders of thyme, basil, oregano, marjoram. She crushes leaves of lemon-scented geranium between two fingers, paints the scent across her cheek.

Along the lake shores and into the steep terraced hillsides, the gardens and coffee plantations of the *wazungu* are choked with nettles. Rocks jut from the soil. Feldspar teeth. Day by day the white families who have been her neighbours pack suitcases and flee. Banana trees wither. In the brittle chatter of their leaves Sister Josephine hears the bitterness of farewell. *Murabeho*, they whisper: forever goodbye.

This morning a pale light washes the sky; there will be no rain. Red dust rises in the still air, and jeeps filled with soldiers idle in the narrow road. Something is wrong, Sister Josephine thinks. There are no fishermen paddling out into the lake, no women washing clothes, no children bathing, filling plastic jugs and tubs with water.

From the orphanage she hears the children waking—rustling bed sheets, whispered supplications, shushed giggles. *Enata stands alone by the gate*, neck craned toward Lake Kivu, searching for Clement. Soon her sister Beata will open the door and run to her, and they will sign to each other in a language that—as far as Sister Josephine knows—only God shares.

She wonders where the boys are. By this time they are usually strutting in the streets. Only last year they stopped by her gate every morning, flat bare feet shuffling, and she brought out baskets of sweet rolls steaming beneath a towel, slices of passion fruit and papaya quivering on a paper plate. Clement always waited until last, although his eyes never left the food. His hunger so natural that sight was sufficient to appease him. With a corner of the towel, Sister Josephine hid the best roll for him.

Now the boys wear sneakers and American T-shirts. One will have a radio, and the sound of Hutu Power from the government station will tear through the morning stillness. Sweetened bread and a few slices of fruit no longer sustain their faith.

Sister Josephine hears the cook scream from the kitchen. She runs out; bubbles of soap stream from her arms. Sister! she calls. She is sobbing, and Sister Josephine can barely pick the words from the slurry of speech. She takes the woman's hands in her own. Mukabera, she says. You must speak slowly.

President Habyarimana is dead, she says. Someone shot down his plane. The government's telling people to stay inside. They're setting up roadblocks all over the country and anyone caught on the streets could be shot. Mukabera stops, pulls in a mouthful of air. They're blaming the Tutsi. All

Hutu, they say, should join the *Interahamwe* going house to house to kill them.

Sister Josephine kneels in the dirt. She feels God deserting her, fleeing into the branches of acacia, spilling into the pebbles of light that fall between the branches.

Imana has abandoned us, Mukabera says, as if, along with her God, bright broken bits of Josephine's thoughts escape from her body and clatter to the ground.

Enata turns from the gate and walks toward them. She holds her fingers to her mouth. Her dress ripples against her thin legs as she begins to run. Sister Josephine sees in her eyes the dulled shock she remembers from three years ago when Enata and Beata first arrived: the unspeakable terror of witness. In an instant, the work of three years is undone—unravelling like a snagged loop of yarn from a sweater.

Come, she says. She rises, holds out her hand. She doesn't bother to brush the earth from her skirt. Enata takes one more step and stops.

Beata runs into the yard, as if signs from her sister's fingers had flown through the air, called her out. What's happened? she asks. What's wrong?

It's the end of the world, Mukabera wails. We're all going to die.

Sister Josephine wants to slap her. She wants to beat her fists at the sky, throw rocks through the windows of the House of God.

Mukabera, we have to find courage within, she says. For the children's sake. They need to believe we can protect them.

Enata signs. If my sister can be with Maman and Papa, she will be happy, Beata says.

When Sister Josephine was a child, she used to clamber to the edge of cliffs at sunset, open her arms wide and look out toward the sun as it careened into the sea beyond Pointe du Raz. Bright beads of spray clung to her skin. Wind lifted her hair, and anticipation thrummed inside her, a taut tendon. *One day*, she would think, *the sun will catch fire in the sea. And I will be here to witness it.* The thought made her giddy and light. Light enough to walk across the sea's surface and touch the skin of the sun.

Today the sun has caught fire and she has seen it. Whether God is with her or not no longer seems important. This thought terrifies her and calms her, both at once.

We'll eat breakfast, Mukabera, then we'll all go to the chapel. Imana hasn't deserted us. We need to keep that in our hearts.

Enata takes one hand, Beata the other. Two little birds, Sister Josephine thinks, resting in my hands.

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Sister Josephine had been planting tomatoes when a fisherman knocked at the orphanage gate. Sister, I've brought you two little girls, he said. Enata

and Beata trembled behind him, eyes half-closed. Their limbs and feet bled, open sores blooming. Mud crowned their heads, covered their ragged dresses. From the way the girls pressed against each other she understood them to be sisters.

What are your names? she asked. She kept her head down, hands at her sides. A posture she learned from her father, working with the new and frightened horses. What are your names? She offered a biscuit from her skirt pocket.

I found them crouched inside my pirogue, the fisherman said. They don't speak.

Enata took a step backwards, wobbled and fell. When Sister Josephine lifted her, the child's head fell against the hollow of her shoulder. She remembered a young stork she found wounded by a rock, wing folded in against itself, a crumpled swirl of feathers on the path. She made a paste of fish and milk, smearing it on his beak until he learned to eat from her hand.

She fed the girls hot chocolate, gave them biscuits to dip in their cups. In the mornings they waited for her by the chapel door. Together they knelt and prayed.

Beata spoke within a week. When Sister Josephine brought them books, she discovered they could read. In the classroom they sat in the front row. A fluid, whispered French rolled off Beata's tongue. Enata traced the words with her fingers. The pores of her fingers drank them in. It was a month before she smiled.

Sister Josephine learned that they lived in Ruhengeri and their parents and aunt had been killed. They had come to Gisenyi to live with their grandmother. One morning, soon after they arrived, they awoke to find her dead. Killed, Beata said, by the grief in her heart.

Beata told her these things as if reciting verses from a book, but the story that surfaced in terrified glances, the startled flight from a loud noise—this remained as secret as Enata's signs. Sister Josephine was patient. *Buhoro, buhoro*, the Banyarwanda said, *ni rwo urugendo*: little by little the bird builds its nest.

The first time Enata saw Clement he was fishing with his father. The children were walking with Sister Josephine around the lake, and he stood in the bow of the pirogue, one hand on a long wooden pole, and waved. Enata did not wave back, but she remembered how he balanced on one foot like a crane and beat the surface of the lake with his pole.

Why does he do that? Enata signed to Beata. Why do the boys beat the water with sticks? Beata asked Sister Josephine.

Sister Josephine looked out across the lake. Enata wondered if it was France, and not Zaire, that she saw in the distance. They're scaring the

*tilapia* onto the hooks, Sister said.

The next day Clement came to the gate. He wore no shirt, and his ribs formed ridges between the valleys of skin. Enata was working with Beata and Sister Josephine in the garden. Rose petals stuck to her feet: tiny pink toes. A basket of blossoms lay in the grass.

I want you to teach me to read, he said, holding a new school book in his arms. Sister Josephine wondered later if it was stolen.

Enata, please open the gate, she said. She dropped a spent hydrangea stalk into the basket, smiling. Her hand brushed at a fly, leaving a streak of earth across her cheek like a second smile. Enata rose, walked to the gate with her head down.

The boy smelled sulfurous, a mixture of fish and rank lake mud. Scratches covered his legs. Sparkles of sand flew when he shook his head. What's your name? he asked.

Enata turned her head toward the garden.

She doesn't speak, said Beata.

Why? She can't?

I don't know.

You can't?

He holds the book like you hold a child, Enata thought. She took the hydrangea from the basket and offered it to him. His fingers felt damp and soft, as if he had risen from the lake bottom. Words pushed against her fingers, but she didn't sign them. Instead she wrote her name in the dirt with her rose-speckled foot: E-N-A-T-A.

During the dry season, the skies of Rwanda sang—as clear and sharp as fine crystal struck with a spoon. The air thrummed with the scent of coffee blossoms, and Mount Nyiragongo breathed harmless puffs of steam. On such days Sister Josephine returned from the market with bags of passion fruit, pineapples, mangoes, bunches of chubby pink finger-bananas. On such days the sweetness of her life intoxicated her; she fell to her knees to thank God for sending her to do His work in this country.

In France her purpose had slipped through her fingers. It had been the nuns who cared for her when her mother became too weak and her father was forced to return to his fields. The scent of their lavender soap lingered in her hair after they brushed it. She inhaled the crisp smell of starch from the sleeves of their habits.

You must pray, they whispered, kneeling with her beside her mother's bed. The sprays of sunlight falling on their wimples in the darkened room seemed to her the proof of God's promise. A simple barter. She would become a nun. Her mother would get well.

She kept her bargain despite her mother's death. But working in the herb gardens at the convent, lost among the pungent tendrils of thyme, the

hedges of rosemary with their dusky fragrance of smoke, her prayers floated away. She called to God and heard only the sloughing breeze and rubbed-together leaves. Here in Rwanda the hillsides spoke to her. The syllables of her name rolled off the tongues of rocks, but it was her given name she heard: Lé-on-tine.

When Clement arrived with his books and asked her to teach him to read, she dared to imagine a sliver of God inside herself, as if she had the power to shape the wet clay of his limbs. She had seen him pause in the bow of the pirogue, leaning against his pole, watching the children walk by in their pressed shirts, school satchels bouncing on their backs. She gave him clothes from the boxes that came from France for the orphans. She cooked him omelettes, shared her cakes and tea. She taught him the magic of numbers and sums, the soothing order of their rules. A hunger for food and for knowledge equally balanced in his soul.

Some months after Enata and Beata came, they sat at a table under a tree reading *Eloise in Paris*. Clement suddenly looked up and touched her eyelid, traced a line down to her chin. She didn't stop him.

You're so beautiful, he said. Too beautiful to be a nun.

Enata frowned and signed. Beata gave words to her shapes: My sister says there is no one more beautiful than a nun.

Enata was running back from her classes one morning when Sister Josephine stopped her. She held out a package wrapped in brown paper. Take it, Sister said.

Enata took it, felt the weight of it in her hands. It came from America. She sat in the dining hall with Beata, slid a knife beneath the tape. She put aside the row of bright stamps: strange flowers and birds. *Gorillas of the Lowlands and Mountains*, Beata read.

They flipped through the pages of photographs. Silverbacks with expressions of bored acceptance: their enormous sloped foreheads, their sad, wise eyes. Babies caught in a posture of chest-beating while mothers lounged on a carpet of nettles and vines. Black fur shone in filtered sunlight, fingers like leather gloves curled around handfuls of leaves.

Clement came out of the kitchen with his empty basin. Lake mud speckled his shorts, but his feet had been scrubbed clean. From the kitchen Enata heard Sister Josephine packing *tilapia* in ice.

I want to be an animal doctor, he said. With his sandy finger he touched a silverback's nose. Beata laughed.

Our father was a tracker, Enata signed. He went with the *wazungu* into the Virunga mountains. Once he took us. When the gorillas came close, you had to lie down on your stomach. My legs were on fire from stinging nettles.

Beata shook her head. No, she signed. I won't tell him.

Please. He always looks so sad. We should make him happy.

Enata remembered the tall rubber boots, the blue jacket her father wore. A Yankees baseball cap that someone from New York had sent. The smell of damp leaves, the sweetness of wild celery on his fingers when he came home.

You can't be a doctor, Beata told Clement. Doctors are white.

Sister Josephine says she'll help me. She says she'll give me money for school.

Rich *wazungu* pay for our school, signed Enata. I'm going to be a nurse.

Beata wrinkled her nose. You can't go to school stinking of fish, Clement, she said.

He picked up his basin. You don't understand that book, he said, sweeping it from the table with his free hand. Stamps followed, fluttering to the floor.

Stupid girl: you don't speak English. He turned away.

Enata wanted to call him back. She wanted to tell him about the photographs the *wazungu* sent to her family. Her father hacking a path with his machete. Calling to the gorillas with a low, throaty cough, head bent forward, foot resting on a fallen tree trunk. A group of tourists kneeling, the trackers, dark as gorillas, standing behind. Enata managed to save one, her favorite, tucked in her dress. She ran back for it after the soldiers came, after her Auntie came to take her and Beata away. They fled into the bush. When she looked back, the windows in her empty house looked like a gorilla's eyes: cavernous and sad. Bullet holes, exploded tears, pocked the walls. Two days later, her Auntie stepped on a snake and died.

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Kneeling beside her bed, Sister Josephine recalls when President Habyarimana visited the orphanage. The children danced for him and presented him with a bouquet of flowers. Seated in a small and uncomfortable chair, he seemed to swallow up all the space around him, as if the boundaries of his body couldn't contain him. She was struck by his smile, the roiling liquid laugh that welled from his belly. He walked down the rows of children and shook their hands. He gave them candy. His soldiers milled about among the gardens, guns swinging sleepily.

Now he has been blown out of the sky. Sister Josephine imagines his spirit rising with the smoke of his burning plane. She closes her eyes and prays for his soul. She prays for the soul of the country.

In the kitchen the radio screeches. Lists are read of people to kill. Addresses are given. Sister Josephine recognizes the name of a pediatrician she met at a conference in Kigali. The name of a professor who has been speaking out against Hutu Power.

The children are waiting in the chapel. What can she tell them? Last

night she sat in her cell and read Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthian Church. *The weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.* She nodded her head, drew comfort and order from the words. Last night she would have said to the children: *Have faith. God's love will protect you.* But between night and morning, this country she has wrapped about her like a cloak of holiness has been picked up, shaken, and flung against the rocks. She hears a faint tap on the windowsill and looks up to see a bird hunting for bugs. His head bobs from the puff of bright feathers as he drums against the concrete. The sound of his beak, she thinks, is not unlike the sound the rain made on the roof of her childhood home.

Sister Josephine tries to recall a message from Saint Paul. She tears apart the softness of vowels, hunts inside the hidden corners of consonants. She can't discern the strength of man or God. She finds only a swamp of weakness. The smoke of burning houses is all that reaches heaven now.

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One Sunday, after church, Clement asked Enata if she could come to his house for a meal. When he came to get her, he wore a clean, pressed shirt and a pair of shorts that were too big. Lining up in front of their doorway, his family looked scrubbed and shining.

They sat at a long, wobbly table, coarsely shaped. Clement's mother poured water from a steaming kettle over their hands. A little girl in a pleated dress held a basin. They ate spicy grilled *tilapia* with their fingers. Platters mounded with fried plantains and crispy potatoes shining with oil were passed around. The eyes of nine brothers and sisters watched Enata as she ate, followed the movement of her hand to her mouth. Bottles of Fanta wept onto the plastic tablecloth.

Why doesn't she talk? a brother asked.

She doesn't want to, Clement replied.

Why do you live in the orphanage? Are your parents dead?

A nod.

Did the Tutsi cockroaches kill them?

Enata thought of her Tutsi grandmother. The smoke from her pipe and the words of her stories curling into the air in late afternoon. The sweetened tea and Belgian biscuits, a thin coating of chocolate melting on the tongue. When you are eight, you have not yet cut these scars across your heart: *Hutu, Tutsi.* When you are eight and your parents are pulled from a bus by men with guns it does not matter who they are. She wiped her noisy fingers on her skirt, silenced them in her lap. The youngest brother, kneeling in the chair next to hers, touched her arm and looked at her plate. She smiled. With his tiny hands he removed the last flakes of fish from the bones, put them, one by one in his mouth.

After lunch they walked down to the lake. Bubbles rose from a hot

spring, steam swirling into the papyrus. Nearly naked boys bathed with filthy bars of soap. A film of soap, oil and sunlight shimmered on the surface; a dead fish floated. Squatting in the mud, a boy dunked a potato speared with a stick. Enata laughed without sound.

Put your toe in the water, Clement said.

She plunged her big toe into the pool, withdrew it quickly, hopped on one foot. It felt as hot as the water she poured from the kettle for Sister's tea.

They waded out onto a rotting dock. The timbers creaked and swayed beneath them as if they were on a ship. Pirogues rocked in the shallows. A man hoisted a net, paddled out into the lake. A group of little girls waved, the bright rags of their dresses lifting above their knees.

I want to learn your language. Will you teach me?

Enata nodded. A hammerkopf lifted off from a branch of eucalyptus and glided across the lake. His flat brown head bobbed toward the waves.

*Umukobwa*, she signed and pointed to herself. Girl. *Umuhungu*. Boy. Clement tried the shapes with his fingers. *Yego*, Enata signed. Yes.

That's what we make the canoes from. He pointed to a stand of silver-trunked trees on the hillside. We call them *imiseke*.

Her fingers made the sign for *igiti*, tree. Tree, Clement signed. She pointed at the lake. *Amazi* she signed, water. She embraced the sky, the lake, the hills with her arms. She held her hands together in prayer. *Imana*, she signed. God.

A convoy of soldiers crawled up the road, leaning out from open-backed jeeps and trucks. Clement leapt up laughing, made a machine gun out of air. He mowed down papyrus, banana trees, oil palms, the boy cooking the potato, the ragged giggling girls.

What's the sign for gun?

Enata squinted. With her half-closed eyes she sent him far away and made him very small. She had no sign for gun. Instead she made the sign for *uburozi*, poison. *Urupfu*, death.

They found the puppy tied to the orphanage gate a week before Christmas. His body was a cage of bones, his shoulder blades tiny wings. He shook and cried. After they washed and dried him, they brushed his fur with a brush made from coconut fiber until he shone like charcoal. He ate fistfuls of *ubugari*, a sweet potato and a piece of fish. His belly expanded until they thought he would roll down the hill.

They stood beneath the sloping roof of the dining hall on the long front porch. A steady rain fell. The sound on the tin roof was like their mother singing when Enata was small. Their grandmother used to sit on a chair in front of their door with her pipe, telling the stories of the lion-woman Nyavirezi, and her children: Nyavirungu, daughter of volcanoes, and

Ryangombe, the powerful king. Their brother cooed in his sling. Their father squatted with his machete and a piece of wood. The shapes appeared slowly, and Enata and Beata guessed what they would be. A truck. A boat. A mountain gorilla with her baby. Sometimes he spoke of the *mzungu* lady, Dian Fossey, who lived with the gorillas and made them famous. He had been her tracker until she was murdered.

Enata signed and pointed to her fingers. At first Beata stared, silent and frowning. Enata signed again, loped out into the rain and beat her hands against her chest. Beata laughed and clapped her hands together.

Digit, she said. We'll call the puppy Digit.

On the window ledge above her bed, the small wooden gorilla that her father carved had squatted, protecting Enata while she slept. This is Digit, her father had said. He was Mademoiselle Fossey's favourite: her child.

Digit was missing for days before Enata found him lying in the flower garden. When he tried to come to her he stumbled and fell. She carried him to Sister Josephine and they made him a bed. They took him to the infirmary. Sister Josephine boiled fish and mixed it with sweet condensed milk. For a week he lay on his blankets. Enata slept in a cot beside him. She dipped her fingers in the sweetened fish. Digit licked them with his soft, hot tongue.

On the day Digit died, Clement came to see her. He had joined Hutu Power, and he wore sunglasses, American jeans, a T-shirt that said "Hard Rock Cafe." On his feet, a new pair of boots.

He rarely came to read books any more, and when Sister Josephine questioned him he replied that big things were going to happen in the country. Secret, powerful things. Only stupid people read books, he said. Soon we won't need them any more.

But he dug a grave for Digit, laid him gently inside. He made a cross from *imiseke* wood with "Digit" painted in blue letters. Two weeks later he came with a dog carved in ironwood. Enata recognized the high, pointed ears, the tail curled into a question mark.

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Mukabera is cooking a pot of porridge. It is thin and has a sharp, sour smell; the margarine she has stirred in is rancid. Sister Josephine opens a cupboard, takes out a tin with a few packets of sugar inside. She has abandoned her black skirt, put on a pair of men's trousers. Spirals of tea-coloured hair escape from her scarf.

In the past three days families have been arriving at the orphanage for protection. Children sleep four and five to a bed. People squat in hallways, lie down on the floors. The news from the countryside is bad.

Today it is raining: black squalls burst from bloated clouds. Water splashes

into the pans and basins placed beneath the roof for collection. Water tears at the soil of the garden—now nearly picked clean—disgorges mouthfuls of mud. Sodden ghosts wander among the bean stalks. There is no power, no phone. Piles of garbage tilt behind the buildings.

Sister Josephine pulls on her raincoat. Today the soldiers are allowing people to go to the market. They're nearly out of food. Mukabera gives the pot of porridge to Enata to bring into the dining hall. She rolls an extra fold into her *pagne* to protect her clothes from the mud.

No, Enata signs. I want to go with them.

Sister knows without waiting for Beata what she has said. Enata, you can't come. You're needed here.

A light shines in Enata's face. Sister recognizes the burning wick of God. The wick that sputters in the hollow space of her own chest.

Before the war began, the shores of Lake Kivu glistened—bejewelled. Gardeners worked in the European gardens of the coffee farmers, the executives from Primus Beer. Belgian women sat beneath umbrellas sipping tea and iced juice. Sister Josephine would wave, call them by name. Tourists at the Palm Beach Hotel lounged in beach chairs, ate passion fruit and pineapple from delicate china. Curling fingers of euphorbia, silver tongues of eucalyptus screened them from the sun.

Today, two more houses have burned. Blackened timbers lean against each other. There is no glass left in the windows; they gape like the empty sockets of a skull. Unhinged shutters slap.

The rain falls harder. It slams into the streets, stains Sister Josephine's sneakers red with mud. When she descended the hill from the orphanage and saw the men with machetes and guns, she sent Mukabera back. The road was thick with them; they loomed beneath the trees, lined the paths and drank their beer. I don't think your identity card will protect you now, she said.

She knocks on the doors of shuttered shops, walks on when no one answers. Down a small dirt path where huts squat beneath pale-leaved acacia there is a little shop where Sister Josephine goes to buy the crumbly cookies from Kenya that the children love. She knocks and a woman lets her in.

Good morning, Sister, the woman says. She is tall and thin, her face sculpted from ironwood with a delicate blade: the features that inspired the Belgians to designate the Tutsi as the chosen tribe.

Good morning, Pauline, she replies. *Amakuru?* How are you?

*Ni meza*, I'm fine.

As if they stood in the sunshine and the world still made sense.

Do you have any bread? Some powdered milk?

The woman disappears into her house. Sister Josephine hears a radio: a song praising Hutu Power.

Here Sister, take this.

In a sack, two loaves of bread, a folded piece of newspaper from which flakes of powdered milk spill. A packet of Kenyan biscuits. Some sugar. Sister Josephine reaches into her bag for her coins. The woman stops her.

*Pas d'importance, Soeur*, it doesn't matter. In a few days time I will be dead.

Enata stands at the locked gate. A red swollen sun rolls on the eastern horizon. She climbs over the bars and runs down the hill behind the orphanage. She hopes Beata will not wake and find her missing.

The *ta-ta-ta* of gunfire rattles the ground. *Abazimu* rise like mist from the lake. Their abandoned bodies roll on the waves. The ghosts are singing: their voices chatter from the tops of trees. They brush against her skin. They catch in branches, snarled nettles, palm fronds. In a scarf, Enata gathers the large heart-shaped leaves of *umuravumba*.

Last night the killing began. People calling out, banging on the gate, pleading for shelter. Gangs going house to house with spears, machetes, clubs studded with nails they called *nta mpongano*, no mercy. The living crawled out from the piles of dead. Smoke filled the night sky like a heavy pungent breath. With the water she has saved in her basin she will boil the *umuravumba* leaves and make a tea to treat the wounds.

The Banyarwanda say about God: *Imana yirwa ahandi igataha i Rwanda*, God spends the day everywhere but comes home to sleep in Rwanda. Sister Josephine steps across the bodies in the road. Eyes and mouths open, they offer up their innocence to her. *Body of Christ, blood of Christ*. Flies lift in a cloud.

Soldiers and militia toss bodies into piles. They sing as they heave—a rhythmic chanting. Identity cards and bright scraps of clothing swirl in the dirt. She shouldn't have come out, but there's no more water. There are so many wounded lying in the halls. They have no more cloth to make bandages, no way to clean the gashes.

Standing at the edge of the road Sister Josephine recognizes two doctors from Médecins Sans Frontiers. They lean out from a ridge overlooking the lake. She calls to them, takes a few tentative steps onto the bloodied sand. They don't hear her—they're counting bodies in the water. With them is a journalist, counting in English. His voice has a flat, sing-song quality, as if he's reciting a children's verse. She thinks of the orphans playing a game they learned from an American tourist.

*Eighty-three, eighty-four  
shut the door  
Eighty-five, eighty-six  
pick-up-sticks*

Sister Josephine awakes to the sound of singing. A crazed, wild song. Notes torn from the throat of a lion. She pulls on pants and a shirt, runs outside. A mass of men and boys pushes against the gate. Women dance in their bright *pagnes*. The night sky sizzles with torchlight. Above their heads hoes and machetes leave incandescent circling trails.

She can name most of them. She held them in her arms when they were small and sick and their mothers brought them, trembling with fever, to her door. They left milk, fish, fruit as payment. They sang to her in greeting as they worked their fields.

What do you want from us? she asks.

We hear you're hiding Tutsi. We've come to fumigate, one says. There is laughter, an incomprehensible torrent of shouts. A beer bottle sails over the wall and shatters beside her feet.

The air staggers with the fumes of *urwagwa*, the strong banana beer. The men sway and lean into each other, eyes glittering. She can count their missing teeth.

Sister Josephine hears a door open. She turns to see Enata walk toward her, hands held out, palms up like a painting of Jesus, the burst of gold around His head, the shining stigmata. The men push against the gate.

It's the stupid one, a woman calls. The mute. Hey, stupid—are you a Tutsi cow? Can you speak to save yourself?

We are all God's children, Sister Josephine says. If you want to kill someone, kill me.

Enata comes to the gate. Her eyes glow in the light of the torches. Her body trembles with light.

For a moment the crowd pauses. Sister Josephine detects a slight backwards shifting of bodies. She dares to pray they will be spared.

We don't want to hurt you, Sister. We only want the *inyenzi*. We're taking them to a safe place. If you bring out the Tutsi cockroaches, the rest of you can live.

A shrill cackling erupts. Then a surge, a freak wave. The gate tears from its hinges; the sea pours in, unstoppable. From the dormitories Sister Josephine hears the screams of children, the keening of the women. She pulls Enata inside the circle of her arms.

Stop, she shouts. Stop where you are. Miraculously, they do. She smells the hot stale sweat, the sour beer, a metallic synapse of excitement. I ask you in the name of God to leave, she says.

The dark curve of the sea parts, reveals a luminescent vein of earth. Clement emerges, steps across this path. He appears to Sister Josephine to be floating toward her.

Enata pulls free. She stands in front of him, arms outstretched, impaled on spears of light. Her nightdress quivers in the breeze. Her scarf quivers against her shoulder.

Tell them you are Hutu, Clement signs. His fingers are wood; they can't get around the shapes of the words. He doesn't know the sign for *mbabarira*, please.

There are no Hutu, no Tutsi in God's eyes, Enata signs. The words glow in her fingertips; her hands are flames. Torchlight ricochets from walls, palm trees, the bruised ghosts of Sister Josephine's flowers.

Behind him the crowd shifts, presses forward. Torchlight glints from the nails in their clubs. They begin to chant. Clement senses that in a minute they will break into a run.

She's Hutu! he shouts. If he moves toward her, they will kill him too.

Tell them, he signs again.

Enata kneels, palms together, bows her head. Her lips move without sound. Sister Josephine kneels beside her. She prays that in the few moments she has managed to bargain from God, the children have run into the hills. She prays that He will find a way to keep them safe in His hands. She prays that Enata will feel no pain.

If you can kill us while we pray then God help you, she says. There's nothing more I can do.

Sister, he says. You could save so many.

No, Clement. It's not for me to judge who can live and who must die.

Clement lowers himself onto his knees. At least the gift of dignity is his to give. A gun glints from the waistband of his trousers.

Sister Josephine, will you pray for me?

Yes, Clement, I will.

They pray, then Clement rises. He puts the gun to her head. Sister Josephine was twelve when her mother died. She walked with her father to the cliffs. The wind pulled at her, and she tilted toward the edge of the precipice. The upwelling spray cooled her cheeks. *Papa, she's not really dead*, she remembers saying. *I can feel her in the water and the wind. She's turned into the breath of God.*

From a nearby tree Sister Josephine hears the sound of a bird. She can see him from the corner of her eye. A small green bird perched on a yellow trumpet flower. She sees that Enata watches him too. How odd, she thinks. He must mistake the light of torches for the rising sun.

## Quiet Rain

The winter snow was dirty and in patches, dirty even where it was banked three feet high, shovelled and shaped for months by those in charge of keeping the train platform clear; in other places, it was scattered like oily rags left carelessly for someone else to pick up, and it was there that Earl stood beside his mother and watched the rain fall evenly out of the sky. He watched it strike the puddles and send bubbles to the surface that were soon pierced by more rain. Where the rain fell into snow it disappeared without a sound. At first Earl thought the rain was only falling over the puddles until he let go of his mother's hand and walked over and stood in his rubber boots at the edge of a snow bank and realized it was raining there too, only it was a quiet rain.

"Earl. Wait over here with me. I don't want you playing in the snow now."

Earl had been playing in the snow all winter—had been instructed to get out of the house and find something to do in the snow, but now for some reason his mother thought less of winter weather. He waited until just before he thought she would replace her reasoned voice with her yelling voice, then returned slowly to watch the unpredictable bubbles in the puddle appear and disappear. The sky was bright despite the falling rain. He found a puddle with swirling greens and blues of oil on the surface; the rain was pushing it around in constantly changing patterns. He squatted down and poked his finger into the kaleidoscope of colour and giggled.

"Don't you get dirty now. Those are clean pants you have on."

Earl knew the importance of clean pants. They had waited for the train to arrive yesterday, a cold and windy day, and it was one of those days Earl forgot he was wearing clean pants. Today, his mother reminded him every chance she got.

Yesterday seemed like a long day that was a long ways away. The train had arrived late and when it came his father wasn't on the train after all. He was coming home from the war. The war was not over, but he was coming home anyway.

The platform outside the train station was getting crowded. From where Earl squatted beside the puddle he could see boots and legs everywhere. A woman in a red coat, clutching a black purse in one hand, made her way surreptitiously between the clumps of dirty snow—brown and black and

pummelled by soles of gumboots and galoshes—and the puddles they were melting into. Her shoes were red too and in the choreography of taking up positions near where the train was expected, she stepped in Earl's puddle, not once but twice. The in and out of the woman's red shoes caused a swirl in the oil slick and Earl chuckled at the show everyone but him was missing. His appreciation of the puddle drew his mother's attention once again, and without saying anything she grabbed his hand and pulled him to her side. "I think I can hear the train," she said, but Earl couldn't hear anything but the murmur of expectation all around him. He took turns standing on one leg for what seemed like a minute before switching to his other leg. After only three turns he could hear the train coming. It might have been the same train his mother heard. It might not.

The train squealed and trudged its way to rest beside the platform. Once it stopped the engine gave a sigh as if it had had a long day and wasn't in the mood to do anything but rest. Two cars were sprinkled with passengers and a soldier came out of the front car, his arms cradled around the shoulders of two other men in uniform. Some of the people gathered began to clap while he disembarked from the train. He was placed in a wheelchair that awaited him, but his right leg was in a cast from his ankle to his hip and it was clear this wasn't going to work because his white leg couldn't bend, so the two healthy soldiers picked him up as before and carried him into the station. The man wasn't the father Earl was hoping for. He looked too young to be anybody's father. While the soldier was being tended to, eight students, equally boys and girls dressed in navy blue and grey, gathered in front of the train carrying instruments in their eager hands. Their teacher moved them over to the side of the platform and a crude facsimile of *When the Saints Go Marching In* filled the station. People with suitcases and people without suitcases stepped off the train in singles and in pairs. Earl could see hugs and kisses and shoulder-punches all around him as knots of people began to make their way inside. His mother squeezed his hand and pulled him down to the second passenger car. An old man held onto the rail and stepped off the train backwards. No one was there to meet him and he didn't look disappointed. Two porters moved a freight and luggage trolley across the platform and the band finished their song to a spattering of applause from the few remaining people. Earl stood there waiting for his mother to say something about being mad or disappointed so they could go home and eat the stew that was simmering on the stove. His mother didn't move; instead, she let go of his hand and put her hands in the pockets of her fur coat. Earl put his hands in his pants pockets because the coat he was wearing only had one pocket and it was small and filled with marbles. Earl was sure he knew what had happened: his father had changed his mind and decided to stay in the war until it was over. He was working up the nerve to tell his mother the explanation he had come

up with when a man in uniform, carrying a duffel bag over his shoulder, stepped from the train and stood absolutely still. Earl could hear his mother take a deep breath that stayed in her chest for a long time. She stared at the man, who remained motionless, so Earl did too. His mother had pictures of his father and he knew this wasn't him. This man had white hair on his head.

"Tom," his mother said. Not loud enough for the man to hear, but more of a whisper. The man slung his duffel bag over his other shoulder and walked slowly over to where Earl and his mother stood. He put the duffel bag down in a puddle. He held Earl's mother in his arms and began to cry.

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The rain gurgled in the storm sewers on the way home. Earl walked behind his mother and his father, named Tom. Tom had removed Earl's toque at the train station, ruffled his hair with a bony hand, and put the toque back on Earl's head. Now Tom walked slowly beside his mother, her right arm around his waist, the two of them under a black umbrella. His mother and Tom didn't talk, and all he could hear was rain pelting the umbrella. The rain on his toque didn't make a sound. On days like this the clouds fell into the valley and Earl imagined there were no such things as mountains on either side.

Their progress up the sidewalk was halting and slow. Earl kept thinking about the stew. He thought they should walk faster. His mother tried carrying the duffel bag for a while, but it was too heavy. Uncle Jim's taxi pulled up beside them and Uncle Jim beeped the horn and Earl got to sit in the front seat.

"I told you to give me a call," Uncle Jim said into the rear-view mirror.

Earl's mother was looking out the window. It took her a while to say, "I didn't see any use. He wasn't on the train yesterday. He might not have been there today."

"You must be exhausted," Uncle Jim said. "You must be plum tuckered out."

When they pulled up in front of the house, Uncle Jim took care of the duffel bag, but not before he procured a flask of whiskey from the trunk of the car.

"Earl, take the clothes you have in my closet to your own room. You'll be sleeping by yourself tonight."

It took Earl two trips to accomplish what his mother had asked. When he got to the kitchen there were three glasses of whiskey out, so without asking he poured himself a glass of milk. He filled the glass all the way to the top because it seemed like a special occasion of some kind. His mother noticed but never said anything.

"It's a good thing, them sending you home now," Uncle Jim said. "When

your nerves are shot the last thing you want is to be in Jerry's firing line. What you need now is rest. Get your mind away from all you've been through. I know, I know—I've got no right telling a veteran what he should be doing at a time like this. If it weren't for my heart murmur I would have been in your shoes and I doubt I'd have lasted as long."

Uncle Jim proposed a toast to a safe return from the war. He drank half the whiskey in his glass and Earl's mother sipped at hers then looked over at the sink. Tom put his glass back on the table without drinking anything, then reached over and ruffled Earl's hair one more time. Earl had his favourite car in his hands under the table, a miniature fire engine with a swivel ladder. Something told him this wasn't the time to show it to his father, who had turned to look down at him.

"You've gotten bigger," he said.

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When Earl woke up he couldn't hear anything. He remembered the sounds of his mother and father's voices. There had been no offering of a bedtime story, and from his own bed he had heard his mother's voice moving up and down the same scale as the sheet music he used to practice piano. The voice of his father always came after a few seconds of silence and always as a murmur near B-flat. They could have been talking about the war or about the rain or even Uncle Jim. He'd fallen asleep imagining his father fighting with a man called Jerry.

Earl walked into the kitchen wearing his flannel pyjamas with brown bats and white baseballs repeated over and over. His mother was dressed and sitting by herself at the table, her head resting in one hand, the other hand holding the handle of her teacup. Her back was to him, but he knew she could see him because she had eyes in the back of her head.

"Your father's tired. He's still sleeping."

Earl only drank tea out of his own cup—the one with the blue bears on the side. He fetched it from the cupboard and brought it to the table. He put a full teaspoon of sugar in the cup without spilling and waited for his mother to pour the tea over the sugar. It was important to stir the tea before adding milk.

"It's Saturday," she said. "I have to go to work in an hour. When Auntie Rose comes you tell her your father is home and I don't need her to watch you today. And don't wake your father. Let him get up when he's ready."

Auntie Rose wasn't a real auntie. When she came over to stay with him it was because his mother had to work or he had chicken pox. She whistled all the time and liked to play chess. She knew how to play piano like a pro and they would play *Chopsticks* together and when it was over, laugh at something they couldn't explain.

Earl kept waiting for his mother to tell him to get dressed, but her eyes

were busy with getting ready for work and didn't notice his pyjamas or the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball cap on his head. She started writing a note at the kitchen table, then crumpled it up and put it in her purse.

"I'll be home in time to cook supper. You can tell your father that. You be good, you hear!"

From his kneeling position on the couch, Earl could see his mother out the window making her way down the two levels of sidewalk to the road. Before she turned toward town and disappeared behind the privet hedge, she always turned and waved. Today Earl doffed his baseball cap because he had just hit a home run and the crowd kept on applauding until he came out of the dugout to acknowledge them. It was always the same thing after he'd hit a home run—he had to wait until the inning was over before jogging back to centre field.

It felt like he was home alone but he wasn't. His father was in the bedroom sleeping. If the house caught on fire he would wake up and Earl would be able to tell his friends his father had come home from the war just in time to save him. Earl got down on his belly and slithered across the grey linoleum until he came to the door and he pushed it slowly until there was just enough room for him to enter the bedroom. He could slither as good as Archie or Steve or anyone he knew, and it was good practice because if he didn't have a heart murmur he would be going to war some day unless he was good enough to play baseball. His head was down until he reached the side of the bed and only then did he risk looking around to get his bearings. The blankets were piled on top of the bed and on top of his father, and he knew his father was in there somewhere because the pile of blankets moved up and down rhythmically like Archie's dog's belly did when he was dreaming. There were dust balls gathered at the waist of Earl's pyjama bottoms and in his belly button, but other than that he was safe. He would report to his commanding officer it was a mission without incident.

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"Someone needs to pull the pinecones," Earl said. His father was finally up and it was one in the afternoon. His father didn't seem to understand. "The clock can't bong if you don't pull the pinecones."

Earl could reach the pinecones if he used a chair, but his mother had told him to let her do it. His mother had forgotten all about it and now the bonging pinecone was at the top. Earl pulled on the sleeve of his father's shirt until he followed him into the living room, and Earl waited until both pinecones were pulled almost down to the floor.

"It's been a long time since I've seen a clock," his father said, then walked slowly back to the kitchen.

When his father sat down at the kitchen table, Earl fetched his Brooklyn

Dodgers baseball cap and handed it to him. His father put the cap on but it just sat on the top of his white hair and made Earl laugh. Before he handed it back, his father ruffled his hair again and Earl realized he knew something about soldiers that he could tell Archie and Steve. Both their fathers were over in the war, but because they hadn't come back yet, they wouldn't know about the ruffling of hair.

"I can play the piano," Earl said. "Do you want to hear me?"

"Maybe later."

"After you eat breakfast we could play chess if you like. I have a favourite move. That's how I beat Auntie Rose all the time."

Earl thought about why it was his father liked to sit and listen to the clock ticking without any music or conversation to interfere. When you're in the war you don't listen to music or play chess—it would be gun noises you would listen to. You'd have to get used to listening for the enemy a lot too. After they'd both practiced listening for a while, Earl made his father two slices of toast and brought the marmalade out of the fridge and the marmalade spoon with a bone handle that had a picture of King George. He moved the kettle to the middle of the stove until it whistled, then added some more water to the teapot. He was shocked to find his father didn't take even one spoon of sugar and no milk at all. There would be some things about going to war that would be hard to get used to.

On a card table in the living room, Earl had the chessmen set up and ready to go. Earl told his father he got the first move and his father sat down like he was going to play, but he looked at the board for a long time and said he wanted to walk in the garden. His gardening boots were behind a bench on the back porch, and after he put them on he stood and wiggled his toes.

"The garden's just mud now," Earl said, but his father didn't take notice. He walked into the backyard where Earl's mother grew carrots and potatoes. It started to rain and his father didn't have a coat on, but he stayed out there anyway. He walked over to the corner of the yard where they had three hens and one rooster in a small chicken coop. Earl's father opened the door to the chicken coop and stood under the apple tree and watched as the four chickens tentatively explored their newfound freedom. The chickens didn't make a run for it like Earl thought they would; instead, they took two or three steps, cocked their heads, scratched the earth and did it all over again. The rooster flapped his wings once and looked disappointed, as if he had forgotten how to fly.

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There was no way for Earl to tell if he had to go to church on Sunday or not. The first Sunday after his father came home was a Sunday without church. He had heard the discussion over breakfast, and instead of church

they were going to go for a ride up the lake in Uncle Jim's taxi and then visit over tea. Earl didn't much like his Auntie Fiona. She was a real aunt and always had something to say about Earl's fingernails or the state of his ears where, she said, he could grow a crop of potatoes. He complained until his mother decided he could play at Archie's house until suppertime.

It was a slow morning. Earl coloured in the new colouring book his mother brought home and the three of them sat in the living room and listened to *Amos and Andy* on the radio. His mother busied herself with knitting. There were things Earl wanted to know about the war. Things like: Why were all the Germans called Jerry? How many men had his father shot when he was over there? And where had his father been wounded? He tried sliding questions like these in when there was a break in the broadcast, but he was shot down every time.

"Your father doesn't want to talk about the war, Earl. I've told you that before. You constantly bringing it up will only make him sicker than he already is."

Earl remembered that in September, just after he'd started kindergarten, he had an earache and couldn't sleep. The doctor came to the house and gave him some drops and his mother stayed home with him for two days. No wonder his father slept so much, because when Earl got sick he was so tired he couldn't even play with the Plasticine Auntie Rose gave him. When he asked his questions his mother had rebuked him with her almost-yelling voice, which was sometimes worse than her yelling voice. She never gave his father a chance to answer any of his questions. He was determined to try again when his mother was out of the house.

When he got to Archie's, Steve was already there because he'd been invited for lunch. That meant he would have to wait a long time before he could play on Archie's drum set. Archie's mother helped him off with his hat and coat and ruffled his hair before sending him upstairs to play. How had *she* found out about the ruffling of hair? That was a big part of what he had to tell and now it seemed everybody knew about it.

Archie and Steve weren't playing the drum set after all. They were content to lie on the floor and work on a jigsaw puzzle of a bridge going over a river.

"My father came home from the war," Earl said.

"Yeah, we know."

"He's got an earache or something. He's home to get some rest."

Steve and Archie weren't interested in talking about much of anything. They only talked about finding the next missing piece to the puzzle.

"He's got lots of stories to tell me when he gets better. I don't know how many Jerrys he shot but I think it was quite a few."

Steve said, "That's not what I heard. I heard your dad's a chicken and he's scared to fight. I heard he was yellow."

“Mom said we’re not to talk about stuff like that, Steve. You heard her.”

“My father ain’t afraid of no one. And his hair is white now, not yellow.”

“Yeah, well—”

“Steve! The cake, remember.”

Earl sat opposite his two friends and watched them search through a pile of jumbled puzzle pieces. He lined up a battalion of tin soldiers from Archie’s army collection. Earl used to have a cookie tin full of soldiers, but after his father joined the army his mother threw them all out. Archie’s mother had baked a chocolate cake and when it cooled she was going to ice it and they could have some, but Earl decided to go home early. Archie’s mother saw him putting on his hat and coat at the door and wrapped a piece of cake without icing for him to take away. Earl thanked her even though he knew he would never eat it. His mother could eat the cake, but he wasn’t interested.

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Spring in the valley had several false starts before the sun was successful in pulling new growth from the earth. Earl’s father was in a recuperating stage, according to the doctor, and his struggle to regain his health mimicked the weather. One day, after Earl had kept up a barrage of questions, his father reinforced the edict his mother had sent out to avoid anything close to the topic of war. He couldn’t get the Sunday that Steve had accused his father of being yellow out of his mind, and what he wanted more than anything was a story that would refute it once and for all. The discussion had started out without incident—his father told him his job had been in vehicle maintenance and when trucks or tanks or anything that moved broke down it was his job to fix them as fast as he could—but Earl had pressed for more details (were bullets flying around when he was fixing things?) and his father allowed his pent-up anger to escape without warning. After his mother’s favourite Royal Albert teacup was shattered in the kitchen sink, Earl went outside to play in the woodshed until his mother returned from work.

For some reason his father’s health began to improve after the outburst. They had been getting by on his mother’s part-time work down at Quality Produce and his father got a shift now and again at the sawmill when someone was sick. Earl liked it when they were both working because Auntie Rose came by in the afternoons and something close to wartime routine was back in order.

For several weeks in a row it didn’t seem like there was a war going on at all. The radio was seldom on and always switched off during news reports. If there was no work at the sawmill, his father walked into the mountains for hours at a stretch. A Saturday night beyond Earl’s wildest imagination took place when Uncle Jim and Auntie Fiona came over and

the four adults sat at the kitchen table drinking and talking louder and louder, then Auntie Rose showed up at the door and looked after Earl while everyone else went to a dance at Proctor. Auntie Fiona told Earl he shouldn't wear his hat in the house because he would lose his hair when he grew older, but that had been her only criticism. Auntie Rose let Earl help her make homemade doughnuts and read him *Cinderella* in German, which was her native tongue. It was okay for Auntie Rose to speak German because she had been born in Canada, hadn't even met Adolph Hitler and was married to an Englishman named Ben Field.

Other than the night they went out dancing, Earl never saw his father take a drink. He was healthy enough and had dug the garden over. He made breakfast every Sunday morning and to Earl the new order of things began to feel like it had always been that way. His father wasn't keen on baseball but would play catch with him after supper if he had worked day shift at the sawmill. Reports on the radio about the outside world were ignored and news was overheard or didn't exist.

Earl's mother never made the same pie two times in a row, and she always made one at a time so they were fresh when they ate them. One evening in June, on the hottest day of the year so far, she made two cherry pies and told Earl to accompany her to Archie's house.

"Archie's father has been reported missing in action," she said. "It doesn't mean the worst, but we have to prepare for the possibility that he won't be coming home. We won't stay long, but you can keep Archie company for a while."

Archie was lying on his bed with his dog beside him, staring out the window.

"I heard about your father going missing," Earl said. "I sure hope they find him."

Archie didn't say anything for a while. He just lay there petting his dog that ordinarily wouldn't be allowed up on the bed. Earl tried to figure out how to explain to Archie that he'd be willing to share his father with him, that they could play catch together, but he couldn't see how to go about it.

"I know what he looks like," Archie said. "Because of the pictures. But I can't remember the sound of his voice."

Earl knew the sound of his father's voice even though he was never one to say much. What Earl didn't know was the sound his father would make if he laughed because that was one thing he hadn't done since he'd returned home.

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Every second week there was an assembly at school. First the choir would sing and then there was a spot reserved for the brass band. Mr. Beasley, the principal, always had something to say about the brave soldiers who were

away fighting for freedom and known casualties were given special recognition. When this happened, some students sitting on the gym floor near Earl would turn and scowl at him. Earl stared at the principal's lips when that happened, expecting his rambling voice to reach out and include his father, who had put two years into the war and needed to rest now. Earl wanted to remind Mr. Beasley of this, but a week before, the principal had strapped three older boys for smashing a robin's nest on school property and he seemed like the kind of man to be afraid of.

There was always so much to think about. The Saturday night everyone went dancing in Proctor was like one of the marks his mother made to show his progress every six months, with him standing up straight with his back to the door jamb—only the happiness that was everywhere that night was never there again. His father still worked the odd shift, sometimes three in a row, but he was edgy. His mother could only muster cheerfulness a minute or two at a time. His mother and father snarled at one another, like two dogs on opposite sides of the street, and when this happened Earl practiced his scales on the piano to fill the room with something. Some nights everything would be quiet except for the ticking of the pinecone clock, but later he would wake up to a battle of bitter words and shattered teacups. Earl would get up in the morning to find his mother sweeping the kitchen floor with the corn broom and his father out of the house walking somewhere.

After supper on a night when his mother and father had eaten without saying a word, his father asked him if he wanted to go outside and play catch. Playing catch had always been Earl's suggestion in the past. After they played catch for a while, his father suggested the two of them walk to the store and buy an ice cream cone.

"I'm going to be gone again for a while, Earl. I hope it won't be for long but I'm expecting you to look after your mother while I'm away. She'll need your help. You could make breakfast on Sundays maybe. There's been a turn in the war. I don't think it will take too much longer. Your mother doesn't want me to go anywhere. She thinks I'm selfish. There are some things you do because you want to. Some things don't give you a choice. Can you understand that?"

Earl nodded his head because it seemed like the right thing to do and kept licking away at his caramel ice cream cone.

"We all have to make sacrifices sometimes. If you can look after your mother that would be a big help. I know I can count on you. It hasn't been easy for you either. I know that. You've been a real trooper, Earl. A real trooper. Why don't we sit down here for a while and finish our cones. I didn't buy one for your mother."

"You're going to come back," Earl said. "You're not going missing or anything?"

"I'll be back, don't you worry. And when I get back I'm going to get myself a good job and buy us a car. Then we can go for Sunday drives and not just where Auntie Fiona wants to."

Earl bit into his cone after pushing the remaining ice cream to the bottom with his tongue. He realized his father was more like him than he thought.

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The next morning Earl woke up at the same time as his father. His mother was still in bed, so the two of them had breakfast together. While his father had tea, Earl played him a tune on the piano, but was interrupted when Uncle Jim came to the door.

"I'm ready, Jim. Thanks for this."

Uncle Jim smiled at Earl even though nothing was funny, and Earl's father disappeared into the bedroom. When he came back to the living room he was by himself, and he grabbed his duffel bag and plunked it down beside the door. He got down on his knees and looked at Earl.

"He can come with us," Uncle Jim said. "I'll see he gets back home."

It only took a few minutes to get to the train station and Earl sat in the back seat, his right arm slung over the duffel bag. Uncle Jim waited until a ticket had been arranged and then gave Earl's father a hug and left, saying he'd be back before nine to give Earl a ride home. The two of them sat on a wooden bench facing the tracks, Earl's feet swinging back and forth in space.

"I'll look after things at home," Earl said. "Don't you worry."

Earl's father lifted his arm and Earl was certain he was in for another hair-ruffling, but instead his father wrapped his arm around his shoulder and pulled him close. Earl could hear the train's whistle coming down the valley, and it had the sound of an out-of-town-train even though it was as in-to-town as you could get.

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There was stillness in the house after Earl's father went away. Some things were easier, some were harder. Going to the last few weeks of school was something Earl looked forward to. The mean kids had to find someone else to scowl at. The Americans had finally joined the war and people were hopeful.

Earl saw more and more of Auntie Rose and less of his mother, who worked as many shifts at Quality Produce as she could and sometimes went for a drink with her co-workers after. Earl kept the coal chute full, which was easy in the summer because they only used the stove when they needed hot water. He was in charge of the pinecone clock, filling the mousetraps in the basement with cheese and emptying them when they

were full. He also did what his father had suggested and cooked pancakes on Sunday mornings. One afternoon he let the chickens out for some exercise, but Auntie Rose said not to do it again because it took them most of the afternoon to get them back in their pen.

Some nights his mother got home late and a man named Charlie dropped her off in front of the privet hedge. Earl could see the bumper of his car out on the road and it sometimes took his mother a long time to get out of the car and come in. She was always in a good mood when she got a ride home. She would grab Earl and throw him on the bed and tickle him non-stop until he said he had to pee.

"I'm going to make macaroni and cheese for supper. Your favourite."

"When will the war will be over?" Earl asked.

"Who knows? The day Hitler folds his tent would be my guess."

From what Earl was able to understand, most of the men lived in ditches while the war was on. If Hitler lived in a tent then Winston Churchill probably did too. It didn't seem fair if they were both comfortable in their own tents considering what the soldiers had to go through.

"So, Winston Churchill lives in his own tent?"

"Not likely," his mother said. "They've probably got him hidden away in a secluded mansion somewhere."

"But I thought you said—"

"Earl, enough talk about the war. I'm going to invite Charlie for supper after work tomorrow night. He said he'd play catch with you if you like. Grab some carrots from the cellar, will you? We need something to go with this macaroni."

Carrots were easy to grow tired of. He was willing to bet they'd eat carrots the night Charlie came by too. Carrots, and for dessert canned cherries that felt like rubber eyeballs when you chewed them.

After they'd eaten, Earl asked if he could go over to Auntie Rose's house. His mother looked disappointed but said okay. Earl figured if he invited Auntie Rose and Ben Field for dinner, then they could help with making doughnuts. His mother never made doughnuts because she didn't know how.

Earl was only gone half an hour and when he got back he told his mother Auntie Rose and Ben Field were coming for dinner too.

"Who invited them?"

"I did. Auntie Rose says she'll cook so you won't have to when you get home, and she'll bring her doughnut maker over to make dessert. They're way better than downtown doughnuts. You'll see."

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Dumplings the way Auntie Rose cooked them made stew even better. Carrots and celery and onion didn't stand out so much in a stew, and if you

helped yourself you could scoop out mostly meat and potatoes. Earl helped Auntie Rose starting in the middle of the afternoon because stew always tasted better if it was left to soak in its own juices. Once dinner was prepared, Earl played piano with Auntie Rose, and when Ben Field came over they played chess. His special move didn't work on Ben Field, and they'd finished three games by the time his mother came home with Charlie.

Ben Field said he didn't drink which was fine with Charlie who brought six beers with him. He looked happy to have them all to himself. Adults wouldn't eat, even when dinner was ready, if there was visiting and drinking to be done first. Earl's mother and Auntie Rose both had a small glass of sherry, so Earl made himself chocolate milk. Earl mentioned playing catch, but Charlie said he'd forgotten his baseball mitt and they'd play catch some other time. Earl sipped on his chocolate milk because he knew his mother wouldn't let him make another, and in the same time, Charlie finished three beers and opened a fourth with dinner.

"I'm a bookkeeper," Charlie said to Auntie Rose's question. "I'm an independent so I have contracts with small businesses in town. Like Quality Produce. That's how I met Vera here. A number-cruncher. That's me. It's mostly straightforward but some businesses lose things and they expect me to fill the gap. That's when things can get testy."

"Do number-crunchers have to join the war?" Earl asked.

"Earl! Don't be rude. That's none of your business," his mother said.

"I just wondered."

"Hell, Vera, that's okay. He's not the first one to ask. I have an exemption. A religious exemption. There are only two beers left, Ben. If you're going to change your mind don't wait till the sun goes down."

Earl's mother suggested they all move into the living room after they'd eaten so Earl could play some piano music while she and Charlie cleaned up the kitchen. Earl played "Bridal March" twice, falteringly, while Ben Field rolled a cigarette over an opened tin of Export tobacco. Auntie Rose played the same piece at Earl's suggestion and Earl went into the kitchen to see when they could start making doughnuts. His mother was washing the dishes and Charlie had a towel over his shoulder. He kept putting his hands around his mother's waist and she kept swatting him away with a soapy hand.

"Charlie, I said stop it. You heard me."

"Come on, Vera. You didn't invite me over to dry dishes."

"Charlie, stop that. Show some decency."

From where Earl was standing it took him five running steps to reach Charlie and he held both fists out in front of him just before he got there. Charlie was partially stooped over, laughing, and only saw Earl out of the corner of his eye. When they collided, Charlie fell sideways over the counter and struck his head on the corner cabinet that held the cups and glasses.

He fell immediately to the floor, blood gushing out of his head like water from a fountain.

"Oh my God, Charlie. You okay?"

Soon Auntie Rose and Ben Field were in the kitchen. Earl's mother held a towel up to Charlie's head and the towel was soaked in blood almost instantly.

"We'd better get him to the hospital right away," Auntie Rose said. "He'll need stitches to fill that gap."

Charlie didn't say anything. He moaned a little and looked stunned.

"The keys are in one of his pockets. Ben, you can drive, can't you? Rose, grab a couple of towels and Earl, you stay put. Get ready for bed is what you can do."

Earl watched as the three of them helped Charlie out the door and down the sidewalk.

"He can drive," Auntie Rose said. "But he doesn't have a license."

Everything was quiet in the house. Even the clock wasn't ticking because both pinecones were all the way to the top. Earl followed the drops of blood back to the kitchen where Charlie had fallen. There were patches of blood smeared over the kitchen floor and the first bloodied towel was curled up like a dead animal.

Earl knew there was only one thing to do. He was too young to join the army now, his father had told him that, but there must be somewhere he could go to practice being a soldier until he was old enough. His mother wouldn't want him now. Not after what he'd done to Charlie. Once he found his father he'd tell him about the religious whatever it was and then they could both come back home. Uncle Jim would know where he could go. Uncle Jim knew about a lot of things.

From the closet in his mother's room he found a brown striped suitcase that he opened up on his bed. Because of the one night he'd stayed over at his cousins he knew about socks and underwear. He threw in two shirts and an extra pair of pants. There was still some room left so he added his colouring book, his fire truck, baseball mitt and ball, a flashlight, and an apple. He looked at his panda bear sitting on the bed but realized it was one thing he'd have to leave behind.

Earl heard a car pull up to the front of the house. The sun was below the mountains but there was enough light that he could see Uncle Jim and Auntie Fiona walking up the sidewalk. It wasn't raining out but it must have rained earlier because the sidewalk was shiny and wet. This was perfect. He had done the right thing and he knew it, and now Uncle Jim had arrived just when he needed him the most. He removed his Brooklyn Dodgers baseball cap so Auntie Fiona wouldn't have to say anything. There was just enough room in his suitcase for it to lie flat.

## The Non-Babylonians

1

Kelly and Erika stood a little into the street, looking east and west for a cab. Riel knelt on the sidewalk in front of a newspaper box, straining to read the front page of *The New Albion Observer*. It was a late-August morning, not especially bright yet, but he wore his wrap-around sunglasses anyway. What was left of the MDMA made his pupils as open as oceans, and everyone knew it was dangerous to trip in the sunshine with eyes widely dilated: UV rays or some such stealthy evil. Kelly and Erika sported their own shades, looking insect-like in the post-dawn. Riel could hardly make out what he was looking at. The text voyaged from the page in the box, out through scratched Plexiglas, through his cheap plastic black panes, and finally into his amphetamine-bugged retinas. He was more or less hugging the box, kneeling there, the tip of his nose almost touching its window, studying the clouded copy like it was the Pentateuch. He was also hiding; the girls would catch a cab quicker this way. They'd flag one, get home, draw the shades, and figure out what to do about the come-down. But now the newspaper's headline and story pointillistically assembled itself in his head: container ship, female stowaway, uncertain origin, language, detained, exact. He searched his pockets for quarters with no success.

Kelly tugged at his collar. Get up, let's go, we got a cab.

He asked her for a quarter, but she was pulling him. He yanked at the box's handle, yanked again.

Get in the goddamn cab, Riel!

He yanked on the handle once more and it opened. He took the news and boarded the yellow sedan, where the wide-eyed driver watched him uncertainly in the rear-view mirror, his left hand hovering, ready to go for something beneath his seat.

Just drive, Riel growled. Fuck. I'm not going to *eat* you, I'm— But Kelly cut him off by reciting their address. The driver hesitated, then pulled out onto Davie Street, making a small show of sighing reluctance.

Back at the apartment, they all collapsed upon the living room chesterfield. Riel flattened the *Observer* out on the coffee table and just looked at it, not even trying to actually read. Kelly put the situation at hand into

words: We're coming down, so now what?

Phone Frances, Erika answered flatly.

Riel felt a twitch of despair. His body wanted sleep. But that, he knew, would be impossible for hours yet. Another pass would delay the inevitable plummet. Erika already had her cell phone ajar, was talking tersely to their fourth roommate.

While they waited for Frances to get there, Erika flicked on some cartoons and sat in front of the television. Kelly got out her crayons and notebooks and sat in front of the coffee table, going for the primary colours. Riel watched her doodle inconsolably and fiercely, and he watched the blue wash of the TV's light shift across Erika's face. The blinds were shut but didn't quite fit the window; the light in the room was checkered. He tottered over to the record player and put on some Roni Size, so Erika killed the volume on the TV, her eyes never quite deviating from their fix upon the animated golems on the screen. Riel looked at Kelly and felt something near desire. She was grinding her jaw, chewing on nothing. Her mouth cycled with rhythm and without sound.

By the time Frances finally arrived, Riel had been on his back on the chesterfield for an hour straight trying to sleep, struggling to stop his eyes from popping open involuntarily every other minute. The girls had been getting up, sitting down, getting up, and looking out the window over and over.

How was the party? Frances said, breezing in. You still fucked up?

Not quite, Erika said, sniffing.

Frances sat next to Riel, who had jerkily righted himself at her arrival. Louis, Louis, she said to him, setting down her infamous briefcase beside the *Observer*. You're lookin' rough.

She never called him by his proper name, and Riel never corrected her. He could only assume, as everyone did, that he was named after the Métis revolutionary, but why, exactly, Riel did not know—his father had vacated his life without ever explaining the odd christening. (He knew three things about his father: he was black, he was from San Francisco, and he was long gone.) As far as Riel knew, he had no Native ancestry, and all his mother could say about his name was that Riel's father had convinced her during her pregnancy that it sounded "musical." Frances, a proud urban Cree, found it amusing that a non-Native carried such a meaningful name for no real reason. She was polite enough not to make fun of him for it directly, but she made her skepticism of the great man's invocation known by referring to her roommate as Louis, Louis, sometimes even singing The Kingsmen's melody as she called him out.

You know, Frances, I think maybe the best thing is that I just tough it out and go to sleep, he said.

Kelly blanched at the suggestion, and opened her mouth as if to speak,

but only sighed in quiet agony.

No, no, Erika said, we're going to hit it again. Summer's almost over, and when school starts we're going to get straight. That means we have to do as much drugs as we can *now*. That's just how it is.

That and you fucking called me all the way here, eh? Frances snorted.

We want *more*, Kelly sputtered impatiently. Riel does too. She glared at him.

Frances fiddled with the combination lock on her case, covering one hand with the other to thwart their sight lines. Riel, who was beside her, watched her hands, but Frances glanced at him sideways, warily. He looked across the room. The case snapped open and she said, What do you need? I've got it all. I just saw Victoria last night.

Who's Victoria?

Not a *who*, a *where*. My connection from Victoria was in town last night. They got a laboratory over there. I'm so hooked-up now, it isn't even funny. Up, down, and all around.

After some haggling, Frances poured out three short rails of meth onto the Roni Size sleeve. Intra-urban rails at best, Riel thought, if "rails" they were: ALRT shit, for sure, and definitely no John A. MacDonald, sea-to-sea, CPR rails. But beggars aren't choosers, and they were taking Frances's dope on credit. Ostensibly, she was responsible for a quarter of the rent, but they always chiselled the payment out of her in drugs before the first of each month, an overdraft Frances carefully kept track of. Riel couldn't recall a single month of the last six that they hadn't ended up owing her money rather than expecting it from her on rent day.

Riel was spent, and his body was crying out for mercy and rest, but he said, What the fuck? as a kind of grace, and hoovered up the acrid powder anyway. He felt like a rag doll one minute, but three later he was standing up, feverishly hunting around for more drum 'n' bass.

Summer *is* almost over, Kelly said plaintively, her head back to catch the nasal drip. Let's go to English Bay. I want to put my feet in the ocean.

Go? Riel grunted.

Let's walk! Erika squealed with sudden enthusiasm.

Frances laughed. You're insane. You're going to walk to the West End? It's like five kilometres, you freaks.

Riel put on his shoes and started lacing them up. Kelly and Erika watched him, then did the same, and they all put on their sunglasses and started for the door.

Frances, who only dipped into her own supply on days of the month that were prime numbers (or so went the myth she was known by), put her briefcase at the end of the chesterfield, where Riel had just been, and laid her head upon it. Riel had seen her sleep like this many times, protecting her livelihood, he knew, from them, which only mildly offended him. But

it amazed him that she could sleep with a four-cornered piece of luggage for a pillow. Frances's day ended there, but Riel's continued sleeplessly out on the sidewalks and all the way to the Pacific where he, his girlfriend, and her best friend stood knee-deep in a greedy tide. They savoured the last days of the first summer of the next one thousand years with hallucinations of motion in the peripheries of their sleep-deprived eyes. Riel would turn to look and there would be nothing there but that which was there. Chasing his own optic nerve. Sneaking up on a mirror.

2

The next day, Riel awoke and extricated himself from Kelly's unconscious embrace. Erika was on the other side of her, sleeping too, still wearing her runners. He noticed that he too was still in his shoes, and there was sand in the sheets. He sneered at himself and got up, scratched, stretched, and retched twice. There was nothing in his stomach, so nothing came up. He went to the living room. No Frances. He looked out the window. It was sickeningly hot and bright out.

After washing up and eating four pieces of unbuttered toast and a bowl of ice cream, he looked in on the girls. They were still asleep, and he envied them, but nevertheless he perched himself on the chesterfield and picked up the newspaper he had left there a day earlier. The article that had attracted him to it returned to memory. He cradled his head in his hands and read.

### **Mystery Migrant Found in Shipping Container**

VANCOUVER — Longshoremen unloading a container ship yesterday at a Vancouver terminal were shocked to discover a single female stowaway of uncertain origin amongst the usual cargo.

While offloading a container at Centerm, workers noticed the sound of a human voice coming from inside, and immediately broke its lock, opening it and notifying the Vancouver Police Department. The standard 20' x 8' x 8'6" container had been converted into improvised living quarters, complete with a portable toilet, a supply of water and

food, blankets, a battery-powered lamp, and small breathing holes drilled through the walls.

The woman emerged gesturing frantically and speaking in a language none of the workers could identify.

The container has been confiscated by the VPD and the woman is currently being detained at their headquarters, where Citizenship and Immigration officers are interviewing her to determine her identity.

A spokesman for the VPD called the stowaway "cooperative but vo-

ciferous." He confirmed that they were uncertain about the woman's exact origin. The ship itself—*The Wing Span*—was initially loaded at the Kwai Chung Container Port in Hong Kong.

Longshoremen interviewed on

site disagreed about the woman's appearance, one saying she was "probably Asian," but another commenting that she looked "Arabic." One worker, who is fluent in two dialects, said he did not recognize her language as Chinese.

Riel re-read the article, then spoke its headline aloud to himself. Wanting to know the story's development, he went down the apartment stairs and up the street to a café, grabbing a house copy of the day's *Observer*. He ordered a cup and settled in.

Two summers earlier, hundreds of Chinese nationals had arrived on the coast illegally, packed onto rickety fishing vessels, and then too, Riel had watched a media circus develop around their incarceration and deportation. That was the same year Riel had first read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Soul on Ice*, books that had stirred and changed him. When he had noticed that everyone in his family, and everyone else he knew in Port Corbus, were angrily unanimous about wanting the refugees sent home, he saw, for the first time, a cohesion among them he had never before fathomed. Everyone in his family was white; everyone he knew in Port Corbus was white. On the issue of illegal aliens at least, all the people in Riel's life thought alike. He developed a sympathy for the Fujian migrants. Could he help them somehow? Should he write a letter to the *Observer* supporting them? What would El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz do? Riel read everything he could find about racism in Port Corbus's small library. Then he narrowed his hip hop consumption down to only the wisest artists: The Coup, Dead Prez, and MC Kaaba. He re-evaluated his position that Bob Marley was something to do with the hippies who sold pot on Patourel Beach in the summer, and he bought every CD from *Catch a Fire* to *Confrontation*, poring over Marley's lifetime of lyrics year-to-year as if they were one long book. Armed with a new political outlook, he challenged his teachers and wrote all his essays about racism. His grades improved. He cared about the essays he wrote, which counted for more than he had imagined to teachers in a resource-economy based town with a high dropout rate. Riel had begun high school indifferently, but at the end was surprised to find himself accepted at his second choice of universities in the Lower Mainland. His mother and stepfather were pleased with his success, but dubious about his new stridency, which was, of course, the key to everything. That he was snorting his student loans and attending few of his classes was a turn he hadn't anticipated, a turn that his family knew nothing about. He would hide this carefully when his parents came down for a visit the week after next.

But here, in the pages of the *Observer*, was a case of illegal migration far more strange than those of 1999. It was now Day Two of the story, and, as he had expected, the *Observer* was all over it. The Mystery Migrant was still in custody and, surprisingly, they still hadn't determined anything about her; they could not be certain of her port of origin, nor even identify the language she was speaking. The authorities refused to speculate to the media, but there were already letters and an editorial about the case. The letters were all shrill, and mainly had her as some sort of terrorist or spy. What economic refugee could afford to send herself in such relative individual comfort? One of the letters called for her to be sent home immediately, saying that "she should be stuffed back in the container they found her in, locked up, and sent back to Hong Kong with 'return to sender' painted on the side." Riel chuckled darkly. They wanted her sent back and they didn't even know where she was from. There had been no photograph in yesterday's paper, but this article was accompanied by a shot of the woman sitting in the back of a police cruiser. A streak of white—glare from the window reflecting the camera's flash—bisected her face, but Riel could still see, examining her features, why there was confusion about her race. She looked, as they'd said, maybe Asian, maybe Middle Eastern. It was hard to tell. Riel himself was used to being misidentified. He traced her face in the photograph with his finger. Maybe Asian, maybe Middle Eastern. There is such a thing as both too, he knew.

He put the newspaper down and finished his coffee. As Erika had pointed out, summer was nearing its end and the start of school was looming. The coming semester would be make-or-break because Riel was on academic probation. The apartment, friends, clubs and drugs had eclipsed everything else somehow. What he loved about Kelly was how she drenched herself in bright colours and plastic accessories, like she was wearing toys rather than clothes. She was quirky, in a steely sort of way. She had those multicoloured refrigerator door magnets that were letters of the alphabet, and with them she'd spelled out **this is the house of yes** on the white surface. Beneath that, Erika had added **there is no should**: the apartment's constitution and sole amendment. But he was fucking up school. If he flunked out, he had no alternative plan. Erika tended to shut down this sort of talk by saying, Twenty-year-olds are supposed to fuck up. That's our job. But Riel was worried. The girls were middle-class kids of university-educated parents, and seemed certain that everything would eventually work out no matter how lost they got. Riel, however, suspected that he had just this one shot. If he fanned on it, he'd be feeding timber into a table saw in Port Corbus for the rest of his life.

Riel took the newspaper and walked back to the apartment. Inside, the girls were up and moping about, listlessly tidying up and looking abstractly distraught. Nobody spoke, and the three roommates each moved

as if the others weren't there. Riel went to his bedroom and pulled a box cutter out of his desk, slicing the photograph of the Mystery Migrant out of the *Observer*, scratching up the hard cover of a textbook as he did so. He pinned the picture to the wall above and behind his computer, next to the photo of his other hero, MC Kaaba.

Kaaba was better than Tupac, better than any other rapper, Riel felt, though much lesser known. Kaaba wrote lyrics that were a mixture of conspiracy theory, Rastafarian cosmology, and Koranic exegesis based on the Nation of Islam splinter group that Kaaba's parents had raised him in, the Khufu Initiative. Indeed, part of what attracted Riel to Kaaba's music was the connection he felt he had with the rapper because they both grew up in families belonging to weird religious minorities. Riel's mother had remarried and converted to her second husband's faith, so at age eleven Riel had been baptized in his stepfather's church, the New Occidental Jerusalem Church of the Peripatetic Christ, Quadrinitist. Riel's stepfather, Walker, had helped to found the church in Port Corbus in the Sixties with several other American draft dodgers who had come to BC during the Vietnam War. (Riel's mother seemed serially attracted to American exiles.) The church had begun as a hippie-oriented, LSD-soaked affair, but over the years had stripped down to a hard core of Jesus-freaks pious enough to eventually renounce drugs, free love, and tie-dye. Riel once had read a critique of the church on the Internet that referred to it as "a hippie revision of Pentecostal evangelism, created out of expatriate nostalgia." He'd quit the church when he was fifteen.

Riel sat and stared at the two photographs, of MC Kaaba and the Mystery Migrant, side-by-side on the smoke-coloured wall, then he shifted the mouse so his computer would wake up. He opened a program and stared at its grey-framed whiteness, thinking about writing. He stared and breathed until the screen saver finally blipped back on, scrolling words that he himself had inputted seventeen months earlier. The square of glass said to him, BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY...GET OUT OF PORT CORBUS.

3

It was Friday and Riel had attended every class of the semester so far, it being only the first unfruitful week. Coming home from campus, he entered the apartment and encountered Frances doling out crank to an autumn-spring couple, some geezer and his young boyfriend. Riel's student loan had been deposited into his account earlier in the week, so he got in line. But the two guys didn't leave when they'd bought their stuff; they made themselves at home, doing bumps off of Riel's textbooks without asking. This was happening more often. He'd come home and Frances would be entertaining; there'd be a strange kid asleep in the bathtub, some

pale girl rooting through the fridge for food. Riel worried that his CDs were going to get scammed this way, or his computer. But he didn't feel like he had a lot to say about it because the place was really Kelly and Erika's. He'd moved in by default, just by crashing there so regularly. Then Frances offered to pay a quarter of the rent so she could use the place to crash or deal when she was in the neighbourhood. They presumed she had another, real home elsewhere. It was users' economics: Kelly and Erika were getting thrifty, looking for ways to spend less on rent, more on drugs. He eyed the skinny hustler who was fondling his copy of *36 Chambers*. Frances produced a small vial from her "files," and he and she traded. Riel pocketed the stuff for later. I was gonna make some tea, she said, and ambled off to the kitchen.

In his and Kelly's room, Riel sat at his desk and looked at his computer, then at the wall above and beyond it. He looked into the black and white eyes of the Mystery Migrant. He had followed the *Observer's* coverage of her faithfully, but after only three days, they'd dropped the story. During the last two weeks he'd bought copies and scanned the pages for signs of her, but found nothing. They had not gotten any closer to identifying her origins. The only thing further they'd learned was that the woman's bags had been full of x-rays, which turned out to be of various parts of her own body. There were speculations of illegal organ donation, but, oddly, the x-rays included all parts of her, head to toe. He didn't understand how the story could have died when nothing had been resolved.

That evening, Kelly and Erika cajoled him into going out. It was dumb, Riel knew, because his parents were visiting in the morning, but it was Friday and he had Frances's speed and government money in his pocket. The girls bought theirs from Frances, who was trying to nap before the evening's work. He resolved to quit the club at a reasonable hour, and be ready to welcome his mother and Walker in the morning with at least a few hours of sleep behind him.

The three set out for The Base. They did half their speed in the wash-room and danced till closing, then took a cab to Microphone Check, the doorman's after hours suggestion. They weren't given an address, but rather just a block, and were told to walk up and down the street until they were spotted and directed in. They did so, getting out of the cab and starting up the street. A guy in a long black coat and fingerless gloves was standing in a doorway eyeing them. He pointed at a building across the street. One-two, one-two, he said, referring to the address above a dark glass door.

Inside they heard the muffled thump-thump-thump-thump of house music coming from above. From behind a desk, a wiry drag queen took their money, forbade in-out privileges, and said, looking at Riel, No tough-guy stuff. You're in a good mood, right? Here to have fun? and Riel nodded. They went down a corridor and up an elevator, eventually finding them-

selves in a large dividerless office floor full of music, lights, and dancing youth. The DJ was at the back wall and there were speakers in all four corners. The three threw their gear against the wall and claimed a stretch of floor, dancing. When he felt the meth flagging a little, Riel decided to do the second half, so he excused himself, following people who looked like-minded. They led him to an unlit room at the far end of the floor with a hot water heater in it and dark figures sitting round the edges intermittently sparking up lighters and talking indistinctly. The music was less pervasive here. The only flat surface was some sort of locker, but others were huddled round it, shaking out various powders onto its surface and snorting them through rolled-up twenties and fifties. A space cleared across from a young woman, her head bowed over a compact mirror, her dark hair long. He arranged a neat line. When he lifted his head, the crystal was gone, and he stuffed the bill back in his front pocket, pinching his nose to keep the powder in. Across from him, the dark-haired woman lifted her face up from her compact, and pinched her nose in just the same way. He connected with her dark watery eyes.

You.

The woman, startled, stared back at him.

You were in the paper. I read about you.

She half-smiled. Yes. But she was aiming herself at the door.

He breathed, the amphetamines blazing trails through his blood. She was dressed much like Kelly and Erika; her accent was local. He either had the wrong person or the *Observer* had had the wrong story.

I was following you. You're the "Mystery Migrant." I was, like, cheering for you. I rooted for the Fujian migrants too, in '99. He was looking for recognition in her eyes. You *are* you, aren't you?

She laughed. The chorus of Bics singed their shadows.

It was a performance. I'm an artist.

Riel winced. It was a hoax? The migrant thing was a hoax?

Not a hoax. She made a gesture like she was holding a large ball in front of her face with both hands. Art.

Art?

I had myself shipped in that container, intending to get caught. No passport, no ID on me. They had no idea who I was or what I was doing, and I wanted to see what stories would be developed about me, you know, how expectations would shape their perceptions. The stories in the newspaper—I'm writing about them right now. The letters from the public were really interesting, don't you think?

Riel felt like running, but he stayed put. But you don't have an accent.

She laughed again. I was born in Canada. Wouldn't have done it unless. They were dying to deport me, although they couldn't figure out where to. But I'm Canadian, so all they can really do is charge me with mischief. I'll

get fined, that's about it. I've got a court date. But I had a grant, and I factored a fine into the cost of the performance.

But what language—?

It wasn't a language. I was saying all the phonemes in the phrase "Tower of Babel" over and over again, jumbling them up as randomly as I could. Her smile was wide now. Eventually I fucked it up and the Citizenship and Immigration guy figured it out. It was exhausting trying to keep that up, actually.

Why didn't the *Observer* expose you? They just, like, dropped the story.

They're embarrassed about being duped, I think.

His mind burned. A mental prairie fire. I'm a student. But this, what you're saying, this is something else. He wanted to convey the importance of the moment for him, but the air was moving about liquidly, too quickly, thickly. I'd like to talk more about it another time, when I'm not tweaking, he admitted.

She took a flyer from her purse. She wrote *Versajna* on the back of it, and her phone number below. He ripped the flyer in half and scribbled his name and number for her too.

Riel turned to go. Kelly was in the doorway, watching him, and he went to her. *Versajna* passed them and joined the crowd.

Who was that? Kelly said tightly.

You know that refugee I was telling you about, the one in the shipping container? That clipping I've got above my desk? It's her! Only she isn't a refugee, she's a performance artist. Isn't that wild?

Are you obsessed with her or something? Kelly hissed, and turned away. Riel watched her go. Then he understood that he was supposed to chase her, so he did.

#### 4

Monday evening, Riel's parents dropped him off at the apartment after their last dinner in Vancouver before going home to Port Corbus. All weekend, he'd managed to spend time with them out in the city, doing touristy things, but now Riel could not avoid inviting them up for tea, where they surreptitiously inspected his living conditions. He introduced Kelly and Erika, who were on their way out, as his roommates. Frances was asleep in the living room, so Riel and his parents crowded into the small kitchen. After a time, there was a knock at the door, which Frances answered, and three guys wearing black velour track suits came in. Frances peeked into the kitchen at Riel and his parents, and then led the velour-bedecked trio into the washroom, shutting the door behind them. Riel's parents exchanged glances, so he explained that the guys were helping her fix the baseboard. They emerged from the washroom shortly after, the

three leaving, and Frances returning to the living room wordlessly. His parents finally excused themselves. They were staying with friends, and had to get a good night's sleep before the long drive home tomorrow.

After they left, Riel phoned Versajna. They talked about her performance, which she called *The Non-Babylonian*; they talked about university and her occupation, which she described as mailing herself places in spectacularly illegal ways, and she laughed at this. He wanted to know something, but he'd been similarly interrogated all his life, so he held back as long as he could, finally wording it, Where does your name come from?

Where does it "come from?"

I mean, what's your ethnicity?

Ah. He could hear that her words came through a grin: I can't say. I'm still performing, you see. A piece that overlaps with the last one. I haven't answered that particular question for two years and four months now. I'm keeping a journal of all the ways I've been asked, all the responses to my non-cooperation, and every speculation.

If you're going to write about what I say, then I don't think I'll say anything.

Too late.

They traded words for three hours.

As soon as he hung up the phone, it rang.

Hello?

I'm not going to let you break your mother's heart.

What?

You think I'm some kind of idiot? Walker said. I know what's going in that place of yours.

Where's Mum? Let me talk to her.

She's asleep. You're screwing up in school, right? You're on drugs, I'm sure.

You don't know anything.

But you are.

If you rang me up just to tell me a bunch of shit that you think you know, then you've achieved that. Mission accomplished. See you later.

You should come back to Port Corbus. Take some time off, straighten out.

Not happening.

I was exactly in your shoes when I was your age. You need some time to get your head together.

Something smacked into the living room window. Riel looked up. A bird had flown into it, he supposed. He reached over and switched off the light. Look, Walker, I'm just starting the new semester. I'm not going north now, so forget it.

There was silence, except for a little of Walker's breathing on the other

end of the receiver, then another thump against the window, and then the click of Walker hanging up.

Riel went to the window and looked out. Two young guys were on the sidewalk below, one of them holding his sneaker in his hand like he was going to shotput it up at the window again. Riel unlatched and lifted the window, leaned out, and shouted, What the fuck?

Yo, is the Indian chick home? This the spot? Your line was busy, yo.

Riel scowled at them. She's out. He scribbled her cell phone digits on the pad beside the phone and tore the page out, spanned his arm out into the weather, and let the note fall. One of the two tweakers reached up for it with both hands, looking, Riel thought, somewhat like Willem Dafoe in *Platoon* when he gets blasted to shit by the NVA. The little piece of paper floated down erratically, and Riel felt for a moment like Galileo dropping a feather to measure the velocity of plummeting bodies in motion. Or whatever the fuck it was he had done to make the church burn him at the stake. Or was that Joan of Arc?

## 5

Riel was dreaming of birds. He was watching them light on the leaves of an enormous red tree, each taking a place on a single leaf, and the sun was behind the tree, and it shone through the leaves. There appeared a lumberjack in gold, and he was driving a stone axe into the base of the tree over and over, but the birds would not fly. Inside the dream, Riel could see a close-up image of one birdless leaf, the sun making a glow of red come from it, and the axe made a terrible knocking noise, and then Riel saw that he was looking at the sun through the insides of his eyelids. It was morning. There was knocking, real knocking, and he opened his eyes: the sound of knuckles on the wood of their front door. Muffled shouting. His name being called. Kelly was beside him. Who the hell is that? she said, squinting and stretching.

Riel got out of the bed and sat at the edge. More bone, through skin, against wood, and someone shouting out there. Okay! he croaked back, and he gathered himself and walked into the hallway. He was reaching for the doorknob when he heard the voice on the other side.

Open up! You're coming with us, Riel! We know exactly what's going on in this apartment! Get up and get your things! We're driving back to Port Corbus, and you're coming with us!

He stepped back, as if the door had suddenly burst into flames. There was no Judas eye in it, but he pictured Walker's blowsy face on the other side nevertheless.

Open the door! I know what's going on here! This is a place of sin!

Riel put the heel of his hand to his forehead. Fuck off! Take your preachy bullshit and just fuck off!

Kelly, Erika and Frances, awakened by all the noise, congregated in the hallway. That your dad? said Kelly, but she didn't wait for an answer, and left for the kitchen, putting on the kettle. Erika went to the living room. Frances wandered about groggily, like she was searching for something.

Stepfather and stepson argued through the closed door.

Drunkenness, revellings, and such like: they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God!

Behold, a beam is in thine own eye, you fucking hippy redneck!

Oh snap, Erika said. She was sitting on the living room floor with the TV going. Oh my God, you've got to look at this.

Open up! You think it's heaven now, but there'll be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth later!

Frances was beside Riel now, no longer searching. Where's my case?

Your case?

Walker started kicking the door with his size tens.

Frances grabbed Riel's arm. My *stash*. Where's my fucking *stash*?

There'll be weeping—

How am I supposed to know? You sleep on it, don't you?

—and wailing—

It's gone. You saw the combo on my case. I *saw* you *see* it.

—and gnashing of teeth!

Riel stepped backwards and through the bathroom door, closing and locking it in front of him. Immediately, Frances began pounding on *that* door, and cussing him out through it. It was almost syncopated, her pounding and Walker's kicking beyond on the landing.

Riel sat on the edge of the bathtub and put his head in his hands. Frances was shouting about having brothers who'd done time in Matsqui, brothers she was going to phone who would come down here and kick his head in. Then she was quiet for a bit. Now she and Kelly were arguing. He faintly heard Walker's preaching two doors removed, but he could no longer discern the words.

Riel looked at the bathroom window. It was wide open. Outside, it was a fair Tuesday morning. But the window, he realized, had been painted shut before. There were chips of paint all over the sill. He looked out, then leaned out, observed the alley below. He climbed out the window feet first, and let himself drop onto the blacktop. Frances's briefcase was on the ground at his feet, leaning against the wall, ripped open, and empty. He looked up at the window, then at the case, then up the alley. He was wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt, no shoes. He started walking.

He circled around to Fraser Street. It was just slipping into the post-rush hour lull. A half-block down, in front of the apartment, he saw Walk-

er's SUV parked and his mother sitting inside it. He was too far away to note the expression on her face. She was rubbing her forehead. Maybe she was brushing her hair.

He crossed the street. The corner market, where Riel sometimes shopped, was open and empty. Tameem let Riel use the phone for free, and asked why he had no shoes, pointing down at his feet. Riel shrugged. How else can I be sure that the ground is really there? Tameem frowned and returned his attention to his small portable radio. Voices spoke of attacks on New York and Washington. While the phone was ringing, Riel asked, Attacks? But then Versajna picked up on the other end.

Outside, he took a seat at the bus stop and waited. He watched his mother in the SUV a half a block up, unaware of him as she stared forward and south. When the bus came, Riel told the driver that he had no money because he had been robbed. He pointed at his bare feet. They even took my shoes, he said. The sloe-eyed driver shrugged. Such a morning, he allowed heavily in a type of English that gently rolled its R's. Riel took a seat in the back.

On his way to Versajna's, he decided he was free. He was commuting to the future. He imagined he would not recover his things from the apartment. He imagined he would not complete the semester. He imagined he would neither return nor repent nor weep nor wail. It was the end of everything. *Fin de siècle. Das Ende der Geschichte. E pur si muove.* Riel spoke to himself out loud there in the back seat, but the driver gunned it just as he opened his mouth. The engine sounded so that none of the dozen strangers sitting and standing around him made out his words. There was no manifest reason to repeat.

*matt robinson*

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## the fore-check

*Every pause pauses in its own style.*

—Don McKay, “50-50 Draw”

a routine dump-and-chase.            and everything, from these seats,  
careens right along; strides through each next measure

of the hanging clock’s score.            it’s a taut, swirling music of legs  
churning up ice, until the moment snaps like a neck—

fractures and then droops, like the sudden cracked slack of  
your jaw that one night when she paused, over dinner,

as you swallowed a bite, and announced she was leaving;  
for good.            now come the gasps, as—from these seats—

all we know is something’s—*someone’s*—gone airborne and awry; come  
down corkscrewed and then stayed a hunched jersey bundle,

all awkwardly still.            it seems there’s a pause  
while we crane, then a whistle.            at first glance, we can’t tell.

but, we try not to wonder to ourselves if he’s broken  
his neck; whether feeling will sizzle its grudging way back,

sting the hushed tips of fingers or toes.            so instead  
we just shuffle our feet in their place—kick

spilt popcorn and wait fretfully through this last stoppage in play.  
and as they cradle his head, hold it frozen in place,

we check wristwatches and programs, even  
out-of-town scores, while the goaltender plows his snowed crease, post to

post.            one more mess swept over.            aside, with the rest.

# psalm for an old goalie

*with apologies to The Weakerthans*

let this ice of ours be one step slower as the game glints and thins towards  
its finish, a blade ground down as rink lights flicker

overhead. let the last shot's staccato music ricochet and then refract  
more kindly—kindredly pinball through and off

our scrum of ankles and hit him squarely in the chest. let this  
tiny blackslapped moment stick and rest for one near-frozen  
clock-tick

and tumble, easy, to his feet. and then—and *only then*—  
let those anxious knees give way and swoon to smother what it is

he's shouldered for so long. let each and every thing he reaches for tug  
only slightly at that outstretched glove and then nestle

snugly in his palm, a recollection hinging at his wrist. let his last  
breath  
be icy sure and smooth as it whispers clouds around

his cage. let him know when to hold dear and freeze  
the puck, when to push off, and when to rage against our errant  
sticks

stabbing at his side. let him come to understand this  
all, and take it with him where he goes: let him, one last time, glide,  
before the ref whistles goodnight.

*Esther Mazakian*

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## Capital Gain

*Some years ago, after the disappearance of civil rights workers Chaney, Goodman, and Schwimer in Mississippi, some friends of mine were dragging the river for their bodies. This one wasn't Schwimer. This one wasn't Goodman. This one wasn't Chaney. Then, as Dave Dennis tells it: "It suddenly struck us—what difference did it make that it wasn't them? What are these bodies doing in the river?"*

—James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*

Crotched. Deltoids lifting her.  
High road or low. A wink from her Delphic sarcophagus, the sapient father  
gave her some money and the old pressure got her staring  
at the in-between-pixels of vision again,  
the massive digitalized  
world. Bruxing molars in a death  
grip  
and taking the low in this bed, a siren of dispatched sound  
tracking the drive into her  
  
courtesy  
the meat she'd immolated late  
last night when she  
was unclouded, starved,  
plastered

to the soaring value of his body over others;  
she looked up  
open at the  
night sky like she was being photographed.  
It was his privacy that kept her  
capitulating, hiding,  
another  
refugee in camps set up in the backs of trucks driving out the capital.  
sterling from the riverbeds. Hope springs



# Some Nerve

*Real pain.* Palms flush and on his stomach to straighten his spine, ease  
the pressure weighing on the nerve the herniated  
disc was pushing  
against,

disc lodged not unlike a shotput,  
the one  
she'd whipped at the small of his back sometime weeks before when she  
told him she  
loved him.

Piercing lasso instead of the friendly shock  
absorber  
his body needed, ached  
for. For real? Was he joking? Should she call someone? She raced to  
the freezer,

grabbed  
the first thing that felt big enough to cover burning  
vertebrae, lifted  
his striped pyjama top he'd been ailing in for weeks, the couch to his  
bed, bed to the easy

chair, sitting, lying gingerly  
as though

impaled,  
and she lay the frozen chicken breast and pressed, leaned over him  
holding but he kept wailing, voice louder *Oh my sciatica* scaring her

*Your what?*  
she flung a leg over,

straddled  
but with her thighs not touching him, a position purely incidental,  
unribald, what anyone

would do  
in an emergency  
and she pressed her breast into his back only wanting to end  
the pain really  
push it through the kitchen linoleum where he'd fallen  
like a man made of timber,  
a stretch of weeping wood, legs logs, moaning she was  
sure for her to yank the radiating pulse out of him and replace it with her  
cool meat.

But she didn't know how. To snap on latex.  
Perform the protocol to save him. Know he was screaming for her to get off.  
Know sooner  
that what he needed was his mother  
to bend over and pick him up  
in her arms body supportive as a lumbo-sacral brace, heart a hot compress,  
soul a deep  
massage.

Know pressing  
her icy breast into him was the worst thing to do  
as the paramedics told her when they came  
and took him away. Know it was always about her  
not him. Know.

# Death Drive

Maps and rivers and an atlas of traffic lines  
tenuous. Early evening. Brushes  
stroking the water,  
diluting, deluging bristles, he said it  
was the last time he'd  
take it from  
her, his patience thinner. Peeling the tape  
from wall borders  
and tugging elastics of tensile paint gum in a war of pulled toffee  
his tolerance she stretched every month  
to survive; latex over oil. Red and purple and ink-blue,  
she found vein colours  
and the prime of other men most  
essential.

# With Moses Parting Her Red Watery Robe Again She Pinched Her Nose Inhaled Went Under and But

for shirking

a remarkable commotion of butcher paper  
stuck  
beneath her, she was safe.  
Into a blue blackness that sent her back to the 1970s  
when her meekness belonged to her parents  
and her body was harnessed in

by Eaton's:

navy pleats stopped  
just under diapered aspirations, white  
crepe blouse  
beneath a baby  
ensign blazer. Eyes pooling  
woolly pools  
of iris  
regarding nothing  
but the oily rainbow arcing unctuous over them:

her toy fingers curling  
tentacles between her mother's, as the swivel chair rolls  
my father——sweaty unshaven  
surgeon of his day——  
After some 2000-odd years inside, Moses, delivered  
into the cradle of waves before us, leaves my  
system now.

*Michael Trussler*

---

## Aubade

The street lamps are just beginning  
their daylight faces, and I've already  
awoken several times to find  
myself eating my way out  
of swollen zebra bellies, stuffed birds, even

tree trunks—this is  
not being beside you. When

I was I was  
infinite. The past  
is unequally peopled, the present, an

airplane caught on a sunflower,  
the future, a door into a hall  
filled with chairs.

Plain talk.

You fed me lox, called me your  
wide-eyed and babbling goy, gave me

a camel's bone for strength, one  
you'd been keeping for yourself, lit vanilla  
candles with your voice.

On top of your small body I showed  
you how to play slow and spooky  
Tarot with postcards we stole  
from the art museum. Giacometti.

Steiglitz. Sasabuchi. Munch.

A Schiele that couldn't quite  
contain your pussy's spill. The Magritte

no one has ever seen, the one sprung  
from the good streets of  
your past in Montreal: there's

a man—he's taking his hat  
for a walk today; he's turned once  
in your direction, right there  
in the field, snapped  
open his favourite  
calculator just to watch

how numbers form and then  
they disappear again.

The sky soon will be  
the bluest of scarves and one day  
I'll run its silk over you.

Everything will  
stagger if I can't.

Plainer talk. Trees  
are shaking. Somewhere

a hummingbird's wings are moving  
so quickly they could be a line  
a pencil might draw across  
the air. And paintings can

never say look into  
a mirror to see you  
for me.

Or, I could

tell you a car rolls, drunk, into  
a gravel parking lot, and then  
at least ten people bounce out, just like  
puppies in slow motion; they're  
the undivided young. But nothing

anyone could ever tell you  
will undo your surprise  
at living among other  
people. And

you are there.

And I'm here.

*Tim Bowling*

---

## In Starbucks

The women around me talk about fat  
who has it who lost it  
how they set about it  
overconsumption underconsumption  
who got buff at the gym  
who had to be jimmied  
through the door of the buff-  
et; she broke up  
with that asshole, now  
her ass is more whole  
than ever; the women around me  
talk about fat, and the little girls  
they were gather shells  
on the beach in the moonlight  
and firelight, the moon that loved  
their bodies will always love them,  
the fire that warmed their bodies  
can warm whatever bodies  
they inhabit. When I hear women  
talk about fat, I press my ears  
to those shells in the girls' hands  
and listen to the sea  
of my daughter's blood  
wrap its massive weight  
around the planet.

# Growing Older

I crawled in the half-hinged driver's side door  
of a rusted Plymouth abandoned in the prickles  
and climbed out the rotted bruise of a beached whale.  
Went into the human, a child.  
Came out of the earth, the earth's.  
And wonder took the wheel of both deaths.  
Drove at terrific speed, years for miles,  
then decades, centuries. Then time  
so vast there is no word, no way  
to hold. Carried in clay of the delta  
on my hands. Carried it out.  
Placed my hands on the salt of the rocks.  
Heard the trains in their death-cries  
bearing dark to the coalport. Starshine.  
Earth a dog's head above black water,  
gasping. Looked back. No doors, no houses.  
Trail of crumbs gone to the vulture.  
Clay and salt and breath and rock.

Built, from these,  
a human craft with earth's will.

Taking that wheel.

# One of the Last Years I Worked With a Knife

The river can't move any slower and  
still be moving. I'm in the stern  
with my blade to the sockeye's shine  
gutting in the last light  
of day. Gutting fast.

A snatcher in streetlamp grain  
ripping the jewels from handbags.  
Under the Patullo Bridge seaward.  
It starts to rain heavily, or the last  
rain has decided to end again.  
The booms darken. Beyond  
the mud flats and salt marshes  
the potholed streets are lined  
with trees that drop leaves  
like flesh. Early autumn.  
My tired friend at the deck-wheel  
dozes. His father, a cop,  
beats him if the catch is small,  
beats him if it isn't.  
I'm gutting for tuition.

We pass a tiny wharf.  
One yellow light in slow sift.  
No boat. No people. Not even a gull.  
I feel an urge to wave at lack.  
My shadow grips me by the wrist.

Mike leaves the wheel to take a leak.  
We veer a little off our course.  
I'm thinking of the future  
and gutting so fast  
I forget to keep a strip of eggs.  
A half-second after they leave  
my hand, I try to grab them back.  
Rain smites our foreheads  
and the deck. The boat's ropes  
drag like gladiator clubs  
through the wake of gore.  
The rain makes the hour dark  
before the earth has turned  
enough to do the work.

Mike's a big man. In twenty years  
he'll beat his wife and sons  
with all his strength, then cry  
to be forgiven. Beat them again.  
Cry to be forgiven. Beat them.  
Cry. Beat them. Cry.  
The rhythm's in the rain.

The last guts in the river, the last  
roe in the bucket. My head's  
leaden with sodden wool.  
For a time, I don't look up.  
When I do, there's no one at the wheel  
the river's pointing with the torn arm  
of a nightgown  
at the heaving ocean  
and a pheasant's screaming  
over the carcass  
of the final island.

Many people once I couldn't live without  
I live without. We live without.

Steel at our shine.

*rob mclennan*

---

## December 16

*the blind is white under its horizontal ribbing*

—bp Nichol

what comes from the land,  
goes back there  
or, please is but wilderness  
where history  
a language come alive  
the rumble of snow & spare cars  
the lights alone in a different place  
an airplane every so  
& the seen & unseen concrete glance  
if you were part of a history  
it has abandoned  
the green shoots from  
burnt wood  
a national procrastination  
long text of divinity, secular  
& secure  
on the telephone, kate, her one  
good eye  
sees past me, through  
is this okay; are we  
prone out on my own,  
a declarative view  
outside my prevue  
broken trees & wind  
a wilderness  
with nothing

# K.I. Press' book

when I ask, do you still curve your spine,

it does not mean. stay awake,  
a shepherd of forms & letters pressed,

a tick of wood. you know  
I've said this before: I think maybe  
they were unhappy

for a short time. until.  
still, still, still, still, still.

if you were a voice & he,  
a bowl scooped from maple, then  
would you. variations on gardens

& the department of tourism, tipped in  
to every third. I press this

into skin, into soft wood, in bamboo;  
in aldus,  
& spare change. of this, a serious

fiction of fonts & blue ink, that only  
a typographer. not true, not true.

the spine that you crack when you open,  
before anything.

*Michael Martone*

---

## 16 Postcards from Terra Incognita

*numbered in the way they were written, not the way they were delivered*

### **1 of 16 Wish You Were Here**

**T**he poignancy of postcards stems from an expressed, or at least implied, desire: Wish you were here! Addressed to a “you” important enough to make the “you” who writes the postcard forgetful of that “here.” To write a postcard is to actually transport yourself to the “there” of the addressee. The genre of the postcard embeds an address in its text like the ghazal insists upon the encoding of the poet’s name into the verse. To write a postcard is to caption its caption, to continually locate and place yourself somewhere, all the time imagining another place, the there, of the recipient.

### **2 of 16 Thinking of You**

The postcard is place inscribed, dramatized, and actually animated. It is place that moves. A piece of place that has broken off and... I like to break the proscribed boxed boundary of the “This Space for Message” space. I write on the photo, verso. I arrow in on the window, the third floor, third from the left. I affix the legend: I am here. Think: the stamp is the postcard’s postcard. Thinking of you! Indeed. Thinking of you, there, thinking of me, here, wishing you were here with me, me there with you. The postcard is a *koan* of place, our having to be somewhere, and our relationship to place and to each other.

### **15 of 16 On the Planet of the Apes**

“Where are you from?” asks Dr. Zaius, the suspicious ape in the movie *The Planet of the Apes*, of Charlton Heston, the marooned astronaut. He warily responds: “Fort Wayne.” And where we watched (in Fort Wayne), the theatre went bananas: howling, raucous, primate applause. I believe we all wanted the film to stop and start over again and return to the place again where a made-up character uttered his made-up hometown that happened to coincide with our real hometown. I have heard people on vacation visit fictional places, send postcards from such places. Greetings from Green

Gables, say, Sunnybrook Farm, say, Field of Dreams. Places that have become (through fiction) real. This real place (Fort Wayne) is authenticated by a bit of fiction.

“Where are *you* from?” the ape asks.

“Fort Wayne!” Moses answers. The Promised Land.

“Me too!” we all respond. “Me too!”

### **5 of 16 Why *Fort Wayne***

It is hard to imagine now, but for a while this plot of ground was to die for. Three American Forts were built here. Four French. Three British. The Miami and the Shawnee each had fortified villages. There were massacres, ambushes, running battles, forced marches, insurgences, sieges, conflagrations, surrenders. Torture. Spy Run Creek, it is said, ran red with blood. This place was, for a while, geopolitically present. And place always contains its component of time. A strip of ten miles of land—a continental divide, actually—separating the Great Lakes Basin from the Mississippi Valley was strategic if one moved around by water. But long ago we stopped moving around by water. And overnight, this contested portage became, quite literally, just another backwater, no longer bothered with or defended. Attention shifts and drifts through time. It lights on and lights up a place for an instant. Now you see it. Now you don't.

### **3 of 16 There Is No Here Here**

I love the map pieced together from the montage satellite photos representing the United States at night. There are great globs of light, dentritic phosphorescent tendrils netting up metropoli, a pearlescent bacterial glowing culture. And then there is the negative space, the absence of light, the empty negated vastness. I imagine that in the black blankness the grid of place is waiting to be sparked, that it is a story or a poem that provides the juice, switches it on. How does a place become a place? In “At the End of the Mechanical Age” Donald Barthelme imagines God as a meter reader and tells us that grace is not *like* electricity; it *is* electricity. Let there be light. Write “light” and there is light.

### **4 of 16 Look Out There**

Once, flying at night from coast to coast, I happened to look out the window, and spotted the burning blots spotting, their shimmering splatter radiating on the ground below. There, suddenly, was Fort Wayne, all its distinguishing features in place—the quirky cant of its downtown street grid, looking like itself, assembling itself before my eyes.

\*\*\*

### **6 of 16 The Necropolis Leads the Metropolis**

City planners once imagined that civilization itself sprang from our ancestors' decision to simply settle down. Time was right to build a town. But I like the new theory that cities were a consequence of something other than a conscious shift away from hunting and gathering, slashing and burning. No, humans changed their practice of burial. They began to bury the dead, and tending the graves stopped the migration. Bury the dead and it precipitates the living out of the flow. They hole up. Tend the dead. Tending the dead necessitated construction of shelter, spurred agriculture, the undertaking of specialized individual tasks. The Necropolis leads the Metropolis, you see, not the other way around. It is a chicken or egg thing, I realize. But I like the notion of tending the dead. Tending the dead: job description of the writer attuned to the steady erosion, evaporation of details of time and place, of everything and everyone's re-placement. Stories can be thought of as vast cemeteries of the past place, affixed now in neat rows of print. How does a place become a place? Perhaps through accumulation of stories. A plot defined by plots.

### **14 of 16 The City of Conductors**

Fort Wayne was division point for all the railroads that once ran through it—the Pennsy, the Wabash, the Big Four, the Nickel Plate, the New York Central, the Monon—and the streets of the downtown were clotted by conductors. Passenger train conductors in their dark serge uniforms, and freight conductors in stiff bib denim. They moved in time, on schedule with the trains, consulting their pocket watches, carrying their tool bags and flares, ticket punches and key rings. Next door to everyone who was not a conductor, lived a conductor who worked strange hours on long drags to Chicago or Lima or bid highballing varnish to Indianapolis or Cleveland. Next door to us was a conductor, Mr. Kelker, who had lost both hands, cleanly cut, in an accident. He'd tell us stories. How the city was once a city of conductors, how it felt once to hold time in his hands, and how it felt to live there, in what was once a destination and how it felt once to feel and how it felt now, the phantom of fleeting feeling, the subtle texture of absence, the heft of loss, the substantial mass of all that nothing in your hands.

### **8 of 16 The Indiana Sky**

There is this shorthand for place employed in prose: the adjectival sky. "He walked out under the Indiana, the Iowa, the Illinois, the Idaho sky." But really, would we know an Indiana sky if we saw it? Or if in a story we read "the Indiana sky," what would we see, what would be conjured up in our imaginations? That is to say, place can certainly be named, but, in merely naming it, can it be known?

### **10 of 16 Sky Writing**

Look up. Wait! Start again. Look up “Art Smith, the Bird Boy of Fort Wayne.” It is said that he was the first to successfully complete a complete outside loop, the loop-the-loop. He died in a crash, an airplane crash, in an Indiana cornfield. Art Smith, it is said, was first to write in the sky, the Indiana sky above the Indiana cornfields, marking the severely clear azure blue with a cloudy cursive script. What did it say? That goes unrecorded. And besides, it is too far away to read, and the letters, the words are already smearing, streaking. The ascender on what appears to be a B is evaporating, the apex of an A is now merely a dull smudge. The sky arrives above our heads—transparent, generic, unremarkable. It is sky. By definition, over everywhere, everything. It must be branded, a proprietary geography of invisible air.

### **12 of 16 The Happiest City in America**

In 1948, *LOOK* magazine designated Fort Wayne as the Happiest City in America. I ask my mother who is pictured on the cover with a group of high school girls huddled laughing at a soda fountain: Where is the source of all the happiness? In the water? In the air? Where did it go? she asks her picture. The photographer had no need to ask anyone to smile.

### **9 of 16 The Dumbest City in America**

From Fort Wayne my mother calls me in Alabama to tell me that Fort Wayne has been designated by *Men's Health* magazine as “The Dumbest City in America.” It seems to have been done scientifically with graphs and categories and surveys. The number of Nobel recipients, library books circulating, SAT scores. “What,” she asks, “are you going to write about this?” I don’t know. I don’t know. By definition my response can’t be very smart. I am influenced by the influence of place, a son of dumb. “Stupid is as stupid does,” Forrest Gump’s mother says. In Alabama, when it comes to lists, Alabamans say “Thank God for Mississippi.” I want, at this juncture, to pun on dumb, to say something about how Alabama gives voice to the notion of place. A silence inhabits whole regions of the world—Fort Wayne, Indiana, for instance. That kind of dumb. In the silence in which some places are steeped, someone will articulate the vacuum. Struck dumb by dumb luck.

### **7 of 16 The Blue Light Special**

Boxing Day, 1965. On the spur of the moment, Earl Bartell, manager at the Fort Wayne Kmart, taped a flashing blue lantern from sporting goods to some scrap two-by-four lumber, creating the first Blue Light Special. The flashing light marked the spot of some holiday paper he was looking to unload. The sale had been advertised. Announcements had been made.

But the customers were having difficulty finding the reduced stock. People had gotten lost in the store. The Blue Light was a navigating beacon, strobing orientation. The customers navigated the cramped crowded aisles toward the discounted breast of—if not the New World—then at least next year's promised presents. The place I write about is the place where the Blue Light Special was created. I, like Gatsby, another Midwesterner, believe in the ecstatic future. I believe in the Blue Light, both illuminating and illustrative.

### **11 of 16 City of Blue Trucks**

Fort Wayne is the world headquarters of North American Van Lines, whose distinctive sky blue rigs wander lonely as clouds continually through the city, waiting for a berth. You see them orbiting on the bypass, idling in the far reaches of parking lots, a herd of them huddled together. Air brakes sneeze; running lights run. They've come to hub, to shift and sort and reload loads, to pool then peel away again, pulmonary pods, heaping beasts. Growing up, I liked thinking of the drifting blue trucks, counted them instead of sheep, each of them, I imagined, tared with another living room or parlour, each trailer transporting a suspended domestic setting, dreaming itself. Animated places crept by, a place parade, places looking for places to go and then going. The whole country, in individual dots and dashes, circulating through my city, the furnishings of its atriums entering the chambered city, this contracting, this expanding heart. And then, in another blue beat or two, beat it out of town.

### **16 of 16 A Bottle in a Message**

Once I got a coconut from Hawaii—its hull hulled with stamps. My address and the stamp the only message. Often postcards are not about the words alone; not the message in the bottle at all. The bottle itself the message: the medium and the means of transportation, transporting the places temporarily inhabited. Once the postal service would deliver almost anything to anywhere if it had enough postage. I always wanted to send a door, unhinged and varnished with stamps, a souvenir of a place entered or left. Instead, in hotel rooms, I strip the door of its framed legal notice encrypted with information that a safe will be provided, that the traveller cannot knowingly defraud the innkeeper, and use it as my souvenir postcard, an accurate indicator of where I'm at, where I've been. This explains everything, I write—an illustration of explanation. I write: Wish you were here.

# Contributors

---

**Naomi Benaron** is an MFA student at Antioch University, Los Angeles. Her fiction has appeared in *New Millennium Writings* and was presented at the Second International Conference on Genocide at Sacramento State University. She was a finalist for the 2004 Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction and the New Millennium Writings Awards XVII. In 2002, she won the Martindale Literary Prize. She is currently writing a novel about Rwanda.

**Tim Bowling** is the author of six collections of poems and two novels. A seventh collection, *I Didn't Go in at the Recess Bell*, will be published by Gaspereau Press in 2006. He lives in Gibsons Landing, British Columbia.

**Wayde Compton** wrote *49th Parallel Psalm* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 1999; reprinted 2005) and edited *Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001); the former was shortlisted for the Dorothy Livesay Prize. His most recent book is *Performance Bond* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004). With Jason de Couto, he is one half of The Contact Zone Crew, a sound-poetry duo. He is also a founding member of the Hogan's Alley Memorial Project, an organization established in 2002 to preserve the memory of Vancouver's original black neighbourhood. He lives in Vancouver and teaches English literature and composition at Coquitlam College.

**Melanie Little's** short story collection, *Confidence*, was a Globe and Mail Top 100 Book of 2003. She will be the Markin-Flanagan Writer in Residence at the University of Calgary for 2005-06. "Wrestling" was inspired by the Ramada Vancouver Centre on Broadway, where she was glamorously employed after completing her MFA at the University of British Columbia. Her husband, Peter Norman, is responsible for Gram's *bon phrase* beginning "They're all a bunch of..."

**Annabel Lyon** is the author of *Oxygen* (2000) and *The Best Thing for You* (2004). She is a Vancouver fiction writer, freelancer, and teacher.

**Michael Martone** is a memoir made up of fifty contributors' notes which were published in the contributors' notes sections of various magazines. *Unconventions*, a book of essays on writing, will appear this fall.

**Esther Mazakian** has just finished her first book, *Move*. She has been previously published in PRISM (42:1), and was last seen in CV2.

**rob mcLennan** lives in Ottawa, even though he was born there. the editor/publisher of above/ground press & STANZASmagazine (founded in 1993), he is the author of ten poetry collections, most recently *what's left* (Talonbooks) and *stone, book one* (Palimpsest Press). the editor/publisher of the online critical journal *Poetics.ca* & the poetry annual *ottawater* (www.ottawater.com), he often says things on his clever blog: www.robmcLennan.blogspot.com

**Mark Mothersbaugh** has dedicated most of his life to his most prolific music endeavor, DEVO—an art project that blossomed into a long career for the Akron quintet. The rest of his life has been, and will be, spent creating an excessive amount of visual artwork, and spreading it around the world. You can see more of his work at [www.mutatovisual.com](http://www.mutatovisual.com)

**matt robinson** works in Residential Life at the University of New Brunswick. A poetry editor at *The Fiddlehead*, his poetry has received numerous awards. Recent work includes his chapbook, *tracery & interplay* (Frog Hollow, 2004), and the forthcoming collection of hockey poems, *no stage contains a stare that well*.

**Bill Stenson** is an editor with *The Claremont Review*. His short story collection, *Translating Women*, published by ThistleDown, came out in 2004. He is presently at work on his second novel.

**Michael Trussler** is editor of *Wascana Review* and teaches English at the University of Regina. He has published literary criticism, poetry, and short fiction in a variety of journals.

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—Michael Martone, Page 82

Fiction Contest Issue

Judge's Essay:  
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rob mclennan  
matt robinson  
Bill Stenson  
Michael Trussler



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