PRISM international

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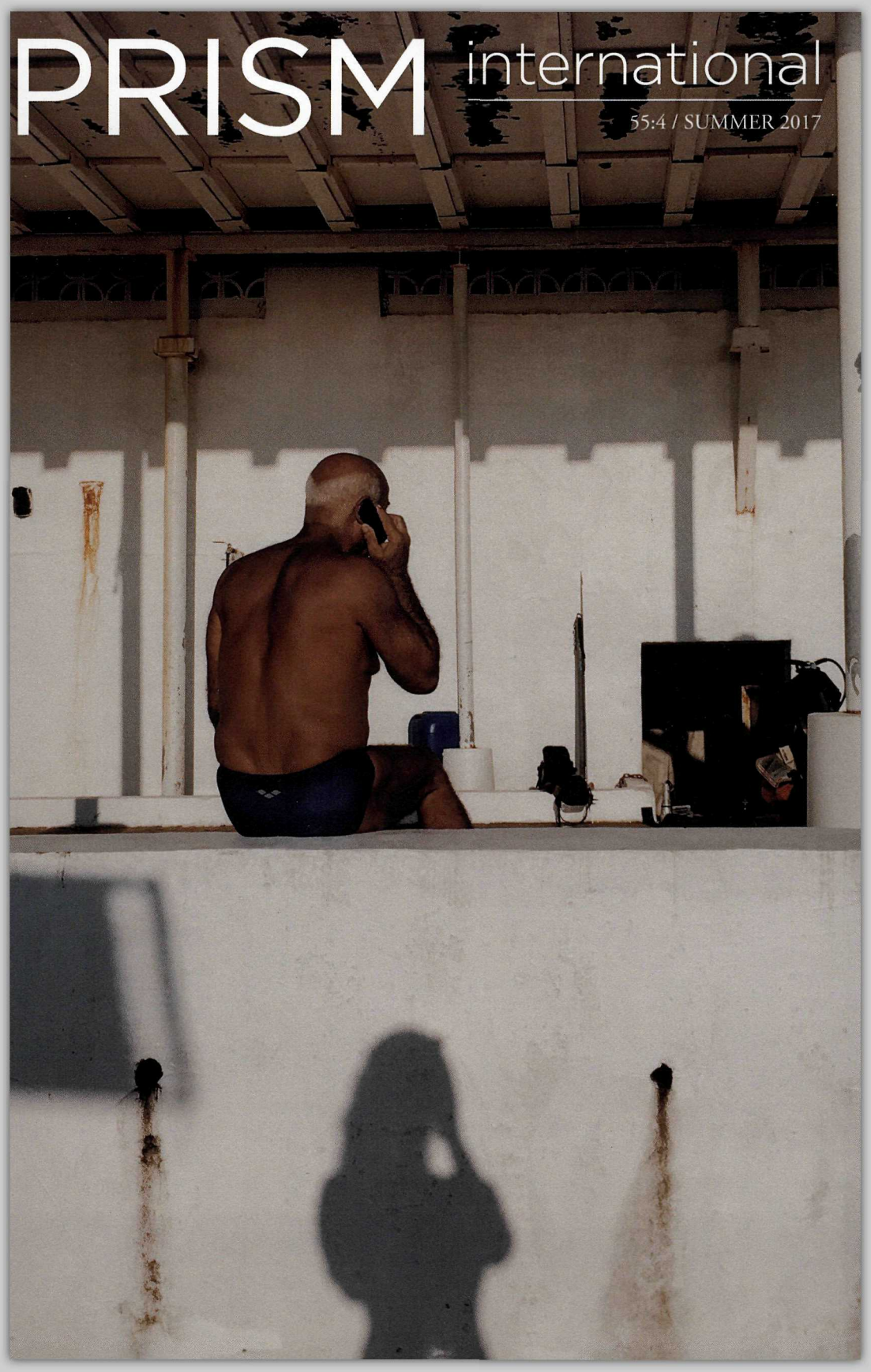

PRISM international

JACOB ZILBER PRIZE FOR SHORT FICTION

GRAND PRIZE

"The Boat, as it Happened" by Carol Matthews

FIRST RUNNER-UP

"Chez Madame" by Adrick Brock

SECOND RUNNER-UP

"The Water" by Christine Miscione

JUDGE Jess Taylor

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PRISM international is proud to announce the launch of our digital archives! With the generous support of the British Columbia Arts Council, we have digitized over 200 back issues, bringing 56 years of literary history online. Joyce Carol Oates, Michael Ondaatje, and Seamus Heaney are just a few names from *PRISM*'s long legacy. Digitization of our archives is an important step in preserving and promoting influential literature, and we are excited to share our publication history with readers worldwide.

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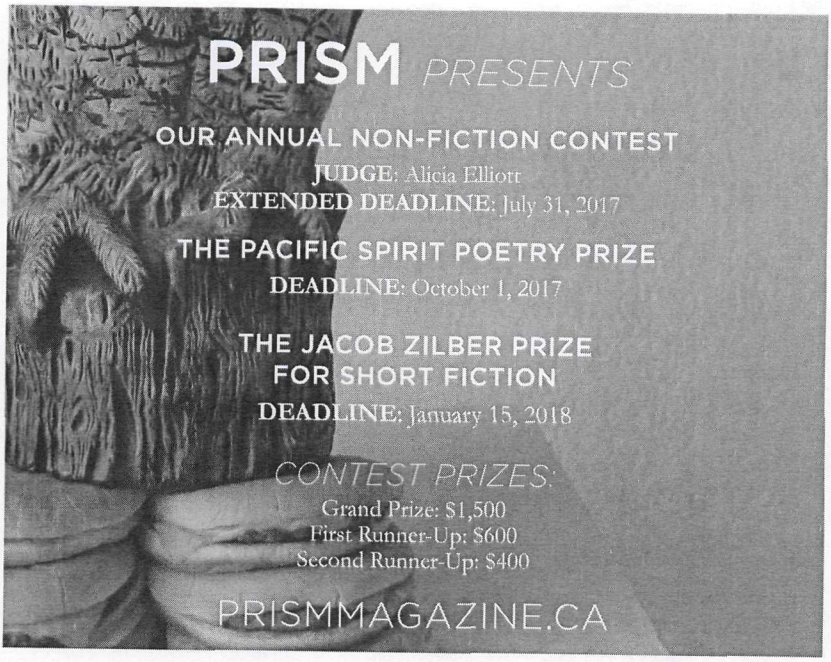

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a place of mind
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

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Jess Taylor

SO MUCH GOOD HERE: NOTES ON THE JACOB ZILBER PRIZE

Two people meet at a party and decide to share ownership of a boat, a plague of caterpillars covers a small town with their writhing bodies, a man and his young assistant track a flock of starlings across the countryside, two young men head to Montreal to track down a now-stripping girl from their past, a couple has their television stolen and fissures in their comfortable relationship are revealed, and a tenant annoys their neighbours by keeping the water on too long.

These were the six finalists of *PRISM*'s inaugural Jacob Zilber Prize for Short Fiction. Even from each story's premise, you can tell there is something interesting here. But besides well-chosen subject matter, there was something special about each story. As a writer who is drawn to character, perspective, and tone, I felt that each story was well-selected for me as a judge, and the stories so different from each other that it made selecting three very different winners easy but choosing very difficult. It wasn't surprising that these six stories rose to the top of about 600 entries from around the world.

After a quick initial skim of the short list, the first story I was drawn to was "The Water" by Christine Miscione of Hamilton, Ontario. The narrator of the story, Carmella, instantly comes alive through her use of language, assigning her upstairs neighbour the label "new tenant." Her use of this label creates a repetition that thrums through the text like the sound of the water from upstairs. Yes, this is the story about a neighbour overusing the water, but from this simple premise, very real stakes emerge. Every word reflects the world view and personality of Miscione's narrator. This is a very carefully sculpted story, containing the world of the narrator's apartment building.

As I continued through the stories, I realized that each one had something about it that made me want to pick it as a winner, especially in terms of craft and technical ability.

"Pestilence" by Mike Alberti of Minneapolis, Minnesota, uses the collective "we" of the townspeople as the narrative voice for his story about a plague of caterpillars. As the town adjusts with an almost-eerie nonchalance, the caterpillars transform, first into pupae, and then into moths that fly away.

In "The Break-In," Mark Gardner of Coventry, U.K., uses narrative perspective in another way, to gradually reveal the naivety and ignorance of the narrator as she tries to hunt down answers about what happened to her TV, invades her neighbours' privacy, and evades the truth about her marriage.

"The Starling Killers" by Joe Totten of Midway, Utah, creates a thick atmosphere with precise, careful language. As much as I enjoyed the story's main plot, following the starling killers across the countryside where they are tracking birds they will eventually blow up with dynamite, I was even more drawn to the stories the protagonist tells his assistant. These stories function as little self-contained narratives that reveal more about the old man's past.

Eventually I decided to judge based on the things that make me like reading: the ability of a piece of fiction to bring me joy and the ability of a story to make me think and reconsider the world around me. Three stories stuck out for me when I considered the submissions in this way.

"The Boat, As It Happened" by Carol Matthews of Nanaimo, British Columbia, made me love it because reading it felt effortless and fun. Reading (or even writing when it's going well) sucks you into a land of imagination where you become unhinged from all the day-to-day awfulness of your life and get to exist in a story. Sparingly written with clear, simple sentences, Matthews's story did this most effectively for me. In addition, after the story was complete, I just sat there and thought about it for awhile. I wasn't ready to leave the world of the story yet, and the story had also taken me through so much. While the story at first appears to be about two acquaintances exploring a shared interest with an intensity that eventually wanes—something easily relatable and interesting—the story is actually about several other things as well, just less obviously. It's about the ennui that eventually seeps into everyone's lives, the ebbs and flows of a relationship, what it means when we give up a past passion, and what it means when we discover another. All of this complexity coupled with the enjoyable reading process earned this story the Grand Prize.

When it came to memorable, realistic characters, "Chez Madame" by Adrick Brock of Vancouver, British Columbia, was the winner. These were characters that I was still thinking about after I finished reading all of the shortlisted stories. Brock constructs realistic characters that still work well as counterbalances to each other, subverts expectations, and uses believable, quick dialogue. In this story, set on a road trip between small-town Northern Ontario and Montreal, both locations come alive—the place the boys are travelling from and the one they are travelling to, a tiny, rundown stripclub in Montreal. I still wonder what

happened to the protagonist, Craig; his friend and foil, Mitch Wilson; Alana Dafoe; and her kind bouncer boyfriend. At over five thousand words, "Chez Madame" was the longest story of the batch and, most writers agree, the longer a story is the more it has to prove its worth to keep you reading. After the first page, this wasn't even a factor; the close third-person narrator flowed smoothly and quickly, moving the reader along. I awarded "Chez Madame" First Runner-Up.

And of course, I returned to "The Water," which was awarded Second Runner-Up.

I wish readers could experience these stories the way I got to experience them, in a balanced anthology with all six, as there is so much good here in the six shortlisted stories. Congratulations to the winners!

Carol Matthews

THE BOAT, AS IT HAPPENED

The boat, as it happened, had its beginning at a cocktail party at which a man and a woman shared childhood memories. The man spoke of a sturdy rowboat he'd been allowed to take out by himself at the lake cottage his family visited every summer. The woman remembered trips on her father's small cabin cruiser.

"On summer weekends, we'd motor up the Fraser River for a day on the water. My sister and I would crawl around the deck and climb up on the roof of the cabin to suntan," she recalled. "Our father would be in the cabin, manning the helm and calling out points of interest while our mother set out a picnic lunch. Nobody ever argued when we were in the boat. It was idyllic."

"I used to row around by myself at the cabin we rented each summer," the man said. "I felt like an adventurer in a foreign country, weaving through the feathery branches of the weeping willow trees that lined the lake. It was a flat-bottomed boat, very solidly built, and sometimes I stood up to paddle."

They continued to speak of their love of such marine adventures and about their regret that neither the man's wife nor the woman's husband had any interest in boating.

"You two should get a little boat together," said another guest overhearing the conversation. "You could share it, and enjoy it until you got your spouses to take an interest, and then you could each buy your own boats."

At first the man and the woman laughed at the suggestion, but when that person went on to tell them about a small boat for sale at a local marina, they agreed to take a look and established a meeting time for the following week.

It was a beautiful boat, beyond anything either of them might have imagined. A sixteen-foot clinker-built boat with a mast for sailing and an inboard engine for motoring. Everything about it was perfect. The wooden trim gleaming against the navy blue of the hull, the inviting curve of the seats, the clever design of the hatch, which was ideal for stowing life jackets and picnic supplies.

"Any other colour—a brighter blue, a red, or a green—just wouldn't work as well," the woman said. "The navy is classic. Elegant." She walked

back and forth on the dock, examining the boat from every angle.

The man crouched beside the boat and peered at the engine. He did not know much about engines, but the look of it pleased him. "It's a Finnish motor," he said, remembering what the owner had said. "It should be reliable."

They were mostly silent as they returned to their respective homes, having agreed that this venture was not one to be rushed. It was perhaps a ridiculous idea to think that two people could share a boat, especially a man and a woman who barely knew each other and were married to other people. Moreover, there was the cost, the question of moorage, the complications of shared ownership. Yet when, a few days later, the man called the woman to ask if she'd like to take another look at the boat, she quickly assented. A third trip was enough to convince them to propose to their respective spouses that a joint purchase be made. It was early spring, a perfect time to buy a boat.

As it happened, neither of the spouses wanted anything to do with the purchase but had no objections to the man and the woman going ahead with the endeavour. The woman's husband was amused to find his wife so excited, almost childlike in her enthusiasm. The man's wife hated the idea of boats, especially as she'd never learned to swim, but was glad to think of her husband taking up a hobby, as he'd always had a tendency to bury himself in his work. With surprising speed, the negotiations were completed, a marina was found, the financial arrangements were made, and a schedule was drawn up whereby the man and the woman would have access to the boat on alternate weeks.

The woman wondered if they might give the boat a new name, but the man insisted that it was bad luck to rename a boat. "Every vessel," he said, "is recorded in the *Ledger of the Deep* and known to Neptune, the god of the sea, so changing the name is not something to be done lightly." He said that were he to rename it he would consider a name like *Wayfarer*, or *Sojourner*, appellations befitting this sort of craft. The woman had thought of naming her *Aphrodite* after the Greek goddess born out of sea foam. In the end, they agreed that the current name of the boat, *Certitude*, was actually as fitting as the navy blue paint.

In the first few weeks the woman persuaded her husband to take trips with her, but she felt he was simply being indulgent when he expressed admiration for her ability to handle the small boat, and he was game for only very short expeditions. Once or twice she took one of her female friends for a picnic on the boat, outings which were pleasant enough and allowed her to point out the many attractions of her new acquisition, but which left her feeling somehow unsatisfied.

For the most part, the man went out by himself when it was his turn to have the boat. His wife could not be persuaded to join him, and his male friends seemed to prefer proper sailing skiffs or large motorboats. Once he took his elderly mother out for a spin, but he worried so much about her comfort he could not fully enjoy himself.

One day, while discussing the need for a small repair, the man suggested to the woman that the two of them might take the boat out together and this soon became a frequent practice. Although they scarcely knew each other, conversation between the two of them was surprisingly easy, perhaps because each found it a pleasure to be with someone who thoroughly appreciated the beauty of the little vessel.

"The word *vessel* is so appropriate, isn't it?" the woman mused, as they drifted along the channel. "It makes me think of vases or the French word *vaisseau*. Or a goblet, or a chalice, maybe. A container to hold things that are precious to you, like jewels, or your thoughts or memories." She laughed, a bit embarrassed to have spoken in this way, but the man simply nodded his head.

"I like the steady *put put put* of this little motor. I'm not a spiritual person, but that is as close as I have come to a mantra," the man said.

"It's like mindfulness, isn't it?"

"Or maybe mindlessness. Which is actually what I prefer."

After such exchanges they would smile at each other and then fall silent for a while.

Sometimes the trips were just short tours around small islands nearby, sometimes longer outings. As summer arrived and the days became warmer, their meetings grew more regular, usually one day a week. Not infrequently the woman packed a basket of cold chicken sandwiches or a baguette with cheese and olives and fresh fruit; the man would bring a bottle of chilled Pinot Gris or Prosecco. On these occasions, they would pull ashore on an island beach to enjoy their picnic. She admired his choice of wine, and he complimented her on the way she set out the picnic on the patterned tablecloth with matching napkins and pretty little plates. They rarely spoke during their lunch, but after a while the woman would say, "Ahoy, Captain," and he'd take her arm as she climbed back into the boat.

"Onwards, Scotty," he ordered, as she pulled the string to start the engine.

"I'm Irish," she protested.

"The ship's engineer is always called Scotty," he insisted. "Think of Star Trek."

As the hot summer days moved toward autumn, they developed a routine of regular meetings and they no longer invited others to join

them on their scheduled times. They had established a comfortable kind of communication in which it was easy to remain silent and also possible to speak of whatever they felt.

The woman told him how much the little boat, *Certitude*, meant to her. "It's a safe place for me and it has a feeling of rightness about it. When I was up on the deck of my father's boat I sometimes imagined that God was looking down on us and smiling, saying to himself that he liked humans best when they were out on the water."

"He would prefer that to most of the other things he might find us doing," the man laughed.

"I still feel like that. I have a sense when we are out with *Certitude* that all is well, that what we are doing is absolutely right."

"I feel it too. It is a fact, as Ratty said to Mole, 'There is nothing—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.'"

The woman had never read *The Wind in the Willows*, and the man promised to bring her his copy.

The rift happened on a chilly day in late September, about six months after they'd purchased the boat. They stopped at the marina office to ask about changes in moorage rates, and found they had walked into an ugly dispute between the couple who ran the marina. The woman wanted to leave off their questions immediately and return another day. The man, keen to settle their account, preferred to wait but, grumbling a bit, consented to leave.

It was one of those days when there was not quite enough rain to cause a change in plans and yet there was a disagreeable drizzle that created dampness on the boat and in the moods of the two people.

"I hate being caught up in other people's personal arguments," said the woman, who noticed the man's ill spirits, but felt that she should not have to apologize. After several minutes of silence, she offered what she hoped was an appeasing observation. "What an unpleasant woman that man's wife appears to be! Her husband hardly had a chance to say a word!"

"He's pussy-whipped," the man responded, in a voice that was too loud.

"What are you talking about?"

"He's pussy-whipped! Like most men today! I'm pussy-whipped, as well. I expect your husband is also pussy-whipped. You see it everywhere!" He laughed, but it was not a nice sound.

The woman wrapped her jacket tightly around her chest and said in a quiet voice, "I find your language very offensive. And you have no right

to say anything about my husband or my marriage."

"The rain is building up," the man said, unnecessarily. "It's not a day for messing about in boats, is it?" He may have smiled when he said this, but the woman was not looking as he steered the boat back to the marina.

As it happened, the woman and her husband were soon to go on their annual fall vacation. It was a good holiday. They enjoyed the month in London, going to theatre productions in the West End and wandering about their favourite art galleries and museums. Her husband surprised her with a five-star riverboat tour along the Thames that combined an elegant dinner with a view of Tower Bridge and St. Paul's Cathedral. "I know how you love being out on a boat," he said.

The woman spent several days at the Tate Gallery and bought a sketchbook so that, inspired by the Turner collection in the Prints and Drawing Room, she could try her hand at some drawing. She told her husband that she thought she might take some art classes over the winter, and he encouraged her in this.

Before leaving for her holiday she had left a message for the man to tell him that he was free to use the boat until the beginning of November. It was a busy time for him at work so the man did not go out in the boat during her absence, but he did check it weekly and, just before the woman was due to return, he spent a day cleaning the hull, and oiling and polishing the woodwork so that it shone like new.

By the time the woman and her husband were back home, a chill had set in and it rained every day. Having no inclination to take the boat out herself, the woman sent a message to the man proposing that it was perhaps time for them to consider selling it. The man's response was swift and curt.

"That will not be necessary," he wrote, "I'm quite happy to buy your share and take care of future moorage costs." This was quickly followed by a cheque, which generously covered the equity she had in the boat and any other related expenses they'd incurred, such as insurance and repairs. The accompanying note simply outlined these costs and included no other remarks.

Throughout the winter, the woman occasionally thought of the many pleasant times she'd had in the little boat and wondered if the man was continuing to use it. She did not ever see him when she walked by the waterfront, however, and heard no word about him from others, although admittedly they knew few people in common. In any case, she found she did not actually miss her seagoing jaunts, and was increasingly absorbed in the time she spent sketching and painting.

The following spring her husband pointed out an advertisement in the weekend paper. "That looks like your old boat, doesn't it?" he asked. "It doesn't give the name but it looks very similar."

"Yes, *Certitude*," she said. "I'm sure that's her."

"Care to drive down and have a look?" her husband inquired.

"Oh no," she replied. "I don't see the purpose. I'm too busy these days to mess about with boats."

She remembered then that she still had the man's copy of *Wind in the Willows*. She would send it back by mail, she decided, with a polite note.

Cole Nowicki

PRIDE & PLOCKWURST

Small-town pride tends to be a desperate thing, like searching for shore crabs under beach rocks. Some towns have it to admire the tiny crabs for their surprising complexity or cuteness, but most use it as a tool to keep themselves sane or to drum up tourists, pulling the crabs apart leg by leg, in hopes of finding even a morsel of meat that can be fried up and shared on Instagram or milked for a buck—a truck stop in the wee town of Valleyview, Alberta, was voted best public bathroom in Canada in 2013, and the highway signs twenty kilometres out from the county limit make sure to let you know.

Small-town pride is also distinct from that of the big-city variety. Bigger city centres usually don't have as much of an issue when it comes to creating community pride. The population density means more opportunities to foster culture, to have major sports teams, and a higher likelihood of infamous musicians or murderers calling them home. Those are things people and their pride naturally rally around. They add to a city's identity, and identity is key when dealing in pride. Vancouver is green. Calgary is sprawling and littered with cowpeople. Hamilton is... Hamilton, for better or worse. And even worse is something that garners special followings. Look at Ottawa, our nation's capital, and perennially touted capital of boring. Worse *is* an identity. How can the teensy town of Boyle, Alberta, stir pride in its ranks when it really doesn't have much of an identity at all due to its sheer dearth of populace. You'll likely only know anything about Boyle because you might be Googling it right now. And that's a big, bristling might. Much like the big, bristling mustache of Justice John Robert Boyle, the former Alberta Liberal Party leader and Minister of Education from whom the town gets its name, which is almost interesting. Unfortunately no one gives a fuck about ol' J.R. Boyle and that's when small towns start reaching to make their toilets best in show.

Napanee, Ontario. That's the name of a town that just barely fits into its official city-sized dungarees with a population of 15,000. If Napanee sounds familiar that's because it's the hometown of Canada's gift/lump of coal to pop music, Avril Lavigne. The city of Greater Napanee's website promotes Avril like she's at city hall handing out black eyeliner and studded bracelets to every tourist who passes through. And so they

should. They have a local talent whose success they can capitalize on and be proud of. Put her on billboards, manhole covers, the official city seal. She's why people know the name Napanee and not Boyle.

I'm from a small town that has nothing akin to an Avril either. Lac La Biche, Alberta, is a community that isn't notable for anything except for being the current home of my grandmother. Which isn't notable but should be, because she's a wonderful person. The last rallying point of town pride I picked up on coming out of the LLB was when they got a Boston Pizza. That was big. Old classmates on Facebook were gleefully planning on making it the next after work/game/wedding hotspot. I was proud of Lac La Biche, too. They'd made it and had the Jambalaya Fettuccini to prove it. I even felt an odd bit of pride when, a couple months after it opened, a pickup truck backed through the restaurant's front doors in the middle of the night and a few masked men stole its ATM—ain't no big-city restaurant gonna change my town!

Unfortunately, the small-town pride model Lac La Biche seems to be using lately is one of general homogenization. As in, let's bring in all the ubiquitous box stores and chain restaurants because that's what the people in other towns with *more* people like. Other, more creative towns, towns that are generally lacking the promising oil sands capital of Lac La Biche, have to go out of their way to separate themselves from their neighbours in an effort to drum up town pride and tourists—and that's where wild, wanton ideas of townsfolk become strange, surprising reality. Vegreville, Alberta, is home to the world's largest Pysanka, a five-ton Ukrainian Easter egg. Duncan, BC, boasts a really big fucking hockey stick that you might be interested in looking at for a few minutes. There are small communities in Alberta named Excelsior, Vulcan, and Balzac.

Excelsior just sounds cool, Vulcan has had a Star Trek makeover and hosts an annual "Spock Days" festival that attracts Trekkies from all over the world, and Balzac is named after noted French novelist Honoré de Balzac. But mostly the name just sounds like ballsack. It's those odd, sometimes grandiose twists that make these small towns compelling.

But for me the highest point any town has reached in the hunt for pride and identity comes from Mundare, Alberta. Mundare is the home of Stawnichy's Meat Processing. If you don't eat meat then I'm sorry you're missing out on those compacted tubes of ground-up animal nirvana. But it's not their sausages that I find so intriguing, it's how the town chose to celebrate them. In 2001, after forty years of turning animals into various delectable, edible shapes, Stawnichy's and Mundare erected a commemorative 42-foot-tall fibreglass replica Kobasa statue. A statue that looks less like a sausage and more like King Kong left the world's largest free-standing turd in the middle of an open field and just walked off.

It's that brand of blind idealism that so wilfully ignores aesthetic taste or good judgment that resonates with the small town roots in me. I'm not from Mundare, but in a sense I feel like I am. That four-storey sausage is the town punching up and back at the city—its pickup truck through the Boston Pizza. Edmonton can build a gargantuan mall and tourists will flock to Orange Julius and get day-drunk in the wave pool, but Mundare has taken a literal and symbolic shit on its community, as if to let the world know that they're happy with the little mess they've made for themselves and they want you to come see it. They even built it an observation deck. And while most of us would try our best to hold back our twelve-year-old selves from calling it the "poop deck," I'm sure most Mundare residents stand on it, in the shadow of their titanic sausage, looking out over the parking lot of the neighbouring Esso station with pride.

Sarah Blake and Kimberly Quioge Andrews

THE SEA WITCH MOVES TO LAND

There, through the wall
of cleaned, stacked bones:

a naked body, striated, variegated,
many small, shifting horizons.

All movements are the wreckage
of preconceived notions of poise.

When she does not move,
she's a pause flush with breath,

a pulse visible due to the
terrible redundancy

of the bones. It's easy to confuse
one line for another. What

does she reach for? What does
she bring to her mouth?

Our jaws such that we may speak
of eating, of watching witches eat.

WHY THE SEA WITCH LIVES IN BONES

Isn't the sea filled with skeletons?

And all the whales and their car-sized hearts.

a house of one—a lung of two—a bolt of three

This is a wonderful neighbourhood.

What we'll call deaths.

You can see all the cages I'm imagining.

The tunnels and their liquid language.

In the heat and sun, the tongue is a useless thing.

an anchor of four—a finger of five—a tooth of—

Why not approach her yourself?

She sits with her back to a bone that holds her.

THE SEA WITCH COMES HOME AFTER A LONG DAY

She turns on the light and the street rolls away like a pulse

The dimness of water becomes a faint injury on the back of the hand

She takes a beer from the fridge like she's ordinary

Her dress works through the prisms of advantage and disadvantage

Her eels don't know why she's come here when she could have anything

They don't perceive this facet of the transactional nature of existence

They don't understand their role in her eternal sense of foreboding

We could explain to them how the neighbours now feel about gills

We could explain to them how every life in the neighbourhood has shifted its phenomenology to infinite vertebrae and humiliated hearts just from the sight of her

Natalie Wee

WOMEN WHO DO NOT FORGIVE

After Jeanann Verlee

There is the Japanese art of putting shattered pottery
back together with gold lacquer. It requires a patience

that cannot be given, even by god. It has to be cut
out from the fleshy heart of you. Women who have had

to reclaim their antlered knees in the river
know this. The unending terror splintering in throats

like trees trying to shrink back in time. The pain of
trying to unmake something that has already happened.

How, at its most ferocious, cleaning looks almost
like trying to break open the earth.

How I wish you here, your fingers shattered on wet stones.
How I wish I could prove my heart was not one of the things

he crushed. Could rise above the *did he really do it.*
The *you pathological liar.* The *you are ruining his life.*

No, I will not wish upon you what descended upon me
like a swift and suffocating fist. But I will wish upon you

suffering that is only a fraction of the suffering
I have known. For bitterness is no pill that sugar

can make sweet. I wish for words to fester on your tongue,
that your cruel mouth holds only night soil, that every person

who kisses you knows what you have laid to rest there.
I wish for you to lose every refuge you once thought

as immovable as the ground beneath your feet.
I wish for you to lose all sacred happiness you once

claimed birthright. That you will be denied peace
in a thousand small ways. That one day you

will awaken at night, cold with the knowledge
of your own bloody knuckles

and sleep, like a gentle hand, will deny
itself to you.

Adrick Brock

CHEZ MADAME

Ask Mitch Wilson where they're going he'll say Snatch City, Pussy Palace, the bona fide home of Alana Dafoe's golden pole. If only they had a teletransporter. If only it wasn't snowing so damn hard. There are cars on the shoulder every twenty clicks, sideways-facing, butts in the ditch. Mitch hasn't lost control once and *he's still driving with summer tires for Chrissake!* The car is a hand-me-down Pontiac, rust-speckled and perfumed with burnt oil, but it gets the job done. Only problem is the cassette player swallowed a U2 tape in the nineties and Bono still can't seem to find what he's looking for.

The blizzard is a sign. "God does not want to let us through," Mitch says, swatting Craig on the shoulder. This is a jab at Craig's older brother, Joel, who stopped drinking last year and started going to meetings in the Lutheran church basement instead. *Pope Joel the First.* Mitch takes his hands off the steering wheel and presses them together in mock prayer. They coast on the tires' limp grip. It could snow hammers and skulls and still they'd make it to Montreal. "With the Lord as my witness," says Mitch, steering the Pontiac away from the oncoming lane.

They take turns urinating in a gas station washroom on the Quebec side. Craig goes second—he's younger than Mitchell by four years—and has to sidestep Mitch's terrible aim, yellow veins on the bleach white tiles. Seeing the piss makes him sick to his stomach. This whole trip is a bad idea. Joel has warned him about hanging around with Mitch, about which he knows a thing or two, given the shit they used to get up to. Then again, who is Craig supposed to hang with otherwise? Everyone close to his age has either moved to Toronto or got stuck in the bear trap of marriage. Cram their whole town into the bingo hall and it'd only be half full.

Mitch buys them jerky and Doritos and a six-pack of Bleu. He's lanky and unkempt and in the gas station's oversaturated light his fledgling goatee looks demonic and perverse. He saddles into the driver's seat and cracks two cans. *Roadies*, the locals call them, where drinking and driving and drunk driving are two separate activities. It's the icy conditions that make Craig hesitate, the cold sting of the Bleu in his hand, two hundred clicks still to go and the night black as open water. "Don't tell me you've become an apostle," Mitch says, noticing his prudence. Craig takes a swig and turns up the volume on "One Tree Hill" so maybe Mitch will stop talking so much.

They pass a four-car pileup, the vehicles smushed together like a botched Tetris game. A tow truck levers a minivan from the wreckage. Where are the kids, Craig wonders, where is the family dog? A siren rotates atop a police SUV and he lowers his beer out of sight.

"When I get Alana alone in that back room I am going to give it to her like nothing she's ever been given." Mitch doesn't seem to register the carnage. He's like a DJ playing and replaying the same stripe of vinyl, wearing it down to a trench. In junior high he managed to touch one of Alana's breasts at a shaker in Ted Saunders's back forty. She slugged him in the gut and took off running and now it's his destiny, he opines, to get his mitts on the second. Talk, talk, talk. That's all there is where they work, J&B Log Homes, hewing red pines into prefab log cabins, *Authentic living for the traditionally minded.* In winter, slow season, it's just the two of them and a cold draft befitting a meat hanger. The only radio station they get plays rock from the 1970s. Craig's noticed how everything seems stuck on something. Mitch and his masturbation fantasy, Joel and his Higher Power, the town, winter, U2. Craig is eighteen years old, blond-haired and newly muscled, legal in Quebec, but what does he care about Alana Dafoe? She left enough years ago for him to stop remembering her. Mitch wants to dig up her gravestone just to see how rotten she's become and, for all his reservations, Craig knows he ought to be there when the corpse emerges. It's his public duty, he figures, to make sure Mitch doesn't deface her even more.

Montreal appears out of the snow as a nest of fuzzy light. The beer has smoothed Mitch's steering and he shifts between slow-moving cars without signalling. Quebec plates all around them. *Je me souviens.*

Craig reads a crinkled Canadian Tire bill, trying to decipher Mitch's directions. The words have been stabbed into the paper:

Exit Berri
R at St. Cats
look for sign:
Chez Madame

He knows Kyle Hewitt was probably drunk when he dictated the directions. Mitch showed up at the shop Monday morning with a milk-commercial smile, waving the ten-cent bill like it was a winning Keno card. Kyle had just returned to their town in the fall after a long stint away. He'd made it big in internet poker, moved to the States, bought a Mercedes Benz, lost it all. Now he was holed up in his parents' house recovering from what he uncomfortably reminded people was a gambling addiction. Something must have jogged his memory, Mitch said, because halfway through the

hockey game they were watching, Kyle said, *Remember that bimbo Dafoe?* and explained how he'd seen her last year while he was in Montreal for a hold'em tournament.

Mitch blazes through a tunnel like a Hollywood chase scene, the tires finding traction on the snow-free asphalt. The road sign for Rue Berri appears like an apparition. Suddenly they're up and into the city, white downy one-ways, the traffic lights on their low black poles, so obscure a height that Mitch gets halfway through an intersection before realizing they're running a red. He reverses, squealing the tires.

"What's French for *dumbass engineering*?"

Craig rolls down the window to break the fish-bowl barrier. The cold air crackles in his lungs and eases his nerves. He wouldn't admit it to Mitch but there's something terrifying about big cities, millions of people stacked on top of one another, rapists and murderers and sleeping families. In their town—a hamlet, really, after the dam shut down and took its workers elsewhere—there's no such thing as anonymity. You can be any variety of messed-up but you can never be a stranger.

Mitch turns right onto St. Catherine and looses a chorus of weird noises, yips and wows and awoogas. It's possible his brain is still cloudy from the cocktail of bathtub drugs he and Joel used to stuff themselves with. Sometimes at work Mitch will rev his chainsaw and lower it toward a neatly measured line, then stop. He'll have a look in his eye: caged, bovine. He'll make Craig measure out the cut again and redraw the line right over top of the original. "Measure twice, cut once," he'll say, but Craig can tell it's not professionalism that makes him cautious but something more like mental hiccups, power lines downed by the wind in his brain.

The directions don't say how many blocks to drive or even what side of the street the strip club's on. Mannequins pose in the windows of brightly lit clothing stores, urbanites huddle out front of bars and restaurants in their dark coats, smoking cigarettes. In his mind, Craig's looking for a vertical neon sign three stories tall, announcing Chez Madame in curling pink letters. He's prepared for bartenders in tuxedoes. He's got a hundred dollars cash, a whole day's wage, ready to blow on whatever fancy drinks they serve. He can't say for sure why there are zoo animals in his imagination but there they are—a pair of caged peacocks suspended on either side of the stage, a tiger on a steel leash, women with pythons for scarves. The thought eases his bourgeoning guilt: if Alana has become a stripper, let her be the swankiest stripper in French Canada.

But St. Catherine seems to be leading them away from the opulence of downtown. The transition is swift and unforgiving, restaurants are now poutine joints, clothing stores become depanneurs.

"Read it to me again," says Mitch. "There has to be something more."

"There isn't."

Mitch snatches the directions and tries to discern his chicken scratch. The Pontiac tacks. "Dammit," he says, "goddamn motherfucking cock snake."

Cock snake? "Maybe we could ask someone."

"Nah. Bunch of bullfrogs, remember."

They idle at a red. There aren't even any people on the sidewalks.

"Maybe we passed it already," Craig offers.

When the light turns green Mitch hits the accelerator too hard and the summer tires sashay on the slippery street. Behind them, a delivery truck honks. "Shove it up your French ass!" Mitch shouts. He gets the Pontiac moving again, drives them deeper into the boonies, past a gas station, a strip mall, some dark tenements. Up ahead is the floating blue H of a hospital sign. It pulls Craig's attention, this missing Scrabble tile set against the white blur of snow, so when Mitchell slams the breaks and the car starts skidding, Craig's first thought is that at least they're within stone's-throw of Emergency. Only what's French for *Emergency*? The car slides to the other side of the street, a rogue curling stone. Mitch spins the wheel like a sea captain. He brings the Pontiac right up to the curb and at the last second the back end evens out, landing them in a perfect parallel park. He hasn't registered the uncanny grace of their crash landing. "Look," he says, eyes lit like a child's. "Fucking look!"

Chez Madame has a dark doorway flanked by blacked-out windows. The sign runs horizontal above the door, peeling decals lit by a single up-turned floodlight. Craig can tell right away there will be no exotic birds. Mitch is so excited to have found the place he can't seem to register what's obvious to Craig: the club is a dive.

They ascend the narrow staircase toward the sound of muffled music. At the top of the stairs is another door, but when Craig gets closer he realizes the door is actually a man. He's the biggest man Craig's ever seen, wider even than Giff Rucoski, their town's lone CFL export, who used to roam the dump on weekends dead-lifting old fridges.

The bouncer asks for IDs.

"I'm twenty-two." Mitch tugs the sprigs of his goatee.

The bouncer crosses his arms and something pops, muscle pushing aside bone. He uses a tiny flashlight to inspect their driver's licences, scrutinizing them for too long. "Buy a drink every half hour," he says in a thick Quebecois accent. "And no trouble." He makes just enough room between himself and the wall for Craig and Mitch to squeeze by.

The place has a ragged, impermanent look, like a set-dressed living room. Small, round tables surround a stage that bubbles out from the

curtained back wall. On the right side of the room is a bar where men perch on stools. Their attention is turned to a woman with puck-black hair who works her oiled body around a silver pole. The music is loud and tinny, bleating from a cheap sound system in the rafters. A thin sign hangs there: NE PAS TOUCHER.

"What did I tell you?" Mitch settles into a chair. "The good Lord doth prevail!"

A woman in only her underwear walks up to their table. Her nipples are hidden behind frilly silver tassels that seem to mock their beholder, a game of peek-a-boo Craig will never win. She says, "*Quelque chose à boire*?"

Mitch stares blankly. Craig's the one with Grade 10 French.

"We'll have beer."

"*Un pichet*?"

Craig shrugs. It's the longest conversation he's had in the language.

"She's into you," Mitch says, eyes trailing her ass as she walks away. On the stage, the stripper rolls her body to a hip-hop song. She places her hands on the pole and levitates, her legs kicking out and away, revealing the dark bud of her anus. She flips around and there are the glossy brown lips of her pussy. Craig hasn't seen one since Samantha McNabb left for makeup school last summer. She'd been shy about it, embarrassed by the wedge of razor stubble and the lips of her labia, always turning out the lights, pulling up the blanket, visiting at night.

A man at the table next to theirs calls out something Craig can't compute. The dancer tosses her black hair to one side and pouts at the crowd. It's supposed to be sexy, but the look makes Craig want to cover her up with his parka and sneak her away from here.

"Those are some nice tits," says Mitch. "Seven out of ten, easy."

The server arrives with the pitcher and he pays by sliding a twenty into the elastic of her G-string. He brings the pint to his face and drinks through the gap in his shit-eating smirk. "Can you imagine if we had a place like this back home?"

Craig pictures his cousins, Ida and Roseanne, up on the stage. They have Aunt Mirtle's muffin top, too much makeup on. There's a reason their town doesn't have that kind of thing.

"Your brother would flip," says Mitch. "He'd have all the old church ladies protesting. Probably send some missionaries to burn the place down." He drinks most of the pint in a long messy sip. "The pious prick."

Craig doesn't laugh.

"What's up with you?"

"Buzzed," says Craig, but the opposite is true. He should be drunker, all things considered. The last time he saw Alana she had blond curly hair, an August tan, seventeen years old with MTV boobs. She and a few of her

girlfriends were down by the river in their bikinis sipping sweet-looking coolers. Craig was only fourteen, another anonymous boy in their idiotic congregation. They were hurling themselves off the bridge into the water like lemmings and then racing back up to do it again, hoping the girls had seen and been impressed. When Craig climbed up the bank he was aware of his underdeveloped body, his sunken chest, the four or five hairs that sprouted from his armpits like weeds. But Alana looked at him. Even when all the girls around her were head-bent and giggling about some private joke, she had locked eyes with him, the purest and most terrifying moment of his adolescence—there was a person inside that airbrushed shell who was just as alive as he was.

When the black-haired dancer leaves the stage it's like the plug gets pulled on the club's life support machine. The music hangs in the air like stale smoke, talk becomes idle. The server with tinsel nipples bumps up against their table. "*Autre*?" she says, which confuses Craig. There's still beer in the pitcher they just ordered.

"Ask her when Alana's coming on," says Mitch, who thinks Craig is suddenly bilingual. He asks the server himself: "Do...you...know... Alana...Dafoe?"

Craig watches the top corners of the woman's mouth lift into a snarl. He sees her teeth, sharp and uneven, her body's dirty secret. She turns and looks at the bouncer, who scans the place like a surveillance camera on steroids.

"Look," she says in perfect English. "Are you going to order another round or what?"

"*Oui*," Craig says. He swallows the beer to make room for more.

After she leaves, Mitch says, "That bitch is on the rag. That's why she's got those panties on, to hide the tampon string." He leans back in his chair and locks his hands behind his skull. "You should move in with me," he continues, as though the invitation is part of some pre-existing thread the tampon has interrupted. "Get out of your parents' house, live a little. You've seen my flatscreen."

Mitchell lives above the general store in one of the town's only apartments. The TV sits in front of the window, blocking out the half-decent view of the lake and the hills beyond. Craig has slept on the couch enough to know that one transport truck is all it takes to create a small earthquake. Truckers plow down the main street like 3 a.m. is midday, which, to them, Craig supposes it is. "I'll think about it," he says.

"Think about it," Mitchell repeats, like he's testing a chain for dull teeth. "I just don't want to see you turning into another Jesus-freak."

Craig lives with his parents so he can save up. At some point his savings

will grow so large they'll bulge into his life like an invisible airbag, pushing him elsewhere, out of the house, out of the town, on to the rest of his life. He's not about to rush away like others have done, Kyle Hewitt and his lost fortune, Alana Dafoe and this grimy hovel. But he says it again to Mitch—"I mean it, I'll think about it"—because he can tell that no matter how manly Mitch's goatee might be, the guy is a little hurt.

There's a sound like a chainsaw hitting metal and then a voice comes over the PA. "*Prochaine est Tiffaneeeeee*!" A new song comes on, digitized jungle, and the crowd's cheering resurfaces. The dancer that steps out from behind the curtain wears a platinum bob wig that turns pink at the tips. Her body looks like plastic, too perfect to be real, the breasts like halved honeydews.

"Ten," says Mitch, "definitely a ten."

The server comes up and sets another pitcher down and Craig hands her the money like he would a gas station attendant, palm to palm. He's just trying to be polite about the transaction but the server seems almost offended by the lack of display. She tucks it in her own G-string, because where else would she put it?

For all her good looks, the dancer doesn't have much vigour. Her movements are slower than the beat, giving it a disjointed look. It's possible she's just drunk or stoned, and in a way he hopes she is, for her own sake. When she takes off her beaded bra she does it with such weeknight, work-a-day nonchalance it looks like she's undressing in her own bedroom for no one in particular.

Mitch glugs his beer and leans forward in his chair. "Wait a minute." He paws his eyeballs to clear his vision. "I know those tits."

Could it be her? With the makeup and wig it's hard to tell.

"Alana!" Mitch yells over the music. "Hey, Alana!"

The dancer opens her legs and shows off her shaven crotch and Craig gets a sinking feeling in his gut, like he's jumped off the bridge and the river is receding from his fall. Beside him, Mitch wears an evil, goateed grin. He can picture Mitch and Joel blitzed on beer and cough medicine, spraying Axe body spray at a lighter for the temporary dazzle of the flames; that jagged smile behind the fiery burp enough to make anyone question their choices.

The dancer finishes her routine and steps onto the floor, rattling a pitcher full of coins like a disappointed church lady. The loonies clink together, chump change. When she approaches their table, Mitch pulls a twenty from his jean pocket, snaps it at the corners like it's worth more. The dancer holds out the pitcher, unimpressed by his theatrics but interested in the money, and Craig's sure they've got the wrong person, this isn't the sun-kissed girl he remembers.

"Two-fifty-one Ohio Road," says Mitch. "Daughter of Martha and Ed."

She frowns. "What's the idea, buddy." Not a trace of Quebec in her English.

"You think you could get away from us?"

"You must be mistaken."

Craig's a little fuzzy from the beer but Mitch seems sharpened, unclogged, like he's swallowed a bottle of Drano. "I'd never forget a pair as nice as yours."

"Asshole." She turns to go.

"Tiffany," says Mitch. "You forgot your tip."

Craig watches the dancer's brain do some hurried math. She holds out the pitcher to take Mitchell's money, which is money after all, no matter how dirty, but his hand goes into his pocket and comes out with a wad of cash. He flips through the bills, a month's worth of wages, easy. "How much for a private dance?"

She considers, and in considering removes all her masks. The almond eyes, the high, flat cheeks. Run, Craig thinks. He's gripping his pint glass so tight it ought to be broken already. "I don't dance for assholes," she says.

It's like Mitch is being bitten by something small, black flies or red ants, a swarm of tiny, insignificant creatures. He stands, itchy-looking, money in hand. Craig says, "Easy now," but Mitch ignores him. He catches Alana's arm to spin her and Craig knows something's been shattered. NE PAS TOUCHER. It happens slowly: Mitch reaches for Alana's left breast and she jerks back, knocking the glasses off the table behind her. Beer sloshes on the ground, men curse in French. The bouncer comes charging like a mother grizzly and takes Mitch down to the floor, gathers him up in a crumpled ball and carries him out, the clack clack clack of his body parts hitting the wall as they descend the stairs.

The music gets turned up loud, restoring the place to normalcy.

Craig feels an uncanny sense of relief. The server comes to bother him for another drink and he orders a scotch, the drink of respectable, worldly men, sips it slowly while the black-haired dancer works her oiled legs around the pole. She's got a new look, an Egyptian princess from one of his world history classes. He leans back in his chair, resplendent, enjoying the spectacle, the female figure bending and looping in its mysterious and rubbery ways. Mitch can wait a while, can taste the bitterness of his own bad judgment. Craig hasn't done anything wrong, which is why he startles so much when the bouncer lays his icy hands on his shoulders, his grip strong as a vice.

The whiteout creates a void—sidewalk and street blend, the cars are blank domes. Craig is confused to find the Pontiac sitting where they parked it under an inch of fluffy snow, locked and empty, Mitch nowhere in sight. The vocabulary returns in a drunk blast: Mitchell est perdu. Why wasn't he loaded for French class more often? Mitchell a le car keys.

He knows this is how people die in Canada, drunk on the side of the road, the booze in their blood making them think they're not freezing to death. There was a kid Joel's age who went that way. It was April, a freak cold snap. He wandered off from one of Ted Saunders's keggers in only a T-shirt. Craig paces, wondering what the fuck Mitch thinks he's playing at, where he's gone, trying to gauge just how long he can last before losing feeling in his toes. He lays on the hood of the Pontiac and stares up at the drifting flakes. They land on his face like cool feathers, hypnotic almost, a white and blurry lullaby.

The dancers emerge much later, though time has lost its shape. It's strange to see them fully dressed, tall leather boots on their feet, scarves around their necks. Alana, Black Hair, Tinsel Tits. Lighting up cigarettes, laughing together. The bouncer looms behind them like a geological feature. Craig wants to appear casual but he thinks he must look like a zombie. Crossing the road, his knees clonking together like numb fists. "Hey," he chatters. "Bonjour."

The women look at him like he's sure they've looked at thousands of men. What do they care of his measly existence? Tinsel Tits tilts her head to the side to exhale a perfect cone of smoke. "We're not working anymore."

"I know," says Craig. "Hey I don't mean any trouble—" more to the bouncer than the girls "—but I'm locked out of my car."

"*Malchanceux*," says Black Hair.

"Tough shit," says Tinsel Tits.

Alana's paying more attention to her cigarette, which disintegrates in noticeable increments with each drag. Without the wig on he can see that she's died her hair brown.

"Alana," he says.

"It's Tiffany."

"Please."

"Why don't you go back to your little hick town," she drops her smoke and grinds it with her heel, "and leave me the fuck alone."

Back at the Pontiac there's a wingless angel imprinted on the hood. He tries to keep the panic at bay. Mitch will wander back with pizza sauce on his face and a bottle of something strong and they'll be back in Ontario by daybreak.

A taxi emerges from the east and stops out front of the club. Alana and the bouncer get in. Craig watches the vehicle drive off and then brake a

hundred feet off. Slowly, it reverses toward him. The window rolls down and Alana Dafoe pokes her head into the falling snow.

Her apartment is on the second level of a brick triplex, a small one bedroom with high ceilings and floors so crammed with stuff it's tough to see the hardwood. Outfits clothe the furniture like the closet sneezed them out. There's a modest TV, a beige couch, a palm plant in need of sunlight. On the table sits a half-empty vodka bottle and a jar of mayonnaise, as though they were at one point involved in the same eating experience, mayo shooters. Alana explains how both she and the bouncer, JF, have lived here a year, though Craig can't see any evidence of the man's existence. There are no dumbbells or Maxims, just the pair of boots JF takes off when they arrive, large enough for four of Craig's feet.

What Craig understands from the short drive: JF doesn't talk much. He seems more like Alana's bodyguard than her boyfriend, but the fact that they live together suggests otherwise. It's like he's drifted off on the hood of Mitch's Pontiac and dreamed himself into this place. Alana pours herself a drink from the vodka bottle, JF pulls ingredients out of the fridge.

"It's not even the first time," she tells JF, picking up her monologue from the cab. "We all told her that guy was trouble, oil money, but she went back to him begging."

JF nods. He's so big the kitchen seems to shrink around him. He runs mustard across slices of bread with a butter knife.

"I'm going to see her tomorrow, if you want to come."

He drapes pink rounds of meat onto the bread.

"JF," she says, sharp.

"I'll join you."

Alana knocks back the vodka and pours another. She looks at Craig, jolting him out of his audience-like haze.

"Heartbreak."

He nods in false comprehension.

"She'll survive."

JF sets two plates down on the table. One of the sandwiches is for Craig. "Thanks," he says. "*Merci.*"

The big man eats his sandwich in three bites. Craig would offer his but it is surprisingly delicious, a nice amount of mustard, the ham mixing well with the beer in his stomach.

"How's the ice fishing this year?" Alana looks down into her glass, and Craig thinks he senses something new. Timidity.

He doesn't know how the ice fishing is. Usual, he supposes. The huts are there, squat little rectangles on the frozen lake, snowmobiles parked out front. He's not one for ice fishing, that bland pastime, to sit and wait

in a foam phone booth for a measly walleye to come along. "They say it's the best year in a while."

"Gord Miller must be happy."

Gord is the town angler. Every winter he moves out of his house and sets up a little palace on the ice, lives out there for months at a time. They say he's caught every fish in the lake at least once.

"Gord's not out this year," says Craig. "He had a stroke last summer."

Alana chooses the opportunity to take a drink. "Shame."

"Bad year for heart attacks, too. Lou Alman's dad, Miss Hyslop." Saying the names make the town feel close.

"I bet they're all still eating cheeseburgers from Chuck's."

At the mention of Chuck's, he thinks of Mitch and the Pontiac and the mess they're in.

"How's Sherry?"

Sherry is Alana's age, two kids, a house. "Pregnant," says Craig.

"Some things never change."

Craig finishes the last bite of his sandwich and JF stands to take his plate. Alana doesn't even seem to notice, but Craig is mesmerized. The bouncer takes the dishes to the sink and starts scrubbing them with a sponge. He might as well be figure skating, a pink tutu fluttering in the turbine of a salchow.

"Well," says Alana, "you two can stay up if you want, but I'm going to bed."

She stands from the table and his voice fails to operate, to summon an apology or the next morsel of nostalgia. He wants her to remember, to rehash the good times their upbringing gifted them.

"You'll get him set up on the couch?" she asks JF.

"Of course."

She's kisses him on the cheek. "*Mon amour*."

"*Ma cherie*."

She exits the kitchen, leaving him alone with the giant. Craig balls his fists under the table, ready for their futility. He watches JF run a dishcloth over the counter, return the mayo to the fridge, the vodka to the freezer, wondering when he's going to drop the housemaid act and pounce. The bouncer rummages in a hallway closet and pulls out a neatly folded blanket, and all Craig can do is open his palms to accept it.

By daybreak the city has a scrubbed white veneer. Craig's imprint is still there on the hood of the Pontiac, and when he wipes the dry snow from the driver's side window he sees Mitch asleep in the seat. One eye cracks open, the other is swollen shut. There's a bloody gauze taped to his forehead, the crusty black drip of a wound. He pops open the door, steps into the

sunlight, and hands Craig the car keys without saying anything.

The Pontiac whinnies before sparking, an old horse hesitant to trot. Craig feels the summer tires fighting for traction. They're like skis, smooth and frictionless, shuttling the car through the quiet streets and out onto the 20.

Craig's the one to break the swampy, hungover silence. "What happened?"

"This," says Mitch, pointing to his face. "Guy was three times my size."

It's hard to picture the same man who washed the dishes last night, socking Mitchell in the skull. "Spent the night in the hospital," he says. "Fucking nurses couldn't speak English. Kept asking me questions I couldn't understand. I just wanted to lie down in a bed after I'd been stitched up but they wouldn't let me." Mitch cups an invisible breast, smirks. "It was worth it, though."

Craig accelerates. To the north, the buildings of downtown sputter exhaust from their tops like rectangular cigarettes. "You're a prick," he says, "you know that? You deserve that face."

To change lanes he has to plow through the drift overtop of the yellow line. The Pontiac wiggles but holds. He's going fast, racing.

"Slow down."

But Craig won't. He's got to get them away from this place, return Mitch to the quarantine of their little town. Only later, once they've crossed safely back into Ontario, will he tell him about the rest of his night. Alana Dafoe has a designer leather couch, art on the walls, a Jacuzzi in her bathroom. She's better off than we thought, he'll say, and isn't that the truth of it? He holds the Pontiac steady at one-thirty, reliving the warm, dark silence of her apartment, the dreams he'd dreamt in French.

JC Bouchard

I AM WELL

I always cared lovingly,
resting at the base of a conifer,
shooting the .22, aiming every time
and shooting still, using the good ammo

that exploded into a million shrapnel
upon impact, and I always carefully
tied the paddleboat at both ends
with a knot I saw my grandmother

tie, and bothered to learn the bends,
the turns of the dirt logging roads, and
checked that all of the doors were locked
before leaving, the propane tank was off,

the water lid was shut tight, the shades
were tightly drawn to keep the furniture
from bleaching. I always looked back
from the truck's rear window for one

last look, and delighted when the foxes
came out to eat the cold partridge parts,
because it was safe to come out, and finally
after my last look of the quiet clearing, they

knew it was safe, and it was always the same
again when I returned, because I never
bothered to look at my reflection in the weed-
threaded lake. Now I'm breathing heavily

at Frank and Oak, and wearing black, buying
Naughty Neighbour IPA, and I move in
the streets like a doppelgänger, but maybe
with my pants not rolled up as high,

and my beard shorter or longer, and I linger
in theatres and cafes, as they're brimming
with patrons of refusal, but still reaching like
conifers and pines and birches. Everyone

I know asks me deeply, how are you,
and I tell them, I am well, and you, and you,
and you, as we meet at the heritage houses,
park's splintered benches. A man behind the

coffee counter tells me, you can drown in just
two inches of water, a puddle or a lake, a bathtub
or a river, that it's only a matter of being awake,
always aware, before I offer my hand towards

the streetcars moving like snakes, hissing like
snakes, holding us in their bodies like snakes,
and the bends look the same from the seats,
from the embedded tracks, every definite departure.

Ben Rawluk

I AM TERRIBLE AT KINDNESS

I

When a bird shits on your shoulder, it's supposed to be good luck.
Seagulls circle overhead, squawking about kindness.

II

I am terrible at kindness: I never remember
to empty the dishwasher, first thing in the morning.

III

I don't pick up loose change left on the street.
Her Majesty is always whispering from the obverse side.
Let somebody else pry them off with their fingernails.

IV

Magical objects are never what you expect:
toenail clippers, a mister filled with bleach, a receipt.
That three-speed vibrator with the interchangeable heads
was blessed by angels and is effective against vampires.

V

I didn't mean to kill my mother's fuchsias that summer she was in Europe.

VI

I donate other people's nasty gifts.
I give away their hateful text messages, their suspicions, their blame,
I am only kind in giving away my guilt.

VII

When we share a bar of chocolate, there is always
an odd number of squares. I never offer you the last one
because sin is magical, brings a certain rush.
Or I just want the chocolate, nothing magical about it.

VIII

A ticket stub, a flavourless lump of chewed gum
ground down between my fingers, a paperclip,
an empty ice cube tray left on the counter.

Eleanor Stanford

MY SONS TAUGHT ME

to kiss the ball
with my laces.
Taught me
look up, aim
straight, follow-
through. I moved
with no finesse
whatsoever
from that life
to this, this
love to that:
leaving my lover's
bed to collide
with their small
bodies on the field
where we met
as unknowable
opponents, not
as ones who'd grown
from the cells
of the other's
body. Patient
and full of their own
knowledge
my sons showed me
pass and deflect,
one touch, give
and go.

Redacted at author's request

Redacted at author's request

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Redacted at author's request

John Emil Vincent

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR NOVEL

Your showy ten-point flops into the koi depress me. And the pizza's ugly even through beer's golden fluted columns. But I eat to keep from blurbing.

I'm running trailers for your career. In your voice. In my head. In a time when brother fought brother, in a leaky place, one man, and one cartoon version of that very same man, facing impossible odds, together ride bass ellipses over reflective present-tense shallows through prepositional threats past pronouns to achieve title. I can hear the font in your voice.

The table is actual wood though. Our roadkill well-gutted, we swagger tipsy and impressed with how small we each are. Into the ingeniously generous new lines

of the new mall lot.

John Stintzi

NOTES FOR MY BIOGRAPHY OF WADE OWENS

Even the way Wade Owens killed himself was funny, if viewed from a distance. His suicide note, which read more like acknowledgements for the book of his life, was clinical, pithy, and—in moments—almost whimsical. He listed people he needed to thank for getting him so far in life, as well as mentioning a few names of people who were no help at all. After describing the premise of his suicide, Wade concluded the note with a disclaimer: *Any similarities my suicide may share with the suicide of another—living or dead—are purely coincidental.*

Wade, of course, wasn't a comedian; Wade was a poet, and from the tone of the suicide note, which is held here in the Queen's University Archives in Kingston—where an impromptu but legally binding will donated all previous drafts of the note (as well as all the papers related to all his *published* work)—it seems clear that he resented the fact that he was going to kill himself because he was a poet.

Wade Owens, as I knew him, had always seemed frustrated with his depression. The fact that it was culturally predictable for him to eventually take his own life—out of anguish—enraged him. Wade was likely torn over this fact because some of his favourite writers had killed themselves. Sylvia Plath, John Kennedy Toole, Virginia Woolf, Hart Crane, Anne Sexton. The penultimate sentences of his suicide note read: *Excuse me for not defying convention. A poet once wrote, live against the grain so it's surprising when you die along it.*[1] Here it seems clear that Wade believed his life had finally become an inauthentic, heteronomous representation of the popular idea of the poet, and that by killing himself he would become complicit in the propagation of the stereotypes therein.

But of course, Wade couldn't help it.

The archivist didn't know who Wade Owens was when I put in the call for his papers. She was too young, perhaps, and likely a historian rather than a poetry fan. Or if she did read poetry, she probably kept it safe with approachable Americans.

1. My searches for this quote have yielded nothing, so I'm assuming Wade is quoting something he's never said, which is a motif carried through many of his books, several beginning with fake epigraphs.

When I handed her the yellow call slip, on which I'd listed every box of Wade's papers in the archives, she looked over at it from her computer but didn't look up at me.

"You know, he used to go to school here, Wade Owens. So did I. We knew one another."

She smiled but she didn't look up from the slip. "What sort of research are you doing? You forgot to write that down."

"I'm working on a biography, trying to get some insight on the way Wade composed his books."

The archivist nodded and turned back to the computer with the list, double-checking the codes against the database. When she was finished checking she said she'd bring them right out and I went back to my table, I sat down, and waited for her to bring the cart of Wade out to me.

The papers I have access to go from around 1994 to 2012—two years before he passed. The remaining two years are restricted until ten years after his death.

I met Wade when we both took English here at Queen's. We'd both come for our master's degrees: I from Saskatchewan to theorize, Wade from Nova Scotia to write. In the program, our circles coincided and split. Because he was a poet, he spent most of his time with the few writers that were here, and because I was a Canadian literature scholar—and a postmodernist[2]—I spent my time with the least popular scholars: the new (and old) historicists and the other postmodernists. Canadian scholars interested in Canada were seen by many as quaint—in Canada as much as elsewhere—because the politics in Canadian writing has always seemed far less dramatic or interesting than the writing of elsewhere. It's seen as polite, as being too much about Canada itself. Sometimes during department gatherings, I felt like a monk among pimps. Sometimes I still do.

The writers, like Wade, were more nomadic along the hierarchy, fitting precisely nowhere because they—unlike the rest of us—actually *loved* literature.

I first became fully aware of Wade in a seminar on Victorian poetry, first butting heads with him over our disparate readings of the symbolism of the dark tower at the end of Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."[3] I argued that the poem was ultimately about writing, that

2. At the time, around 1995, the academy had already become mostly weary of postmodernism and postmodern theory.

3. From Robert Browning's collection *Men and Women*. First published in 1855.

the call at the end (which is the same as the title of the poem) implied that the poem was a search for its own meaning. Wade believed that it was instead a poem about life, and that the squat tower Roland arrives to is the bland climax of life. I brought up T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* as a follow-up to Childe Roland. Wade spoke of Sexton and the other confessional poets who would follow Browning's lead into the tradition of dark, sharp, monologic lyrics. Eventually we conceded to each other's steadfastness. The professor didn't take any sides.

After that class, Wade and I nodded to one another in the hall, and, sometime later—at a local pub after our midterm essays were due—we spoke.

In one of the boxes is a photograph of Wade Owens from his first public reading, which he did in Ottawa. It's in colour, with the date burned in the corner: 10 14 '97. In the photo, Wade is standing at the front of a crowd, armed with nothing but a mic and a book, which he's lifting above his head. From his expression, I'm guessing it was one of the comic lines he's delivering. He always did that when I saw him read, have his eyes desert the page to sweep the crowd when it came time to hit the crowd with humour.

In the picture, Wade is fat, hugely so. Wade was always fat, as far as I know. He thought that was funny. He thought that was one of the ways he stood out from a crowd of statistically emaciated poets (which, like a poet's suicidality, is less real than generalization). Wade often made jokes about his size, and went so far as to compose (nearly) all his poems as either girthy prose, or in Whitmanically long verse lines. He said once—in an interview—that he believed the poem should form itself to its dysfunctional creator, so that was why his poems were fat and funny and tragic. But I wouldn't know if that's how it should be done, because I've never written a poem.

The book Wade is reading from in the photo is his first book, *Over-Wait* (1997), which was a long plunderverse poem that stole its language from three copies—because he needed to make his poems voluminous—of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. It focuses on the metaphysics of waiting past the point where that which one is waiting for is no longer worthy of the investment of the time and hope. That, eventually, the things that the world promises to give us are no longer worth living for. Alongside this general discussion of "over-waiting," through the remapping and regurgitation of Beckett's language, there's a focus, in Wade's long poem, on the futility of inaction to foil Beckett's claim of action being equally futile. Wade's poem argues to Godot that perhaps inaction could—at the very least—be more futile. Despite his depression,

Wade was not a pessimist. He rallied completely for life over existence.

Over-Wait also comically deflates the importance of Beckett's play by confirming both that Godot exists and that he seems to be anxious to go meet up with Vladimir and Estragon—sending promises to them—if only to be free of the strange poet's prying questions. (*"But why, given the circumstances, and heaps of bone, does Estragon gloomily neglect his boot?"*). Wade originally wrote the book as a part of his master's thesis, as there wasn't much in the way of creative writing here at the time, and especially not for a graduate degree. For the other half of his thesis, Wade had to write a critical defence of the book's ideas, clearly disclosing his conversation with Beckett. After getting his degree, Wade turned around, expanded the book and destroyed all evidence of his defence besides the copy here at Queen's, moved to Toronto, and promptly published *Over-Wait* with Oberon Press, out of Ottawa.

Wade—as a human being—was boisterously charismatic. In social situations, he commanded attention beyond the simple bulk of his presence. All of us in the department basked in his vitality at gatherings—bars or house parties—where I would further argue and become acquainted with him.

Wade's comedy—largely based in shamelessness and deprecation at being a poet, as well as about being fat—was sophisticated and quick. He had these bright blue eyes that seemed to be too piercing and, in many ways, he was extremely beautiful. As far as I know, Wade hadn't been single since university—aside from the month before he killed himself, at thirty-nine, when he broke up with his then-girlfriend of six years to give her a head-start on getting over him before his death. Theoretically. He named her in his suicide note, and in every draft of it, apologized for his life but acknowledged her most crucial role in making it less miserable, saying that the only truly happy moments in his life were those with her. In his will, he left the rights to all of his unpublished work to her. His third book: *Stones* (2009), was dedicated to her strength:

> *For S, with love and admiration to the only woman capable of holding me up, which if you know me is quite a Herculean feat. I've never before met a woman able to carry a refrigerator over her head before, one handed. And I hope I never meet another. It's kind of scary. You're kind of scary. I love you. Don't hurt me!*

The notebooks where Wade talks about *Over-Wait* include some from the classes he took at Queen's, one of which was from the Victorian Poetry seminar we took together at the end of our first year. I looked through

the notes but did not find anything about me, or about our discussion in relation to Childe Roland. Mostly, all that he appears to have been doing in class was work on his long poem. Between most of the pages are a few torn-out sheets of *Waiting for Godot*, with little tally marks noted over the words he'd used, none being tallied more than three times. The only semblance of notes for the class are in the margins, often related to what to read next.

> *Read Wordsworth's Prelude & B's "The Lost Leader" for next week. /*
> *Put together presentation on CR's GM.*[4] *Consumption as metaphor for ? ? ? /*
> *Write annotated biblio for essay on matthew arnold*

There are no notes in relation to me in the entire notebook. Not even about my presentation on the position of the author's grief in relation to the speaker in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, for which I got an A+.

In 2009, four years after publishing a loose collection of shorter poems called *Bushels & Brambles: 1996–2004*—which lured a wider readership to his poems—Wade published *Stones*, which quickly became his best received book, going so far as to be shortlisted for the Governor General's Award, as well as the Griffin Poetry Prize. Judges for both prizes praised Wade on the confidence of his voice, and the virtuosic control of his over-pouring waves of language and intellect. He won neither.

I wrote a brief defence of the book's philosophical complexity in comparison to some of the books that beat him, which I nearly published on a blog about Canadian literature run by a colleague of mine. I was at the University of Manitoba by then, where I'd been teaching a survey course—Canadian Literature Post-1900—since finishing my PhD three years before, which focused on postmodern Canadian long poems, particularly Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*.[5] But, inevitably, I decided against publishing the defence. It seemed too incendiary. I hadn't yet achieved the fearlessness of tenure.

4. This is likely referring to Christina Rossetti's long poem "Goblin Market," which he did a presentation for, which was about how its ending—which we had all, before his presentation, agreed was a failure—actually assured that her subversive, homoerotic work made it through the tight Victorian sensibilities, arguing that with a more experiential view of reading (instead of looking at the piece as a whole) the work actually succeeds in its subversion by landing within the acceptable lines, such that the end *seemed* to justify the means well enough to pass.

5. Which included some discussion of the "inheritance" of the postmodern Canadian long-poem form of Kroetsch by newer Canadian writers like Wade.

Conceptually, *Stones* combines scientific systems of measurements, namely different units for measuring weight—like stone, pound, and kilogram—with different perceived scales of meaning. The book inspects units of weight and subjective gravity, how culturally and individually we each weigh our subjective (though, Wade argues, archetypically similar) meanings differently. In an interview, published in *The Malahat Review*, Wade jokingly noted that the widespread affection his book received proved that the central argument was wrong; his book meant too much, too universally. In it, Wade did not seem at all fazed by the fact that he had been robbed of those awards. He said that he'd already started work on his next book, and teased that it would be about beauty.

I don't believe that Wade's life had much to be depressed over, besides the futility I've noted in his work. I know I haven't talked about his other two books, his critique of conceptions of beauty in a capitalist culture (and beauty's role in identity), *Lip(ID)* (2011), or his most recent—and final book—*FethrW8* (2014), but I've already written on *Lip(ID)* so much that to do so now would feel like regurgitation (you can read my essay),[6] and I still haven't been able to clearly encapsulate what Wade was trying to do with *FethrW8*. *FetherW8* is the only book of Wade's where his lines are microscopic, often enjambing mid-word as they bob and weave across the page like a scuttling boxer—which was the book's subject of meditation: swift, organized violence to one's own body, in order to be able to more efficiently use violence on another's. It seems to be about the effects of self-inflicted pain on others.

FethrW8, which came out about two months before his suicide, also has a prophetic sequence called: "Ways 2 Kil 1Self," which discusses the different ways in which one can perform violence to one's own body, and takes daring leaps towards discovering why one might decide to.

The book, unlike *Stones*, wasn't dedicated to his girlfriend, and so far hasn't sold as well as his previous books. He dedicated the book to himself. He wrote: *For Wade Owens. For Once I Write For You, Baby.*

When I first got here, I was happy to be out of Winnipeg and back in Kingston. I liked seeing how the old halls haven't changed, how the library smells roughly the same. I was tired of the school politics back in Manitoba, with the university trying to do more business than good,

6. Example: Kline, Ken. "Fashion, Ad Space, and Lipstick Facades: Wade Owen's *LipID* and the Toxic Cult of Consumerism." *Mosaic Journal*, vol. 45, no. 4., 2012 pp 44-56. Print.

with the students having the same blank reaction to Canadian literature that my colleagues had when I'd done my work here: it's quaint, it's unexciting, it's a requirement for the major.

I've come back to Queen's to follow after Wade partly because one of the few joys I have in teaching my survey course is teaching his *Stones* alongside selections from his lighter and more playful *Bushels & Brambles*. There are moments when I recite his poems in front of the class and catch myself looking off from the book where the laughs should hit, though they never do to his effect. My voice is too sharp. My body, skeletal and irresonant.

After being back for a few weeks, I'm starting to remember that old venom. Because I haven't kept in touch with many people in Kingston, I've mostly just had drinks with the professors in the English department, some of whom I knew and others not. From them I hear the same vitriol. The same cutting down of their colleagues: "Dr. Blank is asking Dr. Etc. to be on the panel about issues of representation instead of me? Can you believe it? She's a hack. They *must* be fucking."

I've started turning down their invitations. I just go back and forth from the archives to my tiny apartment—a block from where I lived almost twenty years ago—and drink and smoke alone on the balcony until dawn.

Wade did a reading at McNally Robinson in Winnipeg as part of a short promotional tour for *FetherW8*, on which he went out to the West Coast and back to Toronto, where he'd lived since graduating. Many of us on the lower tiers of the academic pecking order, when we were defending our theses, were pleased to hear that Wade wasn't going on to do a PhD. We clung to his withdrawal, feeling like we'd beat someone by simply persisting. The fat poet had quit academia, we thought to ourselves, while we were each packing boxes for our own moves.

That reading of *FetherW8* must have been about a month after the book was released, and about three weeks before he killed himself. Wade's girlfriend—*S*—wasn't there on tour with him.[7] She was a damned good poet, too. I'd met her at the release of *Lip(ID)*, when I took a semester to do research at the University of Toronto. She, Wade, and I talked briefly after he'd finished signing all the books. He was massaging a knot from his palm, bouncing those ice-sharp eyes from his hands up to me and to her. When we parted, we promised to catch a drink later that semester, but never did.

7. At that point I didn't know Wade had left her.

When Wade came to Winnipeg, mere weeks before he killed himself, he wasn't as funny or charismatic as he was the last time I'd seen him. His demeanour was shy, and he sweated terribly while he read. The reading itself was exhilarated, passionate, and animated. He bobbed and weaved behind the podium in the back of the bookstore, dodging the mic, yelling out a line and returning very close to whisper—his p's and t's popped in our ears like little punches.

The crowd, which included myself and some of the students from my grad seminar that term on the role of masculinity in the Prairie poets, was stunned by the performance. I suppose it was the mad passion of the piece, or perhaps it was just Wade appearing so vulnerable while reading such a terse, violent work. I suspect he didn't know that we were even there. We were just a wall he was throwing himself against.

During the Q&A, nobody but the host dared ask Wade anything. Wade had made the mistake of wearing a dark button-up shirt to the reading, which became several shades darker from the sweat which saturated everything but the tips of his collar. We were worried about his health. I was, anyways. But nobody asked him any questions. I wanted to ask: Are you okay? But I knew that would be a faux pas coming from a critic. I didn't want to lower myself to biographical criticism, though I guess I've turned biographical here.

I still intended to ask him if he was okay; I was just biding my time for when I could get him alone. But at the signing—where I and many similarly terrified people bought his book—I found myself unable to ask if he wanted to talk later. He took his book from my hand and signed it in silence:

For Ken, an old friend, and my literary pry bar. —Wade O.

I smiled and thanked him for the reading when he handed it to me. He didn't reply, just took the name of the next in line. His eyes were jagged. When I read the inscription, over and over, every single word stabbed me. I took "old friend" as sarcasm, took "pry bar" as a hint to the weariness of my constant criticisms of his work. He wrote neither his whole name nor just the first. It felt like he was accusing me of being interested in the book as a means to merely advance my career.

After he signed my book I walked away from the line, reading it over, unable to turn back. I left.

The irony remains that of course I couldn't advance my career with his book, or probably even a biography of him. My career, almost by definition, has nowhere to go except in circles. Smaller and smaller inside themselves.

After I began to read *FetherW8* I didn't know what to think. It wasn't like his other work. It seemed both more and less veiled than usual. I kept thinking of Childe Roland, weirdly, because of the intensity of the sounds of it. Once, back then, while the lot of us were drinking and faking camaraderie and arguing semantics on the philosophical question of free will—while splayed out on the couches in the apartment of one of the gender scholars—Wade lay on the floor, blitzed out of his mind, reading the host's copy of Browning aloud to himself. Wade's girlfriend at the time, a charming bookseller, was passed out and curled up beside him. When I got up to pee, while one of the semiotics guys was bringing up either Chomsky or Foucault, I lingered just a bit as I walked past Wade and heard him reciting. He'd reached the end of the poem, flipped back a few pages and started again. I can still hear him there, that night, muttering the title and the call, all with a voracity to drown out our jargon'd conversations. *My first thought was, he lied in every word...*

After putting *FetherW8* down for a few weeks, while final essays to be graded stacked up in my brain, the news of Wade's death crashed into the department. With pleasure, it seemed, some of my colleagues flocked to my office with condolences. People began to talk about him over coffee, horrified by the details of his death, noting him as a National loss. Only the assistant head and her husband—the other Canadian scholars—were silent about it. We had nothing to say. I kept imagining him reading for us, frightening us, sweating, huge.

When the funeral date was given in the *Toronto Star*, I cancelled the last week of class and bought a flight. I brought *FetherW8* with me. I didn't read it. I still, frankly, haven't completely finished it. It scares me, much in the same way that I expect *Ariel* did for Plath's scholars. Though I'm not sure Plath had scholars before she died, the best of her work arriving after her. But even so, there's an undeniably terrifying intensity in someone's final scream.

Something that many people never knew was how Wade was always dieting and exercising. Every time we went out to eat, back in university, he just drank water, claiming to have just pounded back some lipid-filled feast before his arrival. But I knew differently. Once, before we were to meet at the cafeteria, I found him sitting on a shadowed bench working very earnestly on a large salad. Also, I remember several foggy mornings, when my insomnia was particularly fatal and I was out on a long walk attempting to exhaust myself, when he jogged past me—a sweaty ball with his inward eyes, likely repeating to himself just how it was—how everything was—only a matter of time. That taking action worked.

But no matter how hard he tried to slim down, Wade never got

anywhere with it. Maybe he caved out of sight. I suspect that his long lines—to himself—were a stylistic representation of the endlessly long journey ahead of him. But for others, as filtered through his tragicomic self-deprecation, those lines represented an ownership of his size. We read it as irony. We read it as the author polluting and poking fun at his work.

Wade's eyes when he read *FethrW8*, weeks before he killed himself, reminded me of those he wore when I caught him jogging—when I was trying to tire myself to sleep—and when he was eating salads in the shade—when I was outside smoking to get my mind racing and distracted—and when he was drunk outside with me—again smoking while I attempted to drink enough to forget a whole chapter of my life.

It's true: I was never exactly close to Wade, I was just near him physically for a few years and critically for a long while more. Nevertheless, on occasion, back in university, he did tell me things when he was very drunk. There was one blackout night in the winter, he was drinking dry white wine, and I, gin, where I remember nothing but a single disembodied scene: Wade is standing outside with me, I'm smoking and he's slowly turning away from staring towards the street and is telling me something along the lines of: "Sometimes I believe that the poem is killing me, and that trying to use it as a means of therapy is just adding concrete to the top of my coffin." Then—moments or minutes later—I'm puking, my last cigarette flying out of me and into the white snow. Then: Wade, rubbing my back.

The notes end a few years back, soon after *Lip(ID)*. There's a book which Wade references every now and again throughout much of them, a book of poems about gardening, which he wanted to write under the guise of being the translator and editor of the book, which includes the poems but not the letters the unnamed poet wrote alongside them—which he'd deemed far too personal. None of the drafts related to this book are present, just some early notes regarding the ideas he wanted to work on, and some notes later on suggest that he'd been working on some version of it since *Bushels & Brambles*. I expect that's one of the books he left behind, unfinished, to S. There is nothing on *FetherW8*. I can only imagine what the notes for that book might look like, considering the work he was doing.

At the end of the notebooks, in 2012, two years before he killed himself, the first inklings of a draft of the suicide note occur as the rough version of the joke that would eventually end it, a glaring non sequitur omen:

Any similarities my death may share with the death of another—

living or not—are purely coincidental.

If I were to bring anyone to my distance from Wade they probably wouldn't find his death to be funny, because I don't think it's funny. Wade Owens was found dead after not being seen for almost a week. His ex-girlfriend was the one who banged on his door, apparently having broken down to come beg him to explain himself further for having left her. Finally, knowing that Wade was never a cruel man and would have come to the door if he had the power to—to explain everything to her and bring clarity to her pain—she panicked. The landlord was brought to the door by the police and she was forced to wait in the hallway while they entered. When the door was opened, it was reported that the hall filled with the stench of sweat and rot.

The apartment, a two-bedroom he afforded on his salary from doing sessional instructional work at several universities in Toronto, was a-clutter with fitness magazines, pamphlets discussing Lap-Band Surgery, and workout DVDs purchased—as his credit card statement would reveal—both online and through late-night infomercials over the previous month. There was also the acidic smell of vegetable rot, and in the kitchen they found a salad prepared—several days prior—heavy with kale, spinach, broccoli, etc. and doused in some kind of thin vinaigrette.

All these details were noted afterwards, though, because first they had to find Wade. They found him dead in the living room, splayed out like a starfish on the carpet in front of his TV, which was set on the menu of a dance-centric workout DVD, where some svelte, bronze woman did excited crunches and squats. Wade was allegedly wearing grey sweats and a yellow sweatband and he was staring at the ceiling. I don't know how he was staring and I refuse to theorize it.

At first the police, the landlord—as well as the eventual paramedics—thought Wade had died of a heart attack, but the autopsy proved that he'd actually choked to death on a large bite of rice cake, which he'd likely eaten because he couldn't quite stand the physical agony of the near-starvation he was imposing on himself. The intention, as stated in the suicide note, was to die of a heart attack by exercising non-stop while starving himself. But for once, or maybe once again, Wade wasn't able to control his world. So, in the end, he closed his book with a bit of irony and a bit of tragicomedy.

Looking back at these notes, I no longer believe—as I once did—that Wade Owens was angry at his depression because he was a poet. No. I believe that Wade was angry at his depression because he was depressed, because depression itself is the absurd loathing of life despite its conditions.

His life wasn't bad: he was loved utterly and continuously, he had a home to come back to with more than a coffee table littered with stacks of uninspired essays about Wah or Atwood, and he was read as much as any Canadian poet can really ever hope to be. In short, he commanded attention and respect, and achieved it. He was doing precisely what he had set out to do, not to argue over wordage but fling it in the direction of his struggles, of our struggles, and yet everything for him was awful. He wanted to be violent against himself, not because he was fat or because he was predisposed—as a writer—to be too sensitive for life, but because his brain didn't like him. As we all do, he had his scapegoats. At the end, the futility of his life was symbolized in his inability to control his body. Just as an insomniac or a drinker or a smoker cannot control his body. His life felt immutable, and the symbolic actions he took to try and keep failure and inevitability out of his way had been a failure itself.

I have read Browning's "Childe Roland" over and over, lately, while being unable to sleep. I sit in the bathroom and read it aloud. I've come around: it's not about writing, it's about life. I cannot read it anymore without seeing a man, wandering from beginning to end, rationalizing his choices into moral and ethical codes. Seeing the suffering horse and thinking it must be wicked and deserve it,[8] not realizing that nothing deserves anything. Wicked or not.

I just see Roland, not wanting to step on the faces of the dead as he crosses that river, pretending that the spear he's using to prod his path is—instead—sinking into a drowned rat.[9] I see someone trying to construct a world where his actions could mean something.

Wade's suicide note claimed he was satisfied knowing that by the time he was dead he would have finally slimmed down—*I'll lose weight until it kills me!*—because he estimated that he would be able to survive a few days of working out hardcore before finally keeling over from the physical stress. That was the most public Wade ever was about his futile attempts to change his shape.

But, of course, the tragic irony of Wade's note was that the corpse he left behind wasn't slim. His body bloated from death, making it much larger than usual, pressing the seams of the sweatsuit towards their breaking point. When his body was removed from the apartment, the rice cake that blocked his throat twisted and let free a final, rancid breath

8. Browning, Robert. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." Line 84.

9. Line 121-126.

of air, which caused two of the five people to drop him to the floor, coughing and gagging.

I've been at Queen's for around two months of the semester I said I'd stay here. I can't believe I came here to live with all these ghosts. I've already decided that it's unlikely that I will get a biography of Wade from this research. I've realized that what I wanted from him was every answer I couldn't get. I'm more and more sickened by the prospect of writing it. Why read a biography of a man when you can simply read him yourself? What would anyone gain from my insights on his process? A biography of him through me would be little more than a filtering of his published work riddled with anecdotes from our time at Queen's, which was probably the least interesting time in his life. Wade's notes do not show that he did anything as peculiar or exceptional as I'd expected. He just wrote.

I asked the archivist the other day if I could get the contact info for the person in control of the rest of Wade's papers, thinking perhaps they could help. She said she couldn't give me that information, but she could reach out for me if I wanted. I know it's probably S who has access to them. The papers themselves—or perhaps copies of them—are probably in Toronto with her. I almost asked the archivist to reach out until I realized how invasive that would be. How S is probably sitting there working on finishing his books and her own books, while his papers are strewn across her kitchen table. How she doesn't want to confront them but every day, doing so. I thought about how sickening my request would be.

I feel like I've come so far just to hit a wall. The same wall I always hit.

I have two more months before I have to go back. Perhaps I'll take some time to try again and write a poem of my own. I lied when I said I'd never written a poem; I did, once, when I was young. I was maybe fourteen and it was about a bird sitting on a bush that I'd killed with a slingshot and the tornado that tore along the valley the same afternoon. That was when I lived in the Qu'Appelle. I thought I'd caused the tornado, that I'd enraged the gods of the prairies. At the end of the poem, I was sad that I didn't know what kind of bird it was. I went back to find the bush, but it had been carried away by the winds. I couldn't find the body.

I might go on; nought else remain'd to do.[10]

10. Line 54.

At his funeral, in her eulogy, S spoke of that moment when Wade's corpse breathed—which she saw through the open doorway—as the moment his tormented spirit finally left his body. She'd refused to leave until she saw his body, until she had proven to herself that he was gone forever. When she saw them lifting him up onto the stretcher, saw his chest deflate and heard the cries of horror and the smack of his flesh on the floor, she knew that Wade was finally free of himself and, unfortunately, of her. Her eulogy was very funny, lampooning Wade for falling sheep to the convention of the angsty poet's "Romantic suicide," and what a chore it was going to be to edit his chunky, unfinished manuscripts. Somehow she didn't cry once, though many of us did. She laughed alongside us. Once, when she was nearing the end, her words did catch in her throat, but she remained tactful. She was always a beautiful person, and I could have fallen in love with her, for her strength, for her vulnerability, if only she wasn't a brilliant poet—a title which had already begun to terrify me. She paused for a second, held a hand up as if to brace her point and said, simply, her throat cleared: *Sorry, nearly pulled a Wade there. Allow me to finish...*

Craig Blais

SONNET (WITH LANGUAGE ETCHED INTO THE CORNER OF A TRAIN WINDOW)

A hawk circles above the tobacco barn as
off-duty firefighters help assemble a
merry-go-round. Hungover and smelling of
wood smoke on New Year's morning. PPC-25C AS

-4 superimposed over a maize maze
farmers have flattened into the face of Darwin.
I still don't know how to treat anyone in
my life. When I close my eyes I see high school exes

with ELECTRIPLEX® and FRA TYPE I TIER II
tattooed on their lower backs. Every part ordered,
"bearing the owner's name someway in the corners,
that we may see and remark, and say Whose?"

The chromed desks where middle-schoolers sit to write
are bent from the frames of old Columbia bikes.

SONNET (WHILE DRIVING AWAY FROM DISNEY WORLD®)

At Stormalong Bay, I first thought I saw the teams
of scientists behind every experience,
figuring the average American attention span
for a fireworks display. Turns out to be thirteen

minutes: the time between two commercial breaks.
Thirteen miles before LIVE GIRLS BARE ALL NEXT EXIT
a billboard promises. Last night, when you said, "I want
to wear your cum," I wondered what the experts might say.

What you really meant was "Mark me as yours," or "I'm fine
with whatever turns you on," or "I don't want to
be a mom," or "Disregard me like a SERIOUSLY
GOOD CHICKEN or AFTER WE DIE WE MEET GOD sign."

When the grand finale rained bright white brocades
fake princesses slept like dead and wounded in the sand.

Carolyne Topdjian

THEY COME FOR GIRLS

The first time they come, it's a Saturday. She is eight years old. Or perhaps she is nine, because she's a head shorter than her brother and no one bothers to keep track anymore.

All week, there's been a strain inside the house, a storm waiting to break beyond the shuttered windows. Though members of her family say nothing, she can sense it in the way mama closes cupboards with too much vigour or Dede rubs his chest like he's developing a rash. Whispers are swallowed and lips purse whenever she enters a room. Yet they carry on, routine and feigned normalcy their only defence against the alternative, since to believe the rumours is to believe the devil, to lift one's skirts over one's head and howl at the moon.

For those who flee, it is a five-day ride to Erzipolis and, from there, another fortnight of travel to reach the Syrian border. Close enough to hear news but far enough to keep hope—that's what she overheard the butcher tell a neighbour. Their home stands on a hillside, providing the advantage of exposing any visitors who traverse the singular, dirt road attached to the village below. Dede is the first to spot trouble.

The old man sits from dawn to dusk on the second-floor balcony, playing solitaire chess, smoking his hookah in his slippered feet. But on this day, a cloud of dust gathering like gnats in humidity interrupts his leisure. He squints at the horizon, at the tips of the cedars, his lashes fluttering a silver veil at the sight. His hearing is too thick to pick up the stomp of hooves in the distance, but his heels, pressed flat to the ground, sense a tickle that travels up their calluses—a vibration that loses subtlety with each passing moment. It's all the warning he needs. Ignoring the pangs of his arthritic joints, he rises and hobbles indoors to give word.

They are coming.

Panic is a contagious thing. Airborne. In a heartbeat, the adults in the home are scampering with alarm, as if they've each been crudely roused with a bullhorn.

Of this initial hullabaloo, Edif is oblivious. She is in the kitchen, perched on a wooden stool over the stove, instructed to stir the coffee in the *cezve* until boiling point. Inside her hold, the pot's thin brass handle is heated just shy of scalding and the scent of the brew sifts into her nose with premature tendrils of steam. A hiss builds. Any moment now, the

surface of the swirl will break with frothing, brown bubbles. But mama's command cuts through her anticipation like a hypnotist clapping her hands: thrice and awake. *Edif. Edif.*

"*Edif, come now!*"

She snaps her head to the sound. "Mama? It's almost—"

"*Leave it,*" her mother cries.

Edif slides the pot off the burner and scurries to the sitting room, where she finds mama gripping her older brother, Zaven, by his shoulders. Mama is staring him down with a DID-YOU-UNDERSTAND look that, today of all days, is not to be denied. Zaven's nod comes in slow motion, and with that, mama releases him.

He marches to Edif with a determined gleam in his eye. It's the same look he wore a few weeks ago while scaling the branches of the tallest pine tree behind their school in order to retrieve Edif. (Like a cat, she ascended with ease and when it came time to descend, found herself frozen with fear. *Had the branches dipped and scattered on her way up? Had the rocks below sharpened?*) Without stopping, Zaven cuffs her wrist in his grip and yanks her into motion.

As she stumbles after his footsteps—past the embroidered cushions on the sofa, the custard lace curtains, past the side table that Zaven once chipped with a miscalculated kick—she turns and looks for her mother, wanting an explanation for this strange behaviour, this sudden sweep of anxiety throughout the household. But her mother offers neither solace nor explanation. Instead, Edif catches a glimpse of her bending beneath an opened vitrine, shovelling an armful of tarnished silverware into a drawer.

Her brother leads her out back without giving her a chance to don her sandals. The grass pushes like needles into the skin of her soles. "Slow down!" she complains. "Where are we going?" But another few strides and it's apparent their destination is the outhouse.

"*Shh.* In here." Zaven swings open the door and shoves her forward into the tight, malodorous space before she can offer further protest.

The backs of her knees slam against the boxed edge of the toilet, and she resists settling herself on the seat. "What are we doing in here?" Blowflies whiz around her ears in lazy loops.

"You're hiding," Zaven replies in a cracked whisper. His voice has deepened in the last year, but it occasionally shifts into its childhood octave.

Edif crosses her arms, experiencing a wave of petulance. "From what?"

He is blocking the exit with his gangly frame and scans over his shoulder. "There's no time to explain. Now step inside."

"What are you talking about?" She struggles to understand his

meaning. "I am inside."

"No," he corrects, and points down to the toilet. "You have to hide in there."

"*What?* No way!"

"Edif." His black brows have pinched to form a hood over his viridian eyes. It's a striking combination and, for a second, she's distracted with envy. Everyone else in the family has brown eyes, including her. Some days, she imagines that, should the sun shine at a particular angle, her irises might yield flecks of gold or motes of amber. But, in truth, they're just brown. Plain, dull brown. No amount of sunshine will change them into something special.

"Edif, you have to crawl inside. Now." Zaven's order draws her back to their dilemma.

She rolls her lips between her teeth and shakes her head.

"It's not a question. *Inside. Now.*" His jaw slides forward the way it does when he wants to punch something.

She considers the narrow odds of slipping through his legs. She could shout for help. "Let me pass or I'm going to—"

"Listen to me!" He scrubs his hands up his face and exhales a cuss word that, under ordinary circumstances, would earn him a smack to the back of the head from mama. When he glares at her again, his hair is sticking up and sweat is beading on his temples. "It's for your own good."

"If it's so good, why don't you go inside?"

There is a pause when she thinks he might grab her arms and wrestle her down the hole. He's determined and strong enough, despite her history of biting him on occasion. Instead, his eyes start to glisten.

Edif is acquainted with bossy Zaven, holier-than-thou Zaven. She is even familiar with fuming-hot-crazy Zaven. Frightened Zaven, however, is entirely out of her depth. She can't remember ever seeing her older brother cry.

He swallows. "If you don't go inside, they'll find you. And do bad things. They do bad things to little girls like you."

It's not his threat. It's not the way his fingertips quiver at his sides or the way he gives her the same DID-YOU-UNDERSTAND look that mama delivered a moment ago. It's the solitary teardrop that slips from his lashline. Edif catches the virus. Fear is implanted in her mind like a drifting seed catching on loam with its barbed edges. It blooms in her blood and flows with her quickened pulse to the boundaries of her extremities. Her eyes widen as she nods at Zaven, but it is more of an up-and-down tremor within her skull. Zaven cradles her elbow for support and she gazes down at the ceramic seat glued atop the box.

The latrine is rudimentary, a deep pit constructed for decomposition

and drained in early spring. There is no lid, but she knows the compounded smell of human waste alone will stop *them* from searching the hole.

As she draws in a deep breath stinking of urine and shit—a stench that will only worsen inside the hole—she doesn't have time to think of who they are. But her unconscious has already begun to spin theories. They are *gulyabani*. Bloodsuckers. One-eyed, scaled goblins that snack on the nipples of little girls. She accepts Zaven's hand and climbs atop the box. Feet first, she begins to lower herself into the toilet, her bony knees rubbing together. The entire time, she grips Zaven's hand, clammy with sweat, and stares into his eyes for courage.

When she touches down, one foot atop the other, the ground is mushy and cold. Nausea releases inside her abdomen and pushes up like a fist pumping into her esophagus. She fights back gag after gag. She wishes the hem of her culottes were longer, tapered like Zaven's knickerbockers to avoid bunching at her hips. And that she had shoes. Boots. Soldier's boots. With thick threads and tall shafts to protect her calves. She tries not to think of the fecal matter she touches, of the worms that curl and beetles that scuttle with the intrusion of her thighs. It's no different than wading in a clay-lined creek. Almost.

Zaven gives her hand a squeeze. *Time to insert the upper half.*

How many times has she exhibited her flexibility by wrapping her ankles behind her neck? (*Braided choereg*, Dede calls her and winks, and mama yells that bread is no way to sit like a lady.) She is too slim for her own good, an animated rag doll, and it takes little effort for her to wiggle her shoulders past the ring of the seat. Her head is next. As shadows creep up her cheeks, she tips her nose to catch a final waft of clean air that flows through the upper vent. The walls of the pit are crude and slimy, scraping her biceps and coating them in gunge. Her bottom becomes sodden. She tries not to cry, but cannot stop her eyes from watering. She tells herself it is the reek that triggers her tears. Not the degradation. Not the horsemen that come for her with their forked tongues and talons tipped with blood. She doesn't want to let go of Zaven's hand. She does not want to be alone in this dark, stinking pit.

"It won't be long," he whispers. "Keep your head down." And with this last order, her big brother releases her and disappears from view. She tucks her fingers into her armpits, tightens her body into a ball, and swallows back bile.

Later that night, when she is curled into mama's ribs—after Zaven has poured buckets of frigid well water over her head, after mama has dunked her inside a bath scented of lavender and mint, while Dede burns her clothes outside—Edif dreams of an angel.

He has eyes the colour of the sea, opaline skin, and hair that runs over his shoulders like drops of molasses. He smiles and offers her his hands. Rapt with wonder, she slides her fingers into his large, pillowy palms, and together, they begin to ascend. Higher and higher, beyond the roof of the house, beyond the olive grove, twenty-foot black pines and junipers, Edif flies into the night with the angel. When she parts her lips to ask him where they are going, she finds her mouth is full of starlight. Her skin starts to glow from the inside out. And Edif is no longer afraid.

This is the first time they come.

Annick MacAskill

VASTBERADEN (STEADFAST)

I was in Amsterdam the first time my leg went through red stairs:
my cheeks were hot; I saw the flowered metal patterns
and a man's buttonhole swallowing the waiter's head.

Outside boats crawled the Haven under an albumen sky
and beer turned to gas in my throat, pooled into the water
and coated the ankles of a woman named Isa.

I sat on the edge of the Keizersgracht and wept, ate my bread
and edam. Three floors up a couple timed their passion
to the *bella, bella, bella* of a tourist below.

The Magere Brug opened its jaws, took in the boat of an Englishman
bellowing his *mal du pays*. Every time he tried to say thank you
it came out wrong.

Mary Angelino

PLAYING HEADS UP SEVEN UP

The classroom windows murdered birds all spring,
but this December morning they cloud and tremble.
Jessie B. writes *Fuck*, but it quickly blurs, drops

sliding like stilts from each letter.
We make staticky nests with our sweaters.
Heads down, thumbs up, and all that exists

in the seashell sound of the next few minutes
is how bad I want someone to tap my thumb.
Anyone. Maybe if I count down: three, two, one...

There's something wrong with me, I think—
but not in words, in a feeling that will grow familiar.
Muted rain on the windows, distant headlights stutter

through fog. I peek, watch posters sweat, fall:
pharaoh's pyramids slip under the closet door,
then a beaky knight lets go, leaving the space

around the gymnast blank—her body perfectly V'd
in front of an ecstatic crowd.

Christine Miscione

THE WATER

It is 9:00 p.m. New tenant upstairs is having a shower like he doesn't live in a small decrepit co-op apartment building with a sad excuse for a water heater. The water's been running at least fifty minutes continuous. Earlier today, lactic acid explosion, my muscle contracted and opened at the physiotherapist. Physiotherapist's sound effects as he rolled his fingers along my knotty thigh, skin to skin. He's never seen a thigh so stiff before. Long shifts at the hospital maybe, lifting patients, bathing patients, dressing patients. Make sure to take a bath tonight, Carmella, he said, long and hot with epsom salts. I came home dreaming of water, water lapping against my thigh, water swaddling me like the newborns in the hospital nursery, water so hot it takes my breath away, burns my ache, regenerates and nourishes.

New tenant will be new tenant until another person moves out and another new tenant moves in.

Encounter one with new tenant a few days ago. He's standing out back leaning against the building staring at nothing really, drinking slowly from a Homer Simpson mug. Hi, I say, awkwardly. It's bright and early and I'm returning from my night shift. He nods at my Hi. I search my gigantic purse, can't seem to find my keys. A rattling chime as he uses his to open the door for me. Thanks, I say, but he doesn't acknowledge it.

9:22 p.m. Every minute of water matters. What is he doing up there? Angry at me, punishment for my toilet flushing in the middle of the night? I work the nightshift for god sakes, doesn't he know how hard my life is? Or maybe he's hot-boxing jungle ganja? Hand-washing his clothes? My only night off work this week and I need this bath more than anyone, my shattered quad, my general all-over ache. Turn on the faucet to check the water: the kind of lukewarm I use for any patient above eighty years old. Turn up music to overpower the squeal of pipes. Long continuous humming squeal. Like the tick of a clock, a grating reminder of each second that's lost.

The co-op building is small. One unit by one unit, four floors including the basement. I know every one of the seven other lone tenants that live

here, except for the new tenant upstairs. I live sandwiched between him and Archimedes the bricklayer. I live two above an ex-marine named Harv. I live across from Kitty whose apartment reeks of cat urine and I can't do a single goddamn thing about it. Plaster disintegrates from the ceilings here. Streaks of amber glue run above where the fraying carpet reaches the wall. There are what appear to be sweat marks on the plaster, soft off-white outlines from years of indoor pesticide spraying. This is an old building. In the summer, every cigarette that was ever smoked here sweats from the walls.

In the sudsy hospital tub where I bathe patients, I look at their palms to see their lifelines, for fun. I've seen lifelines that collapse, lifelines that are convex, braided lifelines, fat, curled, and blunt lifelines, and lifelines so narrow and faint they almost don't exist. I wonder about the exact moment of them steeping in a hospital bath, half-living, and me with latex hands scrubbing places they've always considered only theirs—where does that appear on their lifeline? We all have a story etched into our palms. My lifeline is split in half—does that mean I will be resurrected?

A declaration. At 9:45 p.m. I, Carmella Santiago, will knock on itty-bitty-twenty-something-new-tenant's door and tell him he can't do this. This is obscene. All I can see when I close my eyes is water. Water barrelling down lead pipes, water hammering out a cascade of hydro-electric waterfall. Water so fierce it slices through sheet metal.

Encounter two with new tenant a few days ago. He's leaning against the wall again, drinking slowly from the same mug. Hi, I say, approaching, distracted and looking for my keys, how are you? He looks up at me with faded interest. He says quietly, You wouldn't want to be me. I can't remember what I said in response, something non-engaging like I'm sorry to hear that, then I went in the building. Didn't want to give him the wrong idea.

Dear New Tenant: You are young and obviously with no regard for anything or anyone. You don't understand that not only is the shrill squeal of water through pipes in the silence of 9:43 p.m. equivalent to the harrowing screams of genocide, but you are costing the co-op heaps of money and there will be no hot water when you are done. I know I've barely spoken to you. I know you have problems. But, have you heard of neuromuscular disorders? Or lifting three-hundred-pound men into bath tubs and beds for two dollars above minimum wage?

I had a patient die once while giving her a bath. She was fifty-six, it wasn't supposed to happen. I was lathering soap on her back. Smell of humid antiseptic. She was groaning a lot when suddenly she wasn't anymore. They never told me how it happened, but I remember being messed up for months, had to tell everyone, even people I didn't know. Kept thinking of how our death isn't ours, it's someone else's story.

Water gushing, drilling, screaming. Water insidious, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Water flooding out lungs, a piercing drip between eyes.

OK, I can't take this anymore. I should go up there and pound on his door like I'm the police. Scream at him WTF, tell him to give me his palm, tell him *right here, this terrifying blotch in your lifeline, this is your shower right now when you leached hours of water from your neighbours and they had to hold themselves back from punching your lights out.*

Sometimes it is only the fear of being jailed that prevents me from doing what I feel.

The stairwell is darker than usual. The two small windows are open but no air circulates. Outside is the same temperature as inside—stinking hot, the kind of heat you drown in. The butter on my counter is a couple of degrees from liquefied. My glass of water tastes stagnant. Only I, desperate, would step into a sweltering bath on a night like this. New tenant must be fucking nuts.

I learned once that humans use only 0.006% of the earth's water. A microscopic percentage of this microscopic percentage is housed in two nearby water towers and pumped through a massive art deco central distribution facility on the outskirts of the city. The water is put through a four-tiered filtering system and forty million gallons are pumped out each day.

Eight more steps. Roasting and dripping with sweat. Deep breath in, don't think of quad, don't think of quad, don't think of quad.

New tenants are always frightening. You get accustomed to the previous tenant's habits; their shitty guitar "Stairway to Heaven" all afternoon bores a hole through your brain, but it becomes familiar and you think to yourself, I can handle this, it could be worse, it could be much worse.

Water shooting through pipes full-blast all night: this is worse.

Walking the stairwell, my quad feels like an open sore. Radiating burn from patella to groin and I swear I can hear the twang of muscle knots being pulled uncomfortably with each step. My quad is desiccated, so tight it could snap—if it does, can I sue new tenant? After all, it's his fault I am doing this.

I see his apartment door with its gleaming brass eight above the peephole. Pound on it with the kind of fever accumulated from too much time spent listening to water through walls.

No answer.

Pound again. I know you can hear me!

No answer.

Pound a third time, wait and wait. Put ear to the door—sound of water? Can't hear anything except hyperventilating breath.

Who does new tenant think he is? This is my one night off.

Kick door unexpectedly. Feel sting like hot lava gunning through quad. Defeated, I slink back to stairwell, then wobble-race in agony to my apartment to see—

Nope, water is still running. What now?

One level below my apartment, Archimedes opens his door after a half-knock. Do you hear water running? he asks. He has a phone pressed to his ear. Apartment behind him with no light. He steps from darkness into hallway, pulls the phone away, holds it dangling at his side. Let me show you something, he says.

Outside I wobble around the side of the building, sweat-logged. Above us, a fat moon. New tenant's apartment is dim and curtained and Archimedes points to the bathroom window. It is hot and steamy, screaming with water full-blast.

Been on this way since 4:30 p.m., Archimedes says.

We walk back around the building. Standing by the door he tells me it is not surprising. Young punk is an asshole, he says.

But six hours? I ask.

Archimedes puts his hand up as if to stop me. I don't mean to but notice his lifeline hatching across. It looks ugly. He clears his throat, says, Me and him had it out over the contents of the recycling bin today. Punk doesn't even bother following the rules. Probably getting back at me for throwing his dirty Styrofoam tray at him.

The most threatening people are those who don't give a fuck if others like them.

We should knock on his door, I say, we can't let him waste our money over some stupid recycling spat.

I wobble behind Archimedes back up to the asshole new tenant's apartment. Hallway feels darker except for one flickering tawny light. We stand in front of apartment eight. Archimedes pounds on door.

No answer.

Pounds on door again. We know you're in there!

I put my ear to the door again, faint wail of pipes, or maybe I'm hearing things?

Quad is murderous.

Archimedes pounds again.

Hello? I say nicely, mouth right up against the door, Please open the door. Let's talk about this.

A few more pounds, still no answer. See, not right in the head, Archimedes says. Momentary silence between us—not sure what to do, we edge towards the stairwell. Archimedes clears his throat again and says, Was just thinking, there are only a few reasons people leave the bath water running. His voice trails.

I shiver in the heat, feel the briefest wind through the screened window, scent of sweet linden trees. I realize I haven't heard new tenant's footsteps overhead for a while or a shift in the pipes like when water moves from faucet to shower head or from hot to warm to hot to cold.

Suddenly a deluge of images. Water on top of water, miles of water crushing new tenant. New tenant's elfin body in water in bathtub, his wrists slit. New tenant's palms up, blood like lace unfurling for five straight hours until his body floats, until he's colourless and bloodless and concave.

I can barely get out the words we better call the police.

Archimedes dials a number on his phone that is longer than 911, listens, hangs up. He does it again. Punk gave me his number when he moved in but now no answer. You know, Carmella, I seen him the other day lying on his back on the asphalt, right in the middle of the parking lot, smoking. I think he was staring at the clouds or something, had his cellphone beside him playing that rap music real loud.

Better call the police, I say again, emphasizing police.

Suddenly I can't be there. Everything out of context. The possibility of seeing something I will never forget. Go downstairs and have my bath? Soak in the same water that new tenant is soaking in one bathtub above me? New tenant's bathtub rosy-hued. New tenant's rosy-hued blood water pouring from my faucet, swelling into my quad.

I have to go, I say.

Smell of cat urine hits me like a brick wall in my hallway, hands shaking trying to put key in lock. It's now almost 11 p.m., entire apartment rattles with sound of running water. Water like a nail hammering into my eardrum. Water that aches in my joints. Quad growls at me but I pace the apartment anyway. Not sure what to do, I wait.

I think about how I know bathtubs. Considering variables such as size of tub, water pressure, weight of new tenant, I estimate he could've filled his bathtub over two hundred and fifty times by now.

I think about how new tenant's bathtub technically can't be full. There's no water spilling from under his door, no water seeping through the ugly drop-down ceiling in my bathroom.

Half an hour later, Jeremy, are you in there? A voice so loud I can hear it permeate my entire apartment one storey below. Jeremy, if you can hear me, say hello.

Silence and running water.

Jeremy, if you can hear me, say something.

Running water.

Jeremy, we're coming in.

I am standing by my back window, one window below new tenant's back window. Suddenly the loudest bang in the night at 11:28 p.m., the apartment building quakes, sound of rolling wheels across my ceiling.

I never knew his name was Jeremy.

Muffled sounds filling my apartment, wafting down from new tenant's window. I can't make out what they are saying. I pace around and notice suddenly, with no final hurrah, the water—when did it stop running? I am surprised by the anticlimax.

I wobble as fast as I can down the back stairwell, quad kicking and screaming. I spot Archimedes smoking outside by the recycling bins. He doesn't look up as I approach. He stares at the ground, says matter-of-factly through a cloud of smoke, Dead on the couch.

Smell of linden trees, the cigarette, the quiet.

Paramedics won't tell how it happened, he says without me asking, and flicks his cigarette.

All I can think of now is the water and new tenant is on the couch but his shower is manic. All I can think is thank god for the water, and

what-the-fuck about the water, and did he know he was going to die?

You know, I never seen one person visit him, Archimedes says.

The water, a squawking bird telling the world what would have taken weeks to find out. Water seeping from my lifeline like the miraculous Holy Mary cries—exactly at the point where my life intersects with new tenant's, where my story begins and his ends.

Kid didn't even last a month here, Archimedes continues, and he was real young, I'd say twenty-two or something, couldn't be more than twenty-five, don't know how a young kid like that would up and die on his couch.

But the water, I whisper, the words falling out of me.

Archimedes looks up and shakes his head. Yeah, he says, his voice trailing, the water.

Geoffrey Morrison

ARTHUR PLUSH

This is the drunken boxing of the mind:

The Surgeon General is in deep with the
Tic Tac people, says it's "better than love."
I say, "Jeff Bezos is like Grendel to me."
This is the antifreeze we use to keep
hemispheres peachy, famous dogs alive.

I introduced myself to the groomsmen
as the asinine assonance-man, but
I'd hidden a wee Gene Hackman
under my overbite. Nobody clued.

A guild of home-schooled poets
yoking Cronuts in the pool room:
by consensus, a blue plume for
everybody's tombstone—blue ghosts, too.

This is the National Defenestration
Rating Council of Prague, Nebraska.
You can hear we hear you clear as
Jesus, fed on a Diet of Worms.

This is the autophagic poetics
of the melancholy of the antique
world—the UFO you swore
was a word balloon.

Patrick Grace

EXPO LINE TO KING GEORGE

Expect no less than the seed planted—someone new
interrupts the terminus outflow
to bridge the stop-gap motion of future

imperfect. Green lights flash mystery. I am alone
in wristwatch context milling among businessmen
whose bear-sized palms handle my body with finesse.

Passenger cars lend an easiness
to stranger intimacy. (Tumult.) The drunk
standee, his landing unsoft as

the depth of apple barrels. At the curve, do not
lean into me—my easy bruising will harden you.
We intersect logbooms freewheeling the Fraser,

our hands capping the thimble paperweight. How we hurt
each other unsheathes a pinpricked protection.
My fingers burn from too much touch.

The yellow alarm strip outruns its fear, our bodies
shoulder to shoulder, crossing the line. My body
crosses parallel squares into fogged morning

boulevard and cones of driver light. I dare them to hit me. I dare you.

Diego Valeri, translated by Laura Valeri

ROOM 347

Up there, nothing but clouds; and flowers for an all-too-brief summer; and snow for the rest of the year. Stars, sometimes, so large and shiny as to look frightening, and a moon so harsh and sour as to not even resemble a moon.

Then: three or four dogs belonging to everyone and no one, and a multitude of crows flying in formation, croaking desperately from hour to hour, sticking to the walls of houses with their wings open, like bats. For a while, there was also a big bay horse that pulled the sled laden with provisions up and down the only two roads in the village, the high one and the low one. But on a day when they left him alone on the low road, he suddenly bolted, ran over the fence, and hurled himself down the gorge with the sled and everything still attached.

Finally, there were the village's inhabitants, about one hundred hardscrabble mountain people who appeared and disappeared almost without anyone noticing their labile presence; and Swiss soldiers, maybe about twenty, guarding us in iron helmets and with muskets on arm, they, too, poor mountain people, also absent, also infinitely distant.

And us, in the middle of all this, with our gaunt faces, our feverish vocalizations, and our ferocious, concealed longings for home, for Italy. We were a jumble of castaways, hurled and dumped up there by a rogue wave of destiny or history; shadows delivered from the infernal storm that felled the lives of men like straws into that frigid, melancholy limbo that subtracted us from life, from time, from everything except from memory.

All of us Italian, and, with the exception of a few, all young officers in the army between twenty and thirty years of age. We strayed into Switzerland because of the Armistice,[1] and crowded in that mountainous hermitage to wait out the war by will of the Swiss command. The few elder

1. In 1943, US forces entered Rome from the South, and Italy officially surrendered under the Armistice, declaring Mussolini's government illegal. Mussolini, under house arrest, was rescued by Nazi troops days later and was installed as head of a puppet government in the German-controlled Northern Italy. Those anti-fascists of Northern Italy who had declared fascism dead had to flee for their lives when Mussolini was reinstated and when Nazi troops strengthened their hold on the north.

men in the midst of those escaping racial laws and political persecution were professors, like me, and we had been charged to improvise a little Italian university for student-officers. (The University, as is well known, did get started, and it worked very well for all of two consecutive semesters, which were equivalent to two full scholastic years).

It was quite the strange village, that Murren; and quite strange was our life in it, if life it could be called. Village, too, is an inappropriate word for it because on the edge of that gorge, the walls of the Jungfrau surging just beyond, no more than a handful of families of farmer-shepherds could subsist, secreted inside old cottages made of blackened wood, their animals' stalls scattered around in the Alps. Those true-born villagers could claim as their own only an aging school building, two churches—one Protestant and the other Catholic, both equally slender and equally spiked—a few tiny shops, and a couple of taverns, nothing more. Everything else, that is to say, the entire "village," was artificial: nothing but hotels, big and small, built for the snow season, splendid at one time, but now stooped, and demeaned to the point of becoming shelters for that crowd of raggedy tramps we were.

When the sun came out, the icy peaks, surrounded by their smoky mists, looked radiant in the whirling emptiness of the sky, a sky with hardly a veil of air. Beneath our feet, snow shone with blinding whiteness, or with the luminous green grass of a thaw, here and there spotted with the nocturnal blue of gentians. A world of beauty and no pity. Lights and shadows cut sharp; whites too crude and obvious; blacks like holes gaping into the internal darkness of the world; and a few colours exalted and frozen like those of precious stones. A still mineral world, without warmth or heartbeat, permanently shaped with the late features of the telluric delirium predating humankind.

More often than not, clouds wrapped around us and hid everything; and then we felt more in harmony with our surroundings because that dull nothingness corresponded exactly to our inner state; it painted a faithful rendition of our phantom existence. A limbo, I was saying. Each one of us carried his pain within, guarding it jealously from the others; each one of us drifted elsewhere with his thoughts and heart; and everyone talked and talked with rabid excitement, without rest. The faraway home, the young wife, the passed-away mother or the child born in the father's absence, and a street corner in Milan, in Rome, in Naples; the colours of the sky, the sea; the scents; there wasn't a one who wouldn't contemplate with manic obsession a face, a place, a glimmer of light, fleeting and nearly lost; there wasn't a one who wouldn't listen in the silence of night for the memory of a voice always on the verge of being forgotten. And everyone talked of other things: about war and politics,

about science and literature; and, especially, about the movies. Because the movies were what still connected us to life below, what best evoked it to the eye and to the mind in a way that cohered with our state of mind. Shadows, game of shadows, and words resonating in a void of space and time, just like in the underworld of our memories.

Evenings, in that barrack of waterlogged wood that was our movie theater, we all waited in anxious excitement. The atmosphere sparkled with lively glances and banter all too joyous. But when darkness fell, and on the screen those huge pale women with long pale arms appeared, those youngsters shut themselves inside a tense and crouching silence, each one looking for a different set of eyes inside the eyes of the actress; and in her voice, they sought another voice. Like Anticlus inside the Trojan horse, they set their foot inside the threshold of their faraway home, they saw and heard their faraway woman, and silently they screamed her name. (We understood, then, that the power of an actress is in her ability to become all women, to impersonate a type upon whom we see reflected the specific details of innumerable other women, to realize a type of beauty in which everyone can recognize what is beautiful to them). Later, lying on a cot, waiting for sleep, our thoughts sank like probes into the deep chaos of memory, trying hard to recover some specific moment with precision, to tie the loose knots of memory, to weave a story, and consumed by that painful effort, some, surely, would weep.

A few came weeping, during the daytime, to my room 347; they couldn't take it anymore, they couldn't hold up; they needed to vent their secret, lonely torment in the arms of a man who was to them a little like a priest confessor in a convent of novices. Afterwards, they would continue to discuss things and smile as they went about, and if time allowed, they would go cheer for their shelter's soccer team. (The best player was, how could I forget? The wingback Vaccarossa;[2] and when he stepped on the field the crowd greeted him with a deep lowing.)

This was the suffering of my young friends, which cannot be compared, understand me, to the cruelties endured by those who were deported and by prisoners of war, but it was nonetheless a hard test for the spirit. (And I know all too well how, on some afternoons, when the sun went down early and the windows tinted with a pale, powdery gold light reminiscent of lost happiness, when from the kitchens rose the voices of the soldiers who were readying our slop, singing the songs of our country and of our barracks, I know all too well how one had to hold on to his chest with

2. The name Vaccarossa translates to Red Cow.

both hands lest he be tempted to call death to come and finally return an impossible freedom. It's also true that if death had come, nobody would have wanted to go through with it, because, under all that sorrow, hopes were always green and alive, like flowers under the snow.)

That suffering did bring us some good, something of worth.

For those who had the strength for it, the loss of social freedoms gave them in return the sense and pleasure of an inner freedom, a perfect self-sufficiency of the spirit; loneliness forced them to turn inward, to seek all the nourishment that a soul needs from within their own soul. They learned to know themselves, to explore their own depths, to be in control of their own feelings, and to co-exist with their selves in intimate communion.

And also to co-exist with others. Because up in that place there was no room for conflicts of interest, for ambitions, for vanities; affectionate relationships were born even out of every intimation or misunderstanding, immune to calculations, determined only from simple human empathy, and those friendships would naturally impregnate with brotherly tenderness.

Many of those young men understood what it really means to love their fellow men, and they will have gone back to their lives with a heart more open, and with a mind more ready to understand other minds. It is true that there is no evil that doesn't also bring good. Sadly, the reverse is also true.

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Erin Noteboom

PAVLOVSK STATION

Outside of Leningrad, digging up potatoes,
are scientists. It is 1941. The Germans closing in.
The scientists, men and women, are from Pavlovsk Station.
Their work is to save the six thousand kinds
of potatoes, the banks of edible seeds in glassine packets,
the two hundred varieties
of cherry. It will not be easy.
There are rats, and even rats
are not the hungriest.
There is bread made of sawdust.
Jam made of wallpaper. For 872 days,
Leningrad folds inward like a fertilized flower.
640,000 dead, and mostly of starvation—but these
are merely numbers. Here is the heart
of science: in the basement, the man in charge of rice
starves to death, while leaning on the sacks of rice.

Beasa Dukes

THE HEART-HUM

I.

I'm deadweight under some monkey bars watching the moon burn a dulled white knot in the dark blue sky. Snow is all up in my ass crack and I ain't got no shoes. I wiggle my fingers a little bit, tryna remember where they at. There is a golden rat sitting on my chest. He is chewing a hole into me. He gnaws and gnaws—his claws pinching my nipples, his teeth crunching up bone. And I let him do his thing. Gargantuan spider swinging in the moonlight bares her teeth at me, hissing. I let her spin and spin and spin, until she is also resting on me. She smacks the rat from my chest. He lands somewhere, squealing and clicking his bloodied teeth. I tell her *yo, don't be treatin' my boy like dat.* I swallow a lump of blood. *I was letting him kill me.* I tell her with her big fuzzy head twisting into a broad-jawed woman with dark-brown skin. Her fat abdomen into a trash-bin trench coat, type of trenchcoat you rescue from the sidewalk garbage pile fit with holes and that sweet rot stink. She still had pincers and shit. But her honeycomb eyes was warm, like my fire-mouthed granma who died tussling the sun. I don't panic. I sigh, air let loose in a hot cloud. And then I sleep. And then she's wrapping me in a hush and hum and lullaby.

II.

I slammed the door, marched down piss-wet stairs, and into the dingy winter night. The sky was a dirty gold. I had hit my mama. She had went off on me, gone all lucid and wild-eyed. She had grabbed me by the hair, kissed my cheeks and hissed at me *why did you fuckin' leave me.* I ain't never left that crazy bitch—been living with her bugged-out shit for twenty-two years. But she wasn't talking to me. She was talking to my pops through me, like I'm some dysfunctional faggot conduit. And so she grabbed at my hair, and so she beat me with her sad fists, and so she cried and so she left giant bruises, and so I took each lick like a nigga on the street. I took her anger, her manic delusions, her vivid Japanese-speak that my pops taught her before he blew out his brains on our living room watching *Maury.* I'm used to her bashing on me, used to her manic hurting. Tonight though, I was full on some dizzy drug, some funky acid-treat some trans-babe gave me with a kiss, fog-brained and watching this angry gold rat lick his own matted fur. He was talking to me in gibberish

and I was getting head-heavy. My vision swam pink, then red. The red haze ain't new to me, but it snuck through me like possession—it came from a brawl happening across some Harlem Hood street, a suicidal OD, gun chime banging. I felt it and my body sometimes did its own thing. I shoved her off me and popped her good. I popped her sober. She looked at me like I had betrayed her heart—watery-eyed, lip quivering and shit. I felt a sting in my eyes too.

Then I bounced.

III.

I wake to snow burning at my lips. I am covered in a rank-smelling coat and the golden rat is sleeping at my feet. I pet him. He is at ease now, chilling. We cool now I guess. He tends to come at me sideways with a hunger for my heart. I tap where he tried chewing into my chest. I nod. I gotta remember to tend my heart, I think he be telling me. I don't always get it, but the rat gets me. Cause I end up home. Cause I tuck the granma spider's coat around my body even though it stank like spoilt milk. Cause I end up in my mother's nest. Cause I end up tossing the coat, showering my stink, and putting dinner away. Cause I end up sweeping my mother's disaster and fit, broken glass and torn papers. Cause I tuck my father's plants back into pots, kissing their leaves and watering their roots. Cause I see my mother naked and smile—she gets hot-blooded at night, in sleep. I tuck a pillow under her head. I roll her onto her side, sooth her arthritic hips, knead cocoa butter into her skin cause she likes waking up smelling like my pops used to. I curl her into a blanket. I kiss her angry wrists, her bruised knuckles, her reddened face. I brush the tears from her, still fresh-fallen.

"Please don't leave me," she hums. "I know I ain't easy. But please never leave me again."

Outside a giant spider with honeycomb eyes spins and spins and spins. Her spiderweb dusting hushes over my skin.

I crawl into bed behind her. I curl my long body around her. I sigh.

And I shush my mother. And I kiss the back of her head. And I hush and I hum and I sing lullaby.

She, lethargic and full with sleep, tugs my hand under her chin. She kisses the palm, then the knuckle that hit.

Nathan Mader

VISITING THE FARM

At the apex of Schwarzenegger
and Seagal's recurring roles
in age-eleven fantasies, my distant
cousin put his 44 magnum

in my hand. Shining like a prop
nickel-plated in the aura
of Harry Callahan, it weighed
more than a movie but less

than a man. That windshieldless
Oldsmobile stalked us, the animal
or archenemy we'd typecast as target
in the grass beyond the crop.

I pulled the trigger. I broke
the air like a punch through a fake
door—a stunt upstaged by the flash
between the recoil and report.

Merrill Lee Girardeau

TELEVISION

Forget I am a good woman.
Imagine me hilarious, resolved every half hour.
I am watched, my house cut in half.

Render me all eyes: lined, marblish, rude.
Talk to me about my hair; I am your
Pantene show horse.

Teach me how to talk about you—
how to brush my teeth, spin salads, call now.
How to lie like a child. How to be president.

If my brain is a sponge, squeeze it out
and bathe it in your brine. Your Pepsi, your
OxiClean. Afternoon, midnight, afternoon, noon.

Show me the Barefoot Contessa. At her name,
I will gather my face into my hands and sigh.
I will make a cassoulet.

I've gone so long eating with you, drinking
with you, doing laundry with you,
I can't remember how it was before.

Show me Planet Earth in flower, our fleshy
bleeding hearts—I am I am I am I—
strung along the branch of your love.

LETTER TO E.

Dear girl, you have the heart of a short man
haggling over a hurricane lamp.
He wears thick dark glasses, a square suit.

You can't afford the old ballpark seats,
the stained glass, the crude painting
of Robert Johnson.
You can't afford your indecision,
thoughts tossed like dull swords.

I condescend to you. I can't seem to help it.
It is difficult discovering before you do
that you can't trust me, my friend.

Try on the silk dress and floppy hat.
The thin gold chain, the Coach purse.

How do we love our men?
How do we love each other?

You call your love imperfect
but never unfinished. Your best heart
languishes on the white racks
of a seafoam refrigerator.

Sam Shelstad

THE FIDDLER MURDERS

I got the idea from this know-it-all from work named Cathy. I sit beside her at the call center because she's my age and the least sketchy person there. You make do with what you're given. One weekend, Cathy went on a trip to Niagara-on-the-Lake with her husband and told me everything about it when she returned. They'd gone on a wine tour with bicycles and ate all this great food. They saw a musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and even dressed up for it. She talked about her trip all day.

When I left work at five, Cathy's story slipped from my mind and I put my attention towards other things. There was dinner to prepare, etc. But when I went to bed that night I thought about Niagara-on-the-Lake. It just sounded so nice. I liked how the town was on-the-lake. I wanted to ride bicycles and visit vineyards and put the bottles right in the bike basket. I wanted to see *Fiddler on the Roof*—I wanted to dress up, too. For the next few days it was all I thought about.

I brought the idea up at dinner one night. Orin, my husband, was complaining about his allergies and I interrupted him.

"Niagara," I said.

"Niagara," Orin said. "Is that like Claritin?"

"No, the town. Niagara-on-the-Lake. I think we should go there."

"We don't have any money. But don't interrupt me. It's rude. I'm saying we need to take all the plants out of the house. Just please put them on the back deck or I'll throw them in the garbage. It's got to be your damn plants that are driving me nuts and I need my eight hours, Laura."

"It's not the plants. But anyway, Cathy—"

"How do you know it's not the plants? Are you my doctor? No, you're not."

"I want to go to Niagara-on-the-Lake."

"Forget it."

I couldn't forget it, though. I imagined Cathy enjoying her vacation and I wanted to enjoy one, too. Of course, I couldn't tell Cathy I was going on the same trip because she'd say I was stealing her idea. She's that kind of person. So if I missed work to go, I'd have to tell her I was sick and

watching movies at home with Orin. She probably wouldn't listen to me anyway.

Eventually, Orin said yes. All it took to convince him was I had to ask him while he was drunk. He came home from a meeting one night all puffy and loud, and he kept trying to pull me into the bedroom. I opened a bottle of wine, sat him down at the kitchen table, and started selling him the trip.

"You can ride horses there," I said.

"I've always wanted to ride a horse," Orin said. "When I was a kid I went to summer camp and they had horses, but I never got to ride one."

"Well here's your chance."

"One of the horses at the camp came down with this neurological disease and was acting crazy. They wouldn't let us ride any of them in case the others had the disease, too. We went over to the stables to see them one day and this one horse was scraping his face against a tree. There was blood all over his face. I was ten years old."

"And it won't be that much money. We can drive there and stay someplace cheap. Cathy's hotel was right on the water and they got this really good deal." I made that part up, but it was probably true. There was always some kind of deal on the internet, I figured.

"On the last day of camp I guess the horse tried to jump the fence and his legs got all tangled up in the wires. They had to shoot it. We all heard the shot while we were in the mess hall, eating spaghetti."

"So it's settled."

We left the following weekend. It should only have been a four-hour drive from Windsor, but Orin had to stop every twenty minutes. He didn't have a bowel movement that day, which was unusual. He'd had a bowel movement every morning at nine a.m. exactly for the past thirty or so years, he claimed. And now, nothing.

"I will *not* be constipated on this trip, Laura."

We stopped near Chatham, London, Woodstock, Brantford, Hamilton, and St. Catharines. Orin would go into the washroom, and I'd sit in the car and wait for ten or fifteen minutes. It became this thing where, when Orin came out of a washroom and walked towards the car, he'd put up his hands and shake his head so I'd know he'd failed in there.

"Maybe I need to eat some fruit," he'd say once he was back in the car. Or, "What about figs?" Or, "Maybe I need to lie down in the back seat and massage my stomach for a while."

"What about we just drive to Niagara already?" I said, at one of the stops.

"What about I take us back home?"

I kept my mouth shut.

We were mostly silent for the rest of the drive. I flipped on the radio at one point and Orin flipped it right back off. I didn't press him. I wanted to get to Niagara-on-the-Lake before it turned dark.

I looked out my window and watched the landscape barely change. It was all fields and strip malls. I saw a billboard advertising "knuckle spray," whatever that was. I probably read it wrong.

When we honed in on the Niagara region, however, there were ridges and hills and rivers. It was all beautiful. We drove over a bridge that felt like it was the Golden Gate, it was so big. I'd never been on the Golden Gate and knew it was probably ten or twenty times the size of whatever bridge we were on, but still. I was excited. I did a little dance in my seat.

"For Christ's sake, Laura," Orin said. "I'm driving. You're gonna break the seat."

It was dark by the time we reached Niagara-on-the-Lake. Our hotel was decent, but it smelled slightly of rotten bananas. The kid behind the desk was asleep in his chair—we had to wake him up to get our room key.

There was a Jacuzzi tub in our room with a piece of paper taped to it that said "DO NOT USE." The bathroom had these sliding windows above the Jacuzzi which opened up into our room. Like, you could sit in the tub with the windows open and see the bed or watch TV while you bathed—if the tub actually worked. These sliding windows wouldn't close properly, though, and Orin said he couldn't shit with me in the room. I had to wait in the hall.

I sat out there for ten minutes or so, wondering if Cathy had had these tub windows which wouldn't quite close. Or if she had to wait in a hallway for her husband to use the toilet. Orin came out of the room to get me with his hands up, shaking his head.

"I can't go if you're just out here waiting for me," he said. "You need to be doing something. Not just waiting around."

"What should I do?" I said.

"For Christ's sake, I don't know. But don't stand out here waiting around. It makes me nervous. I will not be constipated the whole trip."

I went down to the lobby and looked at the pamphlets. Most of them were for attractions in Niagara Falls, which Cathy said were overpriced. I found a pamphlet for the bicycle tour. There were pictures of couples cycling down country roads with wine bottles in their bike baskets. A woman in one of the photos looked a little like Cathy and I could picture the guy in the photo being Cathy's husband, whom I'd never met. I

fantasized about going on the bicycle tour the next day, and how maybe someone would take our picture and put it in a pamphlet. I'd get Orin to wear the nice shirt he'd brought for *Fiddler*, just in case. I'd wear my blue dress. I'd keep my chin up if there was a photographer shooting us, so you couldn't see my neck fat.

I picked out a few other pamphlets and read through them: there was a day spa, a tea room, a paranormal museum, a newspaper museum, the horse stables, and the theatre house where Cathy and her husband had gone. I put the pamphlets in order from must-see to maybe-if-there's-time. I drummed my fingers on the pamphlet stand. Half an hour passed with no Orin.

I went back upstairs and he was asleep on the bed.

Cathy texted me while I was lying in the dark, playing Tetris on my phone.

Hope yr feeling ok Laura

I replied that I was still pretty sick but Orin and I were at home watching a movie.

What movie? she wrote back.

I thought for a minute.

Miss congeniality

Oooo what channel? Im so bored

Actually its a dvd

Can I borrow when yr back at work?

Sure

So now I'd have to go and buy it. Damn Cathy.

I went back to Tetris and played until my eyes ached. I closed them and waited for sleep.

"You need to get up, Laura," a voice said. I opened my eyes and there was Orin hovering over me. A pale light shone through the curtains.

"What's—"

"You need to get up. I think I can go now, but I can't go with you in the room. Quick, before it goes away."

"You didn't go last night?"

"No. Hurry up, before it goes away. And don't just stand in the hallway. Go outside or something."

I stood up, pulled on a sweater, and went down to the lobby.

A woman sat behind the reception desk this time. The banana smell was gone. She was talking to an old man with keys on his belt and they both wore serious expressions. They were leaning over a newspaper, which was

spread out on the desk. I went over to the pamphlet stand and listened in.

"So sad," the woman said. "Did you know them?"

"No. I saw the guy around though. Last week at the bank. Funny, Mary and I were supposed to go see it tomorrow. It would've been the last show of the run, but I guess they're shutting down. Obviously."

"I know. So sad."

I could have just asked them what had happened, but I felt too embarrassed to talk to anyone the way I was dressed. I looked around the lobby for another newspaper, but couldn't find one. Then I noticed the *Niagara Advance* box out on the street.

I stepped outside and read the headline through the plastic window on the door: *FIDDLER ON THE ROOF* DIRECTOR AND STAR FOUND DEAD IN CAR. I didn't have my wallet on me to buy a copy, so I read what I could through the window. Apparently, the woman directing the musical that Orin and I were planning to see that night, as well as the guy who played the role of Tevye, were shot in the actor's car outside of the theatre after last night's performance. There were no suspects so far. That's all I could read.

The thing I'd been looking forward to the most, the musical, had been pulled from the menu. Cathy had me beat on this one. I cursed my luck. Of course, I felt terrible for the poor people who had been murdered, but I didn't know them. I just wanted to see a nice performance.

Two cop cars drove by. I went back inside.

Upstairs, Orin was lying on the bed and rubbing his stomach.

"Did you go yet?" I said.

"What do you think?"

"Hey, you'll never guess what happened. Last—"

"Did I take a shit?"

"What?"

"Did I take a shit? Is that what you're about to tell me? Unless you're going to tell me I took a shit, then I don't care."

"That doesn't even make sense, Orin."

We dressed and left to look for breakfast.

We found a place nearby, but Orin wouldn't touch his eggs. He said they looked too yellow. Then he asked our server if she could turn the music down—admittedly, it was a little much—and she did, but her mood changed after that. She wouldn't look at us when she came by our table to refill the water glasses. Orin refused to leave her a tip when we left, but I snuck a five under my plate while he wasn't looking.

We went back to the hotel to ask about the wine tour. We'd missed it.

The lady at the desk said the guy comes by with the bus to pick people up at seven every morning—it was already eleven. She said we could go tomorrow, but we'd have to be ready by seven this time. Seven *sharp*, she said.

"I didn't like her tone," Orin said, when we returned to our room. "She was acting like we were her kids or something. How the hell are we supposed to know when the damn bus comes? And why is there a bus? I thought this was a bicycle thing."

"He has to drive us out to the vineyards first. He has the bikes and everything. Stop being so negative. She didn't mean anything."

"Like hell she didn't."

"Orin, you're being ridiculous." I said this, but didn't really think it. I wasn't so fond of the desk lady myself. We weren't her damn kids.

Orin still hadn't had his bowel movement, but I convinced him to go to the horse stables that afternoon. We drove to a ranch just outside of town and they had this amazing trot path that went by a little waterfall. We paid and got all set up, but then Orin wouldn't get on his horse.

"I don't like the look of mine," he said.

"Well then let's trade."

"No, you go ahead. I don't really like the look of any of them."

I didn't want to ride alone, so we went back to the hotel. Orin made me wait in the hall for a little while and then we took a nap.

We had the TV on while we were dressing up for dinner and there was an update on the "Fiddler Murders," which was what they were calling them. It was a national news story now. There were still no suspects, but I guess there had been another unsolved car shooting in Niagara Falls a month earlier. A woman waiting for her son to get off work was gunned down by the side of the road—probably by the same killer.

The reporter was standing right outside the theatre, cops and news trucks everywhere. They had yellow police tape up and people were crowding behind it, watching the scene. The caption at the bottom of the screen read: *FIDDLER ON THE ROOF* MURDERER ON THE LOOSE IN NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE.

"That's kinda funny," Orin said.

"How is that funny?" I said. "Two people died last night."

"The caption. You can't tell me that's not funny. I think it's meant to be a little funny."

"It's not funny." I was lying—it was kind of funny. But it was the kind of funny you appreciate on the inside and keep to yourself, because two people had been killed and it wasn't right to laugh.

The streets were busy and we had to wait twenty-five minutes for a table at the restaurant I'd picked. We waited at the bar and everyone was talking about the Fiddler murders. One guy said he'd sold the woman, the director, a pack of cigarettes the day she died. Another guy said he figured the killer was someone local who auditioned for a role in the musical, but didn't make the cut—or maybe an understudy. And then this woman said it was great they had all this publicity for the musical now, but that it was useless because they'd shut down the production. Orin and I sat and listened.

Then something happened: the server came to seat us, and on the way to our table I couldn't find Orin. He just kind of slipped off. I sat down anyway and told the server my husband would be back, and he did come back, ten minutes later. He walked towards the table with his arms up, but with a huge grin.

"I made!" he said.

"Oh, I'm so glad, dear."

"Things will be different now. We can really start our vacation. I bet I could hop on a horse right now. Are they still open?"

"Oh, I'm so happy."

It was the best dinner. I ordered pasta and Orin had roast duck and scalloped potatoes. We shared a bottle of pinot noir from one of the local vineyards—one we'd probably visit the next day on the tour. Our server was charming and the music was at the perfect volume. I couldn't stop smiling.

We talked about the wine tour, and Orin even suggested we stay an extra day so we could visit the stables again.

"I'm getting on that horse, Laura," Orin said. "You can count on that."

"We'll ride past the waterfall."

"You bet your little ass we will."

When we got back to the hotel I thought we were going to have sex. We were tipsy from the wine and Orin groped me a little in the elevator. A married couple doesn't need to have sex all the time, but when you're staying in a hotel I think it's important to have sex at least once. Especially if you've had a nice time at dinner. But when we got up to the room, I went into the washroom to change out of my blue dress and Orin fell asleep. I sat on the bed beside him and played Tetris on my phone.

We woke up at eight—we'd missed the pick-up for the bicycle tour. It was raining anyway.

"Maybe we should just drive home," Orin said.

"What about the horses?"
"It's raining."
"I thought we were going to stay another day?"
"It's *raining*, Laura."
We left after Orin's nine a.m. bowel movement.

The rain stopped around Hamilton, and it was clear skies all the way until Windsor. We didn't say much to each other. Orin let me play the radio for a bit. The news came on and they were talking about the Fiddler murders again. Still no suspects, but apparently the police found an unlicensed gun and half an ounce of crystal meth in the director's car. It was too early to speculate, the newswoman said, but she speculated anyway—it was possible the two victims were involved with some sort of crime ring. It was all very sensational, but Orin made me shut the radio off because he had a headache.

I wondered what Cathy would say when I returned to work the next day. She'd probably go on about how she'd just been there, in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and how she'd seen the musical with the two murder victims. She'd act like the office expert on the whole matter. If anyone brought it up, Cathy would swoop in and take over the conversation: *Well, when I saw the production*, I could imagine her saying, *I noticed something a little off about the guy playing Tevye*. I bet you did, Cathy.

The funny thing was that I was actually there for the whole murder. I could have sat next to the killer in a restaurant, or maybe they were staying in our hotel. You never know. But I couldn't say anything because Cathy thought I was sick at home. My Niagara-on-the-Lake story was actually better and more relevant than hers, even though Orin and I didn't really do that much. We didn't really do anything, aside from our dinner the night before. But we were there. And it really was a magical dinner.

"Remember dinner last night?" I said. We were outside of Woodstock.
"It was good."
"I really had a great time with you, Orin."
"The food was excellent."

We stopped for lunch in London and Orin let me run into Wal-Mart afterwards. I went to the DVD section and looked for *Miss Congeniality* so I could lend it to Cathy, but they didn't have it. I found the movie version of *Fiddler on the Roof* in a bargain bin though, which I bought. I missed out on the live show, but I could have my own private experience when we got home to supplement the trip.

I couldn't wait to get back and watch the film. The rest of the drive to

Windsor I scanned the DVD case and imagined what it would be like. It's exciting to watch something that's relevant to your own experiences. The whole thing would be coloured by the murders.

We stopped again near Chatham. Orin filled up the car and I bought an ice cream sandwich. I ate half and passed it to Orin. We drove home. So that was our trip. The next day at work I didn't say a word to Cathy about any of it. I let her yammer on about this painting class she'd signed up for. I smiled and nodded along. She had no idea where I'd just been.

"The instructor's actually from Paris?" I said.

"He really is!" Cathy said.

But I wasn't really listening to Cathy's story. I was thinking about Orin. I pictured him walking over to me in the restaurant, his hands up in the air, the enormous grin plastered across his face. I wanted to live inside that moment. Orin would never reach the table, and we would never place our orders. But I wouldn't know that. I'd watch my smiling husband walk towards me forever.

Kayla Czaga

MICHELLE ON INSTAGRAM

I liked the photo of you eating.
I liked the photo of you stacking
your panties into a suitcase
for China. I did not like China.
Its unreliable wifi spaced out
your face until little of your face
remained in my life. I liked
the photo of you and your turtle
in China. I tapped on its shell
twice with my index finger, liked.
You with your students in China.
You at Chinese Disneyland with
your fiancé. You chewing god-
knows. The photo you took
of Paul Simon's cardstock cutout
in your army green parka. You
drunk-leaning on a balcony.
I liked Paul Simon. Vincent's ramen.
Your new apartment. That other
bitch you sometimes hang out with
who isn't Paul Simon. I liked
your wedding. Everyone crying
at your wedding. Double-tap.
I liked your wedding so much
along with hundreds of other
likers who liked your wedding.
Mimosas. Swans. Lasagna. It
happened so fast. Your mother,
your grandmother in coral, her hair
turned way up. Sorry for saying
I should've been a groomsmen.
I liked the groomsman. I tapped
on their faces. I like you in beer
league, swinging your bat through
Leo-season. Can you feel me tap
on your faces, liking your life?

I like that swimsuit you made.
Do you like your life? I like it
so much I make all the small
hearts underneath you light up.

MONEY

At a book launch in Toronto
Aisha Sasha John read, I need
a lot of money. I like that
because I need money too
but it's like an aunt once told
everyone it was tacky
to admit it. Why is not dying
so embarrassing? Imagine
getting all the money required
to live through the calendar
as one wad of twenties.
I like twenties because
they're wearing the Queen.
How many twenties would
you need and what else? I need
a lot of tampons to avoid
just bleeding onto the streets.
Also I need a lot of people
around who call me
the correct name. I need
Angela sitting on my face.
I need a bucket of coffee
to carry on past 2PM. Most
of what we do isn't living,
it's laundry, it's operating a can
opener, it's seeing fleeting
people on the street. Or seeing
them again and they're assholes.
Some mornings I read really
interesting articles about shit
in Bangladesh, Wisconsin,
or deep in the tissue papers
of the gorilla heart and some
afternoons I don't remember
any of it. This can't be living.
Last night between hellos

with literary near-strangers
I stood beside Michelle
and the feeling of really
living crushed through me
like a ghost elephant lowering
its ghost feet and impeccable
ghost memory onto my skeleton
and I wondered if everyone
or even just Michelle
could tell I was crying.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Kimberly Quiogue Andrews is a poet, critic, and Pennsylvanian. A two-time Academy of American Poets prize winner and a Pushcart nominee, you can find her work in *RHINO*, *The Normal School*, *The Southampton Review*, *West Branch*, *Bomb*, and other venues. She is a doctoral candidate in English at Yale University.

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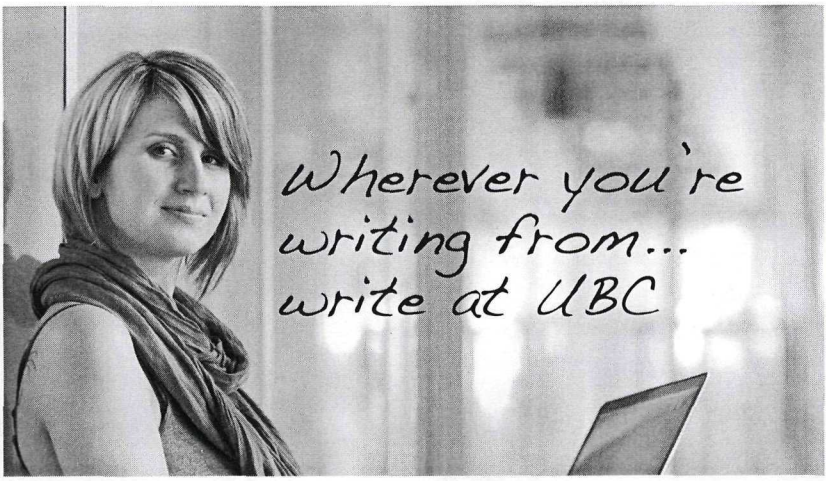

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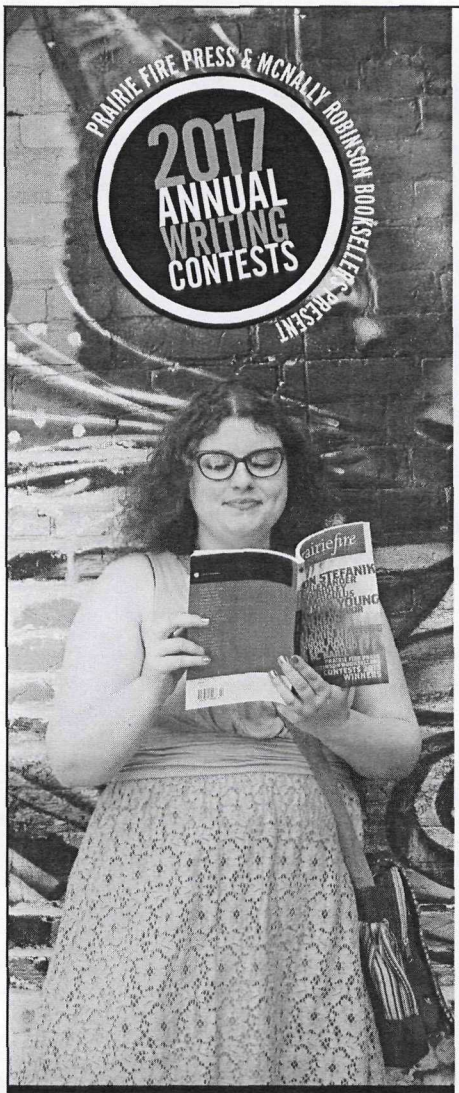

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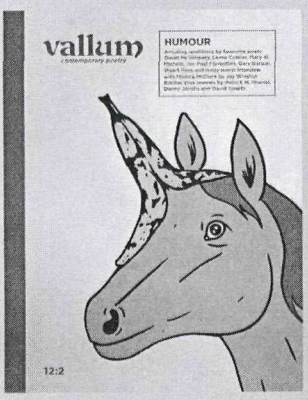

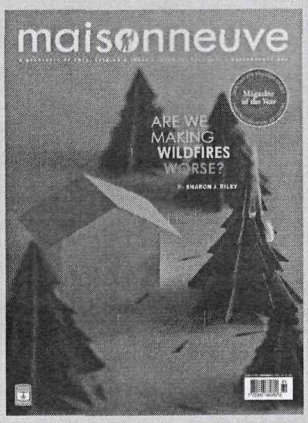

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