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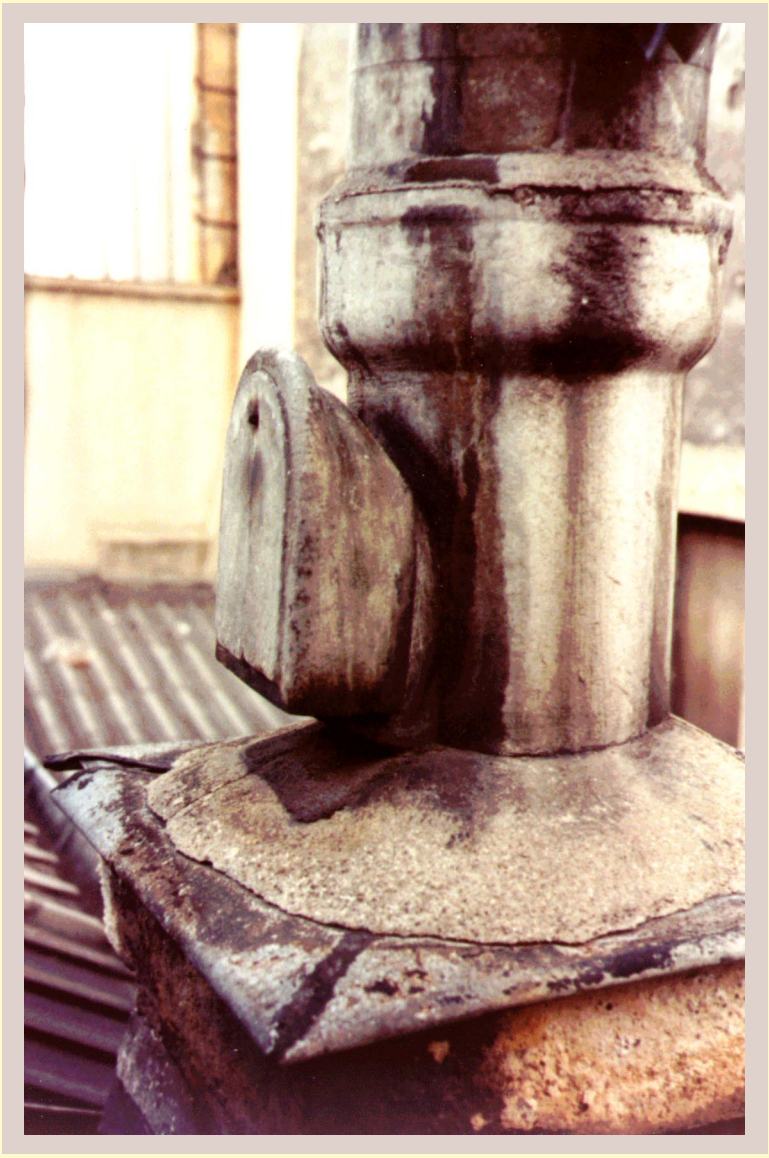

Poetry, fiction, reviews

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Instruction and inspiration

Herewith a few notes on several productive *paperplatesians*.

Cary Fagan published his fourth novel last fall. *The Mermaid of Paris* (Key Porter) takes place in turn of the [20th] century Ontario. Henry Church, an inventor especially interested in flight, finds that his wife Margaret is growing more and more disaffected. If the air has become his element, then water is surely hers. As a child, she survived (just barely) a shipwreck; as an adult, she suffers from nervous symptoms that Henry has been at a loss to explain. Enter Count Anatole Belinsky, a performer whose aquarium and the octopus in it have a fascination for Margaret that will prove all too seductive. She runs off with the undrownable Count. And Henry, after a painful interlude, follows them – to a France that is the very reflection of his pain. There is a good deal more humour in the novel than this scant summary would suggest. Humour and pathos and fantasy mixed, the latter described with Fagan's usual delicate persuasiveness.

Dan Yashinsky's new book, *Suddenly They Heard Footsteps* (Knopf), is to be published this month. A reflection upon a life dedicated to storytelling, as well as upon the art of storytelling itself, *Suddenly They Heard Footsteps* takes the form of an entertaining ramble across a landscape first charted by older tellers from whom Yashinsky received both instruction and inspiration. Naturally, he pays homage to them and connects the lines of his own life to theirs. But he also emphasizes the forwardness of telling, its adaptability in a world so much at odds (it would seem) with tales of paupers and kings. *Story*, that near-abstraction, not only asserts its place in the present, it makes a most untimid claim upon the future. *Suddenly They Heard Footsteps* is a generous book, filled with examples that will encourage even the more reticent among us to begin their own telling.

Tim Conley, our reviews editor, published *Joyces Mistakes: Problems of Intention, Irony, and Interpretation* (University of Toronto Press) last year. Allen Ruch described it as "a vigorous and often delightful examination of the nature of error itself: What exactly is error? What are its consequences, both intended and unintended? How are error, interpretation, and irony related? Although the works of Joyce provide the bulk of material for his arguments, Conley is clear from the beginning that his study encompasses the whole of art, from abstract painting to pop songs; and perhaps even chance encounters on the street."* †

Finally, **David Bezmozgis**, whose short story "An Animal to the Memory" we published in Vol. 5, No. 2, had the kind of year most writers (with or without an agent) hardly dare dream of, his work appearing, in rapid succession, in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Zoetrope*, and even the newly arrived *Walrus*. David is bringing out a collection, *Natasha and Other Stories*, with Farrar, Straus, and Giroux this June.

– Bernard Kelly

* www.themodernword.com/joyce/joyce_crit_5.html

† See also Tim's interview with Michael Bryson, editor of the *Danforth Review*, at www.danforthreview.com/features/interviews/tim_conley.htm

homeplate

Waiting for Go

A TRAGICOMEDY INSIDE THE ACTORS STUDIO

PROLOGUE

"WHAT'S THE good of losing heart now," someone said. A phrase I'm reminded of, but can't quite place. Was it encouragement or melancholy or simple pragmatism? Here I am: Scene Partner to an auditioning Hopeful at the Actors Studio auditions in New York. I've never been here before, yet *something* – something not fully tangible – feels so familiar. Perhaps it's a play? Yes, yes, that's it: life is imitating art. We've come full circle. The existential angst of this audition – of this acting profession my dear friend has chosen – is like stepping into the Beckett tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot.* The story begins and ends and begins again. And now the existential plight of the actor unfolds for me more profoundly than ever before.

ESTRAGON: Where do we come in?
VLADIMIR: Come in? … On our hands and knees.

[A city street. A tree. Morning.]

OUR CAB HURLS to a stop before The New School auditorium on West 12th. The same theatre where Bravo TV's "Inside the Actors Studio" is taped. Where effusive host/dean James Lipton seduces big-time talent like Kevin Spacey and Meryl Streep with his thorough research. Where students speak to these celebrities as mentors ("I'm Sharisa, a first-year actor; I wanted to ask you about crying …"). And where, in this partially televised MFA program, one can (according to *Daily Variety*) obtain a veritable "industry passport".

The Hopeful (or "Hope", for short) points out this *Variety* catch-phrase, used so effectively in the Actors Studio promotional catalogue. Yes, it seems possible: the Actors Studio has mythic powers. And Hope believes. Finally, after many years of toil – working primarily behind the scenes – this is *The* Big Chance, she tells me. The one that could get her past "Go" in this game.

We enter the lobby, sisters-in-arms, and approach a small folding table by a black door. A young redhead with cat's-eye glasses and slipped-off beach thongs sits in the authority seat – a baby-faced guy hovering near.

Red gives a Cheshire smile and confirms Hope's audition time. Ten-thirty. Forty minutes from now. She can be seated in the lobby or go outside to the courtyard. She can find the restrooms to her left. She can relax, because "everyone here wants you to succeed." (I am detached from this exchange, but I assume at least the first two points apply to me, as well.)

We've prepared a scene from John Patrick Shanley's *Savage in Limbo.* In limbo – yes, we are. Time has stopped. Forty minutes? How long is forty minutes really? We can't remember. Here, it is an eternity. We are waiting for *Go.*

We enter the courtyard where a young man in requisite black sportcoat/black jeans/black Doc Martins lets out a hideous, nervous wail. His scene partner – a thin, hunched-over brunette smoking Marlboros – flicks her ashes and laughs at him. "Guess who's auditioning here?" he calls over to us, as he starts pacing the flagstone.

We sit by a thin, leafless tree. We wait.

Red flip-flops through the courtyard to the Coke machine and back again. *Flip-flop. Flip-flop. Flip-flop.* A momentary distraction. Hope grins and sighs a few times. We make a little conversation. We wait.

About 10 o'something, Red calls Sportcoat "on deck". He and Marlboro disappear from view. Silence. We wait.

Some time later (minutes? hours? no, it must be minutes), Red beckons Hope "on deck". We move back to the lobby and catch a glimpse of a dark figure – Sportcoat – entering the black door. Red gestures to the folding chairs by her folding table. We sit. Across from us, a broken elevator opens and closes its doors successively – going nowhere. We wait.

Relaxing in her chair, looking a bit bored, Red tucks her knees up to her chest – her thongs on the linoleum. "Sometimes, after the audition, they'll call you back in – to talk to you," she intimates. "They asked one girl to *sing* today … I think all they said to me was, 'It costs a lot to go here. Do you know that?' That was it." Red is in her second year now.

Babyface returns – at least it *looks* like the same Babyface from before. He hovers again, this time asking Hope what scene she has chosen. He is first-year. He wishes Hope luck in a way that makes me think he wants to get to know her better in his second year. Now, a smiling woman with a clipboard – black turtleneck, black jeans, jet-black ponytail – emerges from behind the black door and says Hope's name.

We enter the black door. We follow Clipboard into a small green room. It is empty. There's a large mirror to gaze into. There's room to spin one's arms, distort one's face, droop like a rag doll, and vocalize pre-historically – all the things actors like to do to prepare. Clipboard introduces herself as the associate dean. She sweetly asks

Hope some questions about her application, her behind-the-scenes job, and where she wants her chairs. She says she will introduce Hope before the scene. "It will be a few minutes – I'll come get you."

We spin, distort, droop and vocalize. We make a little conversation. We wait.

It's now ten-twenty-nine. (Ten-twenty-nine? Then time hasn't stopped?) We hear some activity in the hall: Sportcoat is being called back to the stage for a Question – or, perhaps, a Song. "Jessica Lange has been on that stage," Hope says to me in a nervous whisper. "I hope she left me some of her jou-jou."

[Same day. Same time. Same place.]

Clipboard opens the Green Room door with a smile. She whispers something to Hope and smiles us toward the stage. There are the chairs. I notice the tv Dean on the aisle, row two. We sit.

We wait.

Silence.

A … long … pause. *It's not possible*, is it? Yes, it seems I've missed our cue. Clipboard must have quietly told Hope her introduction had already been made. I snivel into my Kleenex. Now, finally, the scene has begun.

It passes rather quickly. (Time seems to have shifted.) There are no flubbed lines. No stuttering. It's all as it should be. Hope is in good form. My one laugh line takes – the modest glory of The Scene Partner. (Ah, Estragon was right: "we always find something to give us the impression we exist.") For several moments the world has focus.

The scene ends. The audition does not.

James Lipton approaches the stage, magically drawing Hope to the proscenium. Hope is smiling. She is ready for anything – a Question, a Song, a Dance. (Perhaps, he'll ask her to "dance first and think afterwards, if it isn't too much to ask …") I feel a magnetic pull to the wings. Clipboard quickly escorts me into the hall. She asks me to take Hope's things from the Green Room and wait in the lobby. I sit.

Hope emerges from behind the black door, just a few beats behind me. She looks a bit flushed, as if she'd just been dancing.

"How did it go?" Babyface, hovering near, asks first.

"Ummm … I *guess* well … I think," Hope says. She glances to me for reassurance. I smile reassuringly. She bites her lip.

"Did they ask you a Question?" Babyface presses.

"Well, just if I was ready for the three-year commitment … so I said 'absolutely'."

Babyface smiles knowingly. "That's *really* good," he says with a quiet intensity, squinting his eyes like James Dean.

Hope looks even more hopeful. Babyface seems to her a good resource. Of course, there is the possibility he may only be acting. (Wasn't it the Boy who appeared at the end of each act, assuring Estragon and Vladimir that Godot will come tomorrow?)

We don't move. (Unable to depart – ah, such is life.) We are suspended here a few moments, silently contemplating the odds. But there is no answer here. "Go" – if there is one – will come in the mail. We must wait.

VLADIMIR: And it's not over.
ESTRAGON: Apparently not.
VLADIMIR: It's only the beginning.

[A backyard. A tree. Evening.]

Hope's things are all with the movers now – her chairs, her bed, her sofa, her Jetta, everything. She has only her cat and a few suitcases. We sit outside by a thin tree: it has four or five leaves. Hope grins and sighs a few times. She looks hopeful.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she says more than once.

After weeks or months, the Actors Studio has accepted someone other than her – maybe Sportcoat – and she's been invited to try again at another Audition. Yet Hope has declined. Today she is headed to Los Angeles: The Land of Big Chances.

VLADIMIR: What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot.

Epilogue

Now Hope is 3,000 miles away. She takes a weekly class to prepare for the next Big Audition. She has another Scene Partner. Another behind-the-scenes job. And, of course, other distractions. She even works as an Extra – a term that seems existentially appropriate given the odds in Hollywood. Yet in L.A., consistently edged out of work by other Hopefuls, she feels more alive than ever. For there is grace in the waiting – in the hoping – in the reaching. A humanity in the daily ritual and repetition. A deep satisfaction in the perfection of craft. There is, as Beckett wrote, "the beauty of the way." And, after all, as Estragon said on stage, "What's the good of losing heart now?"

– Stacey Resnikoff

Experimental method

Religion has no place in science, but it never hurts to give it a try. You never know what might work. There was a Nobel Prize winning physicist who had a horseshoe nailed to his door. He wasn't superstitious, but as he said, he'd heard that these things were supposed to work whether he believed in them or not. Great logic. It works for me.

"Please God, I don't ask for much, but when I take a picture of this gel, could you make the appropriate band show up. That's all, thanks."

When I pull the cover-slip from the instant photograph, it's blank. It looks like I had asked for too much.

"Help." I say this so quietly that I'm sure no one could have heard me.

"What did you screw up this time?" Eliot asks. He appears from nowhere and scaring the daylights out of me. I shouldn't be surprised, this is his talent. He has some sort of gift. If someone's messing up an experiment in the lab, he'll show up.

Still, it's not as though he has anything else to do. Eliot always manages to finish hours before anyone else, breezing through problems the rest of us have to work on for hours. If he wasn't such a nice person, he'd be totally irredeemable.

"Seriously, do you know where you could have gone wrong?" Eliot asks.

It could have been anything.

The textbook stuff I can handle, it's the labs I hate.

Lab work is a little like cooking: all you have to do is follow the instructions in the booklet. The problem is that the people writing them have a warped grasp of the English language. It probably has something to do with the fact that the people writing them are scientists. Most of the people in my class dread having to write essays, because they hate having to express themselves in words. When they're forced to, it's always ends up being messy. If the professors are anything like us, it makes sense then that we get things like: "Remember not to leave the paper uncut." There are a number of ways of viewing that direction. I have a talent for picking the wrong one.

Since I have a hard time following the method, I go through experiments, unconsciously improvising. I never notice it at the time I'm doing it, but I get things mixed up. I'll add a little too much of something, or too little of something else, and end up with a complete mess. Most TA's have no idea what to do with me.

Worse, I have what they call "fast hands", meaning that I'm a natural klutz. When I brush my hands across a bench, I never fail to send a test tube, or something equally delicate, spinning to the ground. I've broken more things than the rest of the class combined.

After a couple of disasters, like nearly burning myself with phenol, I became a bit of a wreck. It's hard to commit to some sort of action, when you're so sure that what you're doing is wrong.

I tried to deal with this by working so slowly that even though I look busy, I don't get that much done. Sometimes I would get caught in a loop and just do the same thing over and over again – something non-committal, like mixing or measuring out solutions.

It was while I was doing this that I found out something amazing: if I stalled, my lab partner or a frustrated TA would do the experiment for me. This took the pressure away, but at the same time it was like I was some damsel in distress, waiting around simply to be rescued.

I didn't notice how bad things were until I went through an entire lab without doing a thing. My lab partner did the whole experiment for me.

"Why don't you just stand over there," Daria said.

It was a shock. The pretence was gone. I had to figure out what was worse: making a mistake or doing nothing.

At any rate, it was impossible to hide this term because it was all independent work.

The experiment we were given today was complicated. We were supposed to use six different restriction enzymes in different combinations to cut up the Regulein gene. I'll admit it, I rushed putting everything together. I was behind everyone else, and the fact that I'm usually the last person to leave didn't help my nerves.

"Did you remember to put in the gene?" Eliot asks.

"Yes. It was the very first step, please give me enough credit to have done that."

"You could have put the wrong enzymes in the tubes," Eliot adds.

"Take a look at the picture. If I put the wrong enzymes in, I would have at least got some bands on the gel."

"Did you put it in the right waterbath then?"

"What are you talking about?"

"There are two waterbaths back there. There's the 37°C one, and the 70°C one. The tubes were supposed to go into the 37°C one. If you put it in the wrong one, there wouldn't have been a reaction." He says all of this very slowly, as though he's talking to a child, which gets on my nerves. I'm not stupid, just careless.

"So, which one did you put it in, left or right?" he asks.

"The left one … . Damn, no, the right."

It was the one on the right. I remember standing next to it, waiting to take my ependorf tubes out. Timing is everything at this stage.

We're told that if you leave things in there a minute too long, you'll catch the reaction at the wrong stage and therefore get twisted results. A minute too soon, and the reaction might not have started, and you'll get no results.

Okay, so after I took the tubes out, I brought them back to my desk, added the stop solution to halt the reaction, and then added the fluorescent dye that binds to the DNA and make the bands show up under the UV light.

I then loaded the samples onto the agrose gel, and turned the power on. The negative charge pushes the gene fragments along the gel. According to the theory of "excess baggage", the smaller fragments travel further than the larger ones because they have less mass.

Eliot is kind enough to throw out a number of different scenarios of what could have gone wrong. By the end of it, I'm feeling nauseous and hopelessly incompetent.

Well on the positive side, I never make the same mistakes over and over again. I learn from them. The problem is stopping myself from making new ones.

If the worst does happen, I'll just beg him if I could photocopy his picture.

"There's just one more thing you could have messed up."

"What's that."

He turns on the fluorescent light on the camera. "You can't take a picture without light. Well, see you later," he says and then leaves.

I'm sure I did that … . Oh well, what could it hurt?

I stick the gel underneath the camera, and take another picture. One click and it's done.

I pause a moment before I push the button.

Old habits die hard. It's hard to move out of that moment. I could either be right or wrong – and to be honest, I don't want to know if I'm wrong – the only way to know for sure though is to go through with it.

Now I have to wait thirty seconds for the film to develop, and see if I can salvage anything from this experience.

I wave the photograph back and forth. I'm not sure why I have to do this, except that I've seen other people do this, and have concluded that it must help in some way. I wave it for a minute, at which point the suspense is killing me.

Come on, you coward, look at the photograph.

GOD IS GOOD.

The bands are there.

I bump into Eliot at the library, and I tell him what happened.

"Look, I didn't screw it up," I say waving the picture at him.

"Good for you," Eliot said. He had a piece of advice for me. "You should try adding a new variable in your next experiment."

"What's that?" I ask

"Confidence," he says.

"Very funny."

"Would it hurt?"

I can't give him an answer.

– Carolyn Son

Bubble-bone ice

FOR THE PAST several years, I have been fascinated by the way ice forms over the running water of brooks and streams. If the air temperature is below freezing, it is easy to imagine how ice can form on the still water of a pond or lake. First, a thin crust will form over the surface of a pond or any body of still water. Second, gradually, as long as nothing disturbs this thin crust, it will build up until it is several inches thick. Finally, the insulating properties of the ice take over and keep the rest of the water from freezing.

This cannot occur on the swiftly flowing waters of a brook or stream, because the flowing water would break up the paper-thin crust of ice. I have read about a type of ice called *anchor ice*. According to *Webster's*, it is found on the bottom of unfrozen streams or lakes. There, it often coats the stones that rest on the river bed. Maybe that type of ice exists. But wouldn't being covered with water cause the ice to melt, especially at the bottom of a lake? And how could anchor ice form in a streambed? Wouldn't the running water have to be below freezing itself?

With these questions in mind, I began to study the formation of ice on a swiftly flowing stream. I decided on a tributary of the Rockaway River, known as Beaver Brook, as my subject. Weeks after the nearby ponds had frozen over, the brook was almost completely ice-free. The Rockaway River and its tributaries flow through Morris County, New Jersey, all but unnoticed by the majority of the inhabitants. A keen-eyed environmentalist, who has studied maps of the area, claims that more than one of the tributaries of the Rockaway River is called Beaver Brook.

For days, I observed how ice often formed around obstructions in the brook. In many places, a large tangled row of wild roses grew along the brook's edge. At a particularly sharp bend in the brook, a score or so of wild rose stems dipped into the rapidly moving water. A small, irregular sphere of ice would form on the stems, an inch or less above the water line. I assumed that minute drops of spray, caused by the rushing water hitting the stems, froze on the stems of the roses when the air temperature was below freezing. During a prolonged cold snap, these ice balls would enlarge and merge until they formed a bumpy shelf of ice. There was a relatively still pool of water where the brook made a sharp, 90 degree bend. Here, the water froze much as the water on a pond would.

As I EXAMINED the stream more thoroughly, I found a unique formation of ice. In the beginning, I observed that the water often flowed through tangles of roots, sticks, and dead leaves. The confused mass of detritus that broke the surface, was often small compared to the tangled formation that spread out below. They would continually produce bubbles of various sizes. If these bubbles were stopped by some obstruction, such as a branch that dipped into the water, against which some dead leaves had lodged, then an island of bubbles and foam would form.

Often, these islands would be shaped by the flowing water, until they looked like a dog's bone. The end that butted against the obstruction would be bulbous, because the obstruction could stop many bubbles. The middle portion would be tapered since the flowing water would dislodge bubbles. The upstream end would be enlarged, owning to its prominent position, which would allow more bubbles to strike it, many of which it would claim. These islands of bubbles and foam would freeze while the flowing water all around remained ice-free. The ice would be white, its colour and texture like snow. Very light and extremely brittle, it was difficult to pick up without breaking even a small sheet of it into many pieces. A cross-section revealed a compact, frozen bubble structure. The bubbles averaged around a quarter of an inch in diameter. The ice formation's resemblance to an island was striking. The ice rose in a gentle curve, beginning at the water's edge, until the smooth surface formed a thickened portion in the middle. There were small tan-coloured striations running lengthwise that looked like the lines of debris the tides leave on a beach. It was impossible to tell, by observation alone, if the bubbles were naturally occurring or were the result of waste water run-off, rich in household detergents. Finally, the stream froze over.

I didn't observe the actual freezing. The ice was an inch or two thick, almost strong enough to hold my weight without cracking. I had watched the stream daily for at least a week and no significant ice had formed. The day I decided not to bother looking at the stream was the day when the ice formed; the watched pot doesn't boil; the watched stream doesn't freeze – as though nature had a subconscious mind controlling certain phenomena and, like the human subconscious, resisted direct observation of its inner workings. There hadn't been a significant drop in the temperature, so that was not the major factor responsible for the freezing. I noticed that there was a two- to three-inch drop in the water level of the brook – as if a faucet had been turned off – while for the past week or more the level had been constant. This explained something I had noticed before. Often, when a stream froze over, there would be a shelf of ice running along the edge of the brook, three or more inches above the newly frozen ice. Exactly how this fringe layer formed had never been clear. Now it was obvious: the shelf of fringe ice represented the previous water level and the normally occurring fringe of ice that forms along the banks of a swiftly flowing stream.

The next day, a powerful storm deposited two feet of snow. I didn't return to the brook for about a week. By this time, the ice was beginning to melt because of a slight rise in the temperature. I noticed fewer bubbles in the stream. As I made my way upstream I discovered why. Most of the ice had melted, shrinking back to a band of fringe ice along the banks. Along the banks of a straight portion of the stream, a cluster of trees spread out their branches across the brook. Here, shaded from the sun, the melting ice fanned out from either bank. The exposed water formed an elongated V, within which the water was stagnant. The melting ice was thin, grey, and waterlogged. It barely managed to span the width of the stream. But it was enough to make the water stagnant. The waning ice formed a dead end, trapping bubbles and foam.

A FLOTILLA OF trapped bubbles and foam covered the water. They had formed ever decreasing concentric arcs of white froth as they came to rest on the still water, whose smooth surface they decorated. Just barely visible, a few feet in front of the mouth of the V, was a thin black line. At this boundary line the water seemed to slip under itself. This thin black line whipped across the width of the brook as if it were blown by an unseen wind. As the bubbles and foam crossed this line they immediately lost their momentum. They decelerated almost to a complete stop. Then I realized the water wasn't running under itself; instead, it slid under a thin film of detergent. The bubbles lost their momentum as soon as they no longer rested on the water but floated on the stagnant film of detergent. This observation suggested that the bubble ice was made from detergent bubbles. Detergent does have the effect of smoothing out and calming swiftly flowing water. This would give detergent bubbles an advantage over naturally occurring bubbles in the formation of ice-bubble islands. Rivers and their tributaries have not been polished with detergents until recently.

Bubble ice is ephemeral by nature, since it is subsumed by the formation of the ice sheets that freeze over brooks and streams. That being so, it may not have been described before.

– Jim Spinosa

Perseids

So innocent I ran for them with pots & jars
to catch those fireflies or shooting stars,
those Medusa-hunters passing from their house over ours,
too proud not to make a kind of fussy history
on August nights but this is August day & hot & bright
& I look down between the dark green railings high
above the mile-wide white crater where the star has fallen
& still must be, beneath the rock & scumble & stone
somewhere, cold now, & small as the agate wasp alone
in the agate woods not a day away from here,
no one can tell me how all this falling came so near.
& these are like the grave green railings I held last year
in the dark down cold stairs to the carved bier
they said held Lincoln, or what by law was left of him –
bones maybe, a top hat, a cotton shawl, a pipe stem,
something – so now I crawl beneath the rails to the rim,
sliding into the crater, crabby, impatient
for at least one secret after so much silence,
figures petrified, embalmed, laid away like linens
& white-waxed baby shoes. I trip across the broken shale
as my parents, frightened, shout warnings I hear so well
it must be love but farther down I'm sure I will
unearth the last warm cinder, the one rock shaped to Lincoln's hand,
something – what adults have seen & whisper when they understand
what I do not. Then, then I'll have made good on this land
after so much travel in such hot back seats through summer wind,
not knowing ever, really, what my parents have had in mind
to work so hard at on these vacations for me to find.
If only I'd known. But now I do know as they drag me back
screaming out of the sharp dry mouth: I know for absolute fact
they too dream of turning up the star beneath the crack
in the floor of the crater. They dig their heels too deep
into the stubble & look down with such imprudent scrutiny
they must be listening for that wasp still humming
in its polished wood.

– Hillel Schwartz

Lori Bloomfield

Happy Birthday, Mrs Kennedy

Jerry did this every visit: sat in his rusted-out Honda in the parking lot of the Horace Hopkins Home for the Elderly and thrummed his fingers against the steering wheel until he'd worked himself up enough to go inside. He made deals with himself: if he visited his mother for an hour he wouldn't have to do the laundry; instead he'd drop off everything, underwear included, at a dry cleaner. But even with a good deal it usually took him ten or fifteen minutes before he was able to haul himself out of his car.

Once out, he veered across the parking lot away from the imposing centre doors, then cut across the grass, ignoring the sidewalk. The door to the Alzheimer's ward was tucked around the side of the building.

Jerry's father, mild-mannered but tight-lipped, hadn't prepared him, hadn't told him how bad his mother was getting. Or maybe he'd tried to once or twice and Jerry hadn't taken him seriously. It wouldn't have been the first time. But Jerry preferred to think he'd been kept in the dark, shielded. There was less guilt that way. 'I didn't know,' he'd say to both the police and the doctor.

A week after his father's funeral Jerry had swung by his mother's place after work to see how she was doing. He'd found the house empty, the back door swinging open. Her purse was still in the bedroom, the car still in the garage. Afraid, he'd called the police. Three hours later they had found her, asleep in the neighbour's shed. According to the neighbour it wasn't the first time.

Beside the door to the Alzheimer's ward was a small touch pad similar to that on a phone. There was an identical one on the inside wall as well. For the door to open, you first had to punch in the security code. This system was not so much to keep people out as it was to keep people in.

Janine Taylor was behind the reception desk with a Hollywood gossip rag spread open in front of her. As Jerry loped by he hoped whatever she was reading would be riveting enough to keep her from glancing up. No such luck.

"Hey, you ready for the big party?" Janine called after him. "They just finished corralling the last of them into the dining room a few minutes ago."

Jerry waved a hand to show he'd heard, but didn't turn around.

Janine was his ex-wife's best friend though Jerry had never been able to fathom what the two of them had in common, besides a love of baiting him.

"Have fun," Janine drawled as he disappeared around the corner. Something about the way she hung onto each word for several beats made him switch directions and head for his mother's room instead of the dining room.

He slouched against the doorframe and looked around the tiny room. There wasn't much to take in: a chaste single bed, a cheap white three-drawer dresser, an orange plastic chair and a nightstand. The only thing that had come from home (besides the few clothes in the dresser, and even those Jerry couldn't be sure of, he'd caught his mother decked out in things she'd pilfered from other rooms so many times) was the framed photograph on the bedside table. Actually, it wasn't a photograph, just a page cut carefully from an old *Life* magazine. But it was the only possession his mother still

recognized as hers; even her wedding ring she'd calmly let a nurse slip off her bony finger when it grew too big.

The picture, which had sat on the hall table at home for as long as Jerry could remember, was of a pretty, dark-haired young woman, elegant in a white sleeveless dress and pearls, holding a baby. Jerry had hated the picture even before he'd started bringing girls home in high school. Inevitably, they'd all made a beeline for it, cooing what a cute baby he'd been, before falling silent when they recognized Jackie Kennedy. They had each given him the same wounded, accusatory look as though he had deliberately tricked them.

There were pictures of Jackie and John Jr. tucked in among family photos in every room of the house, but this was his mother's favourite. They'd fought a lot about those pictures when Jerry had been a teenager. Then one day his mother had enough; she tore through the house in a rage and took down every picture *except* for the ones of Jackie and John Jr. There'd been no more arguments after that.

Jerry had actually been relieved when the doctor diagnosed his mother as being in the second stage of Alzheimer's. All the while she'd been undergoing tests Jerry had expected the doctor to proclaim his mother crazy, just as most of their relatives and neighbours had been doing, not so quietly, for years. Or maybe she always had been crazy and now just had an official, sympathy-grabbing, kind of craziness. Jerry didn't know. But whatever he'd been expecting when his mother had been brought here, to the Horace Hopkins Home for the Elderly, Alzheimer's Ward, it wasn't this. He didn't think the loony bin could be much different.

Faint strains of *Happy Birthday to You* floated down the hall and coiled around Jerry like an anaconda. He glanced down at the present he held in his right hand. Wrapped in ridiculous dollar-store wrapping paper with cartoon kittens chasing pastel-coloured balloons was a box of liqueur-filled chocolates. Jerry hoped they'd pack enough of a kick to ease him through this party.

As he neared the dining room the drone of singing voices disentangled and he could hear the nurses trying to hurry the tempo along. The old ones, their voices seeming to come from the bottom of a very deep well, dragged along behind. At least, the ones actually singing *Happy Birthday to You* dragged along behind. The old man shouting *Row, Row Your Boat* and the old woman wailing *Kumbiya* were rushing through their songs as if it it were a race.

Jerry waited, pushing open the door only after the nurses hit the final note of the final line. If there was one thing he was not going to do today, it was sing. The last thing he needed was his smart-ass, ex-wife calling him up later saying she'd heard he'd given up the lucrative business of house painting to go on the road as an Elvis impersonator.

He spotted his mother right away. She was sitting at the end of one of the long dining-room tables on the far side of the room. On her head, like a hat, was a white canvas running shoe held in place by an elastic band hooked snugly beneath her chin. In front of her sat a large rectangular cake decorated with white and blue icing, a single yellow candle burning in its centre. Clustered around her were several staff members clapping and urging her to make a wish, but she just stared into the tiny flame as though mesmerized. Finally, Doris Flinch leaned down beside her and with one quick exhalation blew out the candle.

Doris Flinch's son, Sam, had been born the same week as Jerry. For Christmas the year they were both seventeen Sam had asked for, and received, a hunting rifle. On New Year's Eve he'd used it to blow his brains out in his parents' basement while watching Dick Clark. In the decades since, Jerry had never stopped feeling guilty whenever he saw Doris Flinch. He believed his presence must be a painful reminder of Sam, but Doris always seemed glad to see him. Shortly after Sam's suicide, she'd become a born-again Christian and had started working at the Horace Hopkins Home for the Elderly where she cheerfully took on the filthiest and most menial jobs. She saved her money and used it to visit a different pilgrimage site every few years. This summer she was taking the train to Nova Scotia to go to a Tim Horton's where dozens of people had seen the Virgin Mary reflected in the drive-thru window.

As Doris Flinch carried the cake by Jerry she grinned and tilted it so he could read: "Happy Birthday, Mrs Kennedy" spelled out across the top in blue icing letters. It was the staff's idea of a joke to call his mother Mrs Kennedy, a joke that irked Jerry. When he'd first caught on to it he'd gone to the supervisor, the bitchy one they'd brought in from Toronto, and told her he wanted the staff to call his mother Mrs Dumble or Mavis. She'd stared at him as though he was some foul-smelling thing she'd found stuck to the bottom of her high heel and said, "I'm afraid, Mr Dumble, you've misunderstood. Your mother's nickname is a term of endearment, a compliment even." Then she'd strode off. In truth many people had been calling his mother Mrs Kennedy for years, but the staff here at the Horace Hopkins Home for the Elderly were the only people who had extended the practice to Jerry by calling him John-John.

The staff gradually drifted away from his mother, either to chase after wandering old ones or simply to talk among themselves while they waited for Doris Flinch to cut the cake. Jerry began walking towards his mother. He watched her face intently. She was still staring down at the spot where the cake had been as though waiting for it to rematerialize. This was the most nerve-wracking part of every visit. The doctor had

tried to prepare Jerry, had told him there was a fair chance she might not recognize him one day.

He was so close he could have touched her when she finally looked up. Her faded blue eyes met his and she smiled. A small, demure smile but it was enough to haul him back from the edge, to slide firm ground beneath his feet again.

"Hi, Ma. Happy birthday," he said, bending down to kiss her cheek. As he straightened back up, he knocked the shoe – Jesus it was big, a man's size eleven at least – and she grunted her displeasure.

She hadn't spoken in over a year. This happened, the doctor told him. Some patients stop talking, others never shut up, some only open their mouths to swear a blue streak. The doctor confessed he'd once treated a nun with Alzheimer's whose language was so foul he'd blush listening to her.

"Happy birthday," Jerry said again as he settled into the chair next to her. If it had been one of the other inmates (Jerry had a hard time thinking of them as patients) wearing the shoe he would have been amused. But it wasn't amusing on his mother. It was irritating. The staff should have taken it off her, he thought angrily.

His mother, always a small, bird-like woman, had spent entire years of his boyhood, it seemed, hunched over her sewing machine in the basement. Behind her on the table were stacks of *Life*, *Time*, and fashion magazines; anything with a picture of Jackie Kennedy in it. Clever with fabric and scissors, she could copy any outfit Jackie wore. In the early 60s she started dressing like Jackie Kennedy and had never stopped. All through the 60s she'd worn her slim skirts and matching, three-quarter-sleeve jackets, a pillbox hat placed jauntily on her head. In the 70s, when everyone else wore denim and fringe, his mother had stuck with her Jackie Kennedy suits; the only things she added were the huge Jackie O. sunglasses. (Jerry's mother took Jackie's marriage to Onassis hard. She always referred to Onassis as "that thug", and swore he was involved in JFK's assassination.) During the 80s, that era of big shoulder pads and even bigger hair, she stayed faithful to her pageboy haircut and slim suits, to her gloves and low-heeled shoes. Though, by then, her clothes were starting to show a bit of wear and she looked like Jackie Kennedy on the skids. Jerry grabbed for the shoe but his mother ducked out of reach. She was surprisingly quick.

"C'mon, Ma, let me have the shoe. It's your birthday – don't you want to look nice?"

But she bobbed and weaved like a boxer every time he reached for the sneaker.

"You'll never get that thing away from her, John-John. We've all had a go at it. She thinks it's a pillbox hat. Don't you, Mrs Kennedy?"

Oh God, it was Carrie Ballsworth. "Ballworthie", the guys had called her in high school, though she was anything but. Slim, then and now, with red curly hair cut close to her skull and more freckles than a golfball had dimples. But it wasn't just her looks that kept guys away. It was *her*: smug, bossy *her*. Jerry was not the type to hit anyone, let alone a woman, but every time Carrie opened her mouth, his palms itched to slap her. Carrie hadn't married and it didn't surprise Jerry in the least.

"Never say never," Jerry muttered over his shoulder as he stood up.

He took hold of the shoe firmly with one hand and with the other tried to gently ease the rubber band out from beneath his mother's chin, but as soon as he touched the sneaker she started to squawk and flail her arms wildly up and down. Jerry felt everyone turn towards them. It must have looked as if he were assaulting his mother on her birthday. He didn't know whether to stop or keep going and was glad when Doris Flinch rushed over with a piece of cake on a paper plate.

"There, there," she cooed, fitting a plastic spoon into his mother's clawing hand. "Just let her be, Jerry. What's the difference – a paper party hat or a shoe? They're both ridiculous when you think about it."

Doris was right. Jerry slumped back down in his chair and watched his mother begin to calmly scrape her piece of cake clean of its icing.

"I brought you a piece, too," Doris said, setting down a second paper plate. "It doesn't matter," she consoled him. "We always think it does, but it doesn't." Then she patted his shoulder before hurrying away.

When all that was left on Jerry's mother's plate was a whitish lump of naked cake she began to scoop the icing off Jerry's piece. He let her. He liked watching the way she pushed her spoon across the top of the cake like a tiny shovel. When all the icing was gone and she'd finished licking off her spoon, she flung it over her right shoulder. It would have sailed clear across the dining room had it not hit Carrie Ballsworth. Caught her right between the shoulder blades. "Nice shot, Ma," Jerry whispered.

It seemed a good moment to give his mother her present. He slid the package over in front of her and waited to see if she'd open it. When all she did was smile at it uncertainly and poke a few of the cartoon kittens, Jerry took it back and unwrapped it himself. His mother watched intently as first the wrapping paper, then the cellophane came off. Finally, Jerry held the opened box of chocolates out to her.

"Have a chocolate, Ma."

He realized he should have brought a card, too; it would have been something for her to put up in her room. He always thought of these things too late. His mother's hand,

ridged with blue veins, hovered over the box before she snatched up the biggest chocolate. It was shaped like a seashell. When she bit into it the amber-coloured filling dribbled down her chin. Before Jerry could get a napkin her tongue darted out and licked it up. When she was finished, she smacked her lips together and made rude noises like a little boy.

"Have another, Ma." Jerry held the box out to her again. This time she chose quickly and popped the chocolate into her mouth whole.

When Jerry tried to take a chocolate for himself she slapped his hand away, then picked up the box and settled it on her lap.

"Come on, Ma, can't I have just one?" Jerry teased. "I'm your son after all."

She glanced at him sharply. Her pale blue eyes were the colour of faded denim.

"My son is John-John." Her voice, rusty from disuse, came out sounding guttural.

Jerry was stunned. *My son is John-John.* She'd said it clear as day, then had gone back to eating her chocolates. You hope you'll be remembered but try to brace yourself in case you're forgotten. You do not imagine being replaced. His mother's odd clothing and the pictures of Jackie and John-John had always seemed a harmless eccentricity. It hadn't occurred to Jerry that it was a rejection of everything around her, of the life she had been handed. Of him.

Maybe a better person, the kind that takes extended vacations in India, would have been happy his mother's brain had finally granted her a world where she was who she wanted to be. But Jerry wasn't that person. He reached out and jerked the box of chocolates off her lap, spilling them across the floor. Immediately he felt ashamed. Maybe he was crazy too, he thought. The two of them got down on their hands and knees. Jerry began to fit the chocolates back into the brown plastic tray. He blew on each one before dropping it back into its pocket while his mother scrambled to eat as many as she could off the floor. A crowd slowly gathered around them but he didn't look up.

"She threw that too, did she?" Carrie Ballsworth sneered.

Then Doris Flinch was down on her knees beside him. "It doesn't matter," she soothed. "We think it does, but it doesn't."

cold harbour

she broke in

the kayaks were racked like peppers
in the shed
or mythical slippers
she pulled a canoe loose

dropped it in the cold drink
put on its mermaid's tail

suddenly sexless she paddled
to the harbour's quivering middle

she glimpses cyrillic script
like tattoos on a freighter's calf
the cranes doze
halyards gossip in the marina
seabirds sleep

where is the tide which modulates?
or the saving screech?

I am left
I've left land

Yes the eskimo roll
is a symbol of survival

oarless she arcs half
way
turning into another life

upside down she dies.

– Mike Parker

Still image on a walk

A morning walk to Winter work
The moon has dithered after dawn

inscribed in the sky
through another poet's phrase:

"the moon thinned to an air sharpened blade"

Did death dreading Larkin see the Scythe,
while I see cheeky clouds stroke a roundy bum?

His life line is better
but I have a day to complete.

Maybe between the image and the plot
Feeling and meaning meet.

wait

the corner
turns its blade
and stiffened hip

perspective leans on an elbow
peering teeth in lips

the long desiring back
has no preference

what waits
sat which end?

at a perpendicular
another longing stretches:
two Times at angles
breaches and beckoning

what's awaited arrives
along a distance
moving opposite
out of grasp

they begin
both can't be still
if they want a meeting.

went to think

what he went to think was
gone

the pith and peel of former feelings gone
he'd stood over their imagined defeat
before
staunched the sap in their felled trunk

and the game was gone
the free game of losing them
when he cut
their wrists above the roots
before

snatched or shrivelled
the cleared space stayed
and what he'd hurt and hated
of them was gone

but he hadn't handled
the hatchet or willed them
falling from stalks

what he hunted and hounded
in them through bracken
was done
and the scarred tracks
of their challenge
filled with silt

he couldn't think them now
only think of them
gone.

– Mike Parker

Her rook

The rook on the rail
Of the Raleigh Rest Home
Has swallowed the soul
Of Mrs Soames Best.

He'll take the world of her, where?

While the day cook
Brokers the breakfasts
And the Care Nurse counts
And collates pills half awake.

With adage wings and proverb beak
Will he drop her superstitions to dolphins?

In the kitchen, Eliot's Gay gossip
Posits another new lover,
Sipped and savoured
Above the chugging urn's purr.

Or will the rook remand her
To a guide with tortured feet?

The cooks sets a trade tray
For the eldest cot
The rook's cut squawk breaks in
not yet, she's not found yet
at her stopped rest.

What wicker, wicket bridge
Is she led across in ropes, above a piped fall?

Strange, cocks the cook, strange;
Eliot's muted cup lowers:
Something has shut
The singing sparrows up.
A soulless hunter?

Will the rook slit her
Obselete self and similar friends
In their triangle of Time
And paste them against shade?

Nurse can't button her cardigan
She can't hold it closed
She can't fold it clasped
Or ask it to oppose the cold.

In the heat of their living,
Eliot and the cook nod:
The old go, feathers take them
Aloft in the body of a rook.

They go, Nurse, they go.
What Mrs Best meant is gone
But the day never forgets;
Its birdsong recommences.

– Mike Parker

Amir Khan

Lost highway

His Lexus is swerving across the night. His head aches and he can no longer follow the repetition of the bright perforated yellow line imprinted on the street from here to the horizon. It starts to snow, lightly, which is odd for the first day of April. Finally he loses control. The car begins to veer off the road. He puts his head down on the steering wheel and is unsure if he sees a blaring set of lights in the oncoming lane. However, just before impact and groggy now, he is certain. He is being flung across the highway solo – there is no oncoming vehicle. He tucks his hands beneath his armpits and surrenders to the will of the belt as his front end smashes into the bottom of the ditch. His windshield collapses and the car turns over twice. Suspended in some eternal and god-awful state, he can feel the warmth of his blood encasing a piece of embedded glass in his forehead and running down his cheek. He pricks at it with his tongue. It tastes like blood – trauma has not affected its taste. He closes his eyes and waits for the authorities to arrive. He moans, just once, against the blare of the horn, disturbing the dead of night.

■ ■ ■

At the gas station, a tiny but voluptuous hula girl is stationed firmly on the counter. Her oversized breasts read squeeze me. He stares at her with indifference. The attendant finally presses her thumb to the hula girl's right nipple and she begins to vibrate fervently to a tedious Hawaiian melody.

"Isn't that a riot?" the attendant muses.

He smiles briskly at her. He hadn't thought to squeeze her breasts, though they were at his fingertips. He collects his change and exits the shop.

■ ■ ■

Lying awake in bed that night, he begins to wonder what made him take the car out that evening. He had filled the tank and he had bought cigarettes though he could have easily done this on his way to work the next morning. Perhaps he just needed to get his head in order; a serene drive to soothing music can do this. Yet somehow, he was at a loss for a good reason why he had ventured out that evening. He had gone alone. He had talked to no one, except the gas station attendant and, it being dark out, he certainly could not have taken in the countryside.

Getting out, he slammed the car door. A dog's bark echoed through the night. He was glad he had bought the cigarettes. History would not be creeping up on him – not tonight. At least he could smoke those cigarettes, one by one, until the early morning hours squeezed him into a contrived and despondent slumber.

Ode to Thomas Jefferson Sutherland

Those who didn't know him well
thought well of him.
Not so those who knew him well,
though men like himself
muddled and enthusiastic,
not so much indecisive
as making too many decisions,
sometimes at once.

Through the fog of fervour
or opportunism, which
it was hard to tell but
in which he and his fellows
hid themselves,
he's glimpsed at
one of his many trials,
"dressed in a blue blanket coat
under which he wore
a Kentucky hunting shirt with
two tawdry epaulettes on his shoulders".

December 5th was central to his life.
On that day in 1821 he joined the
marines, in nine years rising
to the rank of sergeant.
In upstate New York he learned the printer's trade
but became a "lawyer of low standing".

On December 5th, 1837 York's
revolting farmers southward tramped
Yonge Street ruts with pikes and cudgels,
staves and pitchforks.
Fresh from a tavern putsch
the hothead redhead Mackenzie
led the snorting herd
armed with a perfect constitution.

The same day Sutherland spoke to raise
an "Independent Canadian Service" in Buffalo,
a change though not a rest from
trimming anti-Masonic sheets in the wind.
After all he'd fought with Simón Bolivar
or so he said, adding
"Shall we withhold our sympathies
and as individuals our assistance?"

No, but it ended badly.
The routed Mackenzie fled, his printing type
distributed across the lake.
In Buffalo, squabbles about recruiting
and stealing arms from city hall
and a river island occupied
from which orders were issued,
ignored or countermanded.
In Cleveland, Sutherland told a crowd
how the Queen's
bloodthirsty savages attacked
"our unoffending brethren adjacent to
the Canadian frontier".

His proclamation offered
300 acres, $100 in silver,
"all the blessings of freedom"
for his volunteers but
near Detroit the freedom fighters
saw their schooner grounded near
the fort they meant to capture.
Brig.-Gen. Sutherland declined
to rescue his fellow patriots
and staunchly ordered a retreat.

Everybody but Sutherland
blamed Sutherland.
His men voted him least likely to succeed.
He was collared for breaching neutrality.
In the dock, a reporter said,
"of large stature with dark hair and complexion
he was a very fine specimen of the genus homo".

Not guilty in that court he resigned
a non-existent command,
then was captured on the river ice.
Sure the British would shoot him,
he sliced veins in his hands and feet.
Useless bloodshed. The verdict was
transportation to Van Diemen's Land
with other Tasmanian devils.

But justice fogged around Sutherland.
Claiming he'd been misled,
he whined to the governor.
A fellow inmate said his "bad conduct and
attempts to quarrel with every one
in the room, his lying, his vanity and
assumption of importance, as well as
his playing the spy upon us
made the men all despise him".

The trial had been bungled.
Ordered set free if he gave security he
wouldn't re-enter British soil
he couldn't raise it.
To hell with it and him.
They let him out at Cornwall,
more trouble than he was worth.

Across the line, back in the rag trade,
he published gusty pamphlets, letters to and by the editor,
sheaves of poems, loose leaves.
Hunters' lodges tended the old musket flame.
Wrangles now over raising a regiment
to fight in California against Mexico,
somebody anyway.

For five years he vanished
then turned up in Midwest river towns,
a carpet-sack slung across his shoulders.
A figure out of Twain or Melville,
he churned the Mississippi,
paid his fare with phrenological lectures
for those who needed their heads examined.

Nebraska boomer,
in his head still swirled
life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness
though not for Indians,
who "had no right to keep such fine lands".

He proposed a "Military agricultural school"
to train revolutionists in Europe
and maybe grow grain.
Farther west he tramped, with him
a little girl named Viola, scooped up on his tour,
the ragamuffin pair shuffling dustily
into a mini-series.

At Iowa-and-Sac he died of typhus.
What was in his head had fled.
A trunk contained "a
large quantity of manuscript, made up of
biography, history
and poetry, much of it
seemingly prepared for the press."

The Savannah (Mo.) *Monitor* observed
he'd been "somewhat noted"
as "a fine scholar",
"one of the leading spirits in the
Canadian rebellion".

Across the fitful screen I also write
the obit of my namesake,
a muddy figure lurching across the border,
time's corrected mistake.

– Fraser Sutherland

Paul Lanctot

The male code of silence

My teeth cracked against each other with a sickening crunch. I heard metal rip, felt the seatbelt gnash into my shoulder and the blood flow hot to my head. My brother Jason screamed behind me as my father strained to put all of his weight on the pedal and rein the car in.

We clamored outside. "Dad, I told you to slow down, for Christ's sake," my brother said, his voice edged near tears.

The night closed around us like black water. Jason thought we'd hit a cyclist – he was swearing and whispering, "Oh my God, oh my God." But I drew from my father's stoic silence, from the concentrated frown on his lips that threatened to break at any moment and reveal a lopsided grin. It would feel different if we hit a person, I thought. You'd know if you'd just killed someone.

My father's flashlight picked up the deer almost immediately. The impact must have tossed it off the road and into the trees, creating a wide scar of broken branches. Jason and I watched as Dad picked out details with the light; a little scrap of meat that hung from a branch, the gashed haunch that pulsated and twitched. "Goddammit," my father whispered. He was unable to keep the pride from slipping into his Québécois accent. "We really hit that one, boys. Jee-zus!"

Our station wagon wasn't completely trashed, just badly dented. We drove on, with our one surviving headlight casting a lonely beam ahead of us. We stopped at Eddy's Diner and my father went inside to see if he could find someone to kill our wounded buck. Jason and I stayed in the car. "He's going to kill us if he keeps driving like that," my brother said.

"Calm down, Jason," I said. "It was just an accident."

"No, seriously." Jason's eyes were wide, the whites shining like silver in the car light. "He's going to kill us both." I could tell by his shaky voice and laboured breathing he was still flushed with emotion. I shut up.

Dad came back pretty quick. "No one wanted to finish him off. I had to call the police, and they didn't sound too helpful either." He let out a long, slow sigh. "I've done my part."

We went back onto the road, driving through a curtain of fat raindrops. The wipers sliced back and forth listlessly. I watched them catch and quiver about halfway before finishing their slash across the windshield. "Now, boys, we've got to be on our best behaviour. Mom's family has high expectations of us French Canadians – of the papa frog and his two little tadpoles."

I *ribbitt*ed and Dad sped the car up, laughing his crazed mad scientist cackle. "That sure was one hell of a speed bump, eh boys?" he said and swerved the car across the solid yellow line a few times for dramatic effect. My brother launched a string of protests from the backseat, and Dad winked at me.

When we were younger and Dad had his old Chevy Nova, he used to rocket along country roads while I giggled with fear and barely contained exhilaration from the back seat. I knew without being told that I was never supposed to say anything about

the wild rides to Mom, but I always did. "It's a throwback to his swinging bachelor days when he had his Mustang," Mom explained. Dad always frowned at my transgression, at the breaking of the unwritten La Salle male code of silence.

But I detected something different in tonight's midnight race. Dad's tight smile slipped into a thin scowl, his wide eyes devoured the road. He was driving just as fast as he had before but I could see he was more careful, pouring all his attention into controlling the car. All three of us remained silent for quite some time.

Mom heard about the death of her father quite suddenly one night from Aunt Leona. Al Chisholm had been sick, not the big C, but a more general sort of deterioration. "He hasn't had a crap in over a week," Mom said. "He doesn't have much time left."

His recovery was miraculous. Al was discharged from the hospital, resumed his long walks and crapped with renewed vigor. Four days after his Lazarus-like rising, his heart stopped cold and the last of my grandparents died.

Mom flew down home right away. Dad had to secure the time off work while Jason and I had to clear up some things with our teachers before we left. I was in Grade 8 and Jason was in Grade 11. Once all was sorted out, the male half of the La Salle clan piled into the station wagon and sped towards Rexton, New Brunswick – the ancestral home of the mysterious and seldom-visited Chisholm family. We awaited whatever judgment they would deliver on our strange quirks and mannerisms.

My brother and father were model railroaders. Together, they created a tiny HO scale model world in our basement. They chose as their subject a 1950's era town in generic small town Canada and populated it with miniature people going to miniature drive-ins, model policemen directing plastic cars, and pregnant mothers with eyebrows slashed across their faces in Tamia Gloss Black Number 46. They catered to its needs daily – cleaning the track, repairing the models, working on the wiring problems. They made sure it was running very smoothly, but rarely operated it. "Albert can't come to the phone right now," Mom would say. "He's playing with his trains in the basement."

Jason went further in the hobby – he had a genuine fascination with trains. He planned on taking Mechanical Engineering at Ottawa U, probably so he could design the damn things for a living. He would drag me out to the CP line that ran just beyond the little forest near our house. We would crouch by the tracks and watch the huge freights roll past. Some nights we would walk in among the boxcars, smell their sharp steel and admire the graffiti while the switchers shunted cars a little up the track.

My family was self-contained; we were not an extended-family family. My relatives were really nice people, but they weren't family – not like my parents and brother. Going to see them was a duty we owed our Mom, but I would be lying if I said I was looking forward to it. I would sit there quietly with this dumb smile on my face like I'd just shit my pants and was waiting for the grownups to find out.

"Could be worse," Jason said. "At least we won't have to speak French."

The trip down from Ottawa was long but not tedious. My father sang along with Stan Rogers and the Clancy Brothers, and sometimes argued with Jason while I dozed in the back seat. Around the house they argued constantly. My father once defended this to Mom, saying that they fought because they were so much alike, but Mom thought it was some sort of primal challenging-of-authority thing.

When I was in Grade 7, my teacher asked me to compare my family to one from my favorite movie. I chose *Jaws*. My father was the grizzled Quint, recklessly in command of the ship and heeding no one's advice as to its navigation; my brother was Hooper the scientist, armed with his own ideas and always at odds with Quint; and I was Chief, caught between the two and scared to death of the whole damn boat. My mother was the shark.

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We decided to stop for the night at the Motor Inn right next to a small bar called Sharkey's, just on the outskirts of Campbelton, New Brunswick. It was a truck-stop type motel with faded paint and a slanted overhang that dripped ominously. We ran to the office, the rain striking the top of my head like icy hail.

The man who responded to the ringing bell was a tall man with curly hair. My Dad jabbered away enthusiastically in fast-forward French, and I didn't catch very much, although I noticed the man responded with terse phrases and snapped at the computer keys with annoyance. Dad seemed to take no heed.

He led us to our room and took off. Dad threw his duffel bag onto one of the beds.

"This one's mine, boys. You two can share the other bed."

Jason smiled weakly and whispered to me. "No way can I spend another night in a room this size with Dad. I'm sleeping in the bathroom." Dad's snoring was so loud that when we left campsites, couples stood by the sides of the access road and applauded.

"Who wants to go eat?" Dad asked.

So we went next door to the bar. The waitress, a thin woman who looked like Carla from *Cheers*, asked Jason and me if we wanted beers with our burgers.

"Sure," Dad said. "Bring us a pitcher of Moosehead."

"You boys are eighteen, right?"

"I am," I said. The waitress winked at my father and left. Dad laughed and smacked me with a backhand on the shoulder. He loved this.

As we ate, Dad told us about his days as a pool shark at Bishop's College. "Can't say I went to many classes, but I sure did get my use of that rec room at the dorm. That's why I'm just a store manager with a shitty company and that's why you two are going to work real hard in University and get very good marks. Right?"

Jason nodded. "Don't worry, Dad."

"It's not you I'm worried about," he said, his glance at me full of mock threat.

Dad speculated on how pissed-off Mom would be at the dented car, and wondered if insurance would cover the damage. I sipped my beer a bit – I had been drunk before on vodka and I could feel the familiar spinning beginning to creep into my brain, but the bitter taste of the beer did not agree with me. Jason barely touched his, but his mood did seem to lighten a bit. It was impossible not to feed off Dad's enthusiasm.

"Okay, boys, it's time your old man taught you a thing or two about the pool table. Allons-y."

I felt very much on display as Dad dropped the quarters into the slots of the table to release the balls. The only people in the bar, four trucker types in the corner, turned to glance at us and spoke loudly to each other in French.

I asked Dad how much each game cost. "Seventy-five," he said. For some reason, I thought it would cost much more. It seemed like such an opulent pastime.

Dad racked the balls as Jason got us three cues. The lights over the table made the felt glow softly, as if neon pulsed beneath the surface of the table and bled through. I was surprised at the softness of the felt and the light weight of the cue.

"Hold it proper, son. See? Make a stable base on the table with your fingers. Move your thumb, and anchor it there with your finger. Right, now aim just beyond the centre there. Look where you want the ball to go and just slide the cue with enough strength to really smack it."

There was a loud clack as the pool cue bounced off the white ball. The table in the corner applauded and whistled.

We played a long game. Jason talked about the angles and told me how the ball would deflect. It was really amazing to watch Dad take his shots; he hovered about like a lion over a wounded gazelle, pacing back and forth over the table, squinting one eye as he pointed out his hand to see where the ball would hit. He slid his cue along his fingers like a slick piston and reeled it back swiftly, making each shot an exact strike. It was impossible to tell where his theatrics stopped and his real pool play kicked in.

At home, I used to be fascinated watching him prepare his toast in the morning. He slathered each piece with peanut butter and piled a mosaic of cheddar chunks on top. He cut the cheddar from the block slowly and fitted each piece onto the glaze of peanut butter with a surgeon's precision. Sometimes he would cut a piece too big, announce to the table it was no good and throw it down to the dog. He did this each weekday morning before he went to work.

I smacked at the balls, and the seven ambled slowly towards the pocket. I heard a voice laugh and call out, "Oh yeah, nice shot. You can't scare the ball into the pocket, eh? You gotta hit it."

The men from the corner table were at the bar and had shot glasses lined up in front of them. They wore self-satisfied smirks and the big one, with horn-rimmed glasses and a thick beard, was swaying slightly as he leaned towards us. Dad put down his pool cue and smiled indulgently, but with a defensive air. "Thanks," he said.

"You guys want to play for some real money or what?"

Dad shook his head. "Not really, we're just having a bit of friendly –"

"Teaching your kids to play?" The trio of barflies behind the big man snickered and uttered quick words in French.

Dad nodded. He had the cue in his hands now, held tight against his body with the chalk end pointed towards the ceiling. His posture was erect, and the smile was now only a thin-lipped smirk. "Yeah, just visiting from Ottawa for a while."

The men hollered. "Ottawa! The big city, eh?" the big man roared. "You weren't born there, though."

They could detect his accent. Dad smiled, nodding his head and taking another swig of beer. "Nope. I was born in Quebec."

"Really?"

Jason had pulled up alongside and was whispering to me. "Pat!"

I picked up my own cue and held it awkwardly across my belly like a rifle. "What?" I whispered back.

"Shit!" Jason hissed. I heard him retreat a bit.

"Cause let me tell you one thing: we hate Quebec round here. It's what you call a bad word."

Dad glared at the big man. "Well, some people might complain about New Brunswick, too."

"Really?" The man got up, pushing a stool over onto the floor with a metallic reverberation. I heard the waitress yell something. "Now what might people say about New Brunswick?"

They squared off in a manner I had only seen between umpires and coaches at a baseball game. I could see the end of my father's pool cue quiver and his chest inflate like a bellows – because of the man's jutting belly he had to lean

back slightly to make eye contact. The other man looked bemused, his eyes were watery and his scowling lips jerked spasmodically.

"Nothing," Dad said. "They wouldn't say nothing about New Brunswick. Let's go, boys."

THEY LAUGHED AT us as we left the pool hall and went back to the hotel room. I felt like I had just finished watching a horror movie in the theatre – my chest was constricted and my heart leapt. I realized that I was shaking.

Dad was enraged. His cheeks and forehead were a deep, flushed pink. I had seen that face many times; his store in Bayshore was doing terribly and he came home nights with his face a mottled tartan of frustration. Dad turned off the lights and lay down on top of the covers in his jeans.

"Get to bed."

I changed into my jogging pants and got under the covers. I listened to my Dad's breathing – the fierce-sounding inhales followed by a whistling as he let his breaths out. The rhythm was fast, I expected his breathing to gradually slow down before morphing into the regular buzzing roar of his snores, but it never did. I fell asleep that night with a knot of anxiety eating at my guts.

I WOKE UP early. Dad was shaking my shoulders and whispering to me, "Pat, get up." At first I thought it was a joke, but I saw Dad's eyes in the light, shining with enthusiasm. "C'mon, Pat, we've gotta go. We've got miles to cover today, boy."

As I dressed, I saw Jason outside in the car, looking bewildered in the blue-grey light of early dawn. Dad ran into the motel office and I sat in the car and held my arms tight against my chest to trap body heat.

"Why are we leaving this early?" Jason asked.

"I don't know. Dad's the driver."

"Yeah, well."

Dad opened my door, rooted in the glove compartment and pulled out a large grease-stained jackknife. "I won't be long." He closed the door and ran off.

"What the hell," Jason said. "What's he doing?" We both watched Dad.

He crept along the parking lot and dodged among the cars. He worked his way up to a white tractor-trailer cab adorned with a painted scene of a black sky speckled with golden stars. The words "Cruel Son of a Bitch" were written beneath the driver's window.

I had never before seen my father moving the way he moved across that lot. He sprinted in a crouch up to the rig, craned his neck to glance in the window, and started sawing the jackknife into the tires. I suddenly understood how soldiers could be transformed from bakers and barbers into killing machines, understood the sheer sense of purpose those men must possess.

Jason went crazy when he saw what Dad was doing. "That trucker's going to kill him! What the fuck!"

He glanced at me, but I could only gape.

Dad strained his shoulders and threw his weight against the small knife. Cutting against the thick rubber of the tires must have been like trying to punch through steel. Still, he cut the front two and moved on to the rear tire.

I could see he was beginning to flag. He pushed the knife in and rocked back and forth as he threw his weight against it. He even sat on the ground, planted his foot against the knife and began awkwardly kicking at it.

"Someone will be by soon," I said. The clock on the dash read four-oh-two – a wash of lighter blue bled into the dark and was creeping across the sky.

"Shit," Jason said.

"What do you expect me to do about it, Jason?"

"Nothing, Pat." My father strained against the knife but brought his hand back as if he had been stung. I saw him look about, hang his head and then shake it rapidly back and forth like a dog.

"Just stay here, Pat."

Jason closed his door with a quiet metallic click and ran down the lot to my father's side. He grabbed the knife and threw his weight against it several times while Dad held the knife steady. It reminded me of one time when Mom sent me down to the basement to bring the two of them up for dinner and I found them crouching over the control box, working without speaking, knowing what needed to be done through instinct alone.

Suddenly, Dad pumped his fist into the air, then dragged Jason to his feet and pulled him across the lot, his soft laughter coming through the windshield before he even entered the car. "Hoo hoo hoo …"

Dad gripped the steering wheel lightly between his fingers, without laying his hands on it. His palms were crimson, with purple dots standing out like pinpricks.

"Oh, shit," he said. His smile cracked his face in two like an egg. "Shit. That little piss-head is going to have a surprise waiting for him, eh?"

He gunned the engine several times and pulled the car away. As he roared down the road, he slapped Jason on the arm with a backhand.

"I don't have to tell either of you how much shit I would get in if Mom found out about this. If she asks, this never happened. Get it?"

He poked Jason with a finger. "Hell, you would get in just as much trouble as me." Jason kept his eyes locked on the road, but let his lips break into a smile.

"Don't worry, guys," I said. "I won't tell."

Davin Tikkala

Wise words

Mr Asul, a name ripe for ridicule despite its being pronounced *Azyool*, was fifty-two years old, bespectacled, and overweight. Bald at the crown, he wore his hair in a long comb-over that shone a brilliant blond. He never looked directly at his students but preferred to gaze like a mystic at some point above and beyond our heads. Though he knew my name, he had never taken any serious interest in me. After the events of the speech contest, however, everything changed completely. On this particular Wednesday morning, Asul was in the middle of a long lecture celebrating the merits of public speaking.

"You people must come to realize that speechmaking is not unlike creating a wonderful work of art. Oh yes. You must win the audience over to the *beauty* of your ideas. Of course, certain ideas are unacceptable. Indecent or abusive talks will not be permitted. No profanity, lewd gestures, or props. There will be no innuendos. The best speakers will be invited to compete in the school competition at this Friday's assembly."

"Mr. Asul," called out Timmy (perpetually dirty, with a malicious sense of humour), "what's *in your endo*?"

"*Innuendo*," sighed Asul, "is an indirect reference, often containing sexual implications."

Naturally, the notion of Mr. Asul's authoritative lips pronouncing the word "sex" was deliriously funny for everyone.

"Hmmm, yes, all right," mumbled Asul as he waited for the tide of hilarity to die away. He never seemed to lose his composure. I admired the man for that. "I hope that everyone realizes," he continued in a solemn tone, "that this speech could really change things for you. Someone just might uncover a hidden talent that they never knew they had. On the other hand, if you're not ready, speech day may very well be a source of great humiliation and shame for you in the eyes of your classmates. Remember the 6 Ps: *proper preparation prevents piss-poor production*."

Silence descended upon the class. I envisioned myself carving out an unhappy niche for myself as a classroom laughingstock by babbling inanely at the front of the room for five minutes.

"That's all now, everybody. On Monday we'll present." Mr. Asul clasped his hands together in a gesture of finality, and gave us a subtle, almost mocking smile.

At my desk I broke into a cold sweat, perhaps my first cold sweat. Monday was only five days away, and that seemed hardly enough time to prepare something that would allow me to safely escape the ridicule of my peers. Every topic that flashed through my mind seemed either boring or hopelessly childish: aliens, pollution, my grandfather's apple farm, pizza, Pluto. At first, I imagined that holding forth on aliens for five minutes wouldn't be so difficult. After all, hadn't I been the one to sit out on my back lawn for hours on end last summer searching for UFOs with my mother's birdwatching binoculars? Was that something that I necessarily wanted to share with my classmates?

"James, aliens have been done to death," said my father that evening as he loosened his tie and hung it on the closet rack. "What you need is something so catchy that

All great ideas are dangerous.
– Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

it'll make Mr. Asul jump right up out of his seat."

"Like what?" I asked, increasingly weary from the hunt for an idea. "You mean pizza?"

"Hmmmm." My father frowned and rapped his knuckles a couple of times on the large oak desk. "What about a speech on the future? You know, like five or six years from now."

Immediately, my mind was seized by images of ultra-fast cars, humanoid robots.

"Yeah! Cool!"

"Sure. Why don't you make a few predictions and we'll go over them this weekend and see what we can put together." My father smiled and patted me on the back. He was always coming up with brilliant ideas.

For the next few days I thought of nothing but the speech. I quizzed my friends for ideas, but they weren't very helpful. On Friday afternoon I finally began to develop some interesting ideas of my own. My first prediction, one that came to me as my stomach rumbled in third period geography class, was that food would no longer be a necessity. Special pills, developed by NASA, would expand in our stomachs to make us feel full. The natural corollary to this, of course, was that we wouldn't be flushing our toilets as often, and all the water that we didn't use would cause the lakes and rivers to overflow. It was a stroke of genius, or so I thought at the time. Mr. Asul would be stupefied.

On Saturday morning my father sat down beside me at the kitchen table.

"Son," he said, "what's this that you've written about worldwide flooding? I'm afraid that I don't quite grasp your reasoning here."

"It's the coolest idea! If we don't flush, we don't use water, so all the extra water would start to overflow."

"No," my father said with a smile, "not exactly. Heck, some countries don't even use toilets."

No toilets? It was unthinkable. It was remarkable. So remarkable, in fact, that it was almost worthy of a five-minute talk in its own right. I prodded my father for more information, but he didn't seem to share my enthusiasm.

That Saturday afternoon we sat side by side for five hours at the kitchen table. By the third hour I began to lose focus. We decided to take a break in the afternoon with a bicycle ride around town. In the park I saw a group of my classmates playing baseball, and I momentarily forgot the speech in my desire to join them.

We returned to the table that evening and reworked my ideas even further. I gradually became amazed at the effort my father was making. The speech certainly seemed to have a special significance for him. At the end of the night, after we'd debated the potential effect of nearly every letter that I'd written, my father gave me a sidelong glance and smiled.

"Well, I'd say we're about ready to call it a night. What do you think?"

"Yeah, thanks, Dad. You helped me out a lot."

"James, all these ideas are yours. Yes, I've shaped them. Yes, I've even added a word or two. Perhaps even a sentence. But just remember, I'm only doing the donkey work."

"I know." I hugged him and went upstairs to bed.

I came back down to the kitchen the next morning to discover my father, writing furiously, seated where he had been last night. The table was littered with crumpled balls of loose-leaf, an empty box from Donut Depot.

"Jesus!" he said when he realized that he wasn't alone. "What are you still doing up?"

"What? It's eight o'clock in the morning. What are you still doing up?"

My father began to speak, but then he froze for a moment in his chair. He twisted uncomfortably and peered into the bottom of his coffee cup.

"Oh!" he suddenly burst out, affecting a smile. "Just, uh, just carrying on from last night. Doing a little revising, that's all."

It was at that moment that I saw it, staring shamelessly up at me from the top of the wastepaper bucket: last night's finished copy of the speech was covered with chocolate sprinkles and red jelly. My father had given my ideas all the dignity of a placemat.

"You threw it out? You tossed it in the garbage!" I yelled righteously. "This isn't your speech. It's mine! I don't want your help any more."

I pulled the discarded speech out of the garbage by the top left corner, the only one still left unsullied, and dropped it on the kitchen table. My father looked confused.

"Hold on now," he began in a soothing tone. "I told you last night. I'm simply fleshing out the ideas that you've come up with on your own. We've got a great speech here. You've got a great speech. I haven't thrown anything out. It's all still right here." He patted a new bundle of papers and handed them to me.

At the top of the first page several words were scrawled in almost illegible pencil scratches: "*Dreams of Reality* by James Kunlee". In total, the second edition of the speech must have been close to fifteen pages. If my father had only fattened my ideas up, as he'd claimed, they were now taking on grotesque proportions.

"Dad, what's an international coalition?" I asked.

"Don't worry, James, we'll go through all that."

"What about my food tablet idea?"

"It's pretty much covered in the section on sustainable development. No worries."

"Dad, who's going to believe this? This isn't my speech. Why don't you just come and give it on Monday?"

My father now looked serious. "Don't ever give others credit for your own ideas. If your teacher doesn't believe that you wrote this, which you did, then he has no idea what you're capable of."

And so, until early Sunday afternoon, my father tirelessly explained each of my updated ideas to me in scrupulous detail. After that, we spent a few hours transcribing everything onto cue cards. In the evening we began an intensive training session in the living room. My father used this time to offer constructive criticism on gestures, intonation, leg movement, and the volume, pitch, and timbre of my voice. I suggested that he attach strings to my voice box and appendages so that he could better control things. For a split second he looked as though he were seriously considering it, but then he said with a wave of his hand:

"C'mon now, don't be silly. We've got a lot of work to do."

By ten o'clock that night I felt like a seasoned orator. Despite the fact that I was only eleven years old, my father had nurtured within me the rhetorical powers of another Cicero or Winston Churchill.

I entered the classroom like a celebrated guest of honour, and seated myself beside Jeff Stanley. Jeff was writing in his notebook with such violence that he practically tore the pages from their binding. I'd been in grade school long enough to know that this last minute effort had very little to do with the force of inspiration.

"Not finished?" I asked, looking down at him with the perfect calm of a Buddha.

"Does it look like I'm finished? I forgot all about it until I saw that!" Jeff said, and pointed to the front board in horror.

Mr Asul's message to us was written in imposing block letters: Speech day. Are you prepared? Below the title Asul had listed the pre-ordained sequence of speakers. Ironically, Jeff had been chosen to go on first. I was last.

After all the students had arrived and taken their seats, Asul walked meditatively up to the centre of the room, folded his hands in front of his protuberant belly, and gave us a reassuring smile.

"Today," he announced ceremoniously, "is speech day. You will have a time limit of five minutes. Keep in mind, however, that no idea can be properly explained in fewer than three minutes. Mr. Stanley, you've been chosen to speak first. Good luck."

Asul took a seat at the back of the class, and all eyes turned towards Jeff, who gathered up his hastily made notes and shuffled to the front of the room. For the next thirty seconds he simply stood there in silence, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and trying to scratch some point at the centre of his back like a circus contortionist. Finally, he took several gulps of air and straightened his posture.

"Good morning," he began. "I've chosen to speak today about the most interesting man I know: my grandfather."

For the next five minutes Jeff Stanley commanded our undivided attention. His speech was passionate and heartfelt. By the end, each of us felt terribly cheated that we would never meet the incredible man who had not only written a best-selling book about his World War Two experiences but also dedicated it on his deathbed to Jeff.

Jeff returned to his seat. The class remained in awed silence. Mr. Asul was overwhelmed with emotion. He took several moments to regain his composure by dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief.

"Oh, Jeff! It was wonderful!" he said.

For two hours we listened to speeches on every conceivable topic under the sun, from colon cancer to roller coasters. Many of these were obviously Sunday night productions. I found it difficult to concentrate at all.

At last my turn arrived, and I moved to the front of the room, struggling with the notion that I was only seconds away from complete humiliation. I looked out across the sea of faces that were to judge me; some were smiling, others were critical, but most were indifferent. I imagined my father sitting proudly beside Asul, and that helped to quell the giddiness in my stomach. After I launched into my introduction, things seemed to get easier. Mr. Asul gave me a look of keen interest. His attention inspired me, and with each word my confidence gathered momentum. Gradually I became less dependent on my cue cards, and I moved about the front of the room with such vigour that a fire may as well have been lit beneath me. Were the words my own? Not exactly, but the movement certainly was. I gave my words a personal interpretation by raising a fist in indignation, locking eyes with a particular classmate, or making a dramatic pause. As I wove together dramatic images of my future world, the audience was held spellbound.

"Fellow classmates," I concluded, "this is my dream of a future reality." I smiled and marched confidently back to my seat.

After class Mr. Asul invited Jeff and me to remain behind. Our speeches, he said, were of such unusual calibre for boys of our age that he was both amazed and delighted. When he asked us to present in the competition at Friday's assembly, we exchanged excited glances and quickly agreed.

At dinner that evening I broke the news to my family. Before I was even able to finish the story, my father had already begun clearing dishes from the kitchen table and setting up places in the living room for my mother and sister to eat. He then dashed up the stairs with his mouth still full of stroganoff. Seconds later he came racing back down again with a stack of books piled so high that he nearly tripped over the family cat.

"You won!" He performed an awkward victory dance. "We've really got to work now though, son. You'd be surprised at how quickly Friday is going to creep up on us."

For the next three evenings we toiled together: rearranging, brainstorming, adding, cutting, strengthening, and revising. Speechwriting became a way of life for us. By Thursday evening I could practically recite each of the 237 pages in our thesaurus from memory.

One morning before school, my father took me with him on his way to the bank and made me recite everything in front of the loans manager. The man was so impressed that he awarded me one of the toasters usually reserved for new accounts.

Like a noxious cloud of gas, the speech was constantly taking on new forms and affecting everyone in its vicinity. My little sister Suzy had heard so many rehearsals that she actually began shouting large and often very accurate portions of it in her sleep. My mother began to worry that we were becoming obsessed with the speech, and she was continually telling me that, regardless of the outcome, she'd still go on loving me. My father also produced an interesting variation on this theme: "We'd all love it so much if you won; but if you don't win, don't worry, we probably won't disown you. Ha-ha! Kidding, son!"

For Thursday night my father had organized what he described as a "speech festival." All of our friends and family would come and hear me give one final recital. I didn't exactly jump for joy at the idea. We'd been slaving away for the past four nights relentlessly, and this added pressure before the big day seemed unnecessary. Practically everyone with whom I shared a blood relation or had ever laid eyes upon made an appearance. We moved nearly every spare piece of furniture we owned into the living room to accommodate the crowd.

I stood at the top of the stairs, since my father thought that "descending from above" into the audience would make my entrance more dramatic. As I waited nervously, fumbling with my cue cards, I heard my father address the crowd in a giddy voice. Suddenly there was wild applause, and I recognized that as my cue to enter. When I entered the living room, the number of people present caused me to panic briefly. There were several long silver trays of food laid out, and a man in a caterer's uniform was smiling and giving me the thumbs-up signal. It was more of a wedding feast than a speech party. I walked to the spot where my father had marked a small x on the carpet with clear tape, and I turned to face the crowd.

It was a bizarre sensation to have everyone I knew staring silently at me. Usually it was a monumental struggle to get a word in edgewise with most of these people. I wasn't as nervous as I had been on Monday, but I was intimidated. My voice cracked a couple of times during the introduction, but after that everything began to flow more smoothly. Thankfully, it wasn't long before I felt entirely at ease.

Once again the speech was a success. My grandparents were as "pleased as punch" that I'd become such a fine young man, and Mr. Cliffe told me that I reminded him of some actor from the 50s. People lined up to talk with me, and at one point my father was operating the camcorder and the digital camera simultaneously.

That evening, after everyone had left for their homes, he gave me several final pieces of advice:

"You must try to remember, son," he said, putting a hand on my shoulder, "don't make so many gestures. Your arms aren't windmills."

"I know, Dad." I smiled wanly.

"And don't roam around the room like a homeless vagabond! Have a sense of purpose!"

"Yeah."

"Also," he added, "you really shouldn't drink any milk or juice for a couple of hours before speaking. I'm telling you, I've seen you spit a couple of times when you're talking. Don't be embarrassed, but you're an orator not a garden hose. Small things. Small things. And don't forget to smile! Let's see a smile!"

On Friday morning I woke up feeling reasonably calm and composed. I ate a small breakfast, showered, and gave myself some strong words of encouragement in front of the bedroom mirror while assuming a variety of macho poses. When we arrived at school, my father was unusually taciturn.

"You'll do fine, son," he said.

I entered the classroom and found Jeff Stanley seated in his usual spot. He was smiling blissfully. I wanted to talk to him, but my father had warned me to "think of the competition as a contagious disease." For the entire time leading up to the afternoon assembly I could think of nothing but the speech, and the more I thought about it, the more certain I became that I was developing an ulcer. Finally, Mr. Asul announced that we could begin filing into the gymnasium.

Long before we entered, I could hear the excited din of voices. Well over one-thousand people must have been

crammed into the gym that day. The sense of anticipation and the afternoon heat combined to create a suffocating atmosphere.

"You nervous?" asked Timmy. "You're not? Wow! I'd be nervous. I'm kind of glad that my speech was a piece of crap."

I tried in vain to pick out the faces of my parents. Whereas I could only take in the audience as a whole, it felt like every eye in the room was boring into me. When we arrived at our designated seats, I collapsed onto the metal chair. Mr. Edmonds, the school principal, told us how overjoyed he was to be in the midst of such talent, and advised us to kindly refrain from smoking.

Jeff Stanley, the first to speak, delivered an address worthy of a Nobel Laureate. He'd certainly made some modifications over the past few days. Now old Gramps had received the Hero's Cross for courageously picking up a live grenade and lobbing it back behind enemy lines. When the time came for Jeff to make his closing remarks, every man, woman, and child was honking into a tissue. It was all a little disgusting really, like an oversized nasal orchestra. Even Jeff gave the appearance of being seized with emotion, interrupting himself to lay a hand on his chest, close his eyes, and shakily gulp for air. I secretly hoped that he'd lose points for fluency.

"Grandpa," Jeff concluded in a quavering voice, "I loved you so much. You dedicated your book to me, and now I offer this speech in your memory. Goodbye, Grandpa."

Jeff returned to his seat; he finally released the tears that had been welling up inside. My friends wrapped their arms around his shoulders; the girls offered him their tissues. I turned around a second time to try and find my parents, and this time I succeeded. My father was sitting perfectly erect, with a fiercely aggressive expression on his face, whispering something to my mother. She was crying. I felt outraged, and I wanted to yell at her to stop. For my own flesh and blood to receive the competition's speech with anything but indifference was an unequivocal act of treachery.

"What a splendid story," commented Principal Edmonds from the microphone. "Now we have Mr. James Kunlee with his speech, *Dreams of Reality*."

At first, the Principal's words didn't register. I couldn't possibly go on stage when everybody, including my own mother, was still sobbing over Jeff's speech. Mr. Edmonds beckoned me a second time, and Timmy brought me back to reality by punching my knee with his fist. I rushed to the podium.

Beaming mothers and fathers, smirking students, and concerned teachers all gazed expectantly up at me from the infinite space of the gymnasium. My heart pounded violently. as I stood in silence, transfixed by the crowd, hearing nothing but the gentle whirr of the overhead ceiling fans and my own laboured breathing into the microphone.

"The future, ladies and gentlemen, is but a dream." I managed to mumble through the rest of my introduction. When the time came for my first big topic, however, I couldn't remember if the Chinese economy or corporate responsibility was to come first. Or was it something about democracy in the Middle East? Subtopics loomed in my mind menacingly. After a minute or so of starting and stopping, I had become so desperate that I was willing to run with anything, but the words refused to form in my mouth. After two minutes, I was experiencing my worst nightmare, but this one was filled with displeased adults and unsympathetic peers. My father, clutching my mother's hand down below, mouthed some words to me out of a pained smile.

"What? I ... I can't hear," I whispered into the microphone.

Giggles began to break out from the front rows, but Mr. Edmonds swiftly pounced upon them with an angry "shhh!" It's difficult to say which made me feel smaller, the laughter or Edmonds' intervention.

I don't remember everything that I said in those unforgettable five minutes. I do recall trying to acquaint the audience with my first predictions of teleportation and worldwide flooding.

"And so, the oceans might fill up and we'd die." I exited the stage to the sound of hesitant applause mingled with obscene noises from the students. At least they were sincere. They made no secret of the fact that this incident was inspiration enough for at least a year's supply of jokes, chants, and punches. As for the applause, it was the quietest clapping of hands that I've ever heard, a clap of condemnation.

Nobody said a word to me when I returned to my seat. I wanted to shrink and scuttle away beneath everyone's feet. Each of the remaining speeches was much better than mine, even the one on professional wrestling delivered by a stout nine-year-old boy. I was curious how my parents had suffered, but I couldn't bear to look my father in the eye.

After Jeff had received the first prize, which he dedicated to the memory of his grandfather, and the buzzer had indicated the end of the day, I rose reluctantly from my chair and walked over to my parents. My mother gave me a big wet kiss and told me how brave I'd been. My father crouched down and gave me a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, son," he said, "this was your first big public speech. Think of it as a trial run."

"Trial run? For what?" I asked dejectedly, staring at my sneakers. "That's it, I'm finished. I'm out of the competition."

"Maybe so, son," my father responded with a look of determination, "but there's always next year, and come that time, mark my words, we'll be ready."

[untitled]

I'm asking you on this back porch,
air conditionally open pen,
virtual cube of dull ease

– not a queasy voluptuous ease,
a glorious, over-indulgent, extreme, obscene, much too much,
in other words enough
ease,

but time-efficient, cost-effective ease,
monthly instalment ease,
easy-lay-away-plan ease –

I'm asking you, will there be other days
than this unwonderful one,
this scentless suburban bore of content
on special

with its three corners of wallpaper sky,
its unaffronted offprint clouds,
askew strip of two-tone blue pull-tabbed off:
all you ever need of sky;

its consensus of leaves,
its yawning lawns,
sprinklers, bar-b-ques, buzz and drill of improvement … ?

thank you for this normality, this noxious calm,
cosmetic of weak works and days and ends,
embalming outside-in,
which stills as it makes right,
an un
-pronounced acquiescence in nothing worth noting,
in an ordinal average that binds
without appetite

– Bruce David Wyse

Joe Davies

Odd things we keep

I placed the small tuft of newly fallen snow on the tip of my daughter's mitten and watched her expression as she brought the snow to her mouth, her whole face lighting up, her whole body shaking with the excitement of the sensation. As I watched I wondered how deep the snow was in the sandbox. I didn't want to think this way, I just automatically did, now that I was a father: I wondered if there were any hypodermic needles lurking in the sand beneath. I had no personal experience with needles in the sandbox, but I had heard it was a problem. The wrong people sometimes used the sandbox. I chipped the heel of my boot in the snow. It seemed a safe thickness.

Another stroller arrived at the playground and I nodded at the woman. There were two kids. The older of the two ran off to the slide, while the younger sat in his stroller and stared at my daughter, and I watched as my daughter then waved hello to the boy and was met with what seemed a look of blank indifference, though it was probably nothing more than a simple case of sleepiness. My daughter kept smiling just the same, then she turned and put more snow in her mouth and once again lit up like a daffodil.

That was in the afternoon of that first day. And I remember that on the way home, walking down my street, I saw someone I hadn't seen for several years. He waved and stopped in front of me, then he knelt and looked at my daughter and said to me, "You did good." It was my daughter's turn to appear indifferent. "I haven't seen you in forever," he said, standing up. I took his hand when he offered it, and asked what he was doing in my neighbourhood. He looked surprised and asked if this was where I lived. I told him we were standing on my street. "Really?" he said. "I'm just going down to the end there. Going to see my man," he said, and he winked. "Going through a bit of a dry spell, boy-o." I nodded, glad to know nothing about it.

We walked as far as my house and said goodbye. I watched him go. I turned and saw my neighbour's empty garbage pail had blown into the street and I went and grabbed it and put it back on her front walk, then I unbuckled my daughter from her stroller, carried her inside and started dinner.

My wife came home even more tired than usual. "We've got squirrels in the attic," I told her. "That or raccoons. That's what the noises must be." My wife shot me a look somewhere between harried and frazzled. It was her way of deferring to whatever I might think on the subject. "If we put down some baby powder up there ... . We should be able to tell which it is."

"Then do it, go ahead, my diamond in the rough," was what my wife said, and she went to bed early; she went at the same time as our daughter.

I stayed up and scrambled to do a few of the things I could never get to during the day. I washed and folded clothes. I washed dishes and swept the kitchen floor. I pulled down the folding stairs to the attic and dusted some baby powder on the loose boards leading to the boxes we had hidden away up there. I went back downstairs and looked at some bills and then, at the end, I got together the recycling. I had it by the front door and had gone across to the sofa to pull on my running shoes when I looked up and saw him standing in the window, a man caught by the stark glow of the porch light.

I almost jumped out of my skin. Emaciated, naked from the waist up, his mouth open as if in the throes of some terrible agony, his eyes no more than glassy slits. Thin, thin to the point of being skeletal. His shoulders and chin stuck out like knobs, his ribs no more than a washboard. Then he moved. He raised a hand and slowly dragged it down the length of the window and I closed my eyes. When finally I felt I could open them again, he was gone.

I sat for a long time and stared out the window. I was too startled to do anything. Who was this man? How could he stand to be out in that weather with no coat, not even a shirt? He must be crazy and if that was the case, was there some sort of halfway house in the neighbourhood we didn't know about? I continued to stare but all I saw were the beams and overhang of the verandah caught in the porch light and across the street the lights of the other houses. One of them, I noticed, had yet to take down their Christmas lights. It looked, I suppose, as it always did, but the reassurance it hinted at rang entirely false.

There was nothing extraordinary about the next few days. I had my daughter to look after, and though I was really shaken by what I'd seen, having to give her my undivided attention kept me from thinking about it too much. At first I wondered whether I should tell my wife. I thought it might disturb her too much, but I decided not to hold it from her. I told her the very next morning and she suggested I call the police, which I did. The police asked for a description but I'm sure the officer on the other end of the line was only feeding me a placebo. He could do nothing. I asked whether he knew of a shelter or a mental home some place near, and the officer said to his knowledge there was none, but added that recent government cutbacks had sent a great many into the streets, folks that perhaps might still be better off in an institution. As I hung up the phone I wondered how anyone could stand being outside like that, half naked in the middle of winter. What must their world be like?

The mundane filled mine. I went for long walks with my daughter. We went to the park. She went on the swings and sat in the snowy sandbox. There was progressively less snow, none to eat. We went down the slide together and crawled around on the crusty snow. On the way home one time I saw a woman down by the lights. Her hands were going all over the place, tumbling over one another. Once in a while she stopped and pointed off in some direction and shouted something that sounded like a curse, then the tumbling began all over again. She was also poorly dressed for the weather but at least had on some kind of sweater. At home, me and my daughter played on the floor. I'd pile great towers of yogurt containers and she'd knock them over. I watched her carefully as she climbed up and down the steps, developing her motor skills, her sense of balance and perhaps more confidence than was good for her. What a funny girl she is. No matter what she's doing, if she happens to hear applause coming from the tv or radio, she has to stop and clap her hands. Accompanying this is always a strange little thrill, something like an electric charge which runs through her body and ends with an exclamation mark in her big grey eyes, a thrill too good to contain.

On the Thursday my wife and I went to the Symphony. It was Brahms, Sibelius and Smetana. My wife's mother babysat, only the second time we'd left our daughter with anyone. We'd almost forgotten how to be alone with one another, my wife and I. We'd become so attuned to the constant parade of our daughter's cute new nuances, so much so that we scarcely remembered how to talk of anything else. We went carefully. During the intermission we first ventured into the differences since our daughter came along, but sooner than I expected I found my thoughts began to drift. I stumbled back to what I'd seen recently, and said something about the number of people in the streets; I spoke as if I knew something about it, which in all honesty I don't. And I had nothing nice to say about our government. I'm sure I sounded quite the malcontent. My wife gently pointed out that we are doing fine, we ourselves that is. And she is right. We are fine.

After the concert we were waiting for the streetcar, both of us swaying back and forth. I suspect it wasn't so much because of the music we'd just heard, though the last piece was quite stirring, rather it was because we are both so used to having our daughter in our arms. We had quite a rhythm going. On the streetcar we shared a seat and quietly watched our city glide by, the two of us, anxious parents, waiting to find that everything at home was fine. And it was.

When we got there the tv was on, but my wife's mother was in the kitchen doing the crossword. I drove her home, and after, when I finally got home again myself, I went upstairs, slipped into my pyjamas and drifted off to sleep.

Around two thirty in the morning I heard the door downstairs. I heard it open and close. It has a very distinctive sound. My eyes were open instantly. I heard floorboards creaking, then footsteps padding on the carpeted stairs. I saw a shadow sweep past our opened door and I sat up. I saw my wife and daughter, both soundly asleep, oblivious to what was happening.

I sat and watched the door and for a while nothing happened. I heard nothing. I saw nothing. Then came the slow groaning sound of the pull-down ladder, the one leading to the attic, and then the sound of the ladder bearing the weight of someone climbing all the way to the top.

I imagined the best thing to do in the event of a break-in

was to cooperate, to do whatever seemed most likely to ensure our safety. So I sat there with my little family and I listened and stayed as quiet as possible. I sat shivering in the dark for over an hour and heard not a sound. I didn't understand what was happening. I couldn't see how anyone or anything could climb into that attic and make so little noise. I wondered if I'd dreamt it. The longer everything remained so quiet, the more certain I became that I had.

After an hour and a half of straining to hear the slightest sound and hearing nothing but the wind, I climbed out of bed as quietly as I could. I went to the open door of our bedroom and looked into the spare room, and saw the steps to the attic were still folded away into the ceiling. I listened carefully, trying to detect the slightest sound, but heard nothing. I crept into the spare room and saw the cord, the one which pulled down the attic steps; it was swinging slightly. I looked all around the front room until I was quite sure I was alone. When I was satisfied there was no one lurking in the shadows I pulled down the attic steps and tugged the string for the attic light. With the light switched on I saw the air up there was shimmering with cold.

A rung at a time, I took myself up the steps. My breathing went shallow. When my eyes were level with the attic floor I craned my head and looked into the four corners, searching for any sign of our intruder, but I saw nothing. I climbed the rest of the way and soon I stood on the boards where I'd sprinkled the baby powder only a few days before. I scanned the attic once more to be sure I was as alone as I hoped. It looked that way.

The air was as cold as it looked. It was dusty as well. I looked at the small stack of boxes wedged under the slant of the roof. I narrowed my eyes for a moment, then shook my head. There was no chance they hid anyone. The boxes were too small and I could tell they hadn't been moved. Then I heard the sound of someone arrive at the base of the steps and I just about jumped out of my skin.

"What are you doing up there?" came my wife's sleepy voice.

I almost choked with relief. "Are you all right?" she said.

"Oh, god. Yes, I'm fine. You gave me a start. No, I just thought I heard something ..."

"Squirrels?" she said. "Is it squirrels?"

"No ...," I started to say, and I looked at my feet, at the powder, and there, in the white dust were what looked like footprints. The footprints of bare feet. Yes, I saw we had squirrels as well. I saw their little paw marks and some empty peanut shells, but I also saw the faint outlines of footprints made by bare feet. I followed them with my eyes. They led from where I stood at the top of the steps and went in the direction of the stack of boxes, but stopped halfway. There was no sign of a return trip.

"Are you coming back to bed?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll be just a minute. Have you been up here lately?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I haven't even been in this room for over two weeks. Can't remember the last time I saw the basement. Do we still have one?"

"Yes."

"Might have been last summer. I think I saw it last summer."

"It's still there," I said.

"All I do is come home, go to bed, wake up, go to work. Then I come home, go to bed. You know what?"

"What?"

"I'm going to bed."

"Okay," I said. "I'll be right there. I'll just be a minute."

"Sweet dreams," she said, and I heard her pad away.

But I wasn't just a minute. I walked to where the footprints stopped and I looked all around me and saw nothing the least bit extraordinary. I looked over at the boxes. I looked to see if anything had been touched, but it didn't appear anything had. Everything seemed covered with the dust of three years, the three years since we had moved. Then I looked back over the boards I had just crossed, back towards the steps leading down, and I looked at the baby powder and couldn't seem to see the other footprints any more. I saw my own, clear as day; conspicuous and distinct. The others were gone.

I scoured the whole house before I went back to bed. I even went into the basement and looked behind the furnace. There was no one hiding in our house. I looked at the front door, the door I'd heard open. It was locked and the chain was across. I couldn't understand. I was sure I had heard something, and I was sure I had seen footprints, but in the end I was left with little choice but to think it all a dream.

I went up to bed expecting to have trouble getting back to sleep but drifted off easily, though in the morning I was less than sparkling.

That next weekend was eventful only in the best of ways. As a family we went to the Art Gallery and my wife and I tried to guess at the rationale behind some of the modern pieces. Sometimes we were perfectly mystified and weren't sure whether to feel left out, and if that had been the intention, was it such a bad thing? All I know is we had to go all the way to the basement to change our daughter's diaper. That was where the change table was. There were nice, wide halls down there in the basement of the Art Gallery, which I liked as much as anything else about the place; for me it was good just to escape the loop of staying at home. Afterwards we went for a nice long walk, up to the

new library. Along the way we stopped and had hot chocolate. In the evening I had a nap.

The weather had been very mild over the weekend, so that by the time Monday rolled around and the temperatures had dropped once more, a good portion of the snow and ice had gone. On Tuesday it was cloudy.

We went to the park that Tuesday afternoon, me and my daughter. We'd had a fussy morning. My daughter had fallen and hit her head twice. She was agitated and kept throwing things around. She found a bag of onions and pulled them all out and sent onion skins everywhere. Then she fussed some more and threw a tantrum. I couldn't figure out what was bothering her. I tried her bottle; I tried giving her a cookie; I even tried to give her a bath, which she usually loves, but in the end the only way to quiet her was to pick her up and hold her by the window and rock her back and forth. She eventually fell asleep that way.

As I said, we went to the park that afternoon. The sky was grey and the air was damp and biting. We sat in the sandbox until I looked closely and saw that rising through one of the few remaining crusts of ice was the jagged edge of a broken beer bottle. The swings were no good either: underneath was a small rink of ice. We went down the slide a couple of times but my daughter started fussing and I put her down. She scuttled over the ice and frozen earth for a while until I saw that too many people had neglected to clean up after their dogs. The melting snow had exposed everything.

I set her down on the pavement nearby and stood back to watch what she would do. At first she crawled around for a bit, happy to have a scrap of freedom, then she sat and stuck her mitt in her mouth and tasted the dirt she'd just pawed through. Then she found a twig and managed to grasp it with her mitt. I saw it heading for her mouth and I dashed over and stopped her. She shrieked like I was committing blue murder. A few twigs later, I scooped her up and tried to put her in her stroller but she was having none of that and only screamed all the louder. I wound up pushing the stroller home with one hand and carrying my daughter under my free arm. It felt like everyone was watching me. Why was she having such a rough day?

On our street I saw a pair of police cruisers away down at the end. I only just noticed them and paid no further attention. I carried my daughter into the house and started dinner. She sat on the kitchen floor and strew more onion skins; I defrosted the chicken and peeled potatoes.

My wife came in late. She was apologetic. Her most recent project was getting more and more complex as the days went by, and she was exhausted. She went to bed right after dinner, at the same time as our daughter. I followed my own routine. I tidied, I cleaned, I folded laundry, and after sweeping the kitchen floor I went out to the variety store to buy some milk.

The air was as cold and damp as it was earlier, the streets were dark and empty. The whole way there and back I thought of nothing but returning to the warmth of my own home. When I got in, I went straight to bed, but as soon as I had pulled the duvet up around my shoulders I remembered there was something I had left undone. I tossed the covers, stood up and went back downstairs to put the diapers in the dryer. When I climbed back in bed, my daughter's eyes were open. She was still asleep but her eyes were looking past me at something far away. I rolled over and tried to sleep. I had the feeling I was forgetting something else but couldn't think what.

It was around two-thirty when I awoke. At first I wasn't at all sure why I had stirred, but then I heard the sound of the attic ladder being lowered once again and I sat up. I listened as someone slowly climbed the steps to the top, and then, same as the time before, nothing. The sounds disappeared and I was awake in a quiet house.

This time I didn't wait as long as before. After a few minutes I crept to the bedroom door and peeked across the hall into the spare room. The ladder was down. It was down and the attic light had been switched on. I listened carefully. Still nothing. I crossed the hall into the spare room and looked up into the opening in the ceiling. I couldn't see anyone. I looked around the front room. I was alone. I listened one last time, but all I could hear was my own breathing and the sound of the clock downstairs. All else was quiet.

I looked up into the attic and saw the light up there was swaying slightly. My arms went out and grasped the ladder and I started to climb. Step by step I rose to the top and when I was fully in the attic I shook my head. What on earth was going on? There was no one there. I was fed up and about to go back down when I noticed one of the boxes had been moved and set in front of the others. And in the powder on the boards I saw once more the faint outline of footprints, only this time they led all the way to the boxes. I started towards them but half way there I heard a creaking sound and I turned and there, behind me, almost leaning on me, was the emaciated man I had seen in the window. His mouth open terribly, his eyes almost closed, his bare arm reaching past me, small numbers tattooed above his wrist, pointing at the box.

I was frozen to the spot, incapable of uttering a sound. I sank to the floor and closed my eyes, but almost immediately I sensed he was gone; somehow I knew this. It had been no more than a second, perhaps less.

I sat there a long while, too shaken to move, my breath

all uneven. When I eventually got to my feet I felt quite weak. I almost went back downstairs right then but I glanced around the attic and saw the box. I went over and I opened it and began to pull out all manner of things. There were old patches from teams I had played on when I was a kid. There were letters and a diary, a bunch of half-dollar coins mounted on a card. I found three pennants I bought on a trip when I was younger. There was a fake rose doused with strong perfume and an old nutcracker. There were some brooding snapshots of my younger self, holes from thumbtacks in the corners. A bracelet and some small figures made out of clay, which crumbled a little when I picked them up. Near the bottom was a small box. I lifted it out and pulled off the lid. Inside was a thin piece of cloth. It was a red and white Hitler Youth armband with a black swastika stitched in the middle. For a minute I sat and looked at it. I put my hand over my mouth and thought about the meaning of such a thing. How had I ever kept it? Who had I been?

I put the rest of the stuff back in the box, and I took the armband and climbed downstairs. I switched off the light and folded the ladder back into the ceiling. I went down to the kitchen and found a plastic bag. In went the armband. I put a knot in the bag and stepped out onto the front porch and put the bag in the garbage. I took the pail to the curb and just as I was about to turn around and go back in, I saw across the street the neighbour's Christmas lights. They were flashing on and off, like a marquee. I turned around and went back to bed.

JUST TODAY I found a surprise in my shoe. My daughter and I spent the morning playing on the kitchen floor. We played with onions and potatoes and yogurt containers. She has just learned to remove the lids and put them back on. Every time she did this we clapped our hands to celebrate, and at this she lit up all the more. We listened to the radio. I did. They were talking about the need for more spending on healthcare. I listened and watched my daughter put one yogurt container on top of another. She looked at me and smiled, her new teeth flashing, and she applauded once more for good measure.

In the afternoon we went for a long walk and my daughter fell asleep. We made it all the way to the park on the other side of the valley and I stopped at a café and had a cappuccino. On the way home it started to snow. We left the playground for another day.

At home the heat felt lovely. My daughter and I sprawled out on the sofa, and as I gave her some apple juice from her bottle, we gazed at the fresh big flakes of snow gently gliding earthward. We sat like that so long I was late getting started on dinner.

The surprise in my shoe was one of the tickets from the day we went to the Art Gallery. Just before my wife left for work this morning she put on her good coat and found the tickets from the Art Gallery in her pocket. She gave them to our daughter to play with. When I finally started making dinner I left my daughter in the living room and I kept peeking in to see if she was okay and she was; she was playing with the tickets. She kept waving them in the air and trying to put them on her head, and it was just now when I went to take out the recycling that I found this one ticket inside my shoe. I've taken it upstairs and pinned it to my bulletin board, right next to the first thing she ever scribbled, a mere two days ago. It is a picture of I don't know what. But I don't imagine I shall ever mind not knowing.

Bill Stenson

I See Q

Emily told Justine what Brad said about Colleen and Justine told Colleen everything. Colleen played cool for twenty-four hours. It probably meant nothing. Probably was nothing. She'd seen Brad before. Many times. His locker was beside the cafeteria so how could she not see him. Daily. When school started he'd tried to grow a goatee. It looked stupid. That's what Colleen thought. Now he was back to shaving, which was a good thing. He didn't look like anyone with fuzz on his chin. Who was to say if Emily got it right in the first place? Emily could be a space cadet. Justine was a space cadet so by the time she got the message it could have been far from the truth. Or there could have been no truth to it at all.

Justine said Emily found out from Jason, Brad's best friend, that Brad thought Colleen would be the one person he'd most love to draw. This Colleen found out on ICQ from Kendra and now everyone knew. Colleen had written back: *Get a life. I'm not a model.* But she didn't mean it. She'd thought about becoming a model when she was thirteen because a model stood out. Now she was fifteen and it still felt like a good idea.

Colleen phoned Justine to find out if they had to read chapters 16, 17 and 18 or just 16 and 17. She was considering redoing her nails but not if they had to read chapter 18.

Justine said, "Kendra works with Jason, you know. They work in the kitchen. Jason said Brad definitely wants you. Definitely. Brad goes to the gym – you know that, don't you?"

"I don't know," Colleen said. "He's such a loner."

"Of course he's a loner. He's an artist. Artists can't waste their time like we can. He's sold paintings, you know. His dad helps him. Seriously. His dad drives a BMW, you know, and his sister's studying to be a doctor. Of course you want to meet him."

"I don't know, really. It's so lame. Just a sec. Got another call. Hello?"

"Colleen, it's set for Friday night."

"What are you talking about?"

"Brad, who else? Jessica's parents are in Mexico. Around eight o'clock. Fifteen or twenty people. Someone's inviting a midget for fun. Brad drinks beer and doesn't know you like pear cider. You want me to bring some?"

"Emily, I don't know. I hate going to these things by myself. I always feel like a zit-face. What do you mean, a midget?"

"You know – a little person. Brad will be there and he wants to meet you. Did you hear he wants to paint you? How exciting is that?"

"Got to go, Emily. Justine's on the other line."

"Tell me tomorrow if you want ciders. And tell Justine to find out what's on the Biology test. She writes first and she owes me big time."

"Justine, I'm back. You heard about the party Friday?"

"Where?

"Jessica's."

"Why Jessica's?"

"Parents in Mexico."

"A good enough reason. Is Brad going?'

"Yes and he wants to paint me, you ditz, not draw me."

"Paint, draw, what's the dif? What you wearing?"

"I don't know if I'm going."

"Of course you're going. Don't wear that green thing."

"I was thinking of baggy jeans and white top. Casual."

"You've got to be kidding. Think tight. If he's wants to paint you, give his artistic mind a chance. Emily told me to tell you something but I forget what."

"Just got off the phone with her. She's so out of it. I hear Count Dracula coming up the stairs. Better start my room. See ya."

"I've got to hang anyway. Promised I'd phone Kendra. Ciao."

"Colleen, I was just going to phone you. Of course you're going and Justine's right – dress tight. Justine will be there with Mr. Alley-oop of course. Their eight-month anniversary. I heard he's buying her a new barbell. Cool, eh?"

"Yeah, she's got it totally good. So's he. She gives it to him all the time."

"I'll think about going. Do we have to read chapter 18?"

"Couldn't tell ya. I'm on chapter 4."

Colleen opened her novel with chipped nails. She wasn't sure how far she'd read.

■ ■ ■

One advantage Colleen had was naturally blonde hair. She could put it up in a raised pony tail and not have an ugly dye-line staring you in the face like Justine did. And her skin was good. Her mother never had acne so that was one good thing about having her for a mom. Boobs were another story. If Justine could share half her boob flesh it would be a perfect world—she'd have a reason to turn sideways and Justine wouldn't have to make up excuses why she couldn't run around the track. Colleen's mother said to never compare her body to Justine's because it was a bad habit, but that in any case she'd be glad in a few years when Justine was tripping over hers. Still, Colleen yearned to be half way to tripping and had taken to eating Kentucky fried chicken whenever she could because her science teacher showed them a film about the effects of hormones in chicken and how truck drivers on the road for weeks on end developed "trucker's breasts" from eating chicken. She figured she'd stop once she got to a size C. Maybe just before C, because hormones can linger.

■ ■ ■

The quiz the next day was on three chapters and Colleen had only read two. It was okay, though, because the way the novel was going she could predict what was going to happen next, and anyway, her nails looked fabulous.

She didn't see Brad at break and he was nowhere to be found at lunch time. She wandered into the art room and he was working on a sculpture of something she didn't recognize.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," he said back.

The art teacher, Mr. Swailee, came over and pointed out something about his work. Brad nodded.

"I hear there's a party tonight," Colleen said. Threw it out for him to observe. "Are you going?"

"I might drop by Jessica's, if that's what you mean."

She watched him work for a while. Mr. Swailee changed cds. He only allowed classical music in the art room.

"I'm kind of concentrating," he said, then when she turned to leave: "I could pick you up if you want."

Colleen nodded and swaggered to her locker.

■ ■ ■

"Colleen, remember what we agreed on. If you're not working, Sunday is housekeeping day. I could use a hand with the vacuuming and then there's your room. There's always your room."

"I'm on the computer, Mom. I'm almost finished my essay."

Colleen had found a perfectly good essay on the Internet and had doctored it with a few mistakes she routinely made in her own compositions. She had turned her attention to ICQ.

"whassup?"

"just chattin."

"give us the goods, sista. dont be tite."

"u first."

"jasons a hottie. a little bump and grind on the couch. he knows where to go. i think hes a player."

"jason?"

"ya, jason. he was on e before he got there. he wanted me to try red hearts."

"did u?"

"i don't even like e. so where u bin?"

"worked ten yesterday. bagged."

"last nite u didnt answer."

"i went to brads house." (*Uh-oh.*)

"so, is colleen still a virg?"

"i doubt it. she went to brads by hrself."

"tell us more."

"u mean tell the world."

"theres just 3 of us on." (*Uh-oh.*)

"plus jessica. that makes 4. great nite, jess. how was th cleanup?"

"k. i made my brother help."

"colleens about to reveal all."

"sweet. go colleen go."

"who said brad liked me?"

"lotsa ppl. wat happend?"

"he foned aftr work and said lets do sumpin. like wat i said. come over and c my studio he said so i go rite. why not. so i get ther and it turns out his studio is where he lives. th hole bottum flor. he says his parents never no if hees in or out. its safe he says. zilions of cds and he puts on jaz for chrisake. mango sombody i never herd of and im thinkin hes an artist and thats wat artists do. he starts to show me his paintings and i notis ther all female or guys with sords. i tel him his paintings r cool and he says u bnex. poz by the windo he says so i do then he shows me his nu collexon of paints and says do i no wat they r 4. i say 4 painting and he says ther body paints and hees branchng out and he shows me pixturs of girls completely naked and painted but u wood never no. the paint looks like jeans and flags and shit. i almost died."

"harsh. so wat u do then?"

"nutin. just stood ther frozen. i was weirded out. then i said i had to go and he freakd. he said i thot you wanted to b painted and i said not naked i didnt. he said its your chance to b famus and u put tape over the parts u dont want painted. he wasnt gunna let me go and i told him id scream so he turnd up the music and i left."

"wat an adventur coleen. i got a tear formin."

"that definitly sux. wat r u goin to do now?"

"pretend it didnt hapn. if any one finds out i tel all. no one finds out u hear."

"i hear ya sista. my lips r seald."

"nuthin from me but zero. cant wait til school. its guna be dope."

"gtg hun."

"me 2."

"c u."

■ ■ ■

Silence you can never rely on. The following Friday school was closed for teacher meetings. Brad had a party in his artist studio, but he only invited a dozen people. Colleen wasn't invited. She wasn't even interested in how the party went and then Emily phoned her house.

"You won't believe last night," Emily said.

"Ya, I bet."

"Brad was showing everyone his paintings and telling us which ones were sold and for how much. Then he started showing pictures of those naked girls with paint all over, and Justine said she thought they were extremely cool and some day she might like to do it. Brad told her to stand up and he started walking around her, thinking out loud, then stared at her chest and said a mountain scene with skiers would be fun. He reached up, he didn't grab her, just sizing things up, you know, when Mr. Alley-oop loses it and then there's this big fight and when it was mostly over Alley-oop starts kicking every painting he could find. Justine's bawling her eyes out and people are screaming for him to stop. The neighbours called the cops or I don't know what might have happened. Colleen, you there?"

"Ya, I'm here."

"So now I heard Brad's father, the one with the BMW, is suing because he's a lawyer or something. One of Brad's paintings had been paid for over the Internet for a thousand bucks. Hard to believe. So anyway, Alley-oop is out of it now because Justine and him aren't on the same page and he went out with friends and got majorly drunk and had to have his stomach pumped. Justine shouldn't have said anything about wanting to get painted – that's what I think. Not with Alley-oop in the room. She's such a space cadet. It would be all right for me cause I'm single. Colleen, you're not saying much. Is everything okay? Your mom in the room?"

"Well, thanks for phoning, Granny. I'll come by this week. Promise." Colleen put the phone down but kept her hand on it for a long time.

"The lighting is less than ideal," Brad said, "but it will have to do." He was having trouble reading his hand-held light meter because his left eye was badly swollen. "With the blinds up and the sheers down the light is pretty even," he said. Colleen's room had a lot of windows but it was cloudy outside. She reached for the thermostat and turned up the heat.

"That was my grandmother, by the way."

"Sure."

Brad started popping lids off the paint cans with a screwdriver. Colleen knew this was her cue. She walked over and stood by the window, started undoing the buttons on her blouse slowly, one at a time.

Jan Marin Tramontano

The landlady

Miranda stood at the curb looking at the house, a house similar to many of the others she had lived in before, those dilapidated two-family houses with heaving front porches, wide doorways and peeling paint. This one was a faded yellow trimmed with dark green that leaned to the left. She had never lived in a house that wasn't sinking in one way or another.

It was her second year of law school. The student housing, with its crowded dormitories and annoying roommates, left her gasping for air. With the housing allowance allotted to her as a student on full scholarship, Miranda saw one rat hole after another but she was determined to live off-campus. Discouraged, she stood in front of the one place in the classifieds that had to be a mistake, a bargain rent she could almost afford, including utilities. The last listing in her price range.

She walked up the stairs to the front door and rang the bell. Miranda heard a rattling of the slats in the window blinds and slow thumping steps moving towards the door. An elderly woman appeared.

"Hello, dear." Miranda extended her hand. The woman grasped it firmly with one hand, holding the cane handle with the other.

"Mrs Polanski? I'm Miranda Stone. I called you this morning to look at the apartment."

"Come in. I was boiling water for tea. Make yourself comfortable while I fix tray. I'd like we should talk before we go upstairs."

Miranda's eyes followed her and she walked slowly through the living room and dining room to the kitchen doorway. Her back and shoulders were ramrod straight despite her limp. Dressed in navy wool, she had white hair upswept into a twist held by a pearl comb. Cameo earrings dangled from her earlobes.

The living room had overstuffed blue velvet furniture. The backs and arms were draped with heavy brocade print scarves. On the coffee table was a foreign-language newspaper. A grand piano stood on the other side of the room; the keys were yellowed and chipped. The closed top, covered with lace, displayed sepia-toned pictures in ornate frames, two silver candlesticks, paperweights, and a collection of porcelain dolls.

Many of the dolls couldn't keep their eyes open; their bisque faces were discoloured; their legs were cracked; and some had broken fingers. Most were international dolls dressed in costume, but in the centre was a delicate ballerina, surrounded by a row of dolls holding musical instruments.

On one wall hung photographs. Each stiffly posed unsmiling face had its own frame. The eyes of a young girl seemed to be looking straight at Miranda. She shuddered, backing away from the morbid faces and hit her ankle on the end table. As she rubbed it to massage away the pain, she looked again, this time noticing that the individual frames were encased as a group in a large rectangular frame. Beneath it was a wide ledge holding a row of candles.

Mrs Polanski called out, "Miranda, dear, please come help me with tray."

She walked through the dining room, quickly looking at the table and the crowded china closet. Maybe Mrs Polanski was an antiques dealer.

A young Jewish boy from a small town in the Carparthian Mountains woke up, not far from Goethe's beloved Weimar, in a place of eternal infamy called Buchenwald. He was finally free, but there was no joy in his heart. He thought there never would be again.

– Elie Weisel, *The Perils of Indifference*, Millenium Lecture Series, April 1999

The kitchen was also old-fashioned, but there was no time to look around. Mrs Polanski gestured for her to pick up the tray, eager to get back into the living room.

She sank heavily into the chair, wincing as she lifted her bad leg onto the ottoman. "Ah, doing simple things can sometimes take so much," she said .

"Are you in pain?"

"Ah, not pain." She waved her hand. "Just ache. Bad hip from fall. Sometimes even sidewalk has hidden trap." She laughed. "Have some tea. There is sugar and lemon."

The hot tea was poured into tall glasses. Miranda held one out to her, her fingers at the rim, the glass steaming. Mrs Polanski took it as if it were a glass of ice water. "May I have a sugar cube as well?" she asked.

She took the cube and placed it in her cheek between her teeth, taking a sip. "Ah, good. Help yourself. I made butter cookies. Take one. Please."

Miranda bit into the cookie, sinking her teeth into a buttery sweetness she'd never tasted before. The cookies were still warm from the oven.

"Well, Miranda. You are here to see about the apartment. So let's not beat about the bush. I never did quite understand this American expression but … so. I would think smart girl like you is wondering why so cheap. A palace it isn't. But nice with plenty of space. This is situation. The house is big. I don't need to rent upstairs but I don't like it empty. I like to know the creaks in the night belong to someone I know. So money is not so important as who is up there. The rent I ask pays utilities for using."

She paused to take a sip of tea. "A couple, from the medical school just moved out. Nobody ever stays put any more. Darling children. Helped me out sometimes. Not too much, but sometimes."

Nodding, Miranda said, "You can't expect to do everything you used to."

Mrs Polanski looked her over. "You are young thing to be living alone. With me it's something else altogether. How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?"

She laughed. "Old enough," she said, shaking out her ponytail, blonde hair touching her shoulders. "Do I look older now?"

Mrs Polanski smiled, holding a palm to each cheek. "Oy, a mature woman I have here before my eyes." She had a beautiful face: her eyes were a sharp blue, her ruddy skin heavily wrinkled, but rosy.

"Ah, not so young, you think!" Mrs Polanski smiled. "Your family here, yes?"

"No. No family. I am on scholarship and there is so much work I need to live in a quiet place."

"It's lonely having no family with you," she muttered. "Another cookie?"

"Thank you. Just one more. They are delicious. Then, may we take a look upstairs?"

"Of course. You are here for business, not to vaste time with old woman." Mrs Polanski smiled.

"Oh no, Mrs Polanski. I'm just curious to see what the apartment looks like," she said, hoping she didn't blow her chances.

"Okay. We talk business. Upstairs, the layout is same. Living room, dining room, bedrooms, kitchen, and back porch. It's furnished. Not full as this, but my own furniture. Long time ago, my son lived there and left everything. He is modern and doesn't like old things. My tenants before like it furnished for no extra and it was easier than trying to get rid of. Is that a problem?"

"It's furnished?" she asked incredulously, "No, it's not a problem since I don't own a single thing." Miranda laughed.

"Ah, a girl at the start of life. Good. My main thought is to have somebody I like up there. I need someone quiet. But I was once a young girl too, and a pretty one so I was told, so a boyfriend is okay. Just not to live. Love is life's big treasure."

She paused, lost in her own thoughts for a moment. "But I decide who lives in my house. Gnug, enough, you want to see?"

"Yes, please."

She reached into her pocket. "Here is the key. I'll save my leg the stairs. One key for both doors. Take your time. Then you ask questions when you come back down."

Miranda took the keys and darted up the stairs. Opening the top door, she walked into a living room with an old couch, a chair, and a coffee table etched with deep scratches. The walls and windows were bare. Unlike in the downstairs flat, light streamed in through the large front windows. Looking out the window at the narrow street and closely connected houses, she saw only a little boy riding a bike with training wheels. Despite the warm day, there was no one sitting idly on their porch steps.

The first bedroom was empty but the back room had a desk set against a window overlooking a small yard filled with flowerbeds. On it was a picture of a smiling young boy and girl standing in front of an old farmhouse. The other walls had bookshelves jammed with books and papers, some in English but many others looked German or Polish and had the curvy scroll of the newspaper. Sliding her hand across the nicked desktop, Miranda imagined how good it would feel, living by herself, finally. The flat was five blocks from school and only twenty-five dollars a month more than her stipend.

She locked the door and ran down the stairs. Mrs Polanski's door was ajar, so she knocked and walked in.

Still sitting in the chair, looking up at the pictures, she was lost in thought. She said softly, aloud but mostly to herself, "My brother Georgie, now, he could have been a lawyer. So smart and such a good talker."

Aware that Miranda was back, she smiled at her, "You are darling girl, your mother must kvell, must be so proud of you, her daughter to be lawyer. So, you like?"

"Like it? I love it. It's more than I ever hoped for. But there is a small problem."

"Yes?"

"As reasonable as the rent is, it is twenty-five dollars a month more than my housing allowance so I would have to pay the balance during the month from my library job – "

"Maybe," Lena interrupted, "instead, you help me sometimes. Not too much. Picking up my medicine, a few things at market, help like that."

Miranda nodded. She needed every dollar she earned.

"So, good." She smiled. "We have no more problem, we have deal then. I like you, my shayna meidela."

"What does that mean, shayna mei –?"

"Oh, it is compliment in Yiddish language. I was born in Poland, so I speak Polish, also a little Russian and German, but Mama spoke Yiddish to me and that is what she called me. It means pretty girl, Miranda, shayna meidela."

Miranda smiled and sat back in the chair.

"We'll have more tea to make deal. I want no lease because if it doesn't work out like we think, I want no trouble. We just part friends. All right, then, raise your glass for tea toast. Miranda Stone. Velcome!"

■ ■ ■

Half dozing, Miranda jumped to the thud of the cane, tapping on the downstairs ceiling. Sprawled out on the living room chair, she had fought to keep her eyes open to read a case she was to present in class the next day, but had dozed off. Jarred by the tapping, she woke up and saw it was only 9:30. Thank heavens she woke me, Miranda thought.

This was how Mrs Polanski, or Lena, as she now insisted upon, called her. A couple of taps to say, Come down. If Miranda didn't answer, it wasn't a problem. But if Lena really needed help or for Miranda to run an errand or do something the next day, she phoned. Most of the cane taps were for company, with excuses to bring her down.

Miranda slipped a sweater on over her t-shirt. Half hour, that's all. Lena was at the door. She was still dressed. Miranda saw tears drying on her face.

The candles, sitting on the shelf beneath the photo wall, were lit as they were every night and the tea kettle whistled from the kitchen. Looking at the piano, Miranda saw that the ballerina was gone and that there was a farm girl with thick braids in its place. How many dolls could she have?

"Come, kinde, my child, have some tea with a lonely old woman."

As was their routine, Miranda would fix the tray and whatever she had to go with it while Lena sat in her big chair facing the pictures. Everything was prepared, tea glasses, bags, sugar for Lena, lemon for Miranda, and – tonight – pound cake.

Settled with her tea, Miranda asked, "Lena, you were crying, what's wrong?"

"Were you learning?"

"Trying to. I have a presentation to make in my 11:00 class and I'm falling asleep over it. Tell me a story to wake me up. Please." She laughed, begging her.

"Ah, you remind me of my boychuk, when we lived in Cracow, begging me for songs and stories." She started to sing, in a rich sweet voice, a lullaby. When Lena sang, it was always in Polish. Miranda closed her eyes, listening to the soothing melody, so unlike the sounds of her own childhood.

She smiled as she finished. "Ah, my children loved that song."

"Children?" Miranda repeated. Lena only told Miranda what she wanted to. Miranda would ask questions and Lena would talk about whatever she wanted as if she didn't hear her. Miranda could never ask her what she really wanted to know, how she came to America, whether she was in Europe during World War ii, what happened to her family.

But even less probing questions, like why there were sometimes different dolls on the piano, how many she had, why she was always rearranging them, and where her son who used to live upstairs was now, were ignored. Lena only heard what she wanted to.

"Ya, that was the children's favorite song. It is Polish folk story," Lena said. "My children loved my singing. 'Sing more,' they would say. 'Please, can I sit on your lap.' My sister Hannah, she was teacher too. Not with voice like mine. But she danced. Very graceful, my Hannah."

"You have a sister?" Miranda asked.

Lena was looking at the pictures on the wall, faces illuminated by the candles. She travelled somewhere far from here. Miranda took a sip of tea, suddenly needing to get away, suffocated by the unpleasant smell of the yellow candles, wanting only to get back upstairs to her books, her cheeks blazing hot as they always did when she needed air.

Lena finally spoke. "We used to take the children to a walled garden for recess. Inside was magic. Gardens of all kinds, Miranda, old trees, good for hide and seek game, one with a sturdy low limb the children could sit and dream on. I try to plant garden back there," she said, gesturing towards the back of the house. "But never same. Different earth.

Different light. I grow good flowers. Special roses. Green thumb, some say, what means this green thumb? Idiotic American talk. The irises I grow are close to home garden but the rest" – she waved her hand, dismissing them – "just flowers."

Miranda, nodding, concentrated on slowing down her breath, relaxing the knot in her stomach.

"Back to story. I would calm children with story before it was time to go home. Make up fantastic stories of horses that fly, magic fairies in forest. They would call out names of their favourites, but each time I tell new because I make up."

She continued, wistfully, "That garden. So beautiful. My husband proposed marriage to me there. Ah, so young and in love, thinking life would always be sweet, just as at that moment. A cruel joke." She spat. "It's late, work hard but be happy girl."

She closed her eyes, signalling the end of the tea party. Gratefully, Miranda gathered up the tea tray, tiptoed to the kitchen and then back past Lena, whose slackened face was pale. Miranda hesitated at the candles. Lena let them burn out each night. They were flickering low in their glass jars, safe to leave. She locked the door handle and went upstairs to her own room, eager to tackle *Bowman v. the State of Ohio.*

■ ■ ■

It was a sunny Saturday morning, warm for late October. Too beautiful to spend in the library with a study group, she mused. Miranda was on the back porch finishing her coffee when she heard voices in the driveway. She couldn't hear what Lena was saying but her tone was irritated. Maybe she was talking to a repairman.

She went back inside, rinsed her cup, grabbed her books, and went down the stairs onto the front porch. The man that she must have been talking to was unloading packages from a minivan parked in the driveway.

He smiled at her. "You must be Miranda," he said, putting out his hand.

She looked at him quizzically, shaking his hand.

"All her talk, talk, talking, and I bet she never mentioned me. I'm her son Benjamin. Pleased to meet you."

"She mentioned a son when I first looked at the apartment. But I never thought –"

"That he lived here in town," he finished for her. "Yup, right here with a wife and child. My sister moved away. Lives in Colorado. But then you don't really count until you have a candle," he mumbled.

"Excuse me, what did you say?" Miranda asked.

"Oh, nothing," Benjamin replied.

"She doesn't really talk much about her family." Benjamin was slight, had dark curly hair, sharp blue eyes like Lena's, and the same ruddy complexion.

He grabbed up the shopping bags, leaving the tools on the porch. "Let me get this in before she refuses the meat, telling me it's spoiled because I was too slow."

"Nice meeting you, Benjamin," she said.

"You, too." He paused and added, "Listen, Miranda, I'm going to give you my number if anything comes up. Got a pencil?"

She opened her sack and pulled out a notebook. "Okay, shoot."

Miranda wrote it in on the inside cover of her book.

"Keep it safe," he said seriously. "And don't ever hesitate to call. My wife's name is Ruthie." He held the screen door open with his knee.

Miranda held the door while he picked up the third bag. Once he was in the house, she stood on the porch for a moment, waiting to hear voices, but all was quiet except for the rustle of the bags.

She looked at her watch and sprinted down the stairs and across the grass. She had ten minutes to get to the library.

■ ■ ■

Classes were over for the Thankgiving break. Miranda had put off her mother, who, in her frantic calls, wept for her to come home, promising that everything would be different, saying that it wasn't fair, cutting them all off like that. They needed her. Reluctantly, she called her mother to let her know that she wasn't going to see her over the holiday, holding the phone away from her ear, trying not to listen to the railing on the other end. She decided that if she had to acknowledge the holiday at all, she would go home with Robin, one of her study partners. They decided to wait and leave on Thanksgiving morning, to avoid the traffic. And one day less of family time was fine with Miranda.

Robin and Miranda caught a Billy Crystal movie to celebrate the break from schoolwork. She was still smiling as she turned the key in the door. Lena's door was partially opened. She was chatting with someone. Good, she won't need me tonight, Miranda thought. "Ah, Miranda, you're home," she called out. "Come in and say hello to Harriet."

Lena smiled. "We went to farmers' market. Bought too much. Here, take some fruits."

"No, thank you, Lena. I'm going away for the holiday tomorrow."

"Then you take for your family. Harriet, a beautiful girl, yes?" Harriet nodded.

Miranda took the bag Lena pushed into her hands. "If I don't see you, I hope you have a happy Thanksgiving and I'll be back Sunday night."

"Good-bye, safe trip," Lena called out gaily.

Miranda went upstairs, packed her bag and fell asleep instantly. She woke up to a foul smell. Grabbing the clock, she saw that it was 3:10. The smell was nauseating. It was far worse than those candles. The stench wasn't that of a fire, but something was burning. Oh my God, she thought, if the house isn't on fire yet, it will be. And here I am, lying in bed on the second floor. I've got to get out of here.

Miranda's heart pounded hard and fast. Her breathing was quick and shallow. She touched the cold floor with her feet, wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead. Grabbing her jeans, she missed the leg hole but finally managed to get them on. What should she do, call the police? No, the fire department.

"*Ayahahahahahahah.*" A slow cry. It didn't sound human, more like a cat, and it was coming from downstairs, from the front of the house.

Benjamin. He said to call any time. Yes. *His number*. Where was it? Inside the cover of one of the notebooks. Miranda turned her backpack upside down. All the books fell to the floor. One by one, she opened the front covers, looking. *There*. With trembling fingers, she dialled 534-9989.

One ring … two rings … three … four. What should she do if they didn't answer? She let it ring and ring. Finally, there was a sleepy "Hello" on the other end. Thank heavens. "This better be good." A male voice.

"Benjamin?" Miranda said uncertainly.

"Yes, who is it?"

"It's Miranda. Miranda Stone, your mother's tenant. There is a terrible smell coming from downstairs and weird sounds and banging and I don't know what to do. Should I call the police or the fire department? I'm afraid to go down. But what if the house is on fire?"

Benjamin sighed and answered calmly. "It's okay. Don't panic. I'll be right over. Ten minutes. You did the right thing by calling me. Listen to me carefully, Miranda. Don't call anyone. Get dressed and go downstairs, in case there is a fire. If you don't want to go in, just wait for me on the front porch. I'll be right there. Don't call anyone, you hear me?"

She nodded.

"Miranda, are you there? I'm going to hang up. I'll be right there. Answer me."

More noise. Then, a crash.

"Yes. Please hurry," she whispered.

Missing the cradle when she hung up the phone, she left it, zipped up her jeans, and threw her books into her backpack. She slung it over her shoulder and went down the stairs, three at a time.

The door to Lena's flat was closed. Miranda stood in front of it for a long minute before knocking. Forget it. She didn't want to go in anyway. She was safer on the porch. Dropping her bag, she cupped her hands around her eyes pressing close to the window. The slats of the blinds were open just wide enough for Miranda to peer in.

Lena's long white hair hung loose, flowing to her waist. She was in her bathrobe. There was a wagon in the middle of the living room. It was lined with a blanket, what looked like the paperweights from the piano, and her purchases from the farmers market – food, apples, potatoes, and bread. Lena was methodically dressing the dolls and gently placing them in the wagon. Miranda couldn't hear her, but she could see that she was talking to them.

Behind Lena, it looked as if all the dolls that were standing on the piano had been swept off in a single motion. Maybe with the large stick that was lying on the floor. Crashing to the floor had damaged many of them. They were heaped on the floor, broken into pieces. Arms and legs were separated from bodies. There were gouges in the porcelain, and the doll on top of the pile had smoking hair. That was the terrible smell. She had set the doll's hair on fire.

Lena ignored the jumbled mess. She cradled the dancing doll in her arms. Miranda could hear her now. She was singing that Polish lullaby. The only word Miranda could make out was "Hannelah", which Lena kept murmuring. When the song was over, she put the doll on the floor by the wall of pictures and covered her completely with one of the scarves from the couch as if she had just died. Her motions were calm and steady.

Lena then looked at the dolls in the wagon, smiled sadly at them and said clearly, "Come kindelah, I keep you safe now." She pinned up her hair in a single motion and took off her robe. She was fully dressed.

Benjamin pulled up, shutting the headlights off as he turned into the driveway. He was by Miranda's side in an instant. "Where are we?" he asked. "Is the wagon prepared for the escape? Has the dancer died? Watch the front door," he said wearily.

Miranda looked at him, her mouth wide open. "She's done this before?"

"Many times. She won't remember in the morning, though. It will only be a dream, just like all the others."

At that moment, the door opened. Lena was turned toward the wagon, her fingers to her lips, motioning to the dolls to be quiet. She turned around and jumped when Benjamin put his arm around her, but his gentleness quieted her. He said something in Yiddish to soothe her. Turning to Miranda, Lena gripped her arm, whispering in Yiddish. Her tone implied instructions. She spoke straight at her but without a hint of recognition in her eyes. Miranda understood that she was a stranger who must be trusted. Lena put the handle of the wagon in her hand and turned with Ben to go back in the house.

Before they did, he said quietly, "Don't believe it when people tell you about survivors. There were a few but most are walking shadows living between two worlds." He looked down at the old lady clinging to his arm. "Frozen to us, saving what little is left for the rest of the world. But" – he kissed her forehead – "one day I finally understood."

They disappeared into the house. Miranda sat on the porch for a long time before she went back up to bed, listening to the sounds of Benjamin sweeping up the remains of Lena's foiled rescue.

■ ■ ■

When Miranda returned from her Thanksgiving holiday, Lena wanted to know how her family had liked her fruits. Benjamin expected her to move out as the others had, but Miranda had no desire to leave her landlady. She lived in the upstairs flat of Lena's house through that year, the remainder of law school, and her first job, long past the time when it was all she could afford, having found something she hadn't known she was looking for.

Jeremy Lanaway

Two men walk into a bar

TWO MEN WALK INTO A BAR. They walk side by side, and they don't say a word, exchanging the dusty sunlight of the early evening for the dimness of the bar. These two young men wait for their eyes to adjust before scrutinizing the scattered tables. One, in the corner, is filled with construction workers, who crane their matted heads toward a hockey game on the big-screen TV. One, at the back, is occupied by an old man, a dirty ashtray, and a half-empty glass of scotch. The old man – if you want to know the truth – is me.

They blink as they cross the empty dance floor, sitting down at a table near the back of the bar beneath a large flickering sign: Molson Canadian. Music warbles anonymously from large speakers lining the walls: an old song from an old band from an old generation. Strobe-lights, dark and poised, jut from the ceiling in all directions.

"They moved the pool table," notes David, his eyes panning the barroom. He wears black slacks and a dress shirt unbuttoned at the collar. His shoes, long and pointed, shine.

"A long time ago," Bobby replies, nodding toward the pool table. He waves at the waitress. He tucks his hair beneath his baseball cap, which is perched backward on his head. He wears a T-shirt, adorned with the logo of a skateboard company, and a pair of baggy jeans. A chain dangles from his hip, linking his wallet to his belt; it jingles with every movement.

"I don t recognize the waitress."

"Heather. She's been here for a long time. She usually works nights. She's cool. She always gives us free shots."

"Hello, hello," Heather says, and beams at Bobby. "I didn't think I'd ever see you here this early. What's the matter? You miss me?"

"Desperately." Bobby motions across the table toward David. "Heather, this is Dave. An old buddy of mine. Dave, Heather."

They smile at each other. They say hi to each other.

"Dave's one of the boys, Heather," Bobby informs the waitress. "He hasn t been out with us for a while." He smiles at David. He smiles without opening his mouth. "He just became a dad."

The waitress nods, raising her eyebrows. "A dad, huh? Well, congratulations. Is it a boy or a girl?" She shifts her weight from one leg to the other, resting the tray against her bony hip. She glances over her shoulder at the table of construction workers.

"A girl. Amanda."

Nobody speaks for a moment. The announcer's voice on the TV rises with exhilaration as one of the players releases a slap-shot at the net. The puck chimes against the post, and the announcer shouts, "He shoots – oh – it's off the post!"

"Amanda." The waitress looks at David again. Her mouth opens into a smile. "That s a pretty name." Her eyes swing quickly toward Bobby. "So what can I get you guys?"

THEY LEAN BACK in their chairs. They fold their arms across their chests. They wait for the beer. Every once in a while they make eye contact across the table, and every

once in a while they smile at each other and turn their heads away. The waitress arrives a few minutes later, placing a pitcher of beer on the table. They both reach for it at the same time. They smile at each other again. They laugh briefly. David withdraws his hand, and Bobby fills two glasses.

"You should've been here last Saturday night," he says, his voice rising. "Sticky got into a tilt with some old bastard – don't ask me what it was about – he closed the old guy's eye."

David nods his head.

"The old guy should've known better than to raise his fists against Sticky. He was in his forties, man. What was he thinking?"

David sips from his beer.

"He's like, 'Let's go, punk!' Can you believe it? He actually called Sticky a punk." He shakes his head. He lifts his glass to his mouth.

"Remember the time he took on two guys at once?" David says, leaning forward in his chair. His eyes brighten, and he begins to chuckle. "It was at that bush party up on the range. Remember when he tried to dance like Mohammed Ali, singing, 'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee'? I ve never laughed so hard in my life. He must've fallen over four or five times."

"You think that was funny?" Bobby replies. "You should've seen him last winter, man. He tried it again. It was classic Sticky." He laughs loudly; he shakes his head. "I don't know how many times he fell down. It went on for at least half an hour. Finally he just stayed on the ground. He didn't wake up until the morning. You should've been there, man."

David's smile fades from his face. He leans back in his chair. He reaches for his glass of beer. He takes a sip. He pushes up his sleeve, rotates his wrist, and looks at his watch.

"It's still early," Bobby tells him. "We have lots of time."

"I know."

They sit in silence. Laughter erupts from the table of construction workers. They're in their forties, most of them sport full beards, and they wear dirty jeans, tattered work shirts, and muddy boots. Cigarette smoke hovers above their table, a fat blue cloud.

"Why do they even bother?" Bobby says, staring at the construction workers. "I mean, what's the point? They'll just have to race off to their families for dinner." He raises his glass.

David gazes at the pitcher of beer between them.

"I don't get it," Bobby mutters. "I mean, it's like they're trying to have everything at the same time. It just doesn't work. Partying is partying and family is family. They don't mix." He grips his glass. "That's why I don't have a family. That's why I won't have one for a very long time."

They order another pitcher. A middle-aged man sits down at the table next to them. His tie droops. His undershirt, yellowed from sweat, shows in the wedge of his open collar. He exhales loudly and leans back in his chair, kneading the back of his neck. A film of sweat glistens on his bald head.

"Here's another one," Bobby mutters from the corner of his mouth.

The man looks at them. He smiles – his teeth are stained. He looks away. The waitress arrives with another pitcher, sets it down, moves to the man's table, and takes his order.

Bobby lifts his glass, saying, "Here's to old times, man."

"And new ones," David adds, holding his glass above the table.

Extending his arm, Bobby doesn't blink. "Right. And new ones."

"So what's the verdict, man?" Bobby asks after several minutes of silence have passed. "I mean, you gonna come on the houseboat trip this summer or what? You said you'd try to get the time off work."

"When is it again?"

"The last week of July. It's gonna be the best year yet. Everyone's coming."

David refills his beer, carefully tilting the glass, pouring slowly. He reaches across the table, refilling Bobby's glass too. Rubbing his thumb against the beaded moisture, he says, "I don't think I ll be able to make it this year."

Bobby takes a drink. He takes another one. He nods his head – once – slowly – and David eyes his watch. Bobby swipes the foam from his lips. They haven't spoken for several minutes when the man leans over from his table, clears his throat, and asks them in a raspy voice if they want to hear a joke.

"I don't know if it's funny or not," he admits, his hand wrapped around a highball. "But I'll tell it to you anyway."

Bobby stares at the man.

"Let's hear it," David says.

"All right, then," the man says, leaning closer to their table. "Remember, don't blame me if it's not funny; I'm just the messenger."

"We won't," David assures him.

The man empties his glass in one gulp, sets it on the table, and clears his throat again. He finally lowers his voice, saying, "Okay, here it goes. Two men walk into a bar –"

"I'll tell you what," Bobby says, straightening in his seat. "Forget the joke." He leans over and lays his hand on the man's shoulder. "Why don't you tell us something else? I mean, you know, something important. An older guy like yourself – you must have a lot to tell us." He snaps his fingers loudly. "I know, man. Why don't you tell us why you bother coming here."

"Bobby," David says, "let him finish his joke."

"No, man, this is more important. I want to know. I really do." His words are slightly slurred. He returns his attention to the man. "Look at yourself, man. I mean, drinking alone in a nightclub surrounded by people half your age."

The man glances around the bar.

"Leave him alone," David insists.

"No, I want to know. I want to know why he still comes here. He's married – I can see that – so why isn't he at home with his wife? Maybe he has kids. Why isn't he at home with them? They probably want to see him. He made the decision to have a family in the first place. Why can't he accept it?"

"I'm sorry about this," David tells the man.

"He means it too," Bobby says. "Look how sorry he is."

"Look at yourself," David says.

"Look at myself? Why should I? I'm not the one who's changed."

"Maybe you should."

"Why?" Bobby says. "So I can be like you?" He swings his thumb at the man. "So I can be like him?"

"No. So you can finally grow up –"

The man snatches his car keys from the table. He stares at the two young men. His left eye twitches slightly. "It was just a joke – a goddamn stupid joke." He flings some money onto the table, stands up, and strides away from them.

THEY SIT IN silence, each staring at his beer. They drink the rest of the pitcher. The waitress brings them the bill. They reach into their wallets for money and place it on the table.

"How much are we short?" David asks.

Bobby, who's counting the money, says, "That's it; we're good."

"You sure? I can put more in."

"No, it's okay."

"You sure?"

"I m sure."

They don't speak. The doors fling open, and a group of girls enters the bar. They laugh loudly, bouncing across the dance floor. The doors open again, and another group appears, a mixture of boys and girls, all laughing and smiling, their voices lively and loud, moving across the room with a confidence reserved for youth. The bartender points a remote control at the TV and turns down the volume. He reaches beneath the bar, changes the song, and turns up the volume. Bass pulses from the speakers, pounding the air like a fist. The strobe-lights eventually swing to life, filling the bar with a spectrum of whirring colours. The construction workers drain their glasses and thumb through their wallets. More girls enter, followed by more boys, followed by more girls, and in this way the tables fill up.

DAVID LEANS forward. "You won't know what it's like until you hold your own baby." He stares at Bobby across the table. "I can t explain it to you – no matter how much I want to – it's just something you have to experience for yourself." He raises his hands – palms up. "I held her, Bob. I held her in the first moments of her life. I'll never forget it. Not as long as I live." He laughs quickly, then wipes his hand across his eyes. "She's my little girl, Bob. I helped make her. I know how that sounds to you – but it's true."

Bobby says nothing.

"One day you'll know what I'm talking about."

"Well, man," Bobby says after a few minutes have passed, drumming his fingers against the table. "I guess we should make a move." He stands up. He slides his chair close to the table.

David stands up too, saying, "It was good to see you, Bob."

Bobby jams his hands into his pockets. He rocks from his heels to his toes and back again, the chain rattling against his leg. David offers his hand across the space between them. Bobby slowly pulls his hand from his pocket and accepts it.

"I ll call you," says David.

"Sure."

They walk toward the doors, these two men, side by side as they came in, but halfway across the dance floor Bobby halts. He recognizes someone at one of the tables, a young man with loops of silver in his eyebrows, lips, and earlobes, who calls his name over the music. Bobby lifts his chin in greeting.

"You go ahead," he tells David. He lifts his hand to say good-bye. He turns toward the table. "I think I'll stay for a while."

I SIT AT THIS table every day and every night, an old man with nowhere else to go, with no one else to give his time to, comfortable in the familiar shadows at the back of this familiar bar, watching them come and go, these kids and these adults, all unaware of the complicated system in which they each play an essential part. I'm a stereotype – I realize that – and yet I m not regretful. I'm not sad. I'm not even lonely. I'm just an old man who walked into a bar and never left.

Mine thy self

Brenda Keble on an enticing form of bad luck

A Tragic Honesty
The Life and Work of Richard Yates
Blake Bailey
Picador 2003
671 pp

John Sutherland's review in the *New York Times* last August was entitled "Waiting for a Break That Never Came" and had for subheading: "As this biography shows, Richard Yates needed only luck to complement his abundant talent. He never had any."

Never had any? That wasn't my impression while reading the book. I'd say that there might have been quite a few *nevers* in Yates's life, but of luck he possessed more than enough. As a writer, that is. Good and bad. As a person, it's true, he was downright unlucky, although how much of that was the result of his own obstinacy in the face of clear directions to change (I'm thinking of his clownish excesses in drinking and smoking, his carelessness with medication) only the most sympathetic of friends and helpers would have the patience to enquire. He was a brooding drunk, a self-tormenting wreck. He collapsed spectacularly and was hoisted to his feet by people who valued not simply the sweet nature of the man (when somewhat sober, happy, and occupied) but also the talent, the "abundant talent", of the writer.

It's hard to know whether that talent saved or condemned him. Certainly, it gave Yates an idea of his worth that was bound to cause discontent, no matter how successful he would sometimes appear to have been. His first novel, *Revolutionary Road*, had the good fortune to be nominated for the National Book Award. It didn't win. It didn't sell out its first print run of 20,000. It didn't get made into a film. And yet, however disappointing its immediate fate, it was well received by many critics (only a few thinking that the theme of postwar optimism had grown a little hackneyed by then) and established him straight off as the equal of other starred authors of the early 60s, like Salinger and Heller. He had an extremely persistent agent, an unflaggingly loyal publisher. What more could any young writer want?

Well, one can always want more. And, for all that he had no difficulty in drawing attention to himself, the right kind and the wrong kind, Yates seems to have wanted above all to be free of that self, to become someone else. In his life, he had any number of models. In his writing, he had only a handful, and the chief among them was F. Scott Fitzgerald, for whom he never lost his admiration and oddly fraternal envy. Fitzgerald had the allure of an eminently sophisticated older brother, the one with the varsity togs and the easy-going prose style, its "freshness and grace". His very ambition was an example to follow. Yates's devotion to Fitzgerald, Flaubert, and a small number of others, his constant reference to them throughout his teaching, his resistance to the non-realistic forms of writing practised by the coming generation, all this has the marks of a blinkered conservatism, not to say a premature aging, and would be pitiful if it weren't for the novels and short stories he kept producing. They vindicate him as nothing else could.

The early part of *A Tragic Honesty* compares so much of Yates's life with what he wrote about it that the reader begins to wonder if a biography isn't just a little superfluous. Yates himself was generally anxious about his propensity for self-mining. Of *Revolutionary Road*, Bailey notes: "The only hope of escape was to write a successful novel – the raw material of which, he already sensed, would be the stuff of his own predicament. But he wanted to transcend the merely personal, to avoid the pitfalls of sentiment and self-pity." Yates seems to have taken a good deal of his own experience into his books without worrying (until afterwards) whether it would be recognized; this is common enough, and perhaps another biographer would have pointed up the many ways in which Yates *did* transmute his raw material. All the same, his voice, the voice we hear through his narrative, is strongest (as in *The Easter Parade*, the other novel for which he is still celebrated) when it relates something that happened to him.

By contrast, Yates disappears from his own biography at times, despite Bailey's assiduity in tracking down every girlfriend and highschool chum, whose conversations and confidences he seems to feel obliged to quote from, no matter how trivial, thus giving long stretches of his account the tone of an alumni newsletter. And then Yates pops up again in the most unexpected quarter – when, for instance, we learn that his daughter Monica once went out with Larry David, the comedian, whom she forced to meet her father for dinner, and that the subsequent dismal encounter provided the inspiration, eventually, for the "suede jacket" episode of *Seinfeld* (which Yates himself was forced to watch and to which

he reacted perfectly in character, i.e., by disapproving).

The later years have a kind of somnambulant grandeur about them, Yates becoming ever more decrepit and solitary, his one link to life the discipline of writing, every day, regardless, so that his last novel, begun with such hope, fades into marginal injunctions to return and improve what he has just written, his oxygen-deprived brain no longer supplying the words or the energy to search for them. Fades and, as its author did, dies.

David Milch, who had been his suffering student and became for a while his gloating employer/benefactor, sums it up nicely: "Henry James spoke of the 'obstinate finality of human being,' and [Yates] was that. He was an aching example of what an artist is, and what being an artist doesn't solve in our human predicament." ●

Yellow food

Karl Buchner on the wrong end of a garden fork

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time
Mark Haddon
Doubleday Canada
226 pp

It's not hard to see why this novel has been so well received. Christopher John Francis Boone, the narrator, is the kind of person who normally turns up as the victim or as a difficult witness or as someone the other, really interesting characters have to contend with when they're not on stage. Autism, which is what Christopher suffers from, isn't something we expect to get an inner view of. Without the emotions that give meaning to our experience, what would that experience be like?

From Christopher's perspective: pretty well unfathomable. This is a mystery, after all, and Christopher is fond of mysteries, especially the Sherlock Holmes stories, in which the great detective, as socially awkward (as autistical) as he may have been, showed a more sophisticated understanding of life simply by placing the clues in their proper (their rational) order. Christopher-Sherlock combines the irrational and compulsive (food must not touch nor be yellow or brown) with the sort of rationality best applied to mathematical puzzles – or the death of a neighbour's dog, which he finds shortly after midnight (sorry: "seven minutes after midnight") impaled with a garden fork. He cannot imagine why this was done. The pictures he carries in his head are only of what has happened, not of what might have happened. He is a detective to whom motive means little, less perhaps than the jokes his father tells him. But he can solve puzzles – if he knows them to be puzzles. He has been told that his mother is dead. When he discovers that she is not (and he discovers this accidentally, rather than by thinking about it), his investigation into the murder of a poodle grows considerably larger, much riskier.

Chapters are given prime numbers; the first, then, is chapter two. There are lists, charts, drawings – there is even an appendix containing the solution to a mathematical problem. Christopher is writing the book as we read it. At one point, it is taken by his father and (seemingly) thrown away. This is oddly dislocating, causing the reader to wonder if what she has just read, with all its doubts and hesitations, should now be understood to have been a recreation (in a new, somewhat better concealed notebook) or whether there might not be, hovering nearby, an urgently guiding authorial hand.

Christopher is a curiously self-describing autistic: he takes special care to explain himself and his condition. As an unreliable narrator, he is more reliable, being more consistent, than most. His limits are so well posted that the discovery of his mother's letters and their reproduction have a jarring effect, look like a cheat. The very misspellings in her letters seem forced, as if she too must be given a suggestive flaw. It's a plausible ruse to get around the strict boundaries of Christopher's point of view, but is it fair? (By Christopher's own standards, it is not. Why, the reader again wonders, could Christopher not have figured out this key to the puzzle for himself?)

In the end, it may not matter. Or it may be that subverting the narrative with such intrusions was Haddon's only choice if he were to keep the (adult or teenage) reader engaged. For all its occasional charm, Christopher's unmodulated voice isn't one I would have wished to hear too much more of. The cautiously happy ending (with a puppy, at that) itself confirmed the suspicion that we, as readers, had been set up like pins and that autism (and not Christopher) was the ball meant to knock us down. Would it be overly cynical of me to remain standing? ●

Death trip dreaming

Sara Jamieson on a strangely alienated sense of intimacy

Ashland
Gil Adamson
ECW Press
79 pages, $16.95

The cover of *Ashland*, Gil Adamson's second collection of poems, features an old black-and-white photograph of a person in frontier dress, fringed and elaborately holstered, who levels a gun and squints down the barrel at the reader. This person could be either a man or a woman, and this indeterminacy mirrors the androgynous appearance of the author's name overlapping the broad-brimmed hat. The image playfully announces some of the central concerns of the poems inside: the mysterious allure of old photos, the violence of the Old West, and the disruption of any uncomplicated nostalgia for the frontier as a man's world.

Adamson acknowledges that the volume's title, which is also the title of its first section, is taken from Michael Lesy's book *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973). In the town of Black River Falls, Wisconsin, Lesy discovered an archive of photographs from the 1890s, among them images of dead children laid out in their coffins. In *Wisconsin Death Trip*, Lesy accompanies the photos with extracts from the town newspaper from the same period, documenting all manner of mayhem conducted and endured by the townspeople: murder, suicide, madness, epidemics, hauntings, arson, demonic possession and the like apparently took place with astonishing frequency in Black River Falls. Adamson's "Ashland" is a sequence of 22 brief prose-poems that pay full homage to the macabre aspect of Lesy's work. Perhaps inspired by Lesy's fascination with what is simultaneously concealed and revealed within a single photographic image, each of Adamson's poems relates a fragment of narrative or presents a scenario in vivid but minimal detail. The cumulative effect is the creation of a bizarre, hallucinatory, nightmarish world in which the reader is often hard pressed to find her bearings, "lost", like the speaker of "Panic", "in branches too dark to see." As I read through the sequence for the first time, I became convinced that I would have to read Lesy's book in order to appreciate fully what Adamson is doing in these poems. After scouring libraries and bookstores in the city where I live, I was unable to find it, even though a new edition was published in 2000. (The book was made into a film by James Marsh in 1999, but I couldn't find it either; I continue to search, as both book and movie sound extremely interesting.) I did find some of the photographs on the film's website, and was struck by Adamson's ability to translate their details into prose, for example, the "lacy slouch" of a girl dressed to the nines and stuffed into one of those old-fashioned tapered coffins ("Wan").

Whereas Lesy's book foregrounds the supposed objectivity of newspaper stories, Adamson often adopts a first-person perspective, as though trying to imagine herself inside the world of Black River Falls. Her subjective "I" confounds distinctions between sleep and waking, death and life: it is a voice that seems to speak from beyond the grave, yet is intensely alive. Adamson's use of unique historical material gives new life to a theme that has become all too familiar in late twentieth-century Canadian writing, that of the gothic

weirdness lurking beneath the surface of the most apparently bland and conventional communities. As in her collection of short stories *Help Me, Jacques Cousteau* (1995), eccentric relatives abound: a corrupt uncle, a fanatical grandmother, a brother and sister who simply try to survive. The poems create a strangely alienated sense of intimacy, dropping names of characters as if we should know who they are (early in the first poem is an oblique reference to a Mrs Dumont who "has slashed herself across her withered thigh" and who never reappears). The atmosphere is that of a small town where everyone is familiar, yet at the same time infinitely strange. Other themes include the exploration of the dark side of American dreams of freedom and prosperity. While a title like "Eden" evokes the promise of the frontier, "On One Side" suggests the destructiveness of colonialism with the image of "a map erased by other maps". In "The New World", "fist-prints in the host's birthday cake" announce that this is no utopia but a place where natural disasters and economic recession produce anger and despair, and violence permeates every aspect of life.

Adamson has named Michael Ondaatje as one of her favourite writers, and the influence of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is palpable in the next section, "Here's Your Money", a kind of brief biography in verse of another famous outlaw, Jesse James. Proceeding by the accumulation of anecdotes about the man, along with his preferences and habits, the poem is an anatomy of celebrity that foregrounds the difficulty of trying to discern the person behind the legend. James's long cinematic afterlife, in which generations of actors "have raised his arms in joy at Mexican weddings" and made him sing "songs of love", contrasts with the blank surface of his "white [. . .] nearly unmarked body" at his death. Adamson's poem itself participates in the myth-making, imagining a formative childhood encounter: a "fanatical and dwarfish" (and apparently pedophiliac) judge teaches that "men are good or bad", but James perhaps inhabits the "rift of nothingness [that] lies between the two". In 2003, one cannot read the judge's pronouncement – "He that is not with me [. . .] is against me" – without thinking of contemporary American politics. In the face of George W. Bush's attempts to invoke the Old West as a source of simple, black-and-white certainties, Adamson's poem insists on the moral ambiguities that a figure like James embodies.

"Mary", a sequence of poems about a murderous woman, functions as a kind of companion piece to "Here's Your Money", in that, taken together, they explore the gender bias implicit within the "traditional values" of frontier culture. In contrast to James, the much-chronicled outlaw-hero, whose violence is sometimes interpreted according to some kind of redeeming narrative, such as the defense of traditional agrarian values in the face of encroaching industrialism, the female violence of Adamson's Mary is read by the men in the poem as "motiveless, vulgar, a pointless human lesson". Throughout the collection, I was repeatedly reminded of the proverb about the frontier being a great place if you were a man or a dog, but hell on women and horses. In a place where the available role for women is that of wife, schoolmistress, or whore, Mary's murder of her indifferent husband seems motivated by the death of her baby, and by the prospect of a future that holds nothing but more pregnancy, more loss. When Mary kills her neighbour in cold blood, his wife stands "motionless", surrounded by the "ornamental plates" and "doilies" that suggest the softening, civilizing influence that women were expected to bring to the frontier. Although Mary has rejected this role, the smoke from her rifle "drift[s] in ribbons on the air". With this conspicuously decorative image, Adamson subtly insists on a connection between the murderess and the proper wife, and foreshadows how the men at the end of the poem fail to understand how Mary has perhaps been damaged by the burden of their expectations. At the end of the poem, Mary haunts their sleep, "pitiless and spectral", while they "[strike] out terrified in the dark / defending against the quick, descending fury".

Similar images of demonic, death-dealing women appear throughout the third section, "Black Wing", including a "woman giant" who "crests the hill, fetching up / gusts of locusts" ("Easy"). In this section, Adamson again evokes the frontier world of plains and buffalo, horses, bars, and foothills, an ultra-masculine society where females are imagined as disturbingly alien, and domestic life is shadowed by brutality:

> The hidden nest is not so secret now;
> little eggs feel the chill already.
>
> Omens like this are rare,
> and the men chuckle, nod to each other.
> She cannot escape them now.
>
> ("Hidden")

This section seems as haunted by the images from Lesy's book as the first, its poems populated by desperate people, vicious dogs, and dead children.

While the final section, "Euphoria", returns to the prose-poem format of "Ashland", its atmosphere is very different. Based on Adamson's grandfather's experiences in a TB sanatorium, the sequence evokes a place of disease and fevered visions, but also of care, cleanliness, and light, "sunny rooms" pervaded by "the smell of peas cooking in butter".

A meditation on art and mortality through the eyes of a febrile photographer, this was for me the least compelling section of the book, and conclusions such as "we last longer on paper" struck me as a little tired. The darker vein of the rest of the collection is much more original and engaging. Adamson's ability to imbue the most gruesome of images with lyricism and ambiguity will haunt me for a long while to come. ●

Off the shelf

Gord Dueck on an inventory of sources far from complete

Character Parts: Who's Really Who in CanLit
Brian Busby
Knopf
349 pages, $29.95

Why do authors of fiction offer up a disclaimer — "this book is a work of fiction, a product of the imagination", et cetera – before getting on with their story? Brian Busby, whose new book is intended to show that not all resemblances to persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental, surmises that the publisher's lawyer's advice is but one explanation for this practice. Readers must be warned beforehand in case they "will not be capable of divorcing the character from the original, or worse, will refuse to recognize the character as a creation." In the foreword, broadcaster/writer Bill Richardson provides a more thorough set of reasons, even though he comes to the same conclusion:

> Why such coyness in this regard? All the usual reasons, I guess: the fear of litigation, should a portrait be on the defamatory side of unflattering; the pure and childish joy of mischief-making; the clubby pleasure of winking across the room at those who are in on the joke; the warm glow that lights the rendering of a cloaked homage, or its opposite number, the acid satisfaction of base vengefulness. Mostly, I suspect, writers resist pinning the tail on their chosen donkeys out of fear that they will be seen as creatively wanting, and so depleted of that most vital writerly mojo, the imagination, they must resort to cannibalizing their families, their enemies, their friends.

The autonomy of imagination is sacrosanct, both Busby and Richardson agree. Many writers resent it when interviewers ask about the sources for their material, since the implication is that they couldn't possibly have come up with this stuff on their own. Canadian SF author Barry Longyear, when asked by an American television newscaster where he got his ideas, answered: "Schenectady." Yes, he continued, it's a little known fact but most professional writers get their ideas from there. Upon subscribing to this service, all creative types have to do is check their individually assigned boxes in the Schenectady, New York, post office on a regular basis, and their works basically write themselves.

Some creative types, on the other hand, admit to lacking limitless reserves of creativity. Take, for instance, Dave Eggers's disclosure/disclaimer on the copyright page of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000):

> This is a work of fiction, only in that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people, and exact descriptions of certain things, so had to fill in gaps as best he could. Otherwise, all characters and incidents and dialogue are real, are not products of the author's imagination, because at the time of this writing, the author had no imagination whatsoever for those sorts of things, and could not conceive of making up a story or characters — it felt like driving a car in a clown suit — especially when there was so much to say about his own, true, sorry and inspirational story, the actual people that he has known, and of course the many twists and turns of his own thrilling and complex mind. Any resemblance to persons living or dead should be plainly apparent to them and those who know them, especially if the author has been kind enough to have provided their real names, and in some cases, their phone numbers. All events described herein actually happened, though on occasion the author has taken certain, very small, liberties, with chronology, because that is his right as an American.

Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work* is considered postmodern in part because of its blurring of the line between fiction and non-fiction. Yet, as Busby's *Character Parts* indicates, such smudging has been going on for a while, even in as old-fashioned a literary climate as Canada was long supposed to be. Grey Owl's autobiography turned out to be a masterpiece of literary deception, since in reality he was not an Apache Indian but an Irishman raised in Hastings, England, named Archie Belaney. As well, the author of the award-winning *In Search of Myself* (1946), Frederick Philip Grove, proved to be, in Busby's words, "his own greatest creation"; claiming to be the son of a Scottish mother and a Swedish lord, this novelist specializing in portraits of Canadian prairie life was actually born into a middle-class German family in Hamburg.

Although the bulk of Busby's book is devoted to unmasking the true identities of characters appearing in Canadian novels, he discusses several memoirs as well, because the form has been a mainstay in CanLit, Susannah Moodie's *Roughing It In*

the Bush (1852) being one of the earliest and best known examples. One should also note that Busby has an especial, vested interest in the subject, given that he is currently working on a biography of John Glassco, who (I'm told) was perhaps the greatest, certainly the most entertaining, Canadian practitioner of the genre. Not surprisingly, Busby includes more than a few entries that attempt to explain when Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (1970) – an account of his salad days hobnobbing with the expatriate literati in 1920s Paris – strays from fact into fiction; there is also the question of when it was in fact written. (Glassco claimed that he had written *Memoirs* in 1932 but had delayed its publication; there is now a critical consensus that, despite its aura of historical immediacy, it was composed as late as the mid-60s.)

Busby cloaks himself in consensus, or at least in second-hand information, which is what makes *Character Parts* at times a frustrating read. Apart from his own detective work on Glassco, Busby claims not to have done any original or primary research. "In composing this book I had only one rule: someone somewhere had made the linkage," he says in the introduction. "None of the associations between characters and their originals or inspirations are mine; they are the claims of biographers, scholars, historians, critics and journalists, and I take no credit for them." A curious admission on his part – one must wonder why he chose this route and how it affected his selection process. Was this really a self-imposed "rule", or did Knopf Canada's legal consultants advise this restriction? Are some of the most obvious omissions, and there are a fair number of them, due to a fear of liability?

Well, that would be ironic, wouldn't it? In any case, I offer the following as an example of what Busby puts in and, perhaps as a result of his research directive, leaves out. In one entry Busby identifies Canadian theatre critic Nathan Cohen as the real-life counterpart to the ornery, chronically constipated Seymore Bone, a character in Mordecai Richler's savage farce *The Incomparable Atuk*. Busby credits Ada Craniford for coming up with this factoid in her *Fiction and Fact in Mordecai Richler's Novels* (1992). Ditto for his identification of long-distance swimmer Marilyn Bell as the model for "Canada's Darling" and Atuk's trophy girlfriend, Bette Dolan. But since Craniford does not mention, say, that the character of health and fitness guru Dr Parks was inspired by one Dr Tilney, a former, now forgotten, associate of Ben and Joe Weider, neither does Busby. Not much sleuthing was required to come up with this (admittedly obscure) bit of information. All one had to do was read Mordecai Richler's fiction and his non-fiction.

The parallels are obvious, even by Richlerian standards. In *The Incomparable Atuk* (1963), Dr. Parks presides over a bodybuilding contest, speechifying on the theme: "What You Dare to Dream, Dare to Do." In an article on a bodybuilding contest originally published in an American monthly in the early 60s, and republished in the collection *Home Sweet Home* (1984), Richler tells of the Weiders hiring a Dr Tilney to judge. He, too, has a slogan, which is contained in the article's title: "A Real Canadian Success Story, Or What You Dare to Dream, Dare to Do." Parks is a "doctor of philosophy, divinity, naturopathy" and "world-famous … all over Canada". His flesh-and-blood dybbuk Tilney was even more accomplished, a "doctor of philosophy, divinity, natural law, naturopathy, and chiropractic, and food science". Besides which, he also claimed to be the author of all the self-help booklets – including *How to Make Women Like You*, *How to Develop Leadership Qualities*, and, of course, *Sex Education for the Body Builder* – distributed at the time by the Weider brothers' fitness empire.

Had Busby taken the time to do some reading on his own, he might have mentioned Dr Tilney's fictionalized presence (under the heading "Dr Parks") in the *The Incomparable Atuk* if only to point out that Ben and Frank Weider, founders of the International Bodybuilding Federation, were boyhood acquaintances of Richler's from St. Urbain Street; it was in their capacity as IBF impresarios that they discovered the current governor of California when he was just another muscle-head. That's right, two Jews from Montreal brought about the "Austrian Oak's" rise to power. From little acorns. . .

Should one care? Probably not. These are useless facts. Then again, *Character Parts* is full of useless facts; it's a book of trivia, not a work of serious scholarship. Despite the fact that it could be even more trivial than it already is, I recommend it. ●

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