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A Magazine for *Fifty* Readers

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Poetry, fiction, reviews

Lola by Night

A novel by

Norman Ravvin

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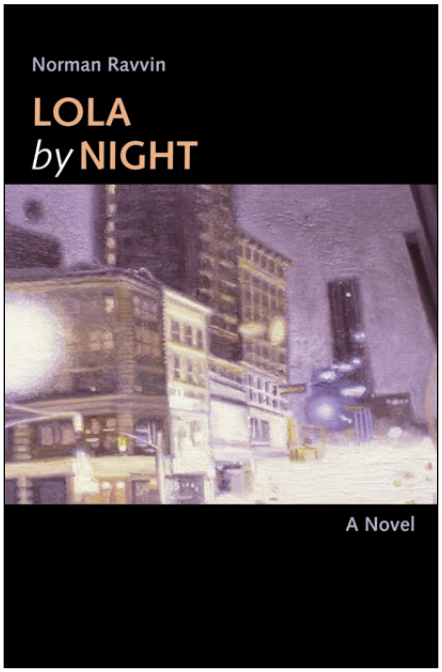

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Poets together

I don't know why April should be considered a suitable month for honouring poetry in (other than the one line of Eliot that comes all too easily to mind). Perhaps it's the evident lyrical strength of a season that begins with spareness and ends, in these parts at least, with a prodigality all the more surprising for being so impatiently awaited. (I'm not thinking only of the weedy flowerpots I can see from my window.) Poetry Month here is soon enough followed by the well promoted shortlistings of the Griffin Prize, the winners of which, Sylvia Legris and Kamau Brathwaite, were announced last week, during a celebration that demonstrated the kind of open-handedness publishers have long since stopped expecting from readers. Canadian poetry may be read; it isn't bought. Without government subsidies, it wouldn't even be published. And yet it is flourishing as never before, if the appearance of three relatively recent anthologies — they all came out in 2005 — is anything to go by.

Open Field, edited by Sina Queyras for Persea Books, was meant to serve as an introduction of "30 contemporary Canadian poets" to the U.S. public. The editor, herself a poet, aimed to show "the full diversity of the country's poetics". I wouldn't say, as the back cover does, that it's an indispensable compendium, portable or stationary, but it is a fresh look at a by no means untilled field and includes among the more readily exportable crop (Atwood, Bowering, Carson, Clarke, Crozier, Dewdney, Lee, Ondaatje, Zwicky) some names possibly new to market (Armstrong, Babstock, Brand, Dalton, Goyette, L'Abbé, Lilburn, Solie, Swift). (Only 29 of the contributors have a teeny bio at the back. "Give me hackneyed words because / they are good," writes the oddly omitted Lisa Robertson, of whom one would have liked to know at least as much as the rest.)

In Fine Form, edited by Kate Braid and Sandy Shreve for Polestar, is both an anthology and a reference text, perhaps mostly the latter, since the selections (all Canadian) have been made to illustrate the many forms in which poems may be written: ballad, blues, couplet, epigram, fugue and madrigal, ghazal, glosa, haiku, incantation, palindrome, pantoum, rondeau, sestina, sonnet, stanza, syllabics, tercet, triolet, villanelle, ending with some curiosities such as the limerick and the lipogram. Not exhaustive, the editors too modestly concede, but pretty thorough, I would say, especially for a collection that mixes the long dead with the (seemingly) just born and manages to be both instructive and highly entertaining. Any poet looking for a jump start might do well to attach his/her metaphorical cables here.

The most interesting anthology is the most contentious. All anthologies are restrictive (show your passport, show your rhyming scheme). Carmine Starnino's *The New Canon* (Véhicule Press) chooses to publish the work of fifty poets born between 1955 and 1975. This is more than simple birthdate reckoning. It is, as he makes (somewhat) clear in his introduction, the assertion of a difference in poetic practice, a difference between a generation that has said – if not everything it had to say – then at least enough to define itself and a generation that is determined to define itself altogether otherwise. "We have become set in our ways," Starnino writes, "and our expectations have thus

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homeplate

Aunthood or how I became Uncle Stacy

ONE HOT AUGUST evening last summer we slept over at my brother-in-law's house. We borrowed his family's basement because Maria and Bill live several bridges, two rivers and one state from our house in New Jersey. The stopover at their house was supposed to be just the chance for a night's sleep on the way to somewhere else. Some time later I realized the hours we spent with them weren't just the opportunity for a bit of company but when I made the transition from being one person to becoming another.

Maria and Bill are really Maria and Bill and Meagan and William and Timothy and Caitlyn. Meagan is about to be ten. William is presently eight. Timothy is five and Caitlyn is three.

Meagan is the living result of one of the greatest days of my life: the day I became Aunt Stacy. It was the fourth greatest thing that ever happened to me after my marriage, my daughter's birth, and the day I found out I wasn't allergic to cats. One May morning my sister-in-law the new mother lay in bed utterly exhausted while her husband stood around with the biggest grin I'd ever seen on his face. Inside the bassinet was an actual person. My own husband and I were instantly and madly in love with her.

The night we slept over is the night I got to be someone even better: Uncle Stacy. That's what Timothy dubbed me in between jumps on the air mattress we brought with us. Uncle Stacy showed up that afternoon when Meagan and her brothers and her sister and my husband sat on the floor of their living room together, laughing and tickling each other. My husband hefted his niece into the air and lifted her upside down again and again as Meagan's brothers begged for their turn in his arms. My small daughter stared at her father and her cousins, then tried to join in the pile of joyful bodies on the floor. At that moment I sat on the couch with Maria and watched them all.

Maria and I tried to talk but we could barely breathe because we were so happy.

At the time of Meagan's birth I had vowed to be the kind of aunt my Aunt Susan was to me when I was growing up: the aunt who secretly hands you candy when your mother isn't looking and buys you lots of cool clothing for your birthday. She's the aunt you almost wish was your own mother if only you didn't have to live in her apartment.

I WAS AUNT Stacy for a few years. As Aunt Stacy I observed my nieces and nephews so closely I could see their faces in my head without looking at photographs. Because we live in another state I only saw them intermittently so my mental photographs were more like short movies.

There's one labelled *Meagan's second birthday* and another labelled *William's first Christmas* and a third labelled *the time Caitlyn rode the dog around the living room*. An entire album fills my heart for each child

Even as I loved them so fiercely it almost hurt, for a long time I didn't want any children of my own. I was involved in their lives but only from far away and with lots of conventions to carefully observe. The day my own daughter was born the rules began to change.

THAT AFTERNOON all my meticulously constructed inner codes crumbled as Aunt Stacy left and Uncle Stacy took her place. Uncle Stacy is the human being who joins in the laughter without wondering why. While Aunt Stacy would have once stared at the scene on the floor a little bewildered, Uncle Stacy sits on the couch and giggles unselfconsciously as loudly as anyone in the room. Aunt Stacy was a visitor here, a liked visitor but someone who really wasn't from the same neighborhood. Uncle Stacy is family.

One day some time very soon my nieces and nephews and even my own daughter will be teenagers. They won't tumble over my husband, asking to be slung over his shoulder or spun around like the Flying Wallendas. I'm not even sure they'll speak to Uncle Stacy very much. After adolescence ends, they'll promptly head off to college and turn into adults in between Christmas and Spring Break. Maria and I will contemplate them then a bit glad and a bit wistful, knowing that being an aunt isn't quite the same when someone's children aren't children anymore. With luck, my sister-in-law and I may graduate to grandmother and great-aunt.

Watching my nieces and nephews has taught me a lot of things. Mostly that time is short. One day Meagan was seven pounds and had the smallest hands I'd seen since my brother was born twenty years before. This summer she tries on lipstick and nail polish. In the fleeting years before our children leave childhood behind, I want to experience moments like the time on the couch and the carpet as fully as I possibly can. So Uncle Stacy is here. Or rather *there*, on the living room carpet, laughing at the top of my voice, with Maria and Meagan and William and Timothy and Caitlyn, with my sister-in-law's family. And, at long last, mine, too.

– Stacy Mintzer Herlihy

Tales of an apron

The soft, worn fabric of my grandmother's apron drapes across my lap. Its pale blue flowers with olive-coloured leaves are faded and the fabric is beginning to succumb to age. I never met my grandmother – she died before I was born – but she is here, with me. Sure, it is just an apron, just a material item that has survived time and landed in my hands. But it can't just be an apron – it is more, so much more.

As a writer, I struggle with expressing my creativity. And so I put on this apron and begin to tap into thoughts of her …

I imagine her wearing her apron while washing endless dishes, cooking meals for her large brood, cleaning her home to make it sparkle despite any cracks or age that it may have shown, and washing and caring for the clothes that her children wore so that they would be presentable and well-groomed. Although my challenges as a writer are not nearly as stressful or taxing, these visions of my Baba encourage me to face my challenges as a writer with patience, hope and the necessary work ethic.

My grandmother – I call her Baba – was a woman of great courage. She raised thirteen children and the last was still a small child when her husband died. I relish the stories of her that my parents and others share with me. I try to piece those stories together to create a picture of this amazing woman. I want to know her, to understand the women in my family who have come before me and have had instrumental roles in the life that I have today.

The stories I hear reveal her to be a practical and creative woman. I've been told that when a pot had a hole in the bottom she repaired it with cloth. I am not really sure how this worked; I haven't been able to figure this out from the explanations of others. With little money, she used what she had and made it work for the good of her family.

I am told that she had magical abilities in the kitchen. With simple ingredients, she created meals that live as legends in my family. My dad along with my aunts and uncles can spend endless time recalling the details of her creations even though it has been nearly 30 years since her death. My mother has spent years trying to perfect her mother-in-law's recipes and although she comes close, I don't think she can ever add the special touch that exists in my father's heart, that only his own mother could add.

In photos, she appears self-conscious – as though she is both embarrassed and delighted that someone would want to take a picture of her. The years of her labour as an incredibly busy mother and wife make her appear tired in the photos, yet there is a vigour and power that cannot be denied in her strong, chiselled features.

I am honoured to possess four things that belonged to my grandmother. Three of those are pieces of jewellry. When I wear them, I feel wealthier than royalty, and I think I can embody her courage and grace. From what I know, my Baba really didn't have a lot of opportunities or special occasions to wear jewellery. After all, there were so many children to care for and she gave birth to them in just over twenty years. So it is her apron that I cherish most because it was a part of her everyday life.

Being a writer, I endure a lot of rejection from editors. A lot of people – many in my own family – don't understand my work. I have an office in my home and I make my own hours – for some people that means I don't have a real job. All of this negativity is discouraging. I have a tendency to complain about it and let it all affect me in destructive ways. But I put on my Baba's apron and remember that she was not a complainer but a worker. I let its soft edges run through my fingers as I focus on my work.

Her faith sustained her and uplifted her. I allow my faith to do the same. The legacy of my Baba is one of kindness, creativity and hope. I strive to honour her memory in the work that I do as a writer and who I am as a woman, wife, daughter and hopefully one day as a mother.

I must confess that sometimes when I am wearing her apron I stop working, turn on some music and start dancing. Holding the bottom corners of the apron, I float around the house, moving in a celebration of life and its wonders – I believe that she would've wanted it that way. I believe, too, that my Baba would smile in my delight of her memory and the joy I have in holding her close.

– Nettie Bozanich

Still trying to learn to stop worrying and love The Bomb

"How did you grow up, Mom?"

"In the usual way," she replied, standing in the doorway.

"I mean, who are you? What were you raised on? What influences you to be who you are?"

"I really don't know what you mean. If by 'what I was raised on' you mean what kinds of things we did, well, we liked to go to the drive-in, or listen to

Little Orphan Annie on the radio, or when I was a little older we liked to go dancing. The same kinds of things kids do now."

It didn't seem much use to ask my mother who she was. I decided to turn to history. What kind of world did my mother grow up in? What kind of place was it? She was born in 1950. She would have been 13 in 1963: *The Year Kennedy Was Shot*, *The Cold War*, *The Bomb*. Is my mother a product of *The Bomb*?

"Mother, were you afraid of *The Bomb*?" She was crouched beneath the kitchen table, scrubbing dried ketchup off of the faded linoleum.

"The what?"

"*The Bomb*, Mother. Did you think about *The Bomb* every day? Did anyone think about *The Bomb* every day?"

"Well, it was in the news. I don't know if I was afraid of any bomb. I do remember the day Kennedy was shot, though. I was sitting in a class in high school and a secretary or someone came rushing in, crying. She told us all that Kennedy had been shot and the teacher's eyes teared up. A couple of students wept."

The same story everyone tells about the day Kennedy was shot. I'm sure 200,000 schoolteachers wept for Kennedy.

"What about you, Mother. Were you upset when Kennedy was shot?"

"No, not really. I guess my mind was still preoccupied with boys, and drive-ins, and *Midnight Cowboy*. It was the first R-rated picture to win an Academy Award, you know. I was still young then. I wasn't thinking about Kennedy or politics or any bomb."

I left the house. Maybe if I looked at the world today, I could ask myself more clearly who my mother was in the same world 35 years ago. I walked down the main strip of the small, New England town we resided in. The streets were peopled with well-to-do yuppies, and the boulevards were lined with beach-style, two-story, yuppie homes. It reminded me of McCarthyism.

Each home looked different, but they all conformed. Their differences were slight, their samenesses were undeniable. New England is McCarthy's wet dream.

Midnight Cowboy was what was important to my mother. That was 1969. She would have been 19. Did my mother only become who she is when she was 19?

The closest I had ever gotten to John Schlesinger was to read *The Day of the Locust*. He didn't write it, but he did do a screen adaptation of it in 1975. My mother would have been 25. She probably didn't have time to go see movies any more by then. She would have been in college. *The Day of the Locust* was written in 1939. My mother wouldn't be born for another 11 years. My mother and I never seem able to meet in history. The novel was before her time, and the film came too late.

History is unfair in many ways. F. Scott Fitzgerald died on December 21st, 1940 of a heart attack, and Nathanael West died on December 22nd, 1940 in a car accident. I wonder if my mother wept for Fitzgerald. I wonder why history murdered both these men while they still believed they were failures.

The fears of my generation are very different from the fears of my mother's. The fears of my generation are fears of ourselves. We're afraid of the water we drink and the food we eat. We're afraid of our guts consuming themselves or liquefying. We're afraid of not getting enough vitamin C or A or E or potassium or calcium. We're afraid of Alzheimer's, osteoporosis, arthritis. My mother's generation was afraid of someone's finger on a button that would wipe out entire American cities. My generation is afraid of our bodies. My mother and I are united in a fear of death. She feared a death that she could not prevent. She feared for her life while it was in the hands of another. My generation fears for our lives while they are in our own hands, under our own jurisdiction.

My mother's generation was one that relied on rationality. All things could be explained. They liked films like *Psycho*, where all is revealed.

There are no strings left unfastened. The most extreme problems could be explained through aberrations of the mind. Mine is a generation that believes there can be aberrations of the brain, but how can there possibly be aberrations of the mind? My generation enjoys the films of Spike Jonze.

Things are better left unexplained. There can be a portal that shoots a man into another man's head. It's really there. It's not a psychotic delusion. It's really there, and that's okay. I'll accept that. Mine is a generation that accepts because it has never gotten explanations. From our swiss cheese educations to our around-the-bush-beating politicians, we are never explained to, and we've accepted this. This is normal. Aberrations of the mind are a fallacy, but a portal to a man's mind is good fiction to my generation. My mother would say such a film is absurd. "It doesn't make any sense." You're damn right it doesn't.

My mother stood in the doorway of out quaint, New England home. She was waiting to greet me. She looked a great deal like Jane Russell. I leaned against the doorframe opposite her.

"Mother, do you think your personality is more than the films, the history, the books, the music of your time?"

"What, honey? I don't understand."

It suddenly struck me that maybe my mother was the wrong person to ask. How could my mother know who she was. This is a woman who's terrified of the oven exploding. Our oven is not a gas oven.

– Sonya Boht

the snow Buddha

it snowed 5cm last nite &
having nothing else
to do
we set out to build
a snowman
(used to doing such things
in Manitoba &
Northern B.C.)
but somehow
along the way
the snow took the form of
the Buddha

when we noticed that the snow
was meant to be
the Buddha
we set out to build him
perfectly
and so
we crafted perfect belly,
arms, crossed legs & head,
from the plentiful
wet snow

something
out of nothing

then we moved onto
the face,
the ears, the nose, the
jolly grin &
last of all,
after choke cherry jewels,
rosehip nipples &
pine cone belly button
we fashioned
the eyes
where the likeness of
the Buddha
is truly found

then with bare hands
we pat his body down
the warmth from our skin
melting
the top layer of snow
forming
a layer of
thin ice over
the Buddha
to protect him against
the harsh realities of
our world

despite our efforts, our
tender loving care,
someone decided to
smash the snow Buddha
later that nite
when no one was watching,
turning the Buddha back into
just another pile
of snow

something
back into
nothing

– Sheldon Birnie

rose

in the spring mist
he carries a steel ladder
on his shoulder like a giant
silver flower stem.

he props it against the
wall of a building reaching
up to the 2nd floor where a
woman waits behind a
red curtain.

as he climbs he listens to
the music from her buzzing
alarm clock radio grow
louder with each step.

first he is thinking of police
then honeybees, finally
nothing.

the song about you

the song is perfect to you.
everyone else hates it.

you listen to it in your car and then
your friends start groaning
to skip it. you pretend
not to hear them.

i'm one of the passengers.
i hate the song too but i love you
for doing that.

years later i will hear this
terrible music again and remember
how beautiful you were

dreamily swaying your head
and tapping the steering wheel
as we floated through
a mess of traffic.

knees reddened by prayer

remember you are sensitive
like the machines that measure earthquakes

and not like a china swan
perched on the mantlepiece.

when the dark night comes raging
we may be surprised to see you survive it

we who thought you would be
the first to fall. you little freak, you

stumbling alien with your inky fingers
and xray goggles. you will be there

amidst the ruins, humming as you
sweep up the glass of our shattered eyes.

carrying all of us in your skirt
like seashells.

– Raoul Fernandes

Norma DePledge

Annie's Watch

Annie (awkward, with graceless hair, a girl on the verge of change, twelve years old, breasts beginning to form) prepared to begin her wait. She watched her father cross the meadow between her and the trees and disappear into the dense brush that skirted the edge of a small lake nestled against a cliff. From the top of the cliff, water spumed over the rim and hurtled through a hundred and fifty-odd feet of air to crash in froth. Where Annie waited, across the lake from the cascade, the air was heavy with moisture from the spray. It collected in droplets on the loose hairs across her forehead, drew wisps from her pony tail and made them curl.

The undergrowth was densely shadowed. She watched her father disappear into the heavy vegetation.

Beyond the brush, the cliff rose steeply, a perpendicular face, veiled with whipcords of water that ribboned down the rock on either side of the main chute. In a few minutes, her father would reappear just above the treetops near the base of the cliff. His route would be to the left of the falls, away from the slick rock that would be polished by the rivulets. Five, ten minutes maximum, he said. Then she'd be able to see him throughout the remainder of the climb.

She looked down at the watch he'd given her for her twelfth birthday – his own watch, the one he'd worn on his wrist for as long as she could remember. She traced the familiar leather strap, the round face spanning the width of her wrist. "Don't you want it any more, Dad?" she'd asked.

"I want you to have it."

"But what will you use."

"Let me worry about that."

She looked back to the wall where he would soon be climbing. Eyes fixed on the route of his imaginary progress, she groped in her pack with one hand, feeling for her rain cape. In front of the rock where she'd stationed herself, she spread the cape on the ground and moved onto it, pulling her knees up to her chest.

Ten minutes crept past. She wiped away the drops of water that had begun to trickle down her forehead, stood up, nervously checked the meadow behind her, but – as he'd said – there was nothing out there that would hurt her. She crouched down again, her back pressed against the solid curve of the rock, and brushed her hand over the front of her t-shirt. A nap of mist smoothed to an even wetness and soaked into the cloth. She blinked the dampness from her eyelashes.

Beneath the canopy of trees where her father had disappeared, the undergrowth was thick and dark. She squinted at the place where he had entered, a ragged space, an invisible black interior like in a movie when someone climbs down into a tunnel or a cave and disappears while you watch, stomach knotting.

She shifted her position, her eyes scanning back and forth across the cliff where he would reappear. Rock, scrub trees, crevices, the thundering water. Fifteen minutes. Half a tv program. One piano practice. Her breath sounded fluttery in her ears. She leaned her head back to look up at the sky. It was clear blue and open. The sun would soon

reach her. It would dry her shirt. It would make everything bright.

As she shifted again, the mist that had begun to bead and pool on the surface of her rain cape suddenly spilled along a fold and soaked the side of her leg. The cold shock made her jump to her feet, rubbing her leg as if something had stabbed her. In anger, she grabbed the cape, shook it hard and stuffed it back into her pack. Then she pressed her fists to her face and rocked herself as she used to do when she was a little girl, waiting at the kitchen table, her feet dangling, she too big then for a highchair but too small for a grown-up's chair, and when she used to stand by the front room window, watching through the lace curtains, or out by the front gate, peering through the filigree, her fingers gripping a cast-iron bar, waiting for him to come. And when he finally did, she would reach up, her arm stretched toward his hand, he so tall and grand and strong above her.

She moved toward the edge of the pool, squatted, picked a stone out of the water, dropped it back with a plop. She selected another, round and flat, pitched it across the surface. It skipped once, ricocheted off a boulder, arced up into the air. She was leaning forward to find another when, from the corner of her eye, she caught a spurt of movement. She spun around. The flash of a white tail. Three deer. They bounded into the undergrowth. Then everything was still again – except the reverberation in her head, the white roar of the falls. Hurriedly she dug her cape out of her pack once more, wrapped it tight around her shoulders, and held herself.

AND THEN, THERE he was, just as he'd said he would be, part way up the rock to the left of the pool. She gasped with relief. She was safe now. She would be able to follow his progress. She would be connected to him by an invisible thread.

His hands searched the rock surface, then his feet. He found a hold, moved up, began the search again. He was splayed like an insect against a wall, his left leg bent hard at the knee, his toe secure against a nub of rock, his right leg outstretched, tiptoed, his left arm hugging the rockface, while his right parsed the Braille of the surface.

Suddenly, his arm jerked back as a piece of rock pulled away. For a second, the roar of the falls in Annie's ears stopped. But his weight shifted and he tossed the rock to the pool below. She followed its descent to the spot where it should have made a splash, but it disappeared into the turbulence without registering. She shuddered away the water that had rilled along her jaw.

At last, the sun broke over the rim of the cliff. It deepened the shadow that her father climbed in, shining in her eyes and making rainbows in the mist. She squinted through them. Her shirt began to steam.

He was half way, now. Harder to see. Another rock broke loose, bounced once off the rock face, dropped into the whitewater below and was gone, but his hand did not pause as it sought another handhold. A teardrop of water ran down her neck between her new breasts. Her hand fluttered to her chest, brushing away the water as if it were an insect.

A CRACK NEAR the top of the cliff was green with vines and scrub brush. She saw him head for that, climb inside the crevice and be swallowed once again. Now he would be scrambling through vegetation, moving fast, grabbing onto roots, pulling himself upward, quicker, nimbly. Her eyes followed his imagined movement even though she couldn't see him. He would be travelling faster inside the shelter of the crevice; she felt sure of it. Her eyes climbed upward with him as he grasped branches, hoisting himself over rock. She burst out at the top, expectant, breathing heavily even though she hadn't budged. "Now," she murmured. But he didn't appear.

More minutes passed. She decided to start up the crevice again. She would go more slowly this time. She would take into account the tangle of vegetation. She hadn't calculated accurately – she hadn't anticipated the obstacles that must be there, she'd misjudged the length of a step. He would pause to evaluate the route. Or double back around an overhang. Whereas she had rushed headlong, so urgent to get him to the top where she would be able to see him again and not be so alone. She hadn't moved logically. She dropped her eyes back down the crevice, began a slow creep upward.

This time, she arrived at the top puffing only slightly, expectant, yet he wasn't there, and when she realized it, she was suddenly out of breath, gasping like a swimmer struggling at the surface. She clamped her lips tight together to make herself stop. She put her hand over her mouth to slow the breathing; all the while her eyes scoured the ridge in case she'd missed him, in case he'd come out somewhere else, but he wasn't there. She fumbled with the watch, sliding it up her wrist into view. One hour and thirteen minutes. Then it slipped sideways again as it always did because even with the extra holes punched in the strap, it couldn't be made small enough for a twelve-year-old girl.

The sun beat into her eyes and curled the moisture on her rain cape into steam. She felt suffocatingly hot under the plastic, so she pulled it off and dropped it to the ground. The ridge was too bright now. She shaded her face from the glare.

He emerged from the fissure onto the rim of the cliff, a few feet from where the water broke over the lip and began its hundred and fifty foot plunge into the whirlpool below. He turned in her direction and waved.

"Dad!" she called out, waving back frantically. "Dad!" She screamed at the top of her lungs but her voice was

swallowed in the swirl of mist and turbulence. It didn't even make a ripple.

Her breath caught and she wiped the water from her face. It was running into her eyes. She wanted him to come down now. She wanted to go back to camp. She wanted to get a tin pail and pick the berries they'd seen along the trail. She wanted to make lunch within sight of the tent. She wanted them to go down to the smooth sea's edge together and scour the breakfast dishes with salt water and sand, and find shells and make a necklace and eat their supper sitting on the ground.

The sun flared behind him, burning the edge of his silhouette like charred paper. She beckoned him to come down but he gave no indication that he saw her. He was bending over. He was taking off his boots, stepping out into the stream. He didn't say he was going to do that. He said he would come straight back. He said he would go up quickly and then come directly back down. He said that when he got back, the rest of the day would belong to Annie. He said so.

His body was backlit, like an eclipse. It was burning her eyes. He took a step out into the water, tested it as if he were climbing once again, shifted his weight, took another. With each step, he braced himself, his legs wide apart, steeled against the rushing force. There had to be a logical reason that he was crossing to the other side. He never did things that weren't logical. The water swirled up to his knees.

He turned to face her, his arms outspread, a backlit figure leaning dizzily against the sky. And then he jumped.

KURT HALLIDAY

Green

THE ONLY ETHICAL thing to eat, of course, would be oneself.

I'm sorry I said that. Especially to Crazy Steve. The one who lives the truth that extreme ideology and extreme psychology go together. If you wanted to destroy the Left, you'd invent the Greens. Maybe Feminism. But this is not for Steve. Not now. I'm this old fat smart busy guy forgiving over the top of his glasses at the hopeless was-gonna who couldn't leave the methamphetamine of the political moment behind.

In the john, staring my mirror me down about this, I feel non-okay. An intruder in somebody's quality of life. The poor kid's only been making a self for himself, after all. And a few thousand joints. For fifty years. Mind you, it's true the Greens are what happened to environmentalism. A politics too important to be left to the street was put on a platter for every walking insecurity on the planet. By means of the standard libertarianism. And here am I, I frustrate, spending my life on his. Mirroring his mirroring. Firmly pissed, I enjoy my way back to the party.

It's been eons since I wrote "Green: the story". In those days, of course, I was a recovering Green – and, honestly, at best, a drive-by Green – and tonight's curiously full-spectrum reunion was safely somewhere in a merely economic future. The work to be done then was the work of feeling safe that I had left behind me those who didn't get one's witheringest.

Now I'm out of the john and mentally writing this as growed-up *reportage* – an essay. I'm peering through the romantic blue smoke right at [some names may be changed for reasons of emotional distance] Three Steve and Red Steve and Howard. We're semi-remembering Gloria, who could only do the most politically correct stuff – the stuff that made other people wonder how extreme or political [the words were interchangeable for a time] they'd look to non-Greens and the various flavors of Left. And Howard's having to get our unlimited approval for his well-out-of-print textbook, the political speeches of himself as the candidate there in 1984 and exactly how it came to be that *some* food tonight isn't vegetarian.

HOWARD'S HOUSE'S officially wonderful. There's a local architect, whom everybody nod-approves with a smile, who looked at what Ernie the handyman did to the wood sheddy room – made the wood line the walls and hold books and he got some inset curvy window frame parts from Home Depot – and pronounced it intelligent. The architect did. In a Canadian way. Which is to say, more or less. And one is sitting there wanting to say *it's not the effing Pantheon!* But Howard's house is officially wonderful. Because obviously Howard needs the attention.

Howard was kind of dumped by the world. As a retiring full professor, he became a target. The old bull at the back of the herd. When he came home from Cambridge one year, he found his wife had hidden all the knives. It's his version, of course, but the story *is* … his wife had slipped a psychological disc or two and gone further into her life-depression. The one that fit with the firmish Feminism she was growing in

her other identity. The one that stood in for a career. She wasn't important and had to moonlight for the local press, which followed from bearing children, etc. Goddamn biology! One three-hundred-thousand dollar house later – and this is in the Eighties, although they were Canadian dollars – Howard washes up here in fabulous Asscrack, Ontario. He's got his laundry tub of Glenn Gould, half his pension and not a lot else. He didn't even have the subscription to *Harper's* in those days! Years later, we find out his politically correct female lawyer was best buds with his wife's politically correct female lawyer. His politically correct female lawyer worked closely with other politically correct female lawyers clearly and presently to do everything they could to plain hurt men. Which is part of a sick extreme big thing that happened to the whole so-called Left, if not Feminism. And naturally can't be said here in the Green offing. So yes. Howard's place is wonderful.

And talk drifts away. To somewhere safe. The barricades.

To Dubya, for instance. How dumb is that?

It's the 2004 election. Kerry vs. Dubs. We strongly characterize these guys on a personal level. The son couldn't possibly be elected, in the same sense that Ronald Reagan could not possibly be elected in 1980, because he's a meat puppet for the military-industrial complex. And everybody can see that. The Republican national convention has just wrapped up. The room is momentarily divided between those who lived through the Arnie slice and those who did not. I try to bring us back with talk about my novel-or-web site, *Once Upon A Time In Freedonia*. That's what I'm mainly always writing these days. I've started it eleven times and feel I'm getting rather well. Howard's a shrink, named Howard Goldstein, in *Freedonia*. The judge has ordered personal growth. Actually for Cheney. Apparently for Dubs. Cheney of course really runs the thing. Dubs has to do the personal growth. I don't get to say my plot, though. Red Steve and Crazy Steve are popping out for a smoke. The sense and sensimilla kind. The news hour's over.

PERSONAL CATCHING-UP shines the spotlight and casts no shadows. There's me and my encounter with an antibiotic, the one that turned my ten-hour day into a two-hour day, but I shake this down into an opportunity to get some focus, like usual. And there's Ron.

Ron's not old and fat and slow and legible. He hasn't changed. I tell him he's a sonofabitch.

He ran off and spawned – had kids – like most of us. He did planning when most left-over intellectuals who found themselves lost on the beaches of *academe* at early-middle-age did policy. He's on wife three.

Ron started with one of those beautiful minds and ran into a father, also called Ron. Big Ron did the usual to the kid and Ron grew up with certain inversions, including a voice that's not quite with us and a detached retina. In a way, he's like me. A not-really-discontent survivor of civilization. This ontological not-being-totally-not-okay with the world's a Green shame we share.

JULIE WAS ONE of the original voices of the Kingston Greens in 1984. A tape we made, which Howard plays once after calling for order – at which point we ask him if he's calling for order, which is clever because of his ever-unavoidable anarcho-communism, and then we say it's okay because it's academic order – this tape features her voice and of course moves on to Howard. And Howard puts on an interview of himself by a local radio personality with an apparent learning disability, in which he, Howard, quotes a friend from the Fifties. But we're with Julie.

She's still out there, wondering about having kids. She's forty-two. And not sure what happened. In 1984, of course, you had the real Goldstein – Betty Friedan's real name – and 51% of the population. And it was like 51% of the population, all the women and girls in the world, really did march. A thing was happening. They got the Feminist "click." *Ms.* and whatever totally ruled. NOW made the news. One day they were burning bras and the next day they were closing down the corporate agenda. Starting of course with pornography. If you recall. The Redstockings had a manifesto. Lesbian socialist separatist radical feminists were open to becoming Lesbian socialist separatist radical feminists *of colour*. And then. Somehow. It was like there was only a bitter, nasty, vicious hard little core of determined, extremist, self-interested people who knew what was really happening. And it was the size of your pee aitch dee got you in. And. Of course she can have kids without a man or male. She's not sure whether to use "man" or "male" in this venue here tonight. But. She just. Wonders what happened. Is all. And. That's why she's here.

MOST OF US know why we're here. Because Howard invited us.

Or, more accurately, not Howard. It was Vern.

He's in Toronto for the Toronto Film Festival. He drives in, every year, from the west coast. Which is a thing to be taken seriously in itself. Even though it's only the Canadian west coast. The one about weather.

He's in Toronto for the Festival. He "does" film. And. He thought the time was ripe. So. He called Howard.

For Howard, this isn't a plan. It's just Howard.

For Vern Molloy, this is a weirdly key piece of an unfolding drama which is not about him because he's not important, okay, successful or focused.

He wrote this piece called *Fear & Loathing In The*

Academy when he was in the academy.

He was then out.

RON AND VERN'RE buds with Red Steve. RS, if you can get him away from CS, which would, of course, be Crazy Steve, talks economy. He's an educated, and maybe informed, version of the classic non-organized-crime-identified union council guy. He talks about living wages and how people have to live. The libertarian or egoistic idea that there are individuals and personal choice he doesn't talk about.

We go with that.

Americans especially are radically individualized, isolated, desperate and sad. The bizarre, and media-driven, insurgency of fundamentalist religion, can be explained as aggression and competition in every aspect of life except the dull, nervous release of the ersatz community these poor things "feel" – experience would be too generous a term – in church. God giveth what the rest of life, except for advertising and porn and shopping and sports and racist slurs and CNN and gambling and systematic substance abuse and collecting and country & western, basically don't. He giveth release.

Fundamentalist religion is a symptom, much as it is in *The Handmaid's Tale*, with Julie approving, of the alienation of the mode of production.

RS is working on an underground but hopeful software that will show the masses which company owns which other company.

And this will start a thing.

Maybe not the Revolution.

I USED TO wonder about was I Left or Left-over or what? Was the Left alive? Where was the Left on (pick some issue)? Where was the Left? What if the Left was over and I was the only one still capitalizing left?

There would be a church. With a church hall. And in the church hall would be the church ladies. Of all sexes. All seventy-three officially funded sexes. No one of which had the answer. Every one of which wanted co-operation. Only some of which were anarchist. A few of which understood anarchist. Howard being the leader. Or Anarch. Sorry, Howard.

And I would leave the church hall, which was throbbing, red and swollen with Unitarians and folk singers and pot-knowers and just-ex-Hippies and professional vegans and the righteous in general. And I would look back and wonder not where the wonder was but where the explanation was. Because. Three people in Kingston actually knew anything philosophical, historical or even just plain ol' sociological about the world.

I'M LOOKING AT a couple Steves and Ron. I mention this article in *The* recent *New Yorker*. The one with Dick Cheney on the cover getting his blood pressure taken by a sensitive and patient-looking MD who pumps Dick up under an indicator marked with Homeland Security indications – *Low*, *Guarded*, *Elevated*, *High*, *Severe* – and colours to match. *Severe* being red, which is for angry. Get angry now, says *Severe*. *Low* being blue, which is for reasonable. Get reasonable now, says *Low*.

I mention this article in *The* recent *New Yorker*.

The article's by a political scientist or somebody very much trapped in that paradigm.

It says that maybe 10% of people actually know political programs, agendas, ideologies, movements and systems.

I look at the Steves and Ron.

It says that maybe 30% of voters don't really vote. They respond on a gut level. To tone of voice. Use of colour. Sparkles in eyes. Hair. Skin. The word visceral floats up. The joke, and somebody's marketplace-of-ideas-acceptable thesis, is that this is "low-information rationality."

We smile. We did philosophy.

We know what dummies there be.

I look at the Steves and Ron.

I wonder re or i.e. the Greens. Is it possible the kooks took over because they had the energy, they were mad, they made the noise?

Is it possible [that] the personal isn't political because the political is now more or less just shared personality disorder?

I would never say this, of course.

It could like majorly ruin the evening.

I fall back on food. But not the one about eating yourself. I use the kinder, gentler one. I say the problem with vegetarian cooking is you run outta vegetarians.

I set them off.

They go around again.

Salvatore Difalco

The Venetian

One evening back in 1999, Giuseppe, the *barista* at Bar Italia in Toronto's Little Italy, introduced me to the Venetian. His name was Antonio Gallo – thin, balding, bearded, with a great beak of a nose and horn-rimmed glasses. He looked intellectual, one can *look* so, or at the very least like a species of professor. Giuseppe informed me that the man had only recently come to Canada and spoke no English. Indulge him, he told me since he knew I spoke passable Italian. I introduced myself; Antonio limply shook my hand, said he was pleased to make my acquaintance. He had a raspy voice and spoke with a sharp Venetian cadence. I felt awkward at first but when he detected Sicilian in my accent he inquired about my family and listened to what I had to say with interest. I told him how my parents had married by proxy. My father was already living in Canada. One day his barber presented him with a photograph of his niece, a beautiful blue-eyed girl from Palermo, Sicily. My father was impressed. You need a wife, the barber told him. Carmela is a good girl. After an exchange of letters, a written proposal and acceptance, a dual ceremony followed, one in Canada, one in Sicily, and that girl embarked to North America as my father's new wife. A few years later she became my mother. And they loved each other, Antonio said, almost to himself. I remembered how deeply my mother mourned my father's death. Yes, they did, I told him. I think they loved each other very much.

Melissa and I were on the decline after two intense years together. I had wanted to break up with her in February but guilt and sexual jealousy had sent me scurrying back. But she had changed since the aborted break-up, had become more secretive, less generous, less humorous. Naturally the woman had a right to protect herself, given what had happened – she no longer trusted my intentions, or my commitment to her. But I sensed that something else was going on. I had never been unfaithful to Melissa, and had assumed the same for her. We had agreed early on to be honest with each other if we strayed, but it's difficult to do that when the time comes. You clam up, feel guilty, afraid, protective, angry – in the end you say nothing and just let the thing play out as it will.

Giuseppe had shaved his head that morning and had applied a skin lotion that caused it to shine under the bar-lights. I paid a fortune for the shit, he confessed, rubbing a paper serviette over his head. I loved Bar Italia in the late afternoon. It was beautifully cool and quiet, far less trafficked than at lunch and early evening when it thronged with yuppies, artist-types, and locals. I rested my arms on the cool marble counter and sipped an iced latte that seemed impossibly delicious. A few regulars sat around sipping espresso, reading, lost in their thoughts. Giuseppe asked me what I made of Antonio. He seems harmless enough, I said, a little opinionated maybe. He loves Toronto, can't say enough about it. And he did love the city – though I thought he was exaggerating at times, going on about air-conditioned subways and multilingual street signs. This was a man who had lived in Venice for crying out loud. How could he be so impressed by Toronto, given that? Perhaps he simply found Toronto a very liveable city, unlike the museum of Venice. Toronto was a city of the future, evolving and growing by the moment; Venice, for all its beauty, was a relic, a thing of the past, with nothing to look forward to except the encroaching sea.

Giuseppe served me a glass of ice water and asked me where Melissa was; she usually accompanied me for a late afternoon drink. She's working, I told him. She had a gig researching a music documentary, and was meeting with her producer, Gary, and then going to a business dinner with some investors. She's what again? Giuseppe asked. A researcher, I said but he had wandered off to the end of the bar.

HE TALKED ABOUT Doges that evening and told me that Venice wouldn't survive the twenty-first century. All the technology and engineering in the world couldn't turn back the tide. Venice was doomed to be submerged. I asked him why he had come to Toronto and he told me it was a long story – he had a bachelor uncle here, his last living relative, sad really, no one left to continue the line. I assumed that Antonio was also a bachelor, though I gathered from the way he ogled pretty girls in the café that he liked the opposite sex. He inquired about my relationship with Melissa. I told him I had been seeing her for a couple of years. You live together? he asked. No, I said. I often stayed at her place but wasn't prepared to give up my own yet. If he had asked me the same question a month ago I would not have said that.

SHE HAD FINISHED off one bottle of wine and uncorked a second, her teeth a dark red, her movements languid, hazy. I switched on the lamp in the corner and sat on the sofa. She wasn't talking so I didn't press the issue. I removed my shoes and socks. You're not planning to stay, are you? she asked. Well, I said. She didn't want me to spend the night. Why not? I asked, but I knew why. Tears filled her eyes. Wine made her sentimental, except it wasn't that this time.

GIUSEPPE HAD BEEN studying *aikido* for years and liked to talk about his instructor, a fellow called Mo. Just Mo. From the sounds of it he was a strange cat, maybe a little too serious for his own good. He can kill a man with his bare hands in ten seconds, Giuseppe told me. That long? I said. Seriously, Giuseppe said, Mo is extraordinary. Yes, I thought, a man I want to hang out with, learn from. Giuseppe was growing a goatee. I asked him about it. I'm bored with my face, he said. Ever get bored with your own face? I didn't know how to answer. Bored wasn't the right word for how I felt about it. We came to a wall in the conversation; Giuseppe moved on to grind coffee beans. I sat there for a long time resting my elbows on the cool marble bartop, my face in my hands.

THEY WERE LUNCHING at Sotto Voce, this tony little place across the street from Bar Italia. I happened to be walking by; I saw them at a table engaged in an intense *tête à tête*. Sparsely bearded, neckless, insipid, Gary had nothing going for him except his producer status. On any other plane, physical, intellectual, artistic, he would have been what he was, untalented and weak. But at fifty, and somewhat powerful in his field, he commanded respect – women in the business thought he was hot. His confidence, and his power, gave him sex appeal, among other things. It was simple. I understood the situation. Even though Melissa seemed to be hanging onto Gary's every word, I didn't stop and make a scene.

I SPENT A COUPLE of days in my bedroom. My roommate, Pat, was in Saskatchewan visiting his sister. I welcomed the solitude. I cried a lot. I felt foolish that I'd let a beautiful girl like Melissa get away from me. On the other hand she wasn't perfect. She drank a lot, and I detested her drunken personality, though others found it comical, charming. Still, nothing had been finalized between us, and during those two days an ember of hope still glowing in my heart gained light and warmth. I entertained the possibility of reconciling with her – doing what I needed to repair the breach – and then moving on to the next phase of our relationship. I wasn't ready to give up yet and if it had become some kind of contest between Gary and me, then I was game. But my bravado felt forced. A deeper part of me knew I was going through the motions, maybe for the sake of pride, or to finish off that chapter of my life with a flourish.

IL GATTO NERO was located down the street from Bar Italia. The proprietor, Michael Conte, had a hard head and a sharp tongue and I didn't care for his ball-breaking, but it came with the turf. But Bar Italia's doors didn't open until 11:00 a.m. and my yearning for an espresso superseded any animus toward Michael. Stranger, he said, now you come – and I know why. I know. But tell me something – is my coffee fine? Is it? It's fine, I said. That's all I want to hear, he said, that my coffee's fine. It's music to me. Antonio entered the bar wearing a brown wool sweater. Michael rolled his eyes. Antonio said he had a summer cold, awful business. Speak English, Michael said. Antonio shrugged. What's the problem? I asked Michael. Tell your friend here to speak English in my joint, he said very seriously. But he's Italian, I said, from Venice. I know where he's from, said Michael, I know.

MARIO BUONANOTE, ONE of the Bar Italia regulars, pulled up that afternoon in a tank top, his short bunchy muscles contracting. I just finished working out, he announced. Despite his impressive musculature, Mario stood an inch short of five feet. Giuseppe, hook me up with an iced espresso and a bucket of cold water. Giuseppe got to the task, faintly smiling. You don't work out enough, Mario said to me. Your body – you used to be an athlete, no? That's right, I said. Played some football back in university. Mario nodded rapidly. Yeah-yeah, he said. I was always too small. I wrestled. Won the Ontario's my senior year.

I could probably kick your ass. I don't think so, I said. No? Mario said. Hey, Giuseppe, do you think I can kick his ass. You wanna kiss his ass? Giuseppe said, squinting. Not kiss, Mario said. Kick, kick. Giuseppe burst out laughing, and I was debating whether to settle the issue right there and then.

WE HAD DINNER at Senior's on St. Clair Avenue, an old-school steakhouse I used to frequent in the eighties. I was surprised it was still going strong. I was also surprised at how little it had changed. Melissa wore a black dress with dark green playing card symbols: clubs, diamonds, hearts, and spades. She looked happy. She drank two martinis before the steaks arrived. She shaved her words. I probed, trying to uncover the state of her heart but she proved to be elusive. Let's just have fun tonight, she said. Let's pretend this is a first date. Sounded fine by me. I tried to recall our first date. Actually it occurred in her bedroom over iced lattes one tumid July afternoon. Later we agreed it was the closest thing to insanity we had ever experienced. But we never repeated that performance. It was a hard act to follow.

AGAIN YOU, Michael said. His hair had been trimmed too short on the sideburns and his ears yawned. What if Bar Italia opened its doors at eight o'clock in the morning – then what? I'd still come here, Mike, I said, or I'd miss your winning personality, your rosy outlook on life. Here comes your friend, he grumbled. What is it with him? I don't know, I said. Antonio briskly marched to the bar. He seemed angry or put off about something, muttering and clenching his jaws. Antonio, I said, *Cosa mi dicci? E*, he said, *sopratutto uno cornuto ma datto il ditto cosi* – he gestured. I told him someone gave me the finger every day. No big deal. *E pure*, he said, *mi fa male la gamba – madonna come e dolorosa.* His leg ached. His face convinced me of his pain. Michael stood by the espresso machine, gaping at us.

MELISSA WALKED AWAY from me. The sun had set, the warm evening smelled of barbecue, exhaust fumes, and garbage. She said she wanted a good night's sleep – she was meeting Gary tomorrow and needed a clear head. Gary's a married man, she added; he has two teen-aged daughters and loves his wife. This was supposed to quiet my concerns but I wasn't so easily thrown off the trail. Anyway, she said, he doesn't find me attractive. That meant what exactly? I didn't know. The thing was dead, I should have just buried it. I was holding back out of vanity perhaps. I walked home, passing pubs and cafés full of young nubile bodies and optimistic, sensuous faces. Look at them, I thought, living. I wanted to join in the exuberance, take my shirt off and throw myself in there, but I knew I would have only drawn blank stares or maybe gasps of horror.

SHOW ME A FEW moves, I said to Giuseppe one overcast July afternoon. Hey, he said, you're not seeing Melissa any more? Well, I don't know, I said, why? Nothing, he said, I just never see her with you any more. I noted that he didn't say he didn't see me with her, implying he had seen her with someone other than me. That was fine; he didn't have to spell it out. Swing at me, he said. I threw a wide right at his head. He redirected my arm with his just enough for my fist to miss his jaw. Then he used my momentum to pull me toward him in a circular motion, around and around, until I corkscrewed to the floor, my arm wrenched behind me and Giuseppe's knee in the small of my back. That was pretty cool, I told him as I stood up, brushing myself off and stretching out a kink in my shoulder blade. I resented him for putting me on the ground. Let me show *you* something, I said. I had studied *ju-jitsu* as a teenager and still knew a move or two. Without too much difficulty I locked Giuseppe's left arm and forced him to his knees. His bald head turned red and he yelped in pain. I held on for a few seconds longer than necessary before I released him.

I THINK I MIGHT settle here, Antonio mused one evening at Bar Italia. I have found a good rhythm – his English still betrayed him, he admitted, so he preferred conversing with me in Italian. My Italian had improved considerably since I had met him. He gently corrected my more egregious errors and lavishly praised any progress I made. I must say that I'd grown addicted to our conversations; there was a music to Italian, and an emotional register, that English simply didn't have. I asked him apropos of nothing how his love life was going. He removed his glasses and rubbed them with tissue paper. His brown eyes looked liquid and sad. My problem, he said, is that I like young women – in their twenties. Women in their thirties are bitter and I am not attracted to women in their forties. I'd like to have kids one day, perhaps sooner rather than later. I am fifty years old. I am not rich, nor am I handsome. All I have is my personality, my experience, my story.

SOMEHOW WE WOUND up in the Beaches on our bicycles. Melissa insisted on stopping at Gary's house. He and his family lived near the water. I don't know why I agreed to go along. The sun must have burned my brain. He lived in a beautiful brick and glass home facing Lake Ontario. He seemed to be expecting us. Pleasant surprise, he said falsely. He was wearing shorts and sandals. His knees looked like ostrich eggs. His toes were broad and hairy. His wife and kids were out of town for a week. Can I get you guys a beer? he asked. I wanted water; Melissa nodded to the beer. We took seats on the veranda. I hated being there. I wanted to get on my bicycle and leave. Gary led us into the backyard and showed us his garden. It was impressive as gardens go, but I didn't give a damn. I had to pee. Gary told me to go in through the sliding glass doors and turn

left off the kitchen, last door. The bathroom colour scheme disturbed me: black and pink tiles, black toilet bowl, pink sink, flamingo shower curtains, pink and black soaps, pink toilet paper – *pink toilet paper* – black and pink walls, all of it too much for my eyes. I glanced out the window, which overlooked the garden, for relief. Melissa and Gary sat on a bench with their backs to me, very close together. For a moment he put his arm around her shoulder and said something in her ear that made her laugh. Then he kissed her neck and looked up at me.

MY HEAD ACHED one morning over coffee. Sensing my discomfort, Michael spared me his jibes. I had to find a job soon; my funds were running more than low. I didn't know how I'd pay my August rent. Antonio came in for his morning espresso sporting an azure neck kerchief. The Italians were playing a World Cup qualifier. The bar was electric, conversations more animated than usual for a morning, a palpable restlessness afflicting everyone. Even Michael admitted suffering from pre-game apprehension. I asked who the Italians were playing but no one supplied an answer. Antonio said something to a man ordering espresso that sounded like normal, unaccented English – but that seemed so improbable I dismissed it and blamed the noise level for distorting what I'd heard. Antonio turned and looked at me with a strange expression. At that moment I felt I didn't know the man at all.

Then later that day I saw him again at Bar Italia and in contrast to his morning performance, he was effusive and chatty, grabbing my hands with excitement as he told me the. Italians had won 2-0, Vieri and DelPiero providing the markers. What a strike force the *azzuri* had! I asked Antonio if he missed Italy at times like this and for a moment he seemed mystified – then I realized I had asked him the question in English and restated it in Italian. He smiled and said yes, at times like this it would have been a joy to be in a proper piazza celebrating the great victory with his people. His chief criticism of Toronto was that it had no piazzas. Antonio ordered a beer from Giuseppe, who stood behind the bar with his head bandaged up with gauze and tape. He hadn't said anything about his injury but I felt obliged to ask. Mo, he said, lost his mind this morning. I don't know what I did to tick him off but I've never seen him so angry. Thought he was going to kill me. Maybe you should find another master, I suggested. That's what Mo said, Giuseppe muttered. Antonio joined two young ladies sitting in a booth. He appeared convivial, lively, summoning every trick in his arsenal to charm the ladies. They laughed at his audacity, his zest.

THEN ONE DAY on College Street little Mario almost ran me over with his stupid mountain bike. He was wearing a full riding kit, complete with cap and goggles, gloves, spandex trunks and so forth. Sorry, man, he wheezed, the brakes on this thing. Guess what Michael told me this afternoon at the Gatto. What's that? I asked. Turns out your Venetian friend Antonio isn't so Venetian. He just taught English there for a few years, English. He was born right here in the hood. Moved to North York when he was a teen. Michael always thought he looked familiar – then one day his Uncle Alphonse spots him in the Gatto and says he went to school with him. What a liar, eh? Yeah, I said, not surprised really but disappointed. I had a feeling Antonio knew more English than he ever admitted but for him to carry on that subterfuge for so long seemed ridiculous, perhaps even pathological. I would have felt worse if I cared. If the guy wanted or needed to play the Venetian, power to him. I just thought it probably had taken more effort than it was worth.

MISERY LOVES COMPANY – but I preferred solitude. My roommate, Pat, was off on another adventure – this time to Prince Edward Island for a cycling trip. I had the apartment to myself again and spent much of the time just lying on my futon and thinking about everything, often about nothing. I was too restless to read or watch television. I tried smoking pot but it made me paranoid. I was at a loss. Though I fought the urge, I called Melissa. She wouldn't pick up. I left a few ludicrous messages, insulting her, accusing her of dishonesty, infidelity and so on, hoping to provoke a return call, even if to tell me to cease and desist, but she didn't call back and for all I knew she was out of town. I rode my bicycle down to her house one night. The lights were on. I tried to get a glimpse inside through the curtained front window but I could make out nothing. I could hear music, however, and laughter. I had half a mind to pound on the door and make a scene and I had been good for them in the past. But it was too late for scenes. I got back on my bicycle and rode home.

MY DEEPEST APOLOGIES, Antonio said in perfect Toronto English, bowing his head a little and taking my hands in his. You of all people, he said, you never presumed, never judged, and I see you suffering and yet you never spare a smile or a good word. You're graceful and noble and I beg your forgiveness. I've offended you and … . He went on at some length. I told him to forget about it. I wasn't going to hold a grudge. We all have our reasons for hiding behind masks. Don't sweat it, I told him; all was forgiven; today was a new day. He seemed very happy with this and ordered two grappas from Giuseppe. Pour one for yourself as well, Antonio told him. We clinked glasses and drank. It burned nicely going down, the aftertaste pinching my tongue. Several young women entered the bar in a swirl of perfume, hair, and sunlight. No reason to despair, I thought. There was a lot of summer left, and I intended to make the best of it. Just one more thing, I said to Antonio, still batting his eyelids with regret and solicitation. Shall we continue speaking in Italian?

Unrequited ending

I'll do anything,
She says.
There's nothing to do,
He answers.
I love you,
She says.
I know,
He answers.
So this is it?
She asks.
Yes,
He answers.
No!
Her heart screams.
No.

Zero

I want to be a size zero.
I diet.
I exercise.
I squeeze my stomach
And clench my ass cheeks.
No use.
The size two pants wont make
It past my hips.

Why can't I suck in my thighs?
I am sad.
I am ugly.
I am fat.
I am not a size zero.
Not yet, anyway.
But I will be.
I am…

Determined
Size zero.
Perfection.
Nothingness.
What size are you?
Zero.
I am no size at all.
I am nothing at all.

Why do I spend all my life striving
For nothing?
To be
Nothing.
I buy my size four pants.
As I leave I pass,
The food court.
Yumm,

Fries.
Screw being a size zero,
I tell myself.
And I eat.
Knowing I will be mad at myself
In the morning.
But I have the rest of my life,
To try to disappear.

– Allison Buck

Rebecca Hendry

Ripe

Simon drummed softly on the steering wheel to the music trickling from his back speakers. *And did you say that she was pretty? And did you say that she loved you?* God, Stevie Nicks. They'd seen her live once, was it '83? Simon and Ellen, swaying in perfect unison, glued together like the sole on a new, shiny leather shoe. Going somewhere. He looked back at the house. Should he go knock? Was Leila waiting for him to come get her?

No, here she was, whirling out onto the front porch, shouting something edgy with indignation at someone before slamming the door as punctuation. Simon smiled and shook his head. Teenagers. She slowed to a more nonchalant stride as she neared the car, her hips waving smoothly side to side. She flipped her hair neatly out of the collar of her ski jacket and Simon watched it fall around her shoulders.

Once, a lifetime ago, Simon had driven across Canada in his VW van. The Prairies had fascinated him: how still, how vast and uncomplicated the land was. Nothing to be distracted by, no lush and endless network of unexplored island, no mountains to feel compelled to climb. Only sky and earth. Her hair was exactly the colour of a wheat field on a blazing Saskatchewan day. Simon noticed this with what he decided was pure objectivity. Like someone taking in a sand swept photo of the Sahara in *National Geographic*. A simple appreciation of beauty.

As she lowered herself into the car Simon could smell strawberries. Fake strawberries, not fresh ones. The artificial scent you find in licorice, lollipops, lip-gloss. Simon saw a lot of teenage girls in his practice, and most of them wore complicated layers of makeup and hair products. Even the ones who didn't need it, the ones whose newly discovered sensuality came from beneath their skin, oozing hormones into the air around them like a fine mist.

"Hello, Leila." Simon turned the music down and shifted slowly into drive. The car inched forward before gaining confidence. It was sluggish lately, reluctant to take the long hill from Davis Bay into Sechelt. There was a faint whirring sound Simon was wary of. "How's it going?"

"Hey, Dr. Marchand." She sat back, smiling like a satisfied cat as she settled into the soft leather seat. "You don't have to turn it down. My mom plays this sometimes. That chick has a cool voice."

He smiled. "That chick is over 50 now." Leila didn't respond, stretching her legs as far as she could in front of her, her jeans moulded to hips and thighs, her painted nails twinkling like a city skyline in the corner of Simon's eye.

Simon cleared his throat. "Hannah shouldn't be a problem. She's pretty tired tonight. She was at a birthday party at the pool today."

Leila was leaning forward in her seat to check out a group of teenagers standing outside the Esso station. She snorted in private disdain at something (or someone) before settling back in her seat. He wanted to tell her to buckle up, but he didn't.

"Hanna's never any trouble," she said. "She's a cool little kid. I've definitely had worse."

"You've had some tough ones, eh?" Simon started up the incline, listening for

knocks, gasps, but again, just that whirring, like a beehive gathering its forces before humming into action.

Leila ran a finger along the inside of her window, tracing a wide circle into the condensation. Tiny rivers dripped and ran together in a web reflected with light from the streetlights outside. "Yeah, sure. I've been babysitting for years." She sounded mildly affronted, as though she thought he was just humouring her. "I've looked after some pretty rotten kids – you know, like freaking out at bedtime and stuffing things in the VCR. Hanna never does any of that." She put her hand back in her lap.

"You're a wonderful father, Dr. Marchand," she said sweetly. "That's why Hanna is the way she is." She was watching him; he could feel her eyes, the intensity. He glanced over.

"Right. Good choice. We would never send our child to bed hungry, but people have different ideas about parenting. Some people believe … "

"Some people are wrong." She leaned toward him ever so slightly, conspiratorially. "Dr. Marchand?"

"Yes, Leila?" Strawberries. God, even fake strawberries smelled good. He remembered, suddenly, picking the plump round berries from Ellen's terracotta planter, feeding them to Hanna as they lounged on a blanket on the lawn. He remembered how the sky was the exact shade of Hanna's eyes, as though her body could transform itself gently to match the elements, as though she belonged that perfectly. He remembered how she had chirped *more, more,* how the berries were so ripe the juice ran down her chin, pooling in the dimples of baby fat. He kept feeding them to her, he couldn't stop, her desire so simple and pure, so easy to satisfy. And then Ellen's hand on his arm, her quiet reprimand. *Simon. You'll make her sick.*

"I heard you were a really good doctor. My friend Sara had a cyst removed by you like two years ago. I don't know if you remember her. Anyway, she said you were very professional."

"Sara. Sure." There was a vague memory of a thin teenager lying in a hospital bed, a cloud of silver balloons around her. Sara, wait a minute, he did remember now. He remembered her because although she was animated, even cheerful when he saw her alone, she became utterly mute in her parent's presence. She remained silent through the bedside check-ups, a small tree, rooted in her own defiance and private sorrow. He remembered thinking that this deterioration would never happen with him and Hanna, that somehow the force and magnitude of his love for her would keep her vibrant and secure for the rest of her life.

"Yeah. It was bad. It was big as a grapefruit. She said you were really nice to her at the hospital. Anyway, I was thinking maybe you could be my doctor."

"Sure, Leila, just get your mom to call the clinic."

Leila laughed, another snort of disdain. "Oh, my mom, god. Actually, I was wondering. If I came to see you would you tell my mom about the things we talked about? Like, could it be secret, or would you have to tell?"

Simon shifted gears. He focused on the droning sound, the fruitless spinning in his engine. "No, Leila, I couldn't tell. You're 16, you aren't a minor anymore. But if you have a health concern …"

Leila dismissed this with a wave of her hand. "Oh, no, I'm not sick or anything. I just meant things like, you know. The pill and stuff."

There was a brief silence. "Ahh. Well, just come on in and I can go over the options with you."

They had hit a straight stretch of road, and the car leapt forward, jumpy and overeager. Transmission. Definitely. Goddamnit. Simon geared down, wiping his forehead. He flicked the heat down and kept his eyes on the road.

"I know my options, Dr. Marchand. I want the pill. I just don't want to get it from Dr. Bridges. He would tell my mom."

Jesus, did she expect him to just reach into his magic doctor's bag in the back seat and hand her a month's supply? "Well, Leila, maybe you should talk it over with your mother. There are a lot of risks these days with becoming … sexually active."

Leila laughed, a rich, throaty Stevie Nicks laugh he had never heard her use. "Oh, it's too late for that talk." Simon almost laughed too, it was so ridiculous. The whole thing, the Stevie Nicks laughing and the *could I just grab some contraceptives off you, Dr. Marchand?* Simon did not know Leila's motives, he never did on these drives to and from her home, but it wasn't the first time she had cornered him into an uncomfortable topic of conversation. And Simon couldn't help it – sometimes he was just certain that if he reached over and touched her she would turn to him with a flicker of golden hair and melt like liquid honey in his hands. He pulled abruptly into his driveway, stopped the car and yanked the keys violently out of the ignition. Jesus. Enough.

Leila watched him, a slow smile creeping over her lips as she pulled on her door handle and unfolded herself from the car. Simon got out. He looked at his house, calm now, noticing that the front steps needed to be pressure washed. They were looking a bit grimy from Hanna's muddy boots tromping in and out. He felt much better as he started up the drive, more in control. This was his house, his family, his world. He stopped on the way to pluck a doll from beneath the cedar hedges. It was headless and missing both arms and one leg. He smiled.

Hanna liked to pull limbs from her dolls, cast them aside. *See dada. Arm go bye-bye.* She would hold the maimed creature up for approval. Ellen would re-affix the

arm or leg, tsk-ing, asking Hanna why she would want her dolly to be hurt. She thought it was some deep-seated expression of inner turmoil, the onset of sociopathic behavior, that their toddler with the button nose and Baby Gap T-shirt was a serial killer in the making. *No!* Hanna would shout, tearing at the doll again. *No arm!* Stamping feet, the siren wail, the spurting tears. Simon understood Hanna's motives. The comprehension of power, the ability to put that look of horror in her Mommy's pretty eyes.

He opened the front door and was almost blinded by the sudden intense light. Leila bumped gently into his back as he stopped in the doorway to get his focus.

"What the hell … ." His eyes were still burning, spots dancing before them.

"SURPRISE!" A chorus of two voices, one his wife and the other …

"Supwise, supwise, daddy, supwise! Look what we did, me and mommy did it, look, look!" Simon could suddenly see again and he swooped up the little girl at his feet. The hallway was adorned in a display of blinking, shining Christmas lights and tinsel.

Ellen walked toward him in a black spaghetti strap dress, her dark hair pulled off her face. "Well?" She smiled her megawatt and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Hello, Leila."

Leila was standing in the hallway, looking around her with something that closely resembled a smirk. "Hello, Mrs. Marchand. Wow."

Christmas. Simon felt his spirits sinking again. He wasn't ready for the cocktail parties, the frantic holiday shoppers, being referee, peacekeeper and potential bodyguard for his meddling mother and his perfectionist wife who had her own way of cooking the damn turkey, thank you. Ellen could barely stand to be in the same room as his mother. Oh God. Couldn't they just go to Costa Rica or something? He smiled at Ellen, who was still looking at him expectantly.

"It looks great, El. You guys did a great job." He gave Hanna a squeeze and leaned over to kiss Ellen's cheek. "You look wonderful," he whispered in her ear. "I'm just going to change. Be right back." She touched his elbow lightly in response.

As he climbed the stairs he could hear her giving instructions to Leila. "There's food in the fridge. Leftover pasta, some chicken strips in the freezer for Hanna. Whatever you want. Please don't give her too much juice before bed, and make sure you brush her teeth very well. She's been into the candy canes." Her voice was composed, smooth, with just a hint of the upper-crust life she grew up with in Shaughnessy, a maple-lined neighborhood of old brick estates and heritage mansions in Vancouver.

ELLEN HAD BEEN a dancer when he met her, a *prima ballerina*, if you please, dancing for a small company in Vancouver. Two years later, she was invited to dance for the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Simon and Ellen's engagement lasted six years, three countries, and thousands of dollars in airfare.

They had travelled to see each other whenever possible, her between shows, him on reading breaks and long weekends from university. They had the thrill of a new love affair every few months, so much to talk about when they never saw each other. They barricaded themselves in hotel rooms, ordered steaks and champagne from room service, made plans. They were going to move to Prague, Zurich, Florence, somewhere, just as soon as Simon finished med school. Simon would work for some humanitarian agency, the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, he would fly to Uganda and dress the wounds of child soldiers, and she would dance the lead on every international stage. Yet somehow, they ended up here, in Sechelt, the same place Simon had begun from 39 years before. Sechelt. A lovely seaside town, yes, but not Prague.

They had only meant to stay while they started a family, to be close to his parents; they were both so excited and so terrified of having a child. A couple of years at the most, then they were off to see the world. But it had taken longer than expected, three years before Ellen got pregnant, and by then she had changed, shrugging on small town suburbia like a comfortable old jacket and buttoning it tightly around herself. She gave up dancing professionally for good. She taught ballet now to chubby eight-year-olds, teetering three-year-olds.

SIMON CHANGED INTO his only suit and a blue tie he still had from his graduation from the University of British Columbia and descended the stairs. Ellen was picking up Styrofoam from the floor, bits of tinsel. She moved with such studied grace, even when she was picking up garbage. He reached out and caught her hand as she walked by. She shot him a puzzled smile and headed to the kitchen.

Simon glanced over at the living room and saw Leila, her shimmering legs stretched languidly in front of her as she lounged on the thick carpet, tickling Hanna under her chin.

"What have you got under there, you?" she asked in a syrupy voice. "Are you hiding a candy cane for me?" She had taken off her jacket, and her fire engine red t-shirt revealed six inches of smooth tanned skin above the low waist of her jeans. She must go to a tanning bed, he thought. It was December for Christ's sake. Leila glanced up and met Simon's eyes as she continued to talk to Hanna. *See*, she seemed to be saying, *do you see how good I am at this?*

"Simon," Ellen called from the hall. "Let's go. We're running late." Simon didn't move, watching Leila whisper

into Hanna's small ear, watching her hair falling like a thick curtain over their faces, concealing them. What was she telling his daughter? Simon felt a sudden stab of panic. He looked back at Ellen, who was putting on her black angora wrap, distracted, not seeing what Simon was seeing, the secrecy, the exclusion, the potential danger.

"Maybe we should stay in." His hand was on Ellen's shoulder. "I'm not feeling too great. I have a bit of a headache."

Ellen raised her perfectly shaped eyebrows, confused. "Don't be ridiculous, Simon. You're getting an award." She glanced over to where Leila held Hanna, placid as a sleepy kitten in her lap. Leila smoothing Hanna's mass of ringlets into a ponytail, murmuring softly, and Hanna giggling like a tiny creek overflowing with fresh water. Ellen glanced back at Simon and smiled benignly, pulling the door open. "Let's go."

The restaurant was elegant, low light and candles and crisp white shirts, a view of Porpoise Bay, of moonlight shimmering on the water. He was awarded his plaque for Community Service; he made an inane joke befitting the situation, managed to come up with several clever things to say about their wonderful community and his wonderful friends, and the wonderful food. Simon felt a real headache coming on. After a few drinks he and Ellen danced on the deserted dance floor to *Lady in Red*. She smelled like lilies, faintly, and Pears soap. Anxiety crept over him, a quiet terror he did not understand. He held her close, inhaled the warmth and softness of her, watching the nape of her neck curve just so below the twist of dark hair.

On the drive home Ellen reached forward and pressed *play* on the CD player. The last two notes of *Silver Springs*. She hit another button and it started from the beginning. *Don't say that she's pretty, and did you say that she loved you … Baby I don't want to know*. She laid her head against the window and closed her eyes.

Simon watched her, desperation rising like a heaving tide in his chest. It took all his strength not to just keep driving, all the way down the Coast and onto the ferry and keep going, to San Francisco, L.A., even Vegas. They could eat at roadside diners, drink bad wine out of coffee mugs in some bohemian tavern in Portland, hold hands and run like crazy people down the endless wind-ravaged beaches of the Oregon Coast.

Then he thought of Hanna, sleeping by now, her stuffed mermaid tucked under her arm. So small, so perfect, so utterly dependent on his being a good person who made good choices. He looked back at the road. "I was thinking Jim would get it again this year for sure. He does so much for those kids."

"Mmm." She laid her head against her seat, closing her eyes. *Time cast a spell on you but you won't forget her. You will never get away from the sound of the woman that loves you*. She hummed along softly. "I love this song."

He reached for her hand. It was cool and smooth. "I know you do."

They arrived home and were halfway to the door when Ellen turned back to the car. "I forgot my purse, Simon. Go ahead. I'll be right in." Simon opened the front door and could hear the muted thumping sounds of pop music coming from the living room TV. Leila was on the couch, her legs curled under her. She didn't move when he came in, her gaze fixed on whatever she was watching.

Simon stopped at the end of the couch. She was watching a music video. A nubile blonde in a g-string was simulating sex with a group of half-naked men under a waterfall, all of them grinding rhythmically to a heavy tribal beat. Leila looked up, flipping her hair off her face, smoothing it back. "Hey. Hanna's in bed. She was super good."

She smiled slowly, her eyes piercing through Simon's like lasers, her lips shining with a new layer of gloss. Simon looked away, at the TV, anywhere, and was immediately entranced by the gyrating hips, the ripped, clinging clothes, the swelling breasts. The tide rose again, gripping his stomach and spreading over his body.

His heart was thumping in his throat. "Okay, well. I'd better get you home. It's getting late."

Leila uncurled herself from the couch. "Sounds good," she said, following his gaze back to the TV. "Just one second, though. I love this song." She stretched her arms above her head lazily, her red shirt rising over her smooth skin.

Ellen brushed past him suddenly, walked up to the TV and flicked it off. She was still wearing her long dark wrap and her shoes. She smiled calmly, extending Leila's ski jacket with a graceful movement. "Here you go, Leila. I'll drive you home now. It's getting late."

Leila looked sharply at Simon. He felt a flush creep over his face. Ellen hated to drive at night; she said the shadows played tricks with her eyes.

Ellen walked serenely up to Simon. "The keys, Simon?"

Simon dug in his pocket for his keys and handed them over. "Are you sure you don't want me to … " But Ellen was already at the door, waiting while Leila zipped up her coat.

"I'm sure, Simon. You've already done enough driving today." Ellen didn't wait for anyone to respond as she ushered Leila out the front door.

He watched them walk away, Ellen's strong back, her even stride. Leila lagged behind, suddenly a sullen child, her ski jacket glowing white in the darkness as she negotiated the path awkwardly in her platform boots. She looked back once, and he met her gaze steadily, didn't even need to look away, a married man saying goodbye to the babysitter. He tried it out.

"Bye, Leila."

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly before she disappeared into the darkness with Ellen. He breathed deeply, inhaling the night air, curiously relaxed for the first time all evening. Then he thought of Hanna.

He took the stairs three at a time, reached Hanna's door, and walked over to her bed, shaking his head at his own stupidity. She was fine. What could have happened to her? Simon smiled down at his daughter, her covers tangled fitfully around her legs, her eyelids fluttering in her deep sleep, watching images that Simon knew nothing about, dreams he couldn't see. He smoothed her hair from her damp forehead and something caught his eye, glinting in the moonlight that flooded the room. He picked up a small hand. Her nails had been painted with Leila's polish, flecks of glitter sparkling like constellations from her tiny fingers.

Adam Honsinger

Flotsam and Jetsam

Lately I have been writing lying down. There is a mysterious ache in my lower back. The kind of pain I get when confining my longwinded diatribes within the corral of a rhyming couplet. I truly love poetry but I have learned to avoid writing it at all costs. But this pain is different. It doesn't feel like the ache of frustration and confinement, it feels more like gravity, like a weight pushing down on my spine, a weight that I must explore in metaphor.

So I achingly bend to the floor, stretch out on my stomach, head held high like the sphinx and I wait for the characters. They emerge flat and disoriented like jetlagged tourists until I give them a voice, desire, and trouble. I ask them riddles and clothe them, nudge them towards independence, and I watch them omnisciently as they interact.

I suspect that the present discomfort of this old injury is a manifestation of a gestating story as I have been carrying this weight for a few weeks now. Ever since I read Pablo Neruda's *The Captain's Verses*. My chiropractor has no idea what forces are at work in the internal notebooks of the writer. He blames the chair, the height of my desk, the ergonomics of my keyboard. I know it's in my head; I blame my imagination. Once the story is written, the pain should go away.

* * *

On September 18th, 1973, five days before Pablo Neruda died, I found myself at his door. At first I had no idea why I was there or how I had arrived. But that is often the predicament of my particular process. It is not uncommon for my imagination to chronologically shuffle the images so that I have to cut and paste the story. Starting at the end can be a little disconcerting, and I could only hope he would treat me as a curious anomaly washed up on his ocean front property. Not knowing what else to do I introduced myself and shook the poet's hand. I was struggling with my Spanish/English dictionary, the ocean breeze making it difficult to manage the pages, my eyes came to rest on the word *ficcion*, and I was back home. Without knowing why, I had traversed two continents and gone back in time twenty-eight years. In fiction, anything is possible.

This I already knew of Neruda: he was a writer of sentimental reflection, a turner of stones, a boat rocker, a materialist, a collector of flotsam and jetsam. I admired these qualities intellectually and emotionally. I was a student of writing, young, naive, and capable of such boldness. I acknowledged Neruda as if we were old friends, the dreamer's hand shaking the poet's hand, a juxtaposition of raw vegetable and seasoned entrée, dandelions and aged wine.

* * *

I had arrived with a limp at Neruda's house in Isla Negra, the breaking waves of the Pacific soothing the soles of my feet. After five thousand, five hundred, and fifty-six miles, I arrived like the monarch at the apex of an intimate and determined journey. But this destination was guided by a voice and my shoulders are calloused and raw from the weight of something – something that I was carrying. But I can't see it yet – something on my back – something heavy. I wait for the image to materialize but draw a blank. I flip through the pages of Neruda's poetry looking for clues. I have an intuitive sense

that I was not alone on the journey, and because my feet are blistered and sore I assume I walked the whole way. I grab an atlas and a cup of tea, and run a finger along the coast from Vancouver to Chile.

Despite my research, my back still hurts. I need more room to get going. I need to get out of the gates, jump some fences, drag the weight of this mystery out into the open. I scroll down the screen and I see in the next paragraph a field of clover. I know that I can't rely on the rabble that usually stumbles onto my page. In first person, I have to rely on myself. I have to narrate and navigate without the luxury of omniscience. I am anxious to continue and construct my mysterious travel companion.

I try to raise myself onto all fours but an incredible weight presses down. My shoulders and ribs are chafed. I feel frustrated. I read out loud what I have written and then scrap the pages. The pain in my back has become unbearable. I can't concentrate. I manage to stand and make my way to the bathroom. I splash water on my face, glance up at the mirror, and then she comes to me. She is smiling over my shoulder – a weather-beaten, carved oak, bare-breasted figurehead.

I am reminded of one of Neruda's poems, but instead of on the beach, as the poem stated, I find her in a run-down shop on Hastings Street. The perfect roundness of her breasts against the rusted assortment of paint cans, winches, and nautical scrap. She smells of seaweed and motor oil. When I free her from the weight of these things she sighs from her blue lips and tilts her head towards the sea. I pay the shopkeeper and with a quick bowline knot strap her to my back. On my way home I have second thoughts, as the excitement of my impulse gives way to the weight of her. "Take me to Pablo Neruda," she says.

Now I know what it is that I am supposed to bring to him. Now I know why my back is killing me. I cancel my appointment with my chiropractor. I can't afford a plane ticket to Chile; this is a story I'll have to write walking. I have to cross seven lines of latitude, the equator, and the Tropic of Capricorn. I must traverse between five and six thousand miles and go back twenty-eight years. By starting at the end of the story and placing myself at Pablo's door about five days before he died, I figure the hardest part is over; it's just a matter of remembering how I got there.

* * *

I FINANCED THE journey by pandering to people's fascination with the absurd. I would have to smuggle her into the men's dorm of the hostels, tuck her in beside me and share the narrow bed with her. Most of the time I had no idea what she was saying, but I grew used to falling asleep to her navigational whispers. And when I kept waking to groups of Japanese tourists clicking photos of us, I decided to smile, tuck my arm under her rigid body, light a cigarette and pass the hat.

I read that Neruda was a collector; he created environments like physical poetry. He passionately collected clocks, sextants, astrolabes, hats, ships in bottles, French postcards, and of course ship's figureheads. Analogies have been drawn between his physical existence and that of his poetry. One mirrors the other. He surrounded himself with things that he loved – conversation, books and his beloved Chile.

He married his third wife, Matilde Urrutia, twice. I imagined her as a curator to a living museum, taking care of a man whose lifetime she knew would be a fraction of the potential of his fame. I read about his political views, his escape into exile under the pseudonym Antonio Ruiz, his trips to Europe and his soirées with eminent and curious company – Miguel Hernandez, Garcia Lorca, and Eduardo Galeano. The passion he innately felt for the simplest of things expressed in his odes to objects, ideas, words, despair, justice, and love.

These details fuelled the momentum of my journey and blackened the pages through California. I love juxtaposition, the oscillation of fiction and fact, because it takes me in and out of reality and fantasy, from suspended belief to rationality, from the reading of the story to the experience of it. Borders are obvious metaphors, imaginary lines that warn us when we are approaching the absurd, lines that mark the limits of suspended belief, margins that define genre.

By the time I hit the border in Tijuana, my feet were sore and the pain in my back made it difficult to write for more than twenty minutes at a time. *She* was by this time incessantly regurgitating stanzas over my shoulder: "I grew, immersed in natural waters like the mollusk in marine phosphorescence. In me sounded the crusty salt forming my singular skeleton … I felt myself beating with it, my voice growing with the water."[1] She was coming fully to life, but the absence of legs curbed my thoughts of her completing this journey of her own volition.

Despite my need for a reprieve from her constant chatter, her voice lifts her from the page, lightens her weight on my back, and her interaction in this journey gives her possibility. "That's impossible," a young soldier at the border says. "How can you visit Neruda? He has been dead for five years." He eyes the figurehead suspiciously, but doesn't seem to hear her when, between odes, she lets loose a volley of expletives.

I smile at the confirmation that I have shaved off twenty-three years. I highlight the word "impossible", hit delete and move on.

I leave the border guards to the reader's imagination and arrange a clandestine midnight meeting, hook up with some smugglers and sneak across the border by the light of

the moon. I imagine great dangers, bullets whistling overhead, have a brush with death, but I don't write any of it down. At this point, I am getting conservative; I don't want to turn this journey into a novel.

* * *

I HAVE NEVER been to Central America, but I have heard things – political unrest, hurricanes, beautiful and generous people … . We camp out at the edge of a banana plantation in Costa Rica. My companion negotiates with the farmers for food – her Spanish is much better than mine. We are offered shelter in a village and the whole town shows up to stare and laugh. I smile back and spend the night writing about the land and my impressions, but scrap it in the morning when she tells me that I have it all wrong.

In Ecuador, I notice a calendar in the town of Machala, and it reads: September 1976. A quick glance through my *Reader's Digest Guide to Places of the World* informed me that I had just missed a civilian uprising and the eruption of one of thirty active volcanoes. I need a rest, but wait until I'm in Peru before I press shift and hit the asterisk three times.

* * *

CHILE IS A beautiful and diverse country, from the arid desert of the north to the stormy rain-drenched forests of the south. It has a 2610-mile coastline and therefore a strong affinity with the sea. I arrived in concert with a military uprising in which the socialist leader was assassinated. I question my timing. "Deber del poeta," she whispers in my ear, and I hope I'm not too early.

I had read that the fence around Neruda's house is covered in writing, eulogies and greetings from the poet's fans – written in paint, pencil, carved with nails. The fence has become a canvas – a shrine. But when I get there, it is simply weatherworn cedar, inconspicuous, because the poet is still alive.

Impossible, but is it believable? I wonder if he knows that he will be dead in a few days. I wonder what all this will amount to. What will I say? The thought hits me as I struggle up the path to his door. Whose story is this? Am I writing it, or am I being written? The figurehead on my back is suddenly silent, rigid and lifeless wood. I am no longer in control. The door opens just as I am about to knock.

* * *

NERUDA OFFERS ME wine and oysters. We eat tomatoes biting into them like apples. He eyes her with the discretion of a shy child, courteous as a host, but obviously distracted by her presence. And when we are full of food and wine he approaches, runs a hand along her cheek, on tiptoes kisses her forehead, and then leads us upstairs into his study. He finally helps me lower her gently into his arms. He speaks to her softly in Spanish, but she does not respond.

"How can I repay you for such a gift?" he asks.

I don't want to trouble him, or waste too much of his time. "I'm tired," I tell him as I straighten my back. "I ask only one thing … finish the story for me."

"That's it? No money? No … autograph?" he adds, smiling.

"You have done enough," I tell him, "You have inspired me."

Neruda reluctantly leans her against the wall. For a man who will be dead in a number of days, he looks good. I glance over at the figurehead. For a woman carved out of oak a few hundred years ago, she looks good too. They look good together. Pablo selects a book from the shelf. He flips to a marked page, "Ah yes, this will do," he says …

> Today we picked you up from the sand
> In the end, you were destined for my eyes.
> Doubtless you're sleeping, sleeper, perhaps you're dead,
> deceased;
> And the errant splendor has ceased its wandering.[2]

With four lines of poetry I am back at my desk typing at the computer. Neruda's cryptic words resonate on the screen and replace the three-hundred words that I was saving to get me home. I close the book lying on my desk entitled *Pablo Neruda – Absence and Presence*, and gaze with nostalgia at the figurehead on the cover. These things are meant to travel, to bring the vessel home safely. I am home, the figurehead is home, the story is finished – flotsam and jetsam – bits and pieces washed up on the page, some discarded, some of it the wrecks of other tales. I wonder if this story is any good. I doubt it, but then remember that in fiction, anything is possible, and if nothing else, at least my back no longer aches.

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1. "Tide" — from *El Feugo Cruel*
2. "To a Ship's Figurehead" — from *El Gran Oceano*

K. Knapp

Blind Potato Salad

At the gravesite as Grandma descends jerkily into the hole, Charisse Black studies the faces of her relatives. Grim, sad, stunned, stoic, reserved, reticent, joyous, bewildered, confused, and more sads. While everyone whispers "amen", Charisse leans her pink coral lips to her husband's ear.

"That insouciant brat thinks this is funny."

Harold reassuringly squeezes her hand. Behind them a poplar tree shudders, an icicle plummets to earth and impales a deer mouse that sleeps beneath the snow. As Arnold Mitchell, Charisse's father, releases a carnation and it falls onto Grandma's casket, the blue jay screams. Wet eyes, dry eyes, emotionless eyes, smiling eyes, and red eyes scan the scene for the jay. The brat claps once and sprints for the parking lot. The blue jay pecks at the crusty snow until its larger cousin lands nearby and menacingly hops toward it. The jay hesitates, drops the seed and cries foul from the safety of an evergreen while the cousin settles in for brunch.

Charisse refreshes her lipstick while Harold bows his body protectively around the steering wheel.

"And what's with the applause? She always has to be the centre of attention."

"It looked involuntary," Harold mutters. Charisse flips the vanity mirror shut with a violent snap.

"How would you know? What? You were staring at her?"

"I wasn't staring. It's just that, well, you know she dresses in that way and she's –"

"– in what way? What are you talking about? I sure hope you weren't checking out my sister at a goddamn funeral, Harold."

"Come on, Charisse. Of course not. Of course I wasn't checking her out. I mean, everyone gave her a once over."

"Which is exactly what she wants and she shouldn't be encouraged." She raps her diamond ring against the passenger window and Harold obediently signals a right turn.

"She's an anomaly. That business with the drugs and the dog –"

"Anything for attention, Harold. I'm surprised at you. That you can't see straight through her childish ruses. She's an embarrassment to the entire family."

Harold parks the Lexus on a residential street and stares beyond the windshield. His in-laws file into a brick-faced bungalow. Amble, meander, march, skip, stride, and shuffle. A small smile plays across his lips as he watches the brat make a snow angel on the front lawn. Charisse emits an exasperated sigh.

"It's not funny. She's damaged. She should be institutionalized."

"She was."

Charisse reaches into the back seat for her garment bag and says, "Hah! A fat lot of good it did her. If I were the attending physician, she'd still be there." She nods her head toward the lawn. "You going to tell me that's a healthy, mentally sound individual?" Harold shrugs his shoulders and turns up his coat collar.

"I'm the doctor, Harold. She's unstable. Bring my bag, please. I can't stand to

be in black all day."

Charisse strides past an open bedroom door. A handmade mish-mash quilt conceals the single mattress. The blanket is incongruously militantly folded and tucked at the corners. Upon the bed sits her father with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. Arnold's thin body shudders as he sobs. Charisse moves past the door and, in the bathroom, changes into a deep maroon pantsuit with a paisley shawl for a splash of respectful colour. She smooths an imaginary crease on the bed and perches beside Arnold.

"Shush, shush, father," she coos. "We'll make it." She strokes his back as his spine buckles and stretches like a hacking cat. "Yes. Let it out." Her fingertips glide across his shoulder blades, pink nails slide through white dandruff. Arnold's grey eyes that were once green search his daughter's face. She wipes his nose with a linen handkerchief. She carefully folds the square, moves to tuck it beneath her blazer's cuff, grimaces and presses it firmly into her father's hand.

"She killed herself, didn't she?" Arnold whispers.

"Well, that's a loaded question, father," she says and emits a short chuckle. "From a medical perspective, I would say yes, indeed, she ended her own life. She had opportunity and certainly the technology within her grasp to continue. She needn't have let it go and, as a physician, I can attest that her quality of life was not as compromised as it may have appeared. Many geriatric patients utilize hospital resources such as oxygen for temporary alleviation of ephemeral conditions. In my opinion, she would have been off the air within seven to ten days. And by off the air, I refer to a return to unassisted living conditions. She was in full control of her mental faculties, which may cause us to ask two specific questions. The first, since she knew exactly what she was doing did that make her decision to refuse treatment acceptable?"

Arnold braces his shaking hands against his grey temples. Charisse plucks the handkerchief from his fist and drops it on his lap, in his line of sight.

"The second, was her decision motivated by altruism in that she felt her children were suffering as caregivers? There is great debate where medically defined mental competence meets logic, especially in terms of survival and self-preservation. Is one capable of logical resolve when faced by a life or death challenge?"

Arnold's older sister Ruth, dry-eyed and stern, waits beneath the doorframe. Charisse turns when Ruth clears her throat.

"We're about to say grace then eat. Will you be joining us?" she asks. Charisse stands, kisses her father's hair and grips his shoulder.

"Maybe we'll just leave Arnold where he is for now," she decides. "Did you put my Seven-Up salad out? It was in the fridge."

"It's there," says Ruth. Charisse follows her down the hallway.

"You know," says Charisse, "I had one heck of a time finding pistachios. And my food processor is on the fritz, so I had to chop the nuts by hand."

THE OAK DINING table is covered by the usual foods associated with death and buffets. John's Edna leads in a thanksgiving hymn with a piercing soprano and the relatives fumble for descending octave harmony. Peter's Edna wraps her arm around Charisse's waist. A tear slides down Charisse's cheek and leaves an expanding watermark on her muted, though festive, scarf.

"Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen," they sing.

The brat stands apart from the relatives and does not sing. She pops a peppermint cookie into her mouth, sneaks another into the pocket of her jumpsuit. She presses the cookie hard against the roof of her mouth with her tongue until it moulds and adheres. She clucks her tongue and the sound of an angry chipmunk emanates from between her chapped lips. Harold regards the brat quizzically and Charisse slams the serving spoon hard against his laminate plate. A green onion nib lands on Charisse's maroon lapel. She plucks it between her manicured talons and flicks it back into the ceramic potato salad tureen. The tureen is painted white with a neon menagerie of Australian species encircling its girth. The pink kangaroo's tail is entwined around the green platypus's bill and his webbed foot touches the yellow puff tail of the koala, around and around. Along the base of the tureen in a light-hearted font is the word "Katy" in large, black letters.

Charisse spies an eggshell fragment between a potato wedge and an overcooked yolk in the tureen. With the serving spoon, she scoops it onto her plate, replaces the utensil and moves along the buffet. Harold studies cheese slices and when Peter

slaps his back in greeting, he startles and his fingertips brush across a fifteen stick array of Swiss.

"Take them," says Charisse.

"What?" asks Harold. Peter reaches for the potato salad.

"There's eggshells in there. I'd reconsider if I were you," she warns Peter. Peter replaces the serving spoon and heaps Seven-Up salad on his plate instead.

"You touched that entire row," she says. "It's unhygienic. Put them on your plate."

Harold dutifully complies but he covers the mound of Swiss with Seven-Up salad.

THE BRAT IS supine on the bedroom floor with her feet atop the mattress. She clicks her boots together.

"I like your shoes," says her father.

"Thanks. They're wrestling boots," she explains. "I wanted red ones but then the yellow ones really caught my eye."

"I like the yellow. They're nice." Arnold reaches over and squeezes her toes.

"I find them very practical in terms of walking, jumping and climbing. They are a pain in the ass to take on and off however."

Arnold begins to cry and places his head in his hands. The brat reaches over and wraps her father's shoelace around her finger.

"Hey, Popsidoodle. Remember Beasley?"

He nods but keeps his eyes averted.

"That was quite the dog, wasn't it? And the whoop-de-dooness when I did what I did was a fitting conclusion, I think. I mean, he was one helluva dog. He deserved the attention."

Her father inhales a mucus string back into his nostril. Without lifting her head, she turns her ankle and undoes the knot in her boot.

"I hated when he was sick, Dad. It made me sick, you know. There were mornings when I would go into the kitchen and Beasley had peed on the floor and I would step in it. I could see how badly he felt." She begins to loosen the bootlaces and continues. "He was acutely aware that he was making mistakes, that he was breaching doggy etiquette. In retrospect, stealing the sleeping pills from Charisse's purse was a mistake. Of course, I was under the false impression she'd be happy to have Beasley out from underfoot."

She tugs the boot from her foot, removes her sock and places it between her father's shoes. He fumbles with it.

"Are you sure?" he croaks.

"It's a fuckin' sock, Dad. Have at 'er," she says. As he blows his nose, the brat tugs the boot over her bare foot.

"Charisse has always been a bit of an enigma to me, really. Wanna hear something kind of funny?"

Arnold's shaking fist clutches the soiled sock and he says, "Sure. I'd like that. Something funny."

"Well, as you know and I'm still swearing you to secrecy on this one, I'm back in the hospital of my own volition and they've got a pretty cool ceramics room. Anyway, long story short, I made a soup tureen with these neat animals on it and I painted the animals with glow-in-the-dark stuff."

"Sounds nice."

"It certainly is. And my theme is Australian animals, which must hold particular appeal for you since you hang out there an awful lot."

"That's very thoughtful. I'd really like to see it."

"It's full of potato salad right now, but you could take it home and check it out later if you want."

"Maybe I'll do that," he says and wipes his nose with the sock.

"Last night, at about midnight I remembered about this business today and so I snuck into the kitchen and made potato salad – but I had to make it in the dark so I wouldn't get caught. They've got a real hang-up about Violents mixing with kitchen utensils."

"You're not violent," whispers Arnold.

She pats the top of his foot.

"It's been determined by logical minds, Popsidoodle. We'll just let it go. Do you have any idea how much of a racket dicing potatoes makes?"

Arnold smiles and shrugs his shoulders.

"A lot. A helluva lot. I cooked the potatoes, threw them in the tureen and stuffed them in the fridge. Then I boiled the eggs and peeled most of them in the dark. I washed the shells off as best I could but I was getting anxious about getting caught and you know how I act when I'm anxious, so a few didn't get shelled."

She whistles and executes a drum roll on her stomach. Her father chuckles. The brat reaches into her pocket and hands her father the peppermint cookie.

"Here. Have a cookie," she says. He takes it and nibbles.

"Now I'm in a great hurry to get back to my room, so I open the fridge and place the tureen on the countertop and begin throwing in the eggs as fast as my hands can move."

She moves her hands quickly back and forth above her body like a child carries the tide from a doomed sand castle.

"And then I am suddenly struck by the animals of Australia because they are glowing and I swear, Dad, crazy or not, they are in a marching procession around the tureen."

"That sounds nice," answers her father.

"That it was. I was personally captivated. I threw the rest of the eggs, shells and all, into the tureen without a second thought."

"Whoopsie," says Arnold, but he laughs.

"Whoopsie is right. Charisse is out there right now warning everyone against her crazy sister's crunchy potato salad."

The brat giggles and clicks her boots together. Laughing,

Arnold reaches over and gently tugs his daughter's pigtail. She squeezes his hand and maintains her grip.

"Here's the best part. Guess who was bringing up the rear of this magnificent parade?"

"Who?"

"Why, Beasley, of course. He was healthy and laughing his head off with a kangaroo's tail wound around his floppy ear and a kiwi bird attached to his tail."

"Wow! That must have been something to see."

The brat kisses her father's finger and releases his hand. "You take the tureen home tonight, Dad. You can see it, too."

"I'd like that," he whispers and stands. The brat swings her legs to the floor and tests her boots, stomping her feet.

"This sockless thing is good. I like it. I'll do it more often," she says. "Do you want to eat now? Do you feel okay about that?"

"In a minute. I'll meet you by the potato salad." He chuckles.

"It's a date," says the brat and skips off toward the dining room. She stops and turns back to her father. "Hey, Dad?"

He faces his daughter, his eyes momentarily, compulsively drawn to her yellow wrestling boots. He cocks his head.

"Do you feel I took Beasley's life away?" she asks.

"I believe you saved Beasley's life," he answers.

She grins. Her dry lips crack and a drop of blood trickles down her chin.

THE BRAT WAITS nervously by the potato salad. Charisse sits on the edge of the couch with her plate on her knees. There is a conspicuous mound of eggshells in the centre. Beside the still full tureen, the Seven-Up salad bowl is empty. Other than her father, the brat has not exchanged words with any of her relatives. She regards the stucco ceiling and whistles *Zip-a-dee-do-dah*.

Suddenly the room is plunged into darkness. The whistling stops. A woman shrieks. Someone knocks the coffee table and hard candies rattle across the glass top. John explains a temporary power outage to the relatives in his booming, authoritative voice. Peter's Edna launches into *The Lord's Prayer* and the relatives mumble along.

The Australian menagerie commences to march.

Spellbound, the brat stares at the tureen and hums softly to herself. As the gleeful Beasley appears, the tureen levitates and moves quickly toward the front door. A chilly hand grasps the brat's and she allows herself to be tugged along, tailing the dog.

In the cold basement, Peter's foot grinds the remains of a peppermint cookie that was discarded on the floor next to the fuse box.

S.M. Lochhead

Attila

My father's name is Attila. I suppose he is eighty now. I remember him with his grey hair and his tight skin. He had no body fat. He worked at a desk all day, staring into blankness. People tell me he wanted to be a writer, but there is no evidence of such an endeavour.

He would lecture to me on the properties of perfect writing.

"It must always be clear. If you are writing about a mouse, write about a mouse. If you are writing about a giant, write about a giant. Vagueness is for fools who jerk off to their own images." He was a blunt man who despised vanity and stupidity.

I was arrested on the Yugoslavian/Hungarian border. I had a knife and a small bag of weed. It is not a pleasurable feeling, having fingers poked up your ass, but I endured. The prison was small. Stone. It made me think of communism. It was from the communist occupation. Makes sense that I thought it was communist.

On cold nights and even on warm ones, I would dream of Salzburg. There would be hills of gummy bears, yogurt/muesli and Julie Andrews singing "Edelweiss". I know, Christopher Plummer sings "Edelweiss", but I was alone and I am, for the most part, heterosexual.

During my time in prison I had a mild obsession with Julie Andrews. I would stare at the walls until they would fade from grey and cold to green and luscious. I would be flying in a helicopter with no sound and I would see her twiddling about on the grass below. Flaunting and teasing, flipping her dress about in an erotic fashion. And then I would orgasm. Some man, a guard I suppose, would pop his eyes through a slot in the cell door.

"Stop pissing." He would say.

I suppose it looked like I was pissing on the wall but I wasn't. I was fucking the wall, well … Julie Andrews really … no, I guess it was the wall.

I escaped prison as one guard came in to clean my cell. Just walked out the door. Nothing too exciting. I was in Hungary. If it had been in Yugoslavia I would have been shot or blown up. Don't ask me why. There is a difference. Every one knows there is a difference.

At first I didn't realize I was in Hungary. I mean, I guess I could have deciphered the flag on the guard's jacket and I probably did at one time or another but I don't remember. I don't remember a lot of things.

It took me three days to get to Budapest. I hitchhiked.

"Budapest?" I would say. They would give a nod and a point to the back. I liked travelling in trucks the best. Little or no conversational effort needed. I would just sit in the back and let the wind whip me in the face. I would smile and that was it. The backseat of a car, well that's a whole other story … basically, the same thing; mostly silence with no wind and a lot more smiling.

I had no money. In normal circumstances I would offer a few American bills

and I believe that, under normal circumstances, it was expected. If English was your first language and you were in Hungary then you had money. I was travelling without a shirt. The Slavic folk understood my circumstances. I was not a rich American. I was a poor Canadian. Someone gave me a T-shirt. Queen's local cover band, Queen, was plastered to the front and the back. This may seem confusing. Simply a Queen T-shirt with a Hungarian Freddy Mercury on the back and the front. It kept me warmer than my skin so I appreciated it with a smile and a nod. The Hungarian government had confiscated my passport, my money and all of everything I had in my backpack. I walked out of the prison without my shirt. I was not a seasoned escape artist but I managed to make it to Budapest. I was left at the train station with a couple of florins (money).

I met a backpacker named Harvey. He hung out on the lower level of Keleti train station. There are bars and food shops down there, open all night long. I had had a pair of sunglasses taken off my face, by some bum, some months back. Harvey was from London. He had two spikes sticking out of his lips and looked a tad strange, even to me, but he gave me a sweater and I liked him. We got drunk on Unicum (a local liquor) and beer. He ended up crying over some Polish vampire girl. He kept lifting up his shirt and showing me his lined, pink flesh.

"She likes to beat me up … ." Tearful sob after tearful sob.

Hungarian girls are beautiful. Every morning at around eight o'clock, a train from the outskirts of the city would arrive, carrying a load of long-haired, pale but dark at the same time, beautiful young girls. A bum, his name was Tony, would sit with me and watch. Tony smelt like shit. It did not make the viewing pleasurable. You haven't smelt shit, and I mean human feces, until you smell it as you are being aroused. It is not pleasant and it stays with you. Every time you fuck or jerk off or make love or do anything with your dick, you can smell it. You'll get a hard-on when you're on the toilet. It becomes one and the same and you get used to it.

He was a very dirty bum. He was an extreme bum. His skin was darkened by filth. He wore a sack and walked with a stick. I don't think he had any toes and I know for sure he was missing a hand. We hung out on Wednesdays. We talked about girls. He was fluent in six languages, including Canadian.

To be clear, I ended up living in the train station. I ate a lot of sausage and drank a lot of beer. I maintained a decent wardrobe, no sacks for me, and I worked from time to time, mostly tours and stuff.

Mary was her name. She was one of them pretty train girls. She tripped over me one morning. I was usually awake by eight but I guess I was pretty tired. She tripped over me. She wasn't hurt.

It was about a year later when I finally talked to her. That is when she told me her name:

"My name is Mary." She smiled at me.

We had a son and we named him Attila. Actually, we just had a son five minutes ago and I named him Attila four minutes ago and my wife agreed three minutes ago. And that is what made me think about my father. I hope this wasn't too vague, I hope it didn't seem like I was jerking off to my own image. My father would kill me, if he knew where I was, I'm sure he would kill me.

Edward McDermott

Moonlit Snow

The northern pines sheltered the abandoned logging road from the frozen light of a January sun, leaving the pillow-white snow in brilliant shadow. Grey, white and brown were the colours John, a traveller in this land of Fancy, saw as he drove the snowmobile too slowly for his tastes and too quickly for his wife.

"Slow down, you'll get us killed," Margaret shouted at him through two helmets and the winter air that froze the words into flakes.

John said nothing, resisting the urge to crank the skidoo up another notch. The cabin remained another five minutes away, five minutes too far. "Whose woods are these?" he wondered.

As if responding to her angry complaints, the engine sputtered. It died. That left them riding in sudden silence for a few seconds. The virgin snow muffled the treads' clattering. As the machine slowed to a stop, Margaret said nothing, for once.

After shifting to neutral, John tried to restart the engine. Nothing. At the lodge they had assured him that he had enough gasoline for a dozen trips. Still, he climbed off and checked the gas tank.

"What's wrong?" Margaret asked.

"I don't know."

"Did you check the gas?"

"Yes. Lots."

"Try starting it again. Never mind. I'll do it."

She tried without success.

John let her. One florist and one composer in the North Ontario woods, dependent on a snowmobile that neither knew the first thing about fixing. He chuckled at the macabre humour of the situation. What time was it, anyway?

"It won't start."

"Be careful you don't flood the engine," he replied.

"You probably already did. Well, what are you going to do about this?"

"I intend to call CAA," John replied. He flipped up the visor on his helmet. The bitter cold stuck pins into his nose and cheeks. His breath froze into a tiny cloud. How cold was it? If he spit, would it freeze before it hit the ground? He wanted to try, but knew that would just start Margaret again.

"Well, don't just stand there, call."

Wearing his snowmobile mitts he was too clumsy to pull his cellphone out and dial it, so he took one off. The phone beeped and then flickered to life. It scanned back and forth on A, and next on B; then it put itself to sleep.

"Stop playing. Give me the phone," she said.

John put the phone in her gloved hand, and turned to pull on his mitt again. How cold was it? Two minutes ago, the sunshine had warded off a chill. Now, with his fingers numb, John wondered. What time was it? He had a watch on his wrist inside his snowmobile suit (They didn't call them snow suits, although that was what they most resembled.) He didn't want to know enough to push the sleeve band back far enough to find it.

"You didn't have to throw it at me. Look what you did. It's somewhere in the snow. Give me a hand."

John turned. Margaret was squatting, running her hands through the pillow-white snow, searching.

"What happened?"

"You tossed the phone at me, and it fell. Now help me find it."

"I put it in your hand and you dropped it."

"Don't blame it on me. Just find the freaking phone."

No phone. The tiny modern electronic marvel must have slipped beneath the pillow-white snow to nestle underneath some ancient bough or rock. After ten minutes, John straightened out, his back stiff.

"Don't move. You'll step on it and then we'll never find it," Margaret said, still searching, now about five feet away from where she had stood. As if the phone could have flown that far in falling.

John glanced at the sky. Were the shadows taking on a more ominous shade? What time was it? They'd left the lodge parking lot at 3:45. This should be a twenty-minute ride, according to the man who rented them the cottage. They should only be five minutes from the cottage. That meant some time past four. How long until sunset?

"I'm going to try the snowmobile again," John said, shivering. Christ, how he hated the cold and the winter. "Besides, the phone probably wouldn't help anyway. Do you know where we are?"

"We're exactly where you brought us," she replied. "It was your idea to come up here."

John said nothing. That complaint contained a smidgen of truth. She had wanted them to get away from the world and life, from the pressures that seemed to push their buttons. She wanted them to have time to discuss their future. Once they couldn't stop talking to each other. Now they only shouted at each other.

When he tried the starter, it ground. Nothing. "Must be something clogging the gas line."

"My husband the mechanic. What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. I don't have the tools and, as you pointed out, I don't have the expertise. Once we reach the cabin, we can call."

"With what? You lost our phone."

"I imagine we'll find a phone in the cabin. Even if there isn't, they'll come looking for us in a couple of days. We have the snowmobile."

"Well, I'm not leaving it. It's on my company credit card. Besides, you don't know how far it is to the cabin."

Five minutes by snowmobile, say thirty miles an hour, say one tenth of that or three miles. Three miles! An hour's walk on a summer's day. It would be more in the snow, in these boots, with nightfall coming.

"It's less than an hour," John lied.

"An hour's walk! Are you crazy? John Marmen, I have no intention of walking for an hour in the snow."

"I don't see what alternative we have," he replied.

His feet felt cold despite the boots. He stamped up and down, but they still felt cold. The pleasant breeze now had a bite to it. Margaret ignored him, climbed onto the snowmobile and tried it. The starter motor now sounded distinctly tired.

"There's nothing for it. I'm walking back to the lodge," she said.

"That's crazy. It must be three times as far."

"At least I know where I'm going. I can follow the tracks of the snowmobile. Besides, I might meet somebody on the trail."

"Don't be an imbecile," John exploded. "It'll take you hours to walk back to the lodge. Once the sun goes down it will get colder. We have to make for the cottage."

THEY ARGUED, BUT he wouldn't leave her. In the end she followed him along the old logging road. Eighty years ago lumberjacks laid logs on the ground for the trucks to drive over and push into the mud. For the large wheels it made good traction. For feet the snow-covered uneven surface was an invitation to a fall or worse. The light from the setting sun distorted the surface.

After ten minutes of walking John felt winded. The only benefit was that Margaret had fallen silent as they walked between the frozen woods in this darkening evening of the new year.

Why had they ever come to this godforsaken place of trees, rocks and snow? They were city people. He'd been born and grown up in Toronto, steps from Bloor and Yonge. Although Margaret had grown up in the north, she fled to the city after high-school. They both revelled in the city core. She ran her flower shop under the TD centre. He played second violin with the TSO, and dreamt someday his symphony would be staged at Massey Hall.

Why had they come here? To escape the arguments. To make a new start. He remembered that much. The road started to climb sharply. John trudged on, not looking back to see if Margaret was keeping up.

Somewhere quiet, she had said. Somewhere they could sit and talk things out. If things worked out Margaret would always remind him that it had been her idea. Like that trip to Cancun. It had been pretty good, aside from the near disaster on that sunfish, when the boom almost knocked him into the ocean. She insisted that sailing had been his idea. He who had never stepped on a sailboat before in his life.

The recriminations were part of the problem. Everything that went wrong ended up on his plate. If the store bought

too many roses for Valentine's Day, she had only been listening to his advice. How could he have predicted a snow storm on the thirteenth of February?

He stopped, his breath ragged. His hair felt wet from sweat under the helmet. Did this hill ever end? It was getting dark. If they still had the cell phone, he could have tried it from the top. Probably good reception there. Was that a flake of snow? What would they do if it started to snow? If he was sweating, why did his feet feel even colder?

Did Margaret have any hint about him and Sylvia, the first cellist? That not all the late rehearsals occurred at the hall? That someone else in this world could listen to him describe his symphony and know what he meant? Sylvia understood because they shared the same background, the same obsession with music.

Why had he ever married Margaret in the first place? Ten years ago, he had pursued her, spending his rent money to buy flowers at her store so he could talk to her. He even wrote her a sonata. (He didn't know she was tone deaf, back then.) He remembered thinking that she had the most perfect breasts. Why had she let him catch her? Perhaps she hadn't realised how poor a classical musician would be.

He reached the top of the hill. Where was the lake? The cabin was supposed to be on a lake. In Northern Ontario, with its ten thousand puddles called lakes, why build a cabin anywhere else? But where was their lake? The road curved and the pines (weighted down with snow) that marked its edges hid the dark valley.

Margaret caught up.

"How far did you say?" she asked. "We've been walking for about an hour. We should have reached it by now."

"It must be down there." John said, waving at the darkness below them.

"I wonder if there are any wolves there."

"Wolves won't attack a healthy adult. I saw that on the Discovery Network," John replied. He started forward before she could begin another argument.

Where did it go wrong? When she opened her own flower shop? When he joined the symphony? Why did every success lead only to bitterness? Why did they fight over everything?

And they did fight. They could argue for days over which show to watch on television, where they had gone to see a movie, whether they saw it on Friday or Saturday, who forgot to turn on the dishwasher. They fought until he lacked the energy for it, until all the arguments coalesced into one accusation, to which he had no response.

So he stopped arguing. No matter what she demanded, he would acquiesce to buy a few minutes of peace. He became a man with blood of snow-broth; one who never feels the wanton stings. He surrendered everything except his music. She hounded him to become successful, leave the TSO and find another position. They could start a second flower shop.

The only sound was the sweep of easy wind and downy flake. He would close his eyes and dream about his symphony, try to weave the notes that circled in his head together into a multitude of simultaneous tunes, one for each instrument in the orchestra. As he trudged, he let his mind slip back to his masterpiece. In his head, the entire glorious work reverberated as he imagined it would in Massey Hall. Then the audience rose, as if pulled by one string, and applauded.

They reached a side road, a fork in the road. John smiled to himself. They must be close. Those side roads led to the cabins along the shore. The logging road would swing around the lake in a lazy arc. Only a few more minutes.

Margaret remained behind him. Was anyone in the other cabins? No snowmobile tracks on the road; no one had come this way since the last snow fall. Even with the sun down the waning moon gave enough light to walk. The woods were lovely, dark and deep. Moonlight and snow. There was a title for a sonata. Sylvia would appreciate the image.

"Then I will tell you a tale that must be told by the moonlight alone," he muttered to himself. How would Beethoven have written it? Or Berlioz? Romantic. It should capture the fragile frigid beauty of moonlit snow. When they got to the cottage, he must jot some notes down. He hummed the tune, hearing the counterpoint in his head. He imagined a duet for violin and cello, an interweaving of limbs. If only Margaret would give him a few moments to write.

Why did he kid himself? It was over. This last trip, a thankless sacrifice to place on the altar of a dead marriage. Next week he would move out, make the final surrender. It wouldn't be as if they hadn't known this was coming. Margaret always seemed to know his mind before he did. He'd move in with Sylvia.

Why couldn't she stumble and fall, hit her head and lie there in the snow, go to sleep and never wake up? He glanced back. She remained behind him like a demon of retribution, some punishment for his youth that would hound him for the rest of his life.

Still looking backward, he stepped through the snow crust and crashed to the ground. He remembered hearing a cracking sound as he fell, thinking it must have been a branch buried in the snow. Then the pain struck and he almost threw up. The pillow-white snow in his face felt like sand paper, too cold to melt. He tried to move and the agony from his left leg lanced up his body until he saw black spots floating on the white snow, and heard himself grunting from the pain.

Pain. Red pain. Pain like a Bach organ fugue thundered through his body and echoed in the space behind his teeth. The pain closed the universe down to his leg, his body and the bit of road he lay on.

"What now?" Margaret asked. She used the same exasperated tone she reserved for questions about a missing clean shirt on opening night.

"Margaret. Christ, I think I broke my leg. Schubert and Schumann on a shingle. You'll have to go on and call for help."

Did she rush up and comfort him, concern in her face? No, she stood staring at him as he flopped on the ground, thinking, trying to think up some remark about his clumsiness. Sure it was his fault. Everything in the world was his fault.

She stopped over him. "Probably just a sprain. Let me see."

"Ahhhhh. Don't touch it. It's broken. What? Do you need to see the splinters sticking out?"

He looked down at his leg, twisted under him, and saw red on the white snow. "Don't just stand there, you stupid bitch. Get me some help."

"Certainly, John," she said with an uncharacteristic peacefulness. "I'll call when I get to the cottage."

As she walked down the road, John wondered if he should try to move the leg. Already his sweat from the walk felt icy inside his clothing. Rather than look at his leg he watched Margaret walk away.

He saw her pull something out of her pocket. Even at this distance, he could recognise the distinct shape of the cell phone. As he watched, she threw it deep into the woods.

Siew Siang Tay

Traces of Light

She moves towards the edge of the water. As the waves roll in, she wades out, stepping over tiny rocks. I can hear the swishing of the water from where I am, sitting by the window overlooking the bay.

The hump on her back looks more pronounced today, but I can't see her face. I would not catch much detail anyway. At dusk the sun silhouettes everything in sight. Soon, after it sets, she will make a turn and head back. But she would not do so just yet, not until the last traces of light are gone.

"No, wait, I want to catch these last moments," she used to say, a long time ago.

She is now standing still, hands in her pockets, back towards me as the sun sinks into the horizon.

It's been seven days since I started sitting here at dusk. The shack is elevated so I have a commanding view. The sea breeze starts to blow at this time, and the afternoon heat eases. Most evenings she strolls along this beach. Sometimes she sits and reads a book or she just looks out. Yesterday she glanced my way. A flock of seagulls had flown past. She shaded her eyes with her hand. The birds were heading my way and her gaze followed them. She would surely see me now, I thought. But after the birds flew away, she turned and continued walking.

I'm not sure how long I'm going to continue watching her. When I first rented this shack, I'd not intended to catch her. I knew she'd moved from Adelaide to Port Elliot. She's always liked the sea, always wanted to watch the entire sunset. Daphne and Diane, our daughters, had mentioned at lunch a few weeks ago about the move. I was dying to know more – when, did she bring all her things, was it permanent? – but I'd promised the girls not to get them involved. They had enough to deal with – Daphne with her first job in the law firm, and Diane going it alone with her two-year-old. But even as I remarked, "Oh really?" I knew somehow I'd find a way of getting here.

Finding this shack on rent I could afford on my pension was like striking gold. Heck, I could use a couple of weeks of coastal views myself, was my thought. Then later, the idea of being in such close proximity to her, bumping into her at the local bakery or newsagent maybe, both thrilled and alarmed me.

After checking in, though, I was seized with immobility. In the last thirteen days, I only ventured out once to top up on milk and bread. She was somewhere out there, what if I really ran into her? So I idled my time away. The books I brought kept me company. But the local radio stations played love songs from the 50s and 60s, which were the last thing I wanted to listen to.

On my fourth day, she appeared.

It was a scorcher of a day. The book I was reading bored me so I fixed dinner early. Hot oil spat out of the pan. The heat was unbearable, so I threw the lamb chop back into the fridge and decided to cool off on the beach.

I was shutting the door when I noticed a figure in the distance. I squinted but my failing eyesight caught no detail. So I got my binoculars. At first I spotted the

hair – a silvery bob. Then I recognised the walk. She'd stopped to dust sand off her ankles. After a while, she went back the way she came.

Ideas swirled in my head that night – of trailing her and hiding behind rocks if she looked my way, or driving slowly on the coastal road so I could find out where she lived. In the end I decided to just sit by my window.

Looking at the dark figure gliding over the sand now, I want to rush out, to cup her hands in mine, but I just sit here. The only movement I can manage is to reach for my Rothmans and lighter. As I pull out a cigarette, I take in a deep breath to ease the tightness in my chest. The sticky fishy smell of the sea is strangely soothing. I sink back into my chair and watch the breeze diffuse the smoke. On both sides of the window, the curtains whip about. The curtains in our house were immaculate. She used to wash them regularly. And whenever they showed signs of wear, she replaced them. I can't remember how many lots we went through – seven maybe? A new set every three, four years? I lost count.

The lighter was a gift from her, way back. I finger it, take a last drag and grind my cigarette into the ashtray.

HOW I TRIED to wipe that image out of my mind: the hollow look, the torment in her eyes. I remember how the tassels of the shade shook as she placed her bag beside the standing lamp.

We'd had arguments before – hell, too many – but that was the first time she'd run off. It happened in our fifteenth year of being married. After the night of our fight, I'd come home from work to find a scribbled note. *I need time out. Don't ring me*. How long? was my first question. How long? The idea of days without her numbed me. No more seeing her smooth down the bed sheet in the morning or crouched over the irises to pull out the weeds. Days without Chanel No. 5 lingering in the bedroom, without her listening at dinnertime to how my work day had been. Nights without the day-old fragrance mingled with the odour of her skin. A couple of days, five days, two weeks … what?

How could I have made sense of the waves? One minute she was cheerful, the next minute sullen, stone cold. Just the weekend before, we'd been to Torrens Island market, rising at that ungodly hour. But the thrill of stuffing our esky with fish straight off the boats had been worth it. Then there was breakfast by the pier, and the sun-kissed promontories that she'd said reminded her of slivers of honey mustard chicken.

Thank God the girls were at karate class that afternoon. Immediately after putting down her bag, she'd gone into the kitchen to make us tea. As I looked at her setting down the mugs, I had no way of telling which way things were going to go. Struggling for something to say, I sipped my tea, hoping the rising steam could break the silence. Then she leapt out of her chair and went to her bag. She returned with a package.

"For you," she said.

In it was the lighter, long, sleek, with fine filigree engravings. It was a work of art. I thanked her, but my thoughts came out in words: "But why?"

Tears had welled up in her eyes but she bit them back. "Oh, it's just a way of saying sorry ... for running off like that."

The evening sun had sliced in from a strip between the curtain and wall. It was blinding. I needed to either shift or draw the curtain. Before I could decide which to do, she got up and went to the kitchen. Then the sound of running water, followed by the fridge door opening and closing, and me just sitting there thinking, *What has just happened?* Somehow it didn't feel like the weight had been lifted. She was back, but the residue of our fight still lingered, and I had no clue as to what I had to do from then on.

That night our love-making was almost surreal. Touching her again made my body tremble, but I felt afloat, as if I wasn't there. Afterwards, as I smoked, she leaned over to kiss me goodnight. In the glow of the streetlight streaming in through the window, I caught the glisten of tears on her cheeks as her head fell on the pillow.

I FEEL TIRED today. There is an ache in my elbows. I walk round the lounge room to try to shake off the tiredness. A sugar fix might help. I raid the kitchen cupboards and find a packet of Tim Tams. After opening the packet, I throw it back into the cupboard. I should do something. A drive. Yes, I could check out the rest of Fleurieu Peninsula. In the earlier part of our marriage, we did a lot of Yorke Peninsula but hardly this region.

We did a lot more than do the run of B&Bs in the Yorke. We tore through wineries in pouring rain to taste Beresford's Shiraz Cabernet with its blend of chocolate and black pepper. And whenever we were near one, we checked out pet shops so she could cuddle the life-size stuffed toy dogs.

All through our courting days, our near perfect wedding, my change of jobs, her transferring to Minlaton Primary School for two years, the birth of the twin girls, her taking up sewing when the girls started kindy, we could do no wrong.

Port Germein jumps out at me now. We'd made a special trip there to watch the sunset from the kilometre-long jetty. The longest in the Southern Hemisphere, I was told. But it paled against the image of her face, orange from the glow of the sun. As she leaned back against me, the scent of Chanel No. 5 swirled around my nose. I could feel the hump of her back, it was very slight then. It was, what, only six years into our marriage. Around us, the sea shimmered

in the fading sun. I wrapped my arms around her and felt her every quiver, every gasp.

Now as much as any is a good time to drive around the Fleurieu. The weather is good; it should hold for the day.

Trees lining the roads form a canopy and throw moving shadows on the asphalt. Yankalilla is pleasant, the rolling hills looking like cushions that join and rejoin one another. Gum trees with silvery trunks dot them.

I'm parked at a lookout and thinking how contented the Frisian cows look sitting under the tree when I doze off. It is only when blowflies start swarming around my head that I wake up. I look at the clock on the dash. 6:40. Shit. I swerve the car round, tires screeching, and head back. The roar of the engine tears into the car. Ahead, the sun is plummeting into the skyline. I step harder on the accelerator and ignore the speed limit. In my mind I see the coming darkness through the window of the shack.

Finally. I'm back in Port Elliot. Everywhere, porch lights are lit and curtains drawn: the whole town is preparing for bed. When I enter the shack, darkness presses against me. The smell of stale chops hangs in the air. In front of me, the blackness of the night sky glares at me from the window. I collapse into my chair. A drink, I need a drink. I'm heading for the kitchen when the doorbell rings. My pulse races. I breathe in, breathe out and take slow measured steps towards the door. If it was her, if it was really her, what would I say – can we talk about how our marriage crumbled before my eyes?

A frail-looking woman with permed grey hair stands at the door.

"Excuse me, I'm from next door. Your car lights are on. You wouldn't want a flat battery tomorrow morning, I was thinkin'." She gives me a broad smile, her eyes distorted through her glasses.

IT'S AMAZING HOW you don't see anyone for weeks and then come across the same person two days in a row.

I was coming out of the bakery with loaves of bread in my arm yesterday when I saw the old lady from next door. She was with a man. Her husband probably. Her head was turned towards him and he was guiding her with a gentle touch on her back. As they crossed the road, he held her hand. They looked about my age. They would have gone through the same rhythms, the same cycles. Surely. What did it take for them to still want to touch each other?

The thing about growing old with someone is that time is slotted into chunks you can't measure and episodes blur into one another.

One thing I do remember – the silence in the house ballooned after the girls left home. At breakfast the drone of the neighbour's lawnmower replaced their chatter. If I wasn't playing golf during the weekend, the only sounds came from the wind chime or the TV.

Two people can weave in and out of each other's path, share the same sofa, lounge room, built-in robes, drawers, bathroom and bed, exchange smells, germs and bodily fluids, year after year, and still not be with each other. I can't recall when she stopped being there. All I recall is the cold, silent veneer.

I don't remember if it was before or after the cocktail waitress that the iciness seemed permanently etched on her face. They say you get used to these things – the cold space between two bodies on the sofa, the invincible wall down the middle of the bed.

The green numbers of the digital clock on the fridge switch to 7:20. Nearly time for her walk. I'm washing the one dish, one knife, one fork, keeping the glass out for later. I'm rushing a little and the grease on the spatula is being stubborn. I scrub, soap suds splashing onto my shirt. 7:30. I throw the spatula back into the sink and race to the window. My eyes tear across the beach. It is murky out there. Heavy and still. A storm may be brewing. In front of the shack some kids are playing ball, screaming and laughing. I wipe my hands with the tea towel and sit down.

Ahead, thick clouds gather. I look out to her direction. No one. Emptiness. Like the hollow ache in me throughout the flight back after the night with the cocktail waitress. What was her name again? She was part of the business trip. An extension of the conference, the Korean restaurant, the Melbourne Casino. How gaudy the lights were. And the fountains, changing colour in rhythm with the music. Then the drinks, the taunting from the blokes and the dare. And my last thought as I shut the hotel room door behind me, the girl already unhooking her bra and flinging herself on the bed: what the bloody hell, what difference would it make? Things were so rotten at home anyway.

I wait. A greyish tinge cloaks the sea. This time yesterday it was still bright. Now the light is pale, the last traces disappearing. Still no sign of anyone.

I return to the kitchen. Scum is floating in the sink. I pull out the plug, and when the water drains I find two forks beside the spatula. How did they get there? I thought I'd washed them all.

The cutlery was what held my gaze throughout dinner that evening. I'd cut the steak into pieces, watching my knife sliding back and forth. I put the knife down, took the fork and picked up each piece. From the lounge room came the murmur and quiet buzz of the TV. As soon as I finished eating, she cleared the dishes. Her food had been untouched. I remember hearing her scrape the food into the bin. And the flap of the lid as her foot released the pedal. A blowfly trapped in the house started buzzing at the kitchen window. She took the tea towel, bunched it up and

slapped the insect. She shook the tea towel and the dead creature fell into the sink. Then she came back to the table. She paused. I thought she was going to sit down but she remained standing.

As she arranged the placemats into a neat pile, she said, "There's no point in living in the same house any more. I'm moving out next week." No mention of Melbourne. No shopping list of my faults. No calling me a bastard or a pig. Not one tear.

That was seven months, three weeks and two days ago.

LATER TODAY I'LL return to Adelaide. I haven't brought much clothing so I can throw them all in last thing. There'll be some linen to gather and the pair of thongs out the back. I'd brought them, just in case. Nothing worse than having sand trapped in your shoes while on the beach. I haven't worn them, though; I haven't even felt the seawater on my feet, for Christ's sake.

Why not have a last shot? I throw off my shoes, open the door and follow a trail running through beach scrub. The sand is hot. I roll up my trousers and tiptoe over clumps of weeds. Waves wash in and out, breaking on rocks. The water is cool and as the waves recede, sand shifts under my feet. I find a spot on some rocks to sit.

Farther out, the sea is calm and a very pale blue. The hue is so light it merges with the sky. In the distance, seagulls encircle the sky. The wind makes a whirring sound in my ears, as if someone is whispering something to me.

I breathe in the scent of the ocean, and lie back on the rock. The sun is potent. Its rays burn my face and neck, dazzling my eyes so I have to shut them. I see the blazing glow on my darkened lids. Visions of the past thirty years of my life appear amidst the glow. There is no detail; they seem to fuse into one another and after a while they become still. I hear the swishing of waves, feel the wind in my face. The images blur, then fade away. A sense of unhurriedness washes over me. Of ease.

In eight hours, the sun will glide into the horizon, teasing onlookers with its last traces of light.

Genevieve Morck

Prepared

Start line. Hundreds of bodies press Madeline from all sides. Healthy bodies hydrated and ready to go, all ages. Bodies clad in CoolMax T's, spandex, and reflective stripes. Sidestepping, they try to take the edge off the October chill. Madeline can't hear above the clatter, but other hearts are beating like her own, ready to engorge with blood. Soon her Nikes will join thousands of feet as they thump the pavement of this ocean city.

A grizzled man in a party hat holds a sign: EXPECTED COMPLETION: 2 HRS. This is where Madeline will take her mark while the announcer counts down. *One minute*. Because it's her first big race, she wonders if she's seeded properly, if she'll get run over by speedsters or trip on slowpokes.

She turns and scans the faces in the crowd for signs of anybody else from Western Mufflers. Nerissa said she'd registered, George from Shipping too.

They're probably ahead. The rest are strangers and the whole alone-in-a-crowd thing kicks in.

She tips her head back and takes stock: even grey sky, good running weather, rain expected to hold off till the afternoon. A subtle wind brushes her skin, stirs tiny hairs on her forearms.

3-2-1 … and somewhere at the front, bodies must be moving but Madeline stands still. She looks down to see if the timing chip is secure on her shoe. Impressive technology. With just the crossing of the line, all that information will come up about her: Madeline Silverwood, Female, 31, from Saanich. And they'll know her time before she does, down to the hundredth of a second.

Finally, the sea of bodies swells to a walk. Then timing chips scream as participants spring onto toes in a massive lemming leap.

Most runners have set the chrono function on their watches but Madeline decided not to worry about time, just distance. Her goal: finish the 21.1 kilometres. Just finish.

She dodges bodies through the inner harbour. This is fantastic.

She smiles for the camera as if posing for *Runner's World*, thinks *sleek-sleek-sleek*. She feels every joint spring to action; her calves' tendons yawn to life. *Whoa* – she jumps to the left to avoid bashing into a cluster of women. She'd better pay attention to obstacles if she wants to stay on her feet. This is worse than December shopper-dodging down at the mall.

She weaves through the crowd, past moms pushing kids in strollers (how did they start way up here?), middle-aged men wearing 80's-style sweatbands (where's your legwarmers, Pops?), and coltish teenagers (outta the way, kiddies!)

Madeline is thin and loved and running and isn't life peachy?

1 km. Maybe she should slow down. She's talked to Bill and Rick at work who've done this Pacific Half, started out way too fast and had a crappy time.

Mind you, Bill thinks he's capable of an ultramarathon but in reality can't pass a Tim Horton's without adding a couple dozen Timbits to his already carb-heavy lunch. And Rick? Well, Rick is lazy. Doesn't prepare for anything. Showed up to

his wedding drunk, wearing sweatpants, a half-cocked tie, one cufflink, and a woman's undershirt (true story).

Those boys are all talk, no action, and the girls run the show down at Head Office. Mostly Nerissa. Multi-task, multi-sport. Promoted three times in two years. She kayaks, rock climbs in Nepal, can explain any model of any muffler anywhere, anytime. Immaculate in a linen suit or yoga gear.

Naturally curly hair hangs down her back in raven ringlets and is never, ever frizzy. Mother of two cherubs and a husband so gorgeous jaws drop. It was Nerissa who said, *I'd like to hook you up with a guy I met at scuba class.* Nerissa who said, *Here's the book for you – Learn to Run in 13 Weeks. – I've heard it's terrific!* Nerissa is Goddess: head of sales, black belt, community pillar, triathlete, friend to all.

She's probably way, way ahead.

2 km. Madeline scans the faces of cheerers. They huddle together around the restaurant district of the tourist zone, waving signs and cavorting.

Sign: *Go Chris!*

Sign: *May the Course be with you.*

Sign: *Nice legs.*

Sign: *We love you Mom! –*

Madeline's abs tense. Had things turned out differently, a man would be standing on the sidelines, their four-year-old slung on his shoulders to have a better view of Mommy coming. But no, don't think that, the man wasn't Benjy, and look how things turn out for the better –

She chuckles at the dude beside her in a Rolling Stones t-shirt and long black wig. How the hell can he run in that thing?

3 km. The spectators cheer harder around this bend. She scans the sidelines for Benjy and sees only friendly strangers. The crowd of runners is still mud-pie thick. She decides a blonde woman in pigtails is about her pace and follows. They're nearing the ocean, heading downhill. Coasting. West Coasting. She tastes salt in the wind.

Damn, shoelace untied, 15 seconds to stop, double-knot. Her shoes, three months old, have lost their new-shoe whiteness; they've covered about 35km/week in training. Sometimes it's hard to remember her body's capable of this – left, right, left, right – for millions of steps. She feels her left butt muscle twitch and marvels that it belongs to her, this tight ass.

4 km. She's warmed up, found her rhythm. As her joints move together, she mulls over her pre-race routine this morning. She'd gotten up well before dawn, leaving Benjy to snore away like a Husqvarna in the bedroom at the back of their bungalow. Wondered what he was dreaming, probably an underwater scene with lots of coral (either that or eating a blueberry muffin – he dreams that a lot). She was tempted to poke him but no, his breathing wasn't anxious, like when he dreams about delivering mail to the tri-Rottweiler house.

After she dressed in her laid-out clothes, she did 25 pushups and 50 crunches on the Turkish carpet. Then she tiptoed to the kitchen and made instant oatmeal: cinnamon & apple. Pinned the race number 6545 to her EZ-dri tanktop, laced up her shoes. Grabbed her keys, a water bottle, and a change of warm clothes. Flexed her legs as she crossed the cool tile, anklebones cracking.

The click of the door must've woken Benjy because she heard him call, as she left, *Good luck, Maddy! You can do it! See you at the finish!* He's a morning person and can do that: sit up and be completely functional, coherent from the get-go.

Why didn't he come with her?

Her breath intensifies into staccato huffs. She's reached the first gradual hill so she tells herself: *You're not fat any more, you can do this.* This is her mental training: *not fat … can do …*

5 km. It feels like she was born running, like she is strong and gazelle-like and the mighty cheetah and all that fast animal stuff. Flat terrain runs through this section of pavement. Perhaps the term *urban jungle* was invented by a runner.

Her body glides like she isn't there to push it. She's aware of every hit of shoes to ground, every bend of knee. But nothing hurts. Yet.

It was an easy enough sport to take up. Her Ex, Christopher, planted the idea, he always seemed so happy after a run. He'd go in the evenings, after his shift at the restaurant where he spent the morning over a hot griddle, flipping eggs for mill workers. When Christopher returned to their one-bedroom hole, a triangle-shaped wet spot sat between the bony points of his shoulder blades. His face glistened like a wet tangerine, the usual sneer turned up at the corners. *Endorphins,* he shouted as he shed sweaty clothes down the hallway to the shower. *Fucking endorphins, amazing.* When the water stopped, he came out with one fluffy towel around his waist, another turbaned around his head. He strolled to the beanbag chair and tweaked her on the cheek hard enough to hurt. *And what were you up to tonight, my little Curdball? Sitting on your fat ass?* Half kidding, half not. *Poutine Princess* was his other nickname for her, originating from Madeline's French-Canadian mother coupled with her weakness for fries. He would narrow his eyes, look towards the screen where Montel was revealing boot camp footage of troubled teens. When the good mood wore off, Christopher looked like he wanted to pinch her again, harder. She tensed, tried not to look towards the couch. Under the folds of its skirt she'd hidden food – a tube of Sour Cream & Onion Pringles perhaps, or some chocolate macadamia cookies.

Forget it. That's all past and Benjy never made fun of her size, never. In fact, when the pounds started coming off, he

seemed nervous. Like the part of her that loved him might be shed at the same time.

6 km. She's done over a quarter of the course now, feels good as her feet swing beneath her body. Pacing through, it's all in the pacing, these longer races. Can she keep her energy up?

She's forgotten about her power gel, pulls the shiny packet from her pocket and tears off the top. It's covered in lint from her Kleenex, but it's okay, she'll eat it anyway. She squirts half the package of brown goo into her mouth. Mmmm, chocolate and lint.

Reaching the water station, general chaos swirls, with runners cutting each other off. Volunteers yell, *Water! Gatorade! Clack, clack* – all around, discarded cups rain to the asphalt, forming a cardboard obstacle course. Madeline slows, seizes a cup from a peppy woman, and downs it. She walks for a minute, then runs again. She licks her lips and they're not as salty as before. The faint taste of chocolate lingers and she wishes she'd grabbed two cups.

With carbohydrates and water, she's fuelled the machine that is her body. *Vroom vroom.*

7 km. The power gel kicks in. Her head begins to separate from her body, which feels powered by something supernatural. Her legs pump harder, locomotive wheels.

She's long since lost Blonde Pigtails so follows a guy in a pink shirt. *Notfatcando.*

8 km. Now the course swings into a residential neighbourhood and families sit on front steps of cedar-shingled houses looking all Norman Rockwell. Faces beam and hands wave. She smiles at a little kid with a toy banjo; his Dad's hands overflow with helium balloons.

Feeling a raindrop roll down the tip of her nose, she waits for another, but it's the only one. She feels a side-stitch coming on, so she slows, focuses on steady breathing. Her stomach gurgles, forces a burp to her throat. She swallows, tells it to go away. She's busy. Her knees seem to groan. *Shut the hell up*, she tells various body parts. *I'm the boss of you.*

9 km. Madeline passes a turquoise port-a-potty. She consults her bowel: *You doing okay down there?* Hoorah, it's silent. Apparently the runners' diarrhea gods are smiling down today.

She used to run only nine kilometres at a time, her well-trod loop around the University chip trails, down to Cadboro Bay and home. Now nine kilometres isn't even halfway. She can't help being proud at how well she's progressed.

She decided to prepare in July. After that conversation in the Datsun, coming home from Doctor Anderson's, test results fresh. Benjy in the passenger seat as she struggled with the finicky clutch. It frequently stuck in second, so she pushed it up until it hit the middle. Elton John played on the radio while Madeline stopped for an acid-washed pedestrian.

Benjy looked away into traffic. He said, *You could find a donor*, and she said, *We could adopt*, and he said, *I'm sorry*, and she said, *What have you got to be sorry for? – a lot of men can't so stop beating yourself up about something you can't fucking change*, and then he said nothing.

She found the online race registration the next day, in time to make the Early Bird deadline, started training for longer runs. Grew lean and pumped. Ripped. Ready.

10 km. Another much needed water station appears. Slow sips this time, two cups, then throws them into the trash. Starts again.

She sees him from the back first. (Could it be? Yes, it is. Or is it?) His ass reminds her of Christopher's, the long flanks, bunched up in the middle, a deformed peanut. But the bald spot? That wasn't there.

Of course, nearly five years have passed and he's gotten older (thirty-three); he could have a mullet, for all she knows.

But yes. It's him because there – the mole on his left calf – shaped like a banana slug.

She forgets to breathe for three seconds; her throat burns. Her body twitches like it wants to yell, but she doesn't let it.

She's coming up behind him and could probably pass but checks her watch. Only fifty-three minutes have passed. Too fast, still half the race to go. Although she doesn't care what her time is, it'd still be nice to do the second half faster and have a negative split. Besides, she never wanted to see him again, from any angle. She'll hang back a tic.

11 km. There are different kinds of runners and there are different kinds of running. Back near the seawall, she saw a guy with his arms swinging like an Orangutan. The white-haired lady up ahead, she doesn't move a muscle above her waist. Some runners bound, others glide, some shuffle or look like they're going to fall on their faces. Madeline's not sure how she looks when she drifts into autopilot. But she knows by the bottom of her shoes that she strikes pavement heel-first, favouring her left.

She realizes she's never seen Christopher run before and he looks damn awkward. It's his shoulders – they're pushed up too high, and he's bent forward, studying potholes. Still he runs with unmistakable cockiness, like he's the only one on the road.

She keeps up easily but avoids passing. She's dreamed of this moment since she got down to a size eight. Finally, she could face her reflection – a woman, still five foot six, but now with a winning smile, only one chin. A waist (yes!) and muscles replacing the cellulite lumps on her butt. During the course of the fitness program, her skin turned from

ashen to peach, her hair from brown to chestnut. On the advice of Nerissa, she updated her Jennifer-Anniston-circa-1995 hairdo to a sporty pixie cut.

Madeline fantasized about meeting him like this, when she's strong, saying, *Don't you recognize me? I'm hot and happy now and nah-nah-nah-nah-nah* –

– No. She doesn't want to meet him, now she's faced with it. She wants to disappear down the closest manhole.

12 km. She has to pass on his left; he's walking and she's not. She turns toward the sea in case he recognizes her. He'd say something like: *Hey, didn't I used to live with you for two years, when you were forty pounds heavier? And the whole time I was fucking a waitress named Annika? And didn't I tell you I was leaving you in a pub in London, after we ordered shandies and toasted Chuck and Camilla? Didn't you bawl like a snotty baby in the rain outside, pressing your forehead against a piss-soaked brick wall and smoking a pack of Benson & Hedges even though you'd never smoked before when we were supposed to be having the trip of our lives that was paid for by your Christmas bonus? Good to see you, Curdball. What've you been up to?*

Sitting on your fat ass?

She passes him now. Feels her limbs hold together in a perfect stance, eyes ahead to the next curve, elbows tucked in at her sides, legs working. She works a gob of phlegm up her throat. A casual spit. He doesn't even blink.

13 km. God, the ocean is beautiful today, on this stretch. Who said grey is dull? Grey is the colour of things real and pure. A marking on the back of that gull's head. Benjy's eyes. Brains. A fetus. Lots of things.

14 km. Face smoldering, her skin feels wet and dry at the same time. She has salt crystals caught in her elbow crooks and knee hollows. She sweats everywhere, everywhere. Her hips seem to be in the most pain but her calves tingle too. She hates running at this moment. Wants to walk and walk and never run again.

She rifles through her pocket and downs the rest of the power gel. She's several metres behind a sweat-drenched guy and catches a sour whiff of B.O. Good lord. But maybe it's her, what direction is the breeze coming from?

The crowd is absent from this part of the course and she feels as though she's running alone, any ordinary Sunday. From far away, a ship blows its horn. In the other lane, a crow pecks a cheeseburger wrapper. Madeline's suddenly hyper-aware of her breath, steady though her stomach flutters. She's ready to keep going, even though one minute ago she felt like quitting. Must be the power gel.

She sails past the water station, can't stop now.

15 km. Are her nipples bleeding? Maybe not, but the undersides of her breasts chafe against the elastic of her sports bra. Feels like her thighs that day at the lake when she forgot to apply the BodyGlide. God, didn't she learn the first time? She rechecks her memory of the morning. Benjy … the snoring … putting on clothes … but what before? She vaguely remembers reaching for the deodorant. She rolled under her arms, reached for the other stick, rubbed down where her tank top met her underarms, the fabric elastic around her shorts, her toes. But did she remember her breasts?

Shit.

16 km. When was the last time they did it? She pictures Benjy, all lanky in his Canada Post uniform, those sexy navy shorts. She misses his body, his furry chest and smooth scrotum. She misses the taut outline of his "V" – the special spot where the minute curve of his belly meets his pubis.

He's been reading in bed lately, always fantasy, lots of Robert Jordan. She's been too tired from training, falls asleep right away under the mallard-print comforter. She used to skim through a couple of chapters of pulp horror: Anne Rice, *Flowers in the Attic*, that kind of thing. Always keyed her up, put her in the mood.

Sex didn't make sense after they'd stopped trying. But this distance … something needs to fix it. For the next few days she'll be too sore. But soon.

Mental note: *fuck husband.*

17 km. She can't give up because she's seen Christopher.

A competitive bastard, he was mean when she landed on Park Place and Boardwalk (which he always owned). When they played NTN in Bob's Pub he knew it all – especially sports and music trivia – and would get huffy and order tequila shots whenever she kicked his ass in the history questions.

Christopher wasn't always so nasty, just near the end. Back when they started dating and he was in chef school, Christopher was peachy. Called her just-plain-*Princess*, brought her mini-quiches and carnations. In that same pub they laughed together over a botched Cornish hen anecdote. The memory is faint, but yes, it happened.

The crowd has dispersed; they're at the finish line, no doubt, to welcome the winners. All she can hear is the steady breathing of the other runners – scattered around her at various intervals, thinned to a group of twelve. Feet slap the pavement in unison, a militaristic beat. She notices that her right foot strikes ground the same time as the left foot of the bald guy in front of her. She tries to alter her rhythm so she won't look like a copycat.

19 km. She must've missed the last marker, she was so focused on just going, going. Each step jars her body; pain

stabs ankles, knee joints, hamstrings, and shoulders. She's a marionette handled by a psycho, strings taut and spider-web thin. What the marathoners must go through, they who wouldn't even have reached halfway by now. They who have persevered to experience more pain, injuries, they of great pride and much pain. Yes.

During training, she's hit the wall, had to stop and shrug it off, try another time. That's okay, every runner has to give herself a break now and then, start fresh. But not today, race day. She can't stop now.

Hey. There's Santa Claus waving at her from beneath a willow, accompanied by The Cat in the Hat and a rodeo clown. Or maybe they're dressed this way to cheer. Freaks.

20 km. Where's Christopher?
Where's the end?
It must be soon,
soon.
She feels her way around each corner,
past hotels,
past volunteers in orange vest,
a hovering ambulance.
Approaches the last marker.

21 km. Drowning out the cacophony of complaints from her body, she keeps going.

She can see it now, the crowd pressed to a fence overlooking cattle-shoot gates, a banner forecasting victory, she dare not look at her watch for fear of time speeding up, jinxing it, a breeze as someone whisks past her; she sprints like she has rockets on her shoes, swings her arms like a mad cartoon robot, maybe she's crazy but she thinks she can make out Benjy's cheer above the general roar, or at least his thundering clap – he has large hands and has embarrassed her at concerts with the sound they make coming together, smoosh of air between palms – and her arms and legs are pumping, pumping, and just … about … there …

Finish line. Madeline Silverwood hears the announcer say her name. She returns her timing chip to one of the ladies with the buckets and makes her way out of the path of finishers to find her husband. Benjy hugs her. "You did it!"

He kisses her on the cheek – a juicy smack – and says, "How do you feel?"

"Hungry." The lineup is building at the food tent. She turns and asks Benjy if he has his keys, if he could fetch her bag from the car, tells him where she's parked.

Madeline limps toward the food tent alone. It's Christopher she comes face to face with, over a box of donuts and cut-up bananas. He looks right through her as if she were any of the spandex-clad runners, not the woman he left so there was nothing she could do but go to the clinic and end it.

They reach the end of the line and Madeline thinks she should speak out. She's ready. "Hello, Christopher."

A blank look, and his face colours with disbelief the way she knew it would. "Hey. Didn't recognize you. Wow. You look good." It doesn't have the ring she thought it would. "So you're a runner now."

"Yep."

"Good, good. So, what was your time?" He really wants to know, she can tell.

"A little over two hours, maybe two hours, one minute."

Every muscle in his body relaxes. "I came in at 1:59."

"Good for you." Not meaning it.

"Too bad about missing that two-hour mark, Maddy."

"There'll be other races." Suddenly Benjy is at her elbow, trying to pass her the bag but she can't take it because she's balancing a plateful of food in one hand, a juice box in the other. "Thanks, but could you hold it for a minute?"

The men size each other up. Benjy crosses and uncrosses his arms; she's got to say something. "This is my husband Benjy. Benjy, this is Christopher." She hasn't told Benjy everything. What Benjy knows: *This is the guy who lived with Madeline in Gordon Head*, or *this is the guy who dumped Madeline in London*, or, simply, *this is Madeline's Ex.*

This is the guy who doesn't matter anymore, she wants to tell Benjy, *because I beat him.*

She sights Nerissa in the crowd and waves her over. Nerissa enfolds her in a perfumed embrace (how come she doesn't smell bad?). "Way to go, Girlfriend! Whoo hoo!"

Madeline turns to introduce her friend to Christopher but he's gone. True to character, fucked off without saying goodbye.

She swaps race summaries, before Nerissa, joined by her perfect family, breezes off to do brunch with the in-laws.

Benjy says, "Ready to go?"

"Yep. I need to get home. Shower."

Benjy turns to her, a crinkled squint. He makes that contemplative face he makes whenever he's pondering anything from a crossword puzzle to Middle Eastern conflicts.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm stiff. And I've got blisters."

"I didn't mean that."

"I need time to recover. But I'm fantabulous, really."

Benjy blinks and a smug smile flashes across his lips. "He was smaller than I pictured." He grabs Madeline's hand and leads her through the crowd.

Everybody looks jovial, healthy. As they pass a car, Madeline sees her reflection in the highly polished metal, the lean tissues of hamstrings, shoulders strong. She looks purified, like any runner on a typical race day.

Endorphins, fucking endorphins. Amazing.

Courageous before wrong

Tim Conley on Edmund Wilson the writer

Edmund Wilson: A Life in Literature
Lewis M. Dabney
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
642 pages, $49.00

Lewis M. Dabney declares that his new biography of Edmund Wilson is an answer to Morris Dickstein's call for "a scrupulous and detailed intellectual biography" of this paragon of American literature. Thus the subtitle, which brings to mind Kafka's protestation: "I am nothing but literature." The same could not be said of Wilson, who is also made up of several troubled love affairs and marriages, travel, friendships and arguments, drink, drink, and yet more drink. The usual plaudits sounded at Wilson still ring true: the clarity of his prose, the evenness of his sensibility, the omnivorousness of his curiosity. Dabney's book follows Rosalind Wilson's memoir of her father, *Near the Magician* (1989), and Jeffrey Meyers's biography (1995), not to mention the many volumes of Wilson's own journals and letters. "Detailed" the present book clearly is – there are some seventy-five pages of notes before the index – but is it "scrupulous?"

Dabney is perhaps a bit adoring of Wilson —he tells his story of having met the Great Man, and glosses over a few of his intellectual weak spots, like his teaching style and inability to grapple with theory – but this is certainly forgivable and entirely preferable to the sort of outright antagonism that makes reading, say, Ray Monk's biography of Bertrand Russell such a loathsome exercise. (I have yet to finish the second volume, despite three attempts.) Both Wilson and Russell represent similar challenges: in each case the biographer has his hands full with a liberal-minded patrician figure with complex sexual histories, an output of writing that suggests a committee rather than an individual, and determined, sometimes controversial political stances. Naturally it is easier to snipe at such a subject, but Dabney does not. His Wilson, whose masterpieces are *To the Finland Station* and *Patriotic Gore*, is not primarily the foot-fetishist observed by Meyers and, with a more gracefully arched eyebrow, Gore Vidal. Dabney's Wilson is a writer.

More than other biographers, Dabney likes to quote Wilson's poems, which as far as I know have nowhere been collected. Here is a taste:

> I heard it, dulled with love against your breast,
> I heard it in our peace of summer suns;
> I heard it where the long waves of the West
> Retard the dark with loud suspended guns;
>
> And even in the white bark of that wood,
> Those mountains roped and broken by our race,
> Beside those high streams where the horses stood
> And watched our strange and desperate embrace.

The rhythm here is straight out of Yeats, and elsewhere Wilson shows a fair talent for parody and imitation, though the overall quality does not change. Wilson's taste in poetry was noticeably more limited than his taste for prose. (He did write about Rimbaud, Éluard, and Eliot, but his own verse is closer to Yeats and Edna St. Vincent Millay, one of the central loves of his life.) Consider, then, the demagogical force of his prose:

> We have seen, in our most recent wars, how a divided and arguing public opinion may be converted overnight into a national near-unanimity, an obedient flood of energy which will carry the young to destruction and overpower any effort to stem it. The unanimity of men at war is like that of a school of fish, which will swerve, simultaneously and apparently without leadership, when the shadow of an enemy appears, or like a sky-darkening flight of grasshoppers, which, also all compelled by one impulse, will descend to consume the crops.

Those are the last lines of the introduction to *Patriotic Gore* (1962), Wilson's careful survey of Civil War writings. None of the hesitating histrionics that force the repetition of "I heard it" and somewhat mechanical pairing of adjectives ("roped and broken . . . strange and desperate") are in evidence here. Wilson's sentences thrive on their own electricity, passing the charge from one to the next without diminishing it. The rhetorical stance of the populist historian comes naturally to him.

And laudably so. Received wisdom meant nothing to him, who aspired to be an honest but intelligent witness. Wilson was downright combative when it came to matters of language, literature, politics, and meaning – these things truly mattered to him, were his bread and life rather than an opportunity for tenure. He could be courageously wrong, but always courageous before wrong. He was among the first critics to respond thoughtfully to many experimental modernists, including Gertrude Stein

and the James Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*. Wilson liked to know what was going on, what was in the air; thus he was equally essayist and diarist.

On the other hand, Wilson could be somewhat unworldly, which quality probably flawed his parenting and marriages. His hobby – if the term has any meaning for a man of many obsessions – was magic, especially sleight of hand, though most reports suggest he was not terribly good at it. He never learned to drive (a Truro newspaper "contained a notice that Edmund Wilson was seen passing through this Massachusetts town in a taxi with a Washington, D.C., license plate"). He brought to the attention of his chum Vladimir Nabokov an appendix in Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychologies of Sex*, in which a Ukrainian man "describes his encounters with nymphets and child prostitutes who turn out to be more sexually experienced than he, and despairs of his inability to control his appetite for them." (*Lolita*, which appeared six years later, did not impress Wilson. This was the opening fissure between the friends; the chasm would open with Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* in the next decade.)

Although the writing is spotlessly lucid and direct, Dabney's book is ultimately stronger on Life than it is on Literature. There are some glib pronouncements on writers and their works here as well as the odd blunder, such as the reference to Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuovo* (sic) as "an obscure seventeenth-century treatise" (the first edition was published in 1725). A passing reference to Professor Jig Cook's "feminist wife Susan Glaspell" has a patronizing tone, neglecting to mention as it does that Glaspell was a playwright. There are a few supercilious asides aimed at contemporary poetry and literary criticism, but these are such broad swipes that nobody gets hurt. For example, Dabney regretfully notes that "in the twenty-first century few poets are committed to the mechanics of verse," and somehow I am not surprised to find no note among the many at the back of the book which might substantiate this claim.

This hint of scorn for contemporary literature is also discernible in references to contemporary literary criticism, and it's not hard to sniff out the nostalgia behind it, a longing for an era of Great Men of Letters downing Manhattans together between *New Yorker*-style *bons mots*, unworried by the greater world except as a subject for intellectual speculation and debate. This hokey vision has little to do with the real Wilson, the man who brusquely turned down an invitation to Lyndon Johnson's White House in the Vietnam years and subsequently suggested that a law be passed to prohibit Texans from becoming president (such fickle historical ironies make us cough). Wilson was as much *l'écrivain engagé* as his friend André Malraux; he might even be called the Sartre of the American Republic. The apolitical Wilson is a myth tailored in the same style that outfits Mark Twain as a charming Southerner who wrote decent children's stories. Dabney is susceptible to this myth's allure – a phrase like "his vision no longer focused by Marx's magic lantern" displays a kind of embarrassment at his subject's politics – but only as part of his celebration of Wilson as hero, which does not overshadow his picture of Wilson the man. ●

Tying the glot

Antje M. Rauwerda on a playful poet

Ligatures
Donato Mancini
New Star Books
106 pages

In *Ligatures*, Donato Mancini takes the typographical technique of printing two separate letters in one unit (ligature) as his poetic premise. Though the technique was purely pragmatic in those almost bygone days of print typesetting, for Mancini it becomes a rich visual toy (appropriate given his background as a visual artist). For example, where "&" started off as a convenient unit combining the "e" and "t" of Latin's *et*, "&" and ligatured units like it are ripe with concrete poetic significance for Mancini. These poems are not about meter or even sound. Neither are they explorations of romantic love (two becoming one). Instead they are predominantly word games: they ask what happens when two words or letters or meanings fuse. Even when humans produce an offspring in whom their genetic material is conjoined ("Writing for the First Time"), Mancini's emphasis is on word play.

The title poem of the collection suggests an evolution from word to word based on form: "chestnut nutrient entrée tree." It shows words hidden within one another ("dropout pouter"). The reader stretches to make the meanings connect as the implied etymologies seem to. This is easier – and funnier – in some lines ("nuptial altar tart Tartuffe") than in others ("metagalaxy xylophone phonecard cardigan gander"). This poem sums up many in

the collection; the catalyzing idea is terrific, but a shred (even the merest whiff) of narrative or plot is needed to justify the length. At six and a half densely worded pages, this piece goes on too long.

The last line of "Ligatures" ("Adam damsel seltzer zero") uses the A to Z theme Mancini explores to great effect in "Lphabeta–Aalphabe." The poem is presented in four columns of 25 eight-letter words. He starts with "Alphabet," removes the first letter and adds one at the end to get "Lphabeta" from which he removes the "L" and adds "g" to get "Phabetag." By removing the first letter and supplementing a last, Mancini reveals the Greek alphabet, in order, from alpha to omega, with all the less famous letters ("sigmatau" [sigma and tau together here] or "I*omikron*" [my emphasis]) in between. As an exercise, this is truly remarkable. 100 words, 100 minor changes and a whole Greek alphabet derived out of the English word "alphabet": highly impressive, and a very engaging puzzle to decipher.

As enjoyable is "The Graphically Classified Alphabet." If each letter is its own species, Mancini here posits (in no particular order) the phyla, subphyla, classes, subclasses, orders and genuses to which they might belong. He groups letters with "curved lines"("CSO"), single, double or no stem (b, H or X and letters like them, respectively). He identifies "combs" ("EF") and "cups" ("JU"). These classifications are genuinely inventive re-envisionings of the alphabet. Mancini includes a row of g's that he calls "ducks"; this representational classification doesn't fit with his others, even though it is amusing. Likewise, he gives "Q" in 10 different fonts and suggests what it visually resembles in each, ashtray through to snail (funny and often apt).

In *Ligatures*, Mancini employs both a lexicon (of words that he uses in mesostics) and a lexigraphy (in which characters represent words). In a mesostic, one writes a word vertically and fills in the horizontal lines. The letters comprising the vertical word appear in the middle of the horizontal words rather than providing the first letter of each horizontal word as in an acrostic. The meaning of the horizontal lines is left (purportedly) to chance. American composer John Cage developed this technique in his *Norton Lectures* texts, *Sixty-Two Mesostics Re: Merce Cunningham*, and *Roaratorio*. Manicini uses it in "Writing For the First Time: 22 baby mesostics." Mancini's mesostics are about congential conditions and deformites that could afflict babies; they are also small (and hence "babies" in that regard, too). [See sidebar.]

The technique is interesting, and the reader's urge to grasp for meaning makes these poems seem to embody the feeling of being a blue baby, of having cerebral palsy or of being a Siamese twin. But there are twenty-two of these, and after about the first four, they become tiring.

The lexigraphy in this collection is ultimately more enjoyable. Mancini coins new ligatures to represent words, provides a glossary of them ("@phabet") and uses them in two graphic stories: "The Body Remembers: An @phabet Reader" and "Love, Knowledge and Memory: Another @phabet reader." Each ligature is a redrawing of the @ symbol with other letters in the "a" space. Thus an encircled "h" means "he" and an encircled "l" "love". In "The Body Remembers," two handsome cartoon muscle men argue, one lops the other's head off, and a mustachioed genie enters the story to introduce what seems to be an evil portent arising from the beheading. A wonderful frame presents the headless

Cage's mesostics are fairly regular on the page:

```
                                from his Jumping
                        the older one is Erik SAtie
                              he never stops sMiling
                                    and thE younger one
                                          iS joyce, thirty-nine

                                        he Jumps
                                  with his back tO the audience
                            for all we know he maY be quietly weeping
                  or silently laughing or both you just Can't
                                          Ell
```

Mancini's travel across the page more, disorienting and disabling the reader (which is probably why he provides a prefatory key for the poem):

```
newBorn
Left
foUr
arE

        Blood, poor
                circulAte
        Before

cYanosis
        Being
        onLy      pUmp-oxyg
Etor    By
sAfety
        Bluish
        generallY
```

[this spells "blue baby blue baby"]

torso topped by the seemingly radiant ligature for "if." The dialogue happens entirely in Mancini's "@phabet" but is cryptic and choppy, even in its allusiveness, even if one goes through and decodes it "word" by "word." "Love, Knowledge and Memory" is a histrionic cartoon of doomed romance. The ligatures represent the female character's emotions. Here, rather than using lines of various ligatures that are almost but not quite dialogue (as in "The Body Remembers"), Mancini uses proliferations of the same ligature to suggest exuberance and excess. Thus the frame in which the lovers orgasm (which depicts their bedroom wall) is ringed with dozens of his ligature for "come" in various sizes. This sequence works well and looks terrific; it would make a great art installation done in colour with the panels taking up generous amounts of wall space.

Ligatures is Mancini's first full-length book, and one of the drawbacks of the collection is its unevenness. Some of these poems are superlatively interesting, while others seem like artworks ill-suited for the small scale of a printed page (for example the constellations of words in the glossy white on black "Starfield Series"). Some poems in the collection simply seem lacking. "T.C.W.N.L." reads, for instance, like random snippets compiled using fridge magnets over a series of mornings while waiting for the coffee to perk; "that's not my vagina, silly" would be an especially good morning's work. However "I and I yes/ you" could do with more caffeine.

Overall, I would heartily recommend *Ligatures*, especially to those who relish crosswords, word -finder games, puns, the metaphysical poets, and *Finnegans Wake*; if decoding is your bag, this collection hits the spot. If, however, you'd like narrative, psychological complexity or even representational imagery, I would suggest you look elsewhere.

A final query: if "ligature" implies connecting two letters in a typographical unit, why is Mancini's first poem a concrete one crafting a pair of scissors out of Es? This collection emphasizes the creation of lexical units; why start with an image that suggests uncoupling them? ●

Past modern

Neta Gordon on the difficulties of being up to date

The Beautiful Wife
Leon Rooke
Thomas Allen Publishers, 2005
293 pages

Leon Rooke's *The Beautiful Wife*, published in the fall of 2005, is a relentlessly contemporary Canadian read. Subsequent to the seemingly timeless prologue set in folktale Ghent, almost every page of this novel is fairly littered with references to a world almost banal in its familiarity: untoward occurrences at the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board; government officials appropriating money from the public purse; warnings to readers about imminent, potentially offensive scenes that feature cigarette-smoking. Mention of the "new pope" – Joseph Ratzinger, now known as Benedict XVI, elected April 2005 – as well as the timeline provided for one character's escape from the Marcos regime in the Philippines, thrusts the reader into a narrative so immediate, one almost feels as if it is being written even as it is being read. And, considering the emphasis Rooke places on the mounting troubles the "author" is having putting his book together, which include receiving aggressively perplexing reports from a series of researchers he has apparently hired to do some fact-checking for him, as well as notices that his own estranged "beautiful wife" is working on her version of the same novel, exploring the immediate turmoil of producing a narrative may be more Rooke's point than the story itself.

In fact, the story of *The Beautiful Wife* defies easy description. The first two chapters appear to initiate a story of a delicious and forbidden love that elevates poor ViVa Straight from the funk she has been in since being granted paid leave from the Immigration and Refugee Board after a dust-up with the Minister. ViVa's mother, Vira, on vacation in the Philippines with her daughter after their plane was mysteriously diverted *en route* to the Dominican Republic, is so concerned about ViVa's full-blown adoration of the rakish M. Epee, who already has a beautiful wife, that she calls her son Finn in Winnipeg to beg him to help her deal with the situation. Finn himself is no stranger to difficult love, as his own beautiful wife Betsy has left him, in part because she is jealous of Finn's obvious fascination with the odd Filipino woman, Marchusa, who had been renting their poorly appointed downstairs apartment, and who was the very Refugee claimant over whom the aforementioned dust-up between ViVa and her boss occurred. So far, so good. Rooke's take on love is decidedly sensual, and ViVa and M. Epee's night of carnal bliss is described with hilarious abandon: "The Monsieur's lips were heavenly. She wanted to come upon those lips, and the whole of his body, from all directions. From all directions simultaneously. The way a hungry octopus might." Yet,

even in the midst of these first two relatively straightforward chapters, Rooke's interest in the "author's" exertions begins to assert itself via the footnotes that he (as well as, apparently, the mysterious team of researchers) inserts. A mere two pages in, an authorially authorized footnote humbly admits to the reader that, yes, both ViVa and Vira smoke cigarettes, but offers the consolation to "Readers opposed to smoking" that "Vira is never seen smoking in this book. ViVa is observed doing so only once … Unless they defy the author, no other character has the habit."

Thus begins Rooke's second narrative about a brewing conflict between author and characters, or rather between "author" and other defiant authorial interlopers (readerly or otherwise). Rooke's concerns here are, of course, decidedly post-modern, and playful suggestions that a narrative, on the one hand, is organized according to an author's whim and, on the other hand, can somehow be wrested from an author's grasp will not strike the reader as particularly unusual. In fact, as footnotes and notes from the researchers begin to pile up, the book feels somehow diminished. At one point, a footnote reports that Finn is the only one of Vira's three sons to have survived, but because "[t]his book is not Vira's," that story will not be pursued. Hear, hear! say I. Let's get back to the beach and see what ViVa and M. Epee are up to! To my mind, the problem with Rooke's post-modern interventions is two-fold: in the first place, the footnotes are not always particularly radical or clever in terms of jarring the reader out of her or his complacent suspension of disbelief. Often, they are just annoying: what, for example, is gained by footnote 28, which informs the reader that the description of Finn's hair as being "worse that Freddy Kruger wig hair" makes reference to "[v]illain of 1984 horror film, *Nightmare on Elm Street*"? Simply put, many of the footnotes are just not very interesting, and the interrogation regarding the degree to which an author's work is his or her own is not sustained.

In the second place, and somewhat paradoxically considering the overwhelming immediacy of most of the allusions, Rooke's play with post-modern concerns and technique seems to date this novel, to make it feel stale even before its allusions have receded. Most seriously, the rather ho-hum effect of wading through passé textual trickery dulls the sensuousness of the love stories that open the novel as well as the impact of the various narratives Rooke dabbles in regarding the complexity of coming to terms with victims of state policy. Marchusa's tale of surviving and escaping the Marcos regime, only to be hunted down and murdered in Canada, never achieves a sufficient emotional or politicized pitch, what with the crossfire between researcher's notes and author's footnotes dealing with the question of whether the author or his estranged beautiful wife can claim ownership of the tale. Issues that echo the emphasis Marchusa's tale should bring to victims of policy, for example the issue of the Catholic Church's liability for not advocating the use of condoms in AIDS-stricken Africa, are given short shrift in favour of further meta-fictional diversions (in this case, the story of a priest's excommunication on the grounds of his critique of Church policy is told from the point of view of his cat, a choice that seems both politically timid and artistically juvenile.)

The Beautiful Wife manages to wrap up quite neatly, if hastily, for all its convolutedness. To my mind, the book itself takes a few too many post-modern diversions (as perhaps far too many planes in the novel are mysteriously diverted from the Dominican Republic); a more direct route between the opening chapters and its conclusion might have offered a more emotionally and intellectually rewarding trip. ●

Continued from p. 4

made us deaf to competing noises." Many, though not all, of the poets anthologized here he has also published separately in the series that he edits for Véhicule, under the imprint Signal Editions. Cliquish? Not really. This is too large and too various a gathering to be a clique. Besides, quite a few are to be found in the other anthologies I've mentioned: Babstock, Clarke, Denham, Solie, and Swift in *Open Field;* Abley, Bök, Bowling, Brebner, Clarke, Crummey, Denham, Heighton, Lahey, Neilson, Nickel, Partridge, Sanger, and Simpson in the non-generational *In Fine Form* (and not surprisingly, since Starnino's choices are said to embody an "emerging openness towards form"). I'm not sure that "innovative" is enough of a distinguishing mark for a generation's stance toward the one that preceded it, but Starnino's claims – as agile as they are nuanced – do no more, in the end, than sensibly urge us to pay attention to a body of work that is unrelentingly new – unmistakably of this, rather than an earlier, time. Which would be our time, too, of course, no matter when we, its readers, were born.

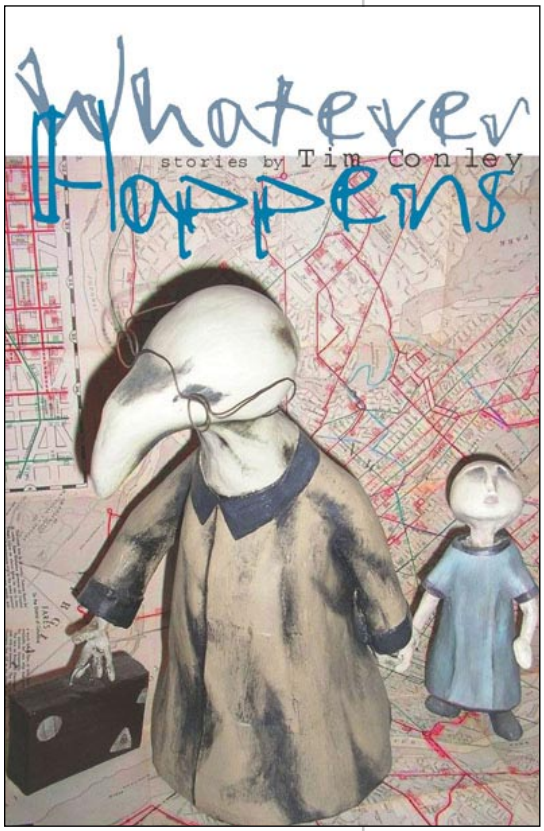
– Bernard Kelly

Whatever Happens

stories by

Tim Conley

Advance praise for *Whatever Happens*:



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Tim Conley's fiction, essays, poetry, and translations have appeared in numerous magazines in five countries. He runs *In Case of Emergency Press,* a fine press chapbook series, and lives in St. Catharines, where he teaches at Brock University.

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paperplates

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