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A photograph of a snowy courtyard. In the foreground, a long, thin bamboo pole leans diagonally across the frame. To the left is a dark wooden building with a snow-covered roof. In the background, a stone table and a small white statue are partially covered in snow. The overall scene is quiet and wintry.

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Vol. 7, No. 1

A Magazine for Fifty Readers

Poetry, fiction, reviews

Lola by Night

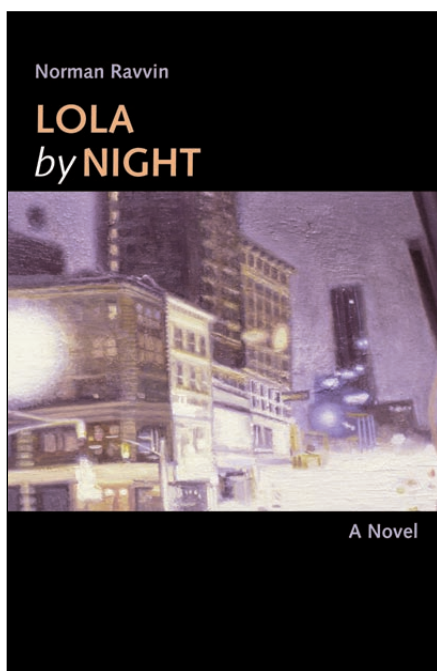
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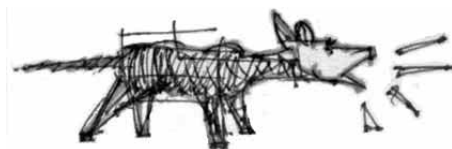


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— Bernadette Rule, *Hammered Out*

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ANTHONY DE SA

My Grandmother was a Fish

I loved the blue ship with all those sails on the Molson Export Ale label. It always reminded me of the place my family came from and I think that's why my father drank it.

ALAN M. DANZIS

Was It Good?

Back then, candles would greet me at the door, Bill would greet me at the dinner table with lamb chops and Yellow Tail, and then I would greet Bill in the bedroom with a slip.

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VICTORIA A. WALSH

Helen's Birthday

The house was a brown place, one in which heavy evening meals were prepared in sepia, with whole scrawny birds or substandard pork as the centrepiece.

NORM REYNOLDS

Living in Reverse

Caroline has her grade fives jot in a journal every Monday what they did on the weekend. This is the first time she has felt the need to write things down in order to make sense of them. And what did you do on the weekend, Mrs. Piper? I left my husband.

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publisher & editor
Bernard Kelly

layout & production
Perkolator {Kommunikation}
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reviews editor
Tim Conley

fiction editor
Bethany Gibson

poetry editor
Colleen Flood

contributing editors
Maja Bannerman, Gil Gauvreau,
Michael Kelly, Dan Yashinsky

guiding light
Alice Kane 1908 – 2003

coordinates
paperplates
19 KENWOOD AVE
TORONTO, ONTARIO M6C 2R8
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The dog died



THE HOUSE DOG. The neighbours' dog. Jacob's dog. There were all sorts of names for Mishigas, other than the slightly derisive one she bore (with such exasperated dignity) throughout her life. And perhaps she was, after all, a little crazy, with the kind of craziness that makes you smarter at what you were created for as well as too demanding of attention from those unfortunate enough to love you. Mishi was a border collie, not quite the runt of the litter, apparently, but the shyest, the most submissive. The pup that came through our door that winter evening, more than a decade ago, bristled, skidded, groaned, and barked — and contaminated everyone with her panic. The entire household was upset, divided by the intrusion.

And yet she prospered, grew to be a truly beautiful animal, impressive for her speed (“All around!”) and agility (“Up and over!”) and obstinacy (innate, unprompted, this). Well into her later years, she would perform these same feats with the same air of toleration, as if to say, really, why was it so surprising that she should circle the park in record time (our record, her time), running up children's slides and leaping over their parents' benches? She was a dog, wasn't she? This was what dogs did.

Dogs also asked to be let out, let in, and let out again; insisted upon being played with when the temperature was below wincing, above screaming; ran away whenever a gate was not shut tight or was off its hinges; refused to climb open stairs or walk upon grillwork or yield to oncoming pedestrians (and sometimes cars); begged for food from the table, a caress from a preoccupied hand; howled inquiringly after squirrels and raccoons and the garden hose; snapped at leashes, tennis balls, frisbees, and bones; glared so sternly, so comically when the game had to stop.

The game went on for a long time. In dog's years.

Mishi died with her spirit, her desire for pleasure, intact. She left behind what is for some of us a void, for some of us a faintly woofing echo.

All around, girl.

– Bernard Kelly

Old friends

THEY ARE A part of my past. A history. Yet, they are very much present. I'm talking about the friends I'd made along life's journey, some having died, others simply fading away. Then there are those who've managed to resurface due to the mellifluous impression they'd left upon me at one time or another. I began replacing CD versions of these old friends once my timeworn stereo with the broken needle had gone the way of the dinosaur, cherishing once again the music that had brought colour to my sepia-toned world back when Herman's Hermits told Mrs. Brown she had a lovely daughter.

For as long as I can remember, music provided not only inspiration for me, but enjoyable company. I have a vivid memory from when I was a young thing in school and was escorted with my classmates to the auditorium to hear my first orchestra performance. Since it was the high school band, I'm sure there were wrong notes hit, but not long after the concert began did one of my classmates nudge another and whisper, "Look at Carol." Their giggles broke my reverie and I was immediately red-faced at having been caught being lost in the strings of the violins. Watchful students ready to laugh at me again kept me from enjoying the rest of the concert, but as I grew older and graduated from 45s to full-length albums, I found I could spend hours alone in my room with Dionne Warwick, the Guess Who, and yes, even Herman's Hermits and hear that my dreams and yearnings were validated by the songs sung.

My love for music was so strong that I attempted to teach myself to play the piano and guitar. However, without the direction I needed, I never accomplished either endeavor. Still, I kept my favourite radio station on hour after hour and stayed attuned while Dusty Springfield gave way to Joni Mitchell and Paul Revere and the Raiders rode off into the sunset while Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young appeared on the horizon in a smoke-filled haze. The sound was fresh and even though I never conquered the piano or guitar the songs inspired me to write. Remaining holed up in my room for hours, I'd compose the most doggerel poetry ever written. I'd roll one sheet of paper after the next into my second-hand Smith & Corona, bottles of Wite-Out at my side, and would clickety-clack incensed rhymes to express my teenage angst, angst that had been galvanized by my parents' inability to understand both the free-loving world I wanted to belong to and the war-torn one thousands of miles away I was protesting. I'd blast Buffalo Springfield's warnings *For What It's Worth* from my bedroom where a peace sign poster hung on my wall showing solidarity about a cause for which I had little understanding. Pot was smoked, baked into brownies and, on one particularly amusing evening, replaced the oregano for the pizza sauce a friend and I had made. All the while the tinny sounds of Whiter Shade of Pale and Fortunate Son blared from my cheap record player.

Alice knows all about this. Go ask her when she's ten feet tall.

Movies rely on a soundtrack to carry a story forward and my life is not much different. Like those before me and those after, I married much too young, believing I would manage to succeed where others had not. My dreams turned to disappointments, which eventually led to that other "D" word, even though Carly Simon had warned about the mundaneness of it all when

she sang *That's the Way I've Always Heard It Should Be*. And, like Carole King, I had to finally admit that it was indeed too late. Great songs when they don't hit the bull's eye. Greater songs when they do.

Now my children — the glorious melodies from an inharmonious marriage — have moved on to make their own way in the world. In this day of angry rap and blatant sexuality, I wonder what their soundtrack is. Sometimes I catch them borrowing what had been mine, appreciating the sounds of yesterday and carrying them over to today. But it is not always the case. When I tried to get my daughters to listen to a particular Jackson Browne song from a CD I'd recently purchased, they rolled their eyes and dashed off. But what did I expect? How could they possibly appreciate where I'd come from when they are trying to make sense of their own whys and hows of life?

So, in the quiet of my home, I poured myself a glass of Merlot, hit *play* and believed Jackson Browne and I were in total agreement when he sang "No one ever talks about their feelings without dressing them in dreams and laughter, I guess it's just too painful otherwise."

Indeed. What insightful old friends I have.

– Carol Hoenig

Berkeley's Enlightened Vocabuleers

I WANT TO KNOW things. Everything, actually. I would very much like to know everything there is to know. I crave complete comprehension.

All I have is a hunger. (Can a hunger be classified as an addiction?) Berkeley says I can feed that hunger easily enough with words. Precious little bite-sized words or glorious epic feast-length words or wondrous balanced moderate-portioned words.

Quotationipotent: Powerful in Quotation. (*Supplemental English Glossary*)

My high school English teacher says, “You’re just like Audrey Hepburn” and “You need to work on semi-colon use.” To me, she is entirely and without a doubt the wisest creature on earth. Or at least in Western Canada. I watch in awe as she etches brilliant commandments onto the chalkboard. She might as well be carving on stone slabs. There is no need for note-taking. All of her wisdom is immediately forged into my long-term memory. She says, “Life is hell and you need a vocabulary.”

Cymbal-Doctor: Teachers giving forth an empty sound. (*Supplemental English Glossary*)

Today, between the desperate blathering of a hopelessly uninteresting music historian and a water-jogging date, I met Berkeley. Then nothing was the same.

Mathom: A treasured object of value received as a gift. Given by one who did not realize that the item would be treasured. (*The Archaic English Project*)

Peter is the friend with whom I eat lunch every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, after my music history class, but before my water-jogging. We don’t actually eat together, although we do. We meet on ICQ. Just another handy Internet communication device. Every lunchtime (every Monday, Wednesday and Friday) since high school Peter has eaten the same lunch:

- 1 Pepsi (can).
- 1 Ham Sandwich (white bread).
- 10 Wheat-Thins (salted).
- 3 Cookies (chocolate chip).

We eat and try to think of new things to say/type. Today, Peter, who attends a philosophy class while I attend my music history class, has something new to say. He introduces me to Berkeley:

“George Berkeley’s theory of idealism states that material entities do not exist at all, and that the universe as we know it – and all of existence – is made up entirely of ideas. ‘To be is to be perceived’: it is inherently impossible to conceive of an unperceived object in existence, since the very act of conception in the mind is also an unwitting act of perception. Hence all ‘matter’ is dependent on mental perception.”

This is actually what he says. Peter talks like this because he is Very Smart. The kind of smart that gets surprise scholarship cheques in the mail for no clear reason other than being Very Smart. However, at the moment of his Berkeley soliloquy, I couldn’t care less how smart Peter is. I have met Berkeley. The path to ultimate knowledge has been revealed.

Crepuscular: Of or pertaining to twilight. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

I lie awake and think about Berkeley. I’m building a mental Berkeley chain. The universe is made up entirely of ideas, he says. Ideas are concepts, and concepts are nothing more than words, I say. Therefore, to understand every

word is to understand the entire universe. Berkeley has made it clear. My project of ultimate satiation begins.

Ratrim: Anything repeated by rote. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

I start with dictionaries. Like unassuming candy-dishes I scatter them about my home. On the coffee table, beside the phone, under the sink, around each corner there is a delicious dictionary just waiting to be sucked of its cerebral juices. The rule is this: every time, in my everyday life, I stumble across one of these planted volumes, I must learn (really learn) one new word. After a word has been fully understood and ingrained, I cross it out in thin grey pencil. This way my crusade towards absolute enlightenment can be measured. I begin to dream in definitions.

Scolecobrotic: Inclined to eat. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

Soon, discussions at family dinners become interesting. I am beginning to realize that my family members (siblings, particularly) are poor idiots who are tragically knowledge-less. Inconspicuously I start slipping healthy bits of fresh vocabulary into our meals. Slowly, things begin to improve. My sister calls me a *fishfag* and I bask in altruistic warmth.

Fishfag: A persistent, nagging female. (*Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words*)

I’m feeling good. Not only am I ever edging closer to total knowledge of a Berkeley-an level, I am helping others to do so as well. I feel like a Mother Teresa of text. I have begun buying *Reader’s Digest* and nonchalantly leaving it open to the “Increase your word power” section around the house. A side dish to the dictionaries for the others in my household to conveniently indulge in.

Traumatropism: A peculiar growth or curvature of an organism resulting from unnatural circumstances. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

I find pictures of Berkeley on the Internet. A little to my disappointment, he is not altogether attractive. Hardly a philosophy department pin-up boy. However, once your head is packed full of all the knowledge in the universe, it's sure to end up a little round and swelled looking. I print the pictures and put them up in my locker, my bedroom, and my car. Do you think the University has a Berkeley club? I ask Peter on ICQ.

Kerygma: Preaching, proclamation of religious truth. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

Peter doesn't want to discuss Berkeley clubs. Instead, he tells me about a new philosopher he's learnt about, Quine. He says:

"Quine explores something called the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, which is basically a notion that (theoretically) it is very possible and easy to have inharmonious translation manuals between languages that are impartially consistent with surveyed verbal dispositions of true speakers of these languages, and there is no truly correct key."

Oh God, I say. I had not considered other languages.

Lokura: The degree to which an individual or situation has lost contact with reality. (ed. Amaro, *Papiamentu Web Translator*)

My quest has taken a frightful new turn. While I am making considerable headway chomping my way through Oxford's English, I have devoted none of my quest thus far to Harper Collins' German, or Larousse's French. Let alone anyone's Inuk, Italian or Indian.

By way of this rapscaillon Quine, my project has extended itself exponentially. Nevertheless, I am not discouraged. What are a few more years of study when your reward is ultimate enlightenment? I start with Papiamentu, the native language of Curacao (as in Blue Curacao). Currently, there are approximately four-hundred persons on earth fluent in Papiamentu. Soon there will be four-hundred-and-one.

I buy a used Japanese-English dictionary and workbook at a church rummage sale. I jog listening to "learn Russian FAST" tapes. I dig up elementary school French activity books. I do not abandon my Oxford. I buy more than grey pencils. I dream internationally. As they say in Papiamentu, *mi ta bon*: "it's all good."

Rinforzamento: Reinforcement. (*Universal Italian Dictionary*)

There is a message on my voicemail from the University social groups office. They say that in order to start a Campus affiliated club, one needs the signatures of a number of interested members. However, once all the paper work has gone through, a new club is entitled to a small amount of University cash to get things started. My appetite is whetted. Perhaps our club could arrange an exchange with knowledge-hungry students at Berkeley University. I ask Peter if he will sign up. Peter says maybe. I tell my sister she has to sign up.

The ball is officially rolling. Fast. Like me rolling downhill on rollerblades back when I had time to roll on rollerblades. I have (near) whole pages of thin grey pencil lines. I have a (small) number of interested signatures for a "Berkeley's Enlightened Vocabuleers" club. I have an (almost) comprehensive understanding of all the culinary delights served at the "International Fork Buffet." I have a picture of

Berkeley (practically) smiling down at me from his wisdom-swelled head permanently etched in my subconscious. I have a real live lunch with Peter, (since his computer is in-shop). I gush all of this to him. He squints his very smart eyes and bites his very smart lip. "Emma," he says. "I think you've completely misunderstood the very essence of Berkeley's entire philosophy."

Curlglaff: The shock felt in bathing when one first plunges into the cold water. (*Etymological Scottish Dictionary*)

Peter explains and I absorb his words in slow motion. "... Berkeley is not in essence concerned with matters of vocabulary at all ... Principles of human knowledge ... Perception ... blah, blah." I am an ignorant, shameful bug. I repeat this in my head in four different languages. Meanwhile, Peter lines up his lunch before me. Pepsi, sandwich, crackers, cookies. "Why do I eat these?" he asks me. Because you're odd and a little gross, I say. Peter squints his Very Smart eyes and asks again, "Why do I eat these?" Because you have a hunger, I say. "Exactly," says Peter. "And if I ate up all the Pepsi and sandwiches and crackers and cookies there are today, I would still be hungry for more food tomorrow. And there would be more food tomorrow for me to eat. Even Berkeley knows you can't ever satiate a hunger. There's always something more to crave." I hate you, Peter, I say. "I know," he says. "Oh, and Emma?" he says. "You're pronouncing it wrong. It's 'Baaahrkeley,' not 'Berrrkeley.'"

– Emma Hooper

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Something not quite the same

IN SOME PARTS of the world, change happens in real time. The jungle grows and decays at a speed that other settings know only in time-lapse sequences. Ants can carry away a pile of Tapir dung in less than an hour. The morning's downpour sweats away before noon. And a papaya seedling develops into a fruit-bearing tree within a year. In my home in the mountains of British Columbia, people become complacent waiting for change. At 1700 feet above sea level, a footprint can last longer on the dry, pine underbrush than the sneaker that made it. An apple left on a counter-top will dehydrate before it will rot. And a clear-cut is like a bomb exploding. Maybe it's because I've seen one too many trees girdled with red flags, waiting like landmines for the inevitable contact of metal with flesh. Or because I know that here it takes more than my lifetime for the same trees to reach a width where I can no longer wrap my arms around them. But for whatever reason, I learned to fear change in my environment like a private declaration of war. And yet, at the same time, I yearned for something different as a Ponderosa Pine yearns for fire to open its cones and let out the seeds.

I SIT ON THE bed while my partner, Dieter, crosses the room to turn on the television planted like a nest where the plaster walls meet. "I can't resist, I have to see what Honduran TV looks like," he says, giving me the same embarrassed grin as when he mounds his plate full of food then undoes the top button on his jeans before eating. Dieter flicks and shadows of the world appear: a hoodied homeboy freestyles like a Latin Eminem; soccer streams by on three channels, each one step closer to the

goal; Joey and Phoebe sit in a café, their dopey banter coming to me in Spanish voiceovers.

"Hey, I remember that episode. That's the one where Joey tries to learn French."

"Oh yeah" Dieter says, "I like this one."

He lets the show run and joins me on the bed, both of us relaxing to the familiar sound of studio-audience laughter. My palms are still sweaty from what Dieter calls the "tourist's triathlon": the dash through customs, out the airport, and into a taxi; the slalom down the crowded concrete streets, gawking all the way; then the home run into the hotel lobby, where "he hecho una reservación" gets a room overlooking the street. Safe, but certainly not sound-proof. As a new program starts, a Hollywood movie in English, I wonder if I should feel dismayed or comforted by how easy it is for us to continue our routine of watching television at night. Is this evidence of some kind of cultural invasion, of American media ploughing under all diversity, transforming the world into a monocrop? Do the people here yearn for revolution? Do they want to expel the foreign gringos? Should I feel complicit: another white face raising land-prices, another self-serving tourist cashing in on opportunities due to privilege?

Restless, I turn over and break the spine of the leather journal I bought before we left. "I'm hoping that this trip will be life-altering somehow," I write, then put the cap back on my pen. What do I mean by that? Life-altering? Is that just another cliché? Is it too much to expect from a trip to a foreign country? I think of all the reasons people travel. Of the two brothers at the airport who were on their way to Mexico for the cheap beer, the homemade tortillas and the "sweet surf". Of a girl I met at university who, bemoaning the lack of spirituality in her upbringing, went to Tibet to study Buddhism. Of my friend Anna,

who swore she would never again go uninvited to a foreign country. “The youth of the Western world think a visa gives them admission into everyone’s private space,” she said. In Guatemala, when she was sixteen, Anna was plagued by rumours of a murdered tourist: a sacrifice made by villagers who translated the growing interest in international adoption as foreigners stealing babies. For three years I used Anna’s story as an excuse for why I’d never ventured outside of Canada; it was the ethical higher ground that kept me from feeling left out when everyone else around me was talking about trekking the Camino Trail, teaching English in Hong Kong, or scuba diving in the Galapagos.

In the end, I gave in to my desire to see for myself what all the travelling-fuss was about, and bought a plane ticket to Tegucigalpa, the capital city of Honduras, with plans to visit the Copán Ruins, hike the Pico Bonito cloud forest, and dive the Bay Islands’ coral reef. My first trip to a different country, not counting the US (Canadians rarely count the States as somewhere different, yet we still display our own flag on our clothes or luggage when we travel).

HERE NOW, I TRY to orient myself to my new setting, ignoring the car-chase on the screen. But as I do this, I realize the culture of the backpacker is as unknown to me as the Honduran landscape. Sure, I’ve heard and read about both, but this will be my first time experiencing these things first-hand. And at twenty-five, I am almost overdue for a journey that many of my friends and family started taking in their teens. Again, I contemplate Anna’s words, and metaphors of space and exploration emerge as flags planted on the landscape of modernity. Is it any wonder, when you grow up navigating, searching and surfing the information superhighway, that crossing borders forms a natural extension to the virtual point and click?

Indeed, these days travelling seems the final stage in a rite of passage that begins when a person logs on to a computer for the first time. Convinced theirs is a simulated reality, swarms of western youth migrate the globe in search of something authentic, cultural, or exotic – all indistinct rejoinders to equally indistinct compounds like *hyper-real*, *post-modern*, and *neo-tribal*. This is the hero quest for the unmediated experience, at the heart of which lies the question that presents the ultimate test of self in a media-saturated world: am I a tourist or a traveller? A new breed of online dealers sells tickets to thousands of enthusiasts looking to have their passports stamped “traveller” at the journey’s end. And though many buyers suspect that the question, too, is a construct – a fixed game, an always already pre-packaged tour – the sacredness of travel remains. Even organizations promoting ecotourism don’t question whether or not people should travel, but rather how people travel.

Maybe it’s the anxiety of being in a new place, or maybe I’m just tired from the flight, but for whatever reason, I’m beginning to wonder why I’ve come to Honduras. Just what sort of *different* do I hope to find here?

But the next day I decide to let other pens dwell on ethical concerns as Dieter, eager for his first cup of Honduran coffee, shakes me out of bed and into the hotel cafeteria. Gone the flat screens and the digital sound, gone the simulations, I am really, physically somewhere different. Behind a counter-top built to the height of children, a Honduran woman waits patiently as Dieter and I attempt to decipher the menu – an act that seems to fall under the heading of one of life’s truisms. Always, the first time for something is at once the most awkward and the most exciting. The first time ordering food, trying to imagine what a *desayuno tipico* might include; the first time venturing into the streets of an unfamiliar city, see-

ing countless security guards holding rifles in plain view and wondering if that’s evidence of a high crime rate; the first time trying to have a conversation with a local we meet in the park, his broken English patched with our few words of Spanish.

LATER, DIETER AND I will return to Tegucigalpa as seasoned veterans of the foreigner’s trek through Honduras, with a little more Spanish under our belts and a little less anxiety hovering over our shoulders. But as much as it will be a comfort then to know that a *desayuno tipico* probably includes fried or scrambled eggs, ham, tortillas, and coffee, and that if we get into trouble we have the phone number for the local we met in the park, a guy named Nelson, the second time around won’t be as exciting as the first. Something about the newness of things not yet experienced tweaks the senses, making the whole body feel more alive. And you can’t get that from a computer.

I’ve read countless travelogues where visitors to Latin America think of Columbus, of those feet that in ancient times walked upon the new world’s jungles green. The controversy surrounding Columbus aside, his name bears with it the rite of discovery. History claims him as its most famous voyageur, and whether they do so with respect or derision, many of those who seek strange shores eventually pay homage to the man who makes travelling seem something bred in the bone, and the dream of discovering paradise an earthly possibility. But no one ever wonders whether Columbus suffered the awkwardness of first experience. Whether he worried about offending peoples whose customs he didn’t understand. (No, of course, he couldn’t have.) But certainly it’s an awkwardness I can’t help feeling as I attempt to interact with the woman behind the cafeteria counter – if only because many of my friends, steeped in the ethos of global studies and environmentalism,

urged me not to exploit the local people and ecosystems in my travels.

As much as I've tried to leave such concerns in my hotel room, they come creeping out once more when I stumble over my Spanish, then manage to point my way to some *huevos* and a can of fruit juice. The woman hands me the juice with a matronly air, pronouncing the words "hugo con para" for me, and I begin to feel a little more welcome. Not being adventurous about food first thing in the morning, Dieter sips his *café con leche*, a request he secured with much less self-consciousness than I did mine.

Still we haven't left the hotel, and my travel alarm-clock is doing the virtual tick. *Where are my cultural encounters? My sights to photograph? My stories to email home?* Finally, we finish breakfast and wander out into the street, officially immersing ourselves in Honduran society. Before we left Canada, we prepared ourselves for this in the usual fashion: bought and read all the handbooks we could find. As we peruse the street-market displays of cheap electronic goods, blue jeans, and backpacks – endless backpacks – I find myself guiltily looking around for other white faces, other explorers lost in the mix. Funny, after coming all this way the biggest thrill would be to stumble across another Canadian.

EVENTUALLY, DIETER and I will find a paradise of sorts, but it won't be in Tegucigalpa, where the poor girdle the city. Nor in the countryside, where *baharques*, or shanties, squeeze into small strips of land next to the highway, the only bits left over after developers and agribusiness bought up everything else. At the risk of branding ourselves tourists, we resolve to spend the bulk of our trip on Utila, one of the Bay Islands. A place that lives up to its claim as a "backpacker's paradise," Utila provides enough of the postcard Caribbean experience, the white sand beaches, palm

trees, and turquoise waters, to satisfy the vacationer, and enough of the no-fringe, roughing-it-on-a-small-budget lifestyle for the adventurer at heart. With no high-end resorts, and numerous bars, restaurants, and inexpensive rooms, Utila creates itself as the ideal stopover for all those flocks of Aussies, Kiwis, Brits, Canucks, and so on, flying the nest, armed or not with their parents' money. That Utila remains largely undeveloped and possesses a conservation society devoted to protecting (but also exhibiting) both the coral reef and the endemic spiny-tailed iguana makes the island a haven for the ecologically minded. Here, I will be able, with some sense of irony, to set aside those concerns that plagued me since my arrival.

The island also attracts backpackers by promoting itself on the concept of the "not quite the same". On Utila, a foreigner can find all the comforts of home in slightly different colourings: coconut ice cream and macadamia nut gelato, island-produced bottled water, and internet cafés built on stilts over the warm Caribbean Sea. And, of course, malaria-carrying mosquitoes, but fortunately an American-born and educated social drop-out everyone calls Doctor Mike keeps everyone well stocked in cloroquine. For those looking to buy hand-crafted items, there's the token Guatemalan store, and the three different Congregational churches evince a vibrant and celebratory religious foundation. When the scent of garbage and decay in the air becomes like a case of bad breath, the waste management crew comes through or the rain falls down, making it all as good as new. And where people cleared the land to build structures that they later abandoned, the jungle quickly encroaches, erasing all evidence of human activity.

In short, Utila offers everything many in modern, industrialized nations have come to expect in life, as well as those things they feel robbed of, like culture, spirituality, and community. In a place

that, not so long ago, boasted such a tight-knit sense of connection that locals left messages for one another on a blackboard erected in the town centre, it's hard not to feel that life is good in this part of the world. And to put the coating on the less politically-minded traveller's cherry, the island sweeps under its volcanic debris all those vacation-ruining scenes of poverty displayed so openly on the mainland. Of course, that's not a comfort to write home about, but in a place that survives by selling itself as a backpacker's paradise, the question "Should I travel?" gets answered with a resounding "Come, see, spend money."

If my time on Utila taught me anything, it's that I went to Central America looking to be a part of an experience the members of my own society were having. Did I find something different, something life-altering? It's difficult to say. What I did find is an old truth – a cliché, if you want to call it that – one that is known to all who travel: we wander out into the world in search of exotic treasures, and what we find is ourselves. When I went somewhere new, it was the familiar things, like ice cream that was not quite the same as the ice cream I'd had before, that re-awakened my senses, but also made me appreciate my home. In British Columbia, I took for granted the scenery because it seemed the same year after year, and only the idea that that scenery might be threatened shook me from my complacency. But in Utila, I saw how quickly the jungle, left unchecked, takes back its own, and I began to wonder if I could learn to stop fearing change in my environment. That even a clear cut, at the very least, will start to re-grow with colours that weren't there before, making me take note of the landscape once again. And though this may not be an authentic observation, perhaps all any of us wants from one day to the next is to experience something a little bit different, a little bit not quite the same?

– Kate Young

Bandwagons

From the Latin *surculus* I gather
there's room to grow into the towering
picture we put up of ourselves.
It's like a foreign language, the way you
empty basements of their keepsakes and still
have time for the person you once
planted in front of me. You always found
the truest approach to trim back whatever
wouldn't paraphrase into the general
direction we were evolving toward.
But there were no sacrifices that choked out
certain impulses, or thistled over
the dreamy alleyway you suggest
for after dinner exercise.
That wasn't the way things were thought about,
or exist. Whole rows of look alike moments
were lined up and caught bending toward
the light, closing again in the darkness.

You had a record of these cycles,
and just speaking about them
gave them a kind of satisfying permanence.
The hard part was to keep up the gestures
of being effortless, when that had worked
so far to win over all your
greatest skeptics. It became second nature,
rescuing some usage out of even
the worst scenarios, building on that.
You wanted me on your side, and I was,
I would be. Far below the bouquet of our
stops and starts bordered what was coming next.
Some day I'll knot them and let them drift
into the indistinct almost.

– *Michael Aird*

Parts

Part One

My grandmother was by far the greatest person I have ever known. The past tense suggests she's gone, and it's true that she's died, but I feel close to her still. I used to spend time with her, sometimes talk non-stop (you know me) but others, I'd just as easily stay quiet. She always knew what people needed and she went with it. I asked her once why she thought my Aunt Genny had killed herself. Your grandpa didn't want any pictures of her around, she said, after it happened it was as if he didn't want to see her. Until I was 12, I thought she had died in a car accident.

"We might die from medication, but we sure killed all the pain ... I'm not sure what the trouble was that started all of this, but it started nonetheless." (Bright Eyes)

Part Two

It's not that it really bothers me — you not liking Woody Allen. But it is so something that I like to picture — us lying on the couch together, watching his movies. I'd hear you laughing in my ear. You ain't no pile of neuroses, baby. But it's okay to cling sometimes. Our car is busted down on the side of the road and you know how to fix it. Your stability, your maps.

"Our."

Look at me with the dual implications.

Part Three

I want us to live like characters in a novel, but sometimes even fiction is too real for me. Oh, just smoke another cigarette already.

Part Four

Communicate this. Words and gestures and singing songs designed to console our hearts. Emails and birthday cards, shaken hands after long-stretched distance. Use these tiny, little letters because they are imperfect. I will never be accountable for all the flaws of language. I wrote *love* and you still don't know why I have such a headache behind my eyes. It's probably too crowded in here, already. Ah, Halifax, dear.

Part Five

Do you remember the time we took the train to Toronto for the weekend? You made circles with your index finger, on the palm of my right hand for almost an hour. And every time I looked down to see you still touching me, I remembered where our hands had been the night before.

Today I got my hair coloured, and I thought how appropriate that you notice things like that. You and your lies about my hair. Some people happen to think a little crimping looks nice. My father has been a brutal, raging alcoholic through various stages of my life. We had to go to court once to see if my parents were "stable." We wore plaid skirts. My mom must've been so panicked. She should have left him then.

We have parted so many times now for various destinations. But only once did I feel as if you were leaving me. And that was after I had already gone.

– *Theresa M. Lapensée*

My Grandmother was a Fish

It

WAS HER TURN TO GO. They all sat in our living room, my Aunt Candy kept staring at the money piling on the coffee table that would pay for her flight. Now, she sat sobbing in the silent room. My mother brushed past my father and Uncle Jose, my father's brother, to sit beside Candida.

"It will be okay, Candida. *Acalmar*. Shhhhh," my mother whispered.

"But I don't want to go. I've made a life for myself here, far away from her hateful voice."

I saw my father and uncle with heads hung low, staring between their knees at the carpet. My Uncle Joe got up, dragged his fingers over my hair as he walked by and left the room.

"Manuel, please – you didn't see the way she left me. You were here – you didn't see." Aunt Candy choked on her words, wiped the snot with her sleeve.

"It is *your* turn, Candida." He offered me his hand and we left the women alone in the room.

"*Filho*, go get us some *cervejas*."

I came up panting from the cantina with two Molson's in hand. My father sat across from my Uncle Jose at the kitchen table. I loved the blue ship with all those sails on the Molson Export Ale label. It always reminded me of the place my family came from and I think that's why my father drank it.

"Jose," my father said, "what exactly happened to Candida? You were there, you saw it."

I climbed onto a chair and sat on top of the kitchen counter, near the sink. I tried not to look at them and was relieved when my father didn't ask me to leave.

"*Estupida*. She was so stupid that girl sometimes," my uncle said.

I just stared into the kitchen sink at the fish my mother was preparing earlier. Earlier, she had let me watch as she brushed the knife quickly against their scales, silvery sparkles flicking into the air. She'd then put the point of her knife in them and sliced their fat bellies open and cleaned their insides.

"Doesn't that hurt them?" I had asked.

"No," she had said, smiling. "Fish have little brains, *filho*, so small they can't even feel."

Uncle Jose, in half-Portuguese and half-English, told of how my Aunt Candy had found a used lipstick tucked in a church pew, how she always had ideas of being a movie star, the kind that filled the smoky screens. In fact, she had been so caught up in the fantasy that she lost track of all time and in her frantic run home, forgot to wipe her lips clean and sat at the table. My grandmother got up, stood behind my aunt and stroked her hair, hummed a song she was fond of singing to them when they were smaller, before their father died – then the humming faded, her fingers curled and tangled themselves in Aunt Candy's hair. She lifted her off the chair by the hair, cupped my aunt's mouth and rubbed the lipstick all over her face; she smeared the red across her chin and up to her ears: "*Putá! Eu nao quero putas em nesta casa.*"

My uncle took three big gulps of beer during the silence that followed his story.

He turned the bottle, quarter turns, tearing at the label, the blue caravela, from the brown glass.

“And there our sister lay – beaten and alone on the dirt road – thrown out for a *puta* at thirteen.”

With these words my father’s fist came down hard on the kitchen table, toppling the beer bottles that rolled to the edge of the table and shattered on the ceramic floor.

I didn’t want to look up; I didn’t like it when he got mad. I kept looking at the fish in the drained kitchen sink. I didn’t want to lose my focus on them; I thought I saw them twitch and open their red gills on the sides of their heads. They were looking at me with their glassy eyes as if they were pleading for their guts back.

I WAS ALMOST six the summer we all gathered for her funeral – even though she wasn’t dead, yet. The phone call had traveled under the deep green Atlantic, sped along countless wires and nodes as it tumbled into our home, 57 Palmerston Avenue, with a crackled “Manuel?”

“Yello,” my father said in his most proper tone.

“Manuel, is that you?– Can you hear me? – She says she wants to see you before she dies. Manuel, please come. She’s not ready. She’s close but –”

“Candida?”

My Aunt Candy had only been there a week when she called. Within days, my mother had us all packed and we followed. I sat beside my father on the plane, bending my neck to look out the small window, convinced that the white flecks in the ocean were migrating whales blowing water through their blow holes or, even better, sharks.

“They’re not sharks, stupid,” my sister said. She was 10 and she was still upset that my mother had only allowed her to bring Thumbelina and not her Easy-Bake Oven, “Oh, *filha*. It’s too big.” It wasn’t a good enough answer. She stomped her feet like a bull and hadn’t stopped sulking. That was three days ago.

The road to the village, for there was only one, snaked its way along the coast, hugging the cliffs so closely that if I placed my arm out the window I could touch the damp rock wall. Large balls of pink and blue lined the road like weeds; my mother called them hydrangeas. Every so often we would be startled by a sudden pounding on the roof of the car – the gush of natural spring water falling from cracks in the dark rock above, only to splash down into the mottled blue-green shore. I pressed my face into my red balloon and squished it against the car window; everything looked pink. Placing my lips against its softness I would practice mouthing the few phrases I knew in Portuguese: *bon dia*, *obrigado* and *ola* (that one was easy). My head tickled as it filled with the humming and droning of my voice.

I sat on my mother’s lap, dressed in my new blue suit, and rode her knee’s nervous bounce. My sister looked like popcorn

in her first communion dress. She sat up front with the taxi driver. She wasn’t afraid of anyone or anything. Every once in a while my mother would reach over the front passenger seat to tug at her fine hair when she kept asking the driver too many questions. I would look back, only to catch the glimmering diamonds set in the corners of my mother’s pussy-cat glasses. Her soft brown eyes would turn to me. She half-smiled, urging me to look away by resuming her gaze out the window. She wasn’t the one my grandmother would have chosen for her son – she didn’t get my grandmother’s blessing – my grandmother refused to go to the wedding. I heard it all the time: how she had taken him away from his mother and was blamed for keeping him far away from her, refusing to return.

“Okay?” my father asked my mother.

She didn’t answer for a while. Only when he turned away did she respond. “She better not bring up the past. Or else” My mother’s voice trembled. I thought she was going to cry but she didn’t. My father just reached over and folded her hand into his.

There was something different about the air; it smelled like wet grass and salt. I would stick my face out the car window to gulp it in. My mother would pull my face in and try to straighten my hair. Every so often my sister would turn around and roll her eyes; she had ants in her pants and the long drive was beginning to make her go crazy. I liked looking at the green all around me. Once in a while we’d pass a village that the highway cut right through; people were stepping out their front doors right onto the road. And the houses all looked the same – long white rows with rusty red roofs. They were all connected like a train but you could tell they were different because the window and door trims were always painted in bright colours: blue and mustard and hurt-your-eyes pink.

I knew we were getting close because the taxi began to slow down. We passed the steps leading up to a church (it was the tallest building in the town), then rounded the corner onto a dirt road to see more of the same small houses in bright white. Some old women were leaning out of their windows with rosaries dangling from their fists. I saw angry dogs, tied up with string, barking and jumping, only to be yanked back, their bodies twisting as they tumbled back onto the dirt road. Some men had stopped pushing their wooden carts as we passed. They straightened up and lifted their straw hats slightly. I didn’t see any children. I turned to my mother and she knew what I was going to ask.

“The children are working in the fields. You’ll see them soon enough.”

My mother reached for her handkerchief, dabbed some spit on it with her pursed lips and began to wipe the corners of my mouth. She then parted my hair, smoothed both sides with her trembling hands and then cupped my cheeks – forcing my face to look at hers. “Don’t be afraid, be strong,” she

whispered. I looked over at my father. He twitched – his eyes seemed to dance: looking out the front window, adjusting his cuffs, now to the rear window to bring into focus something he had passed and half-recognized.

The car stopped and we stepped out to face the little white house with the lime green framed door and matching windows. I looked to my father, only to see tears rolling down his cheeks. He stood there, just scanning for what seemed like forever. My sister tucked her Thumbelina under her armpit, grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the people waiting for us at the front door. My mother shook her head, as she always did when my sister did things like that. On the way in, he hugged some people, shook the hands of others.

I didn't know this family that was ours. But it felt strange to see some of me in their faces: blue eyes, golden hair. They made way for us, steering our movement through the house with their close-mouthed smiles and approving nods. We had moved from the morning brightness into the dark cool of my grandmother's house.

They were all strangers except for grandmother, in a way.

Rarely did my grandmother go unmentioned when my father spoke of his life back home, his brothers and sisters and the hurt my grandmother had felt when my father decided to leave for six months on a fishing boat; he almost drowned off the coast of Newfoundland but somehow he was saved.

"*Um boa sorte,*" he'd say.

He told me that I should feel lucky too.

We reached the doorway to what could only have been my grandmother's bedroom. She just lay there, a small lump of coal. She wore a simple black dress. Silvery wisps peeked through her black veil. I stood behind my sister and saw all this through the crook of her arm. My sister took a step forward, without any urging. She held her Thumbelina doll in front of my grandmother's face and pulled the string on the doll's back. There was laughter as the doll's head spun around and around until the string grew shorter and disappeared.

"Theresa, *Mãe. Tua neta,*" my father whispered.

I didn't have to see my sister's face to know she was smiling. She held up the doll again and was about to tug at the string when my grandmother slowly raised her arm to stop her.

"You got your other grandmother's name." I could see her eyes move to my mother.

"Pretty enough but bold – and dark like your mother."

My mother was moving toward my grandmother but I saw my father's forearm stop her. My sister turned and moved to my mother's side, leaving me exposed.

Perched on my grandmother's bed, Aunt Candy held a cloth that she dragged along the woman's forehead, inviting me to come closer with her toothy, crooked smile. I stood in front of my mother with my father close beside me. My father was pressing the nape of my neck, urging me to

move in my grandmother's direction. I took another step forward, looked up at my red balloon floating over my head, its thin ribbon cutting into my wrist because the mean stewardess, who slapped my hand for trying to grab more than one parting candy, made sure I wouldn't lose it.

"Antonio, *vem ver tua avo* – come see – come see her," Aunt Candy said.

I looked down and found myself standing beside the old woman's bed, feeling the damp, smelling the mothballs floated from her linens and looking at her face – shiny, slippery like the skin of a freshly caught fish. Sweat had found homes in the creases and wrinkles of her face, running down from the corner of her eye, her forehead, down her cheek and making little pools behind her neck. *Her pillow must be very wet.*

Again I felt my father's urging behind me, willing me to kiss her, hoping to show everyone that he had raised his boy to respect his elders. I puckered and leaned my head in my grandmother's direction. Her face turned to meet mine. Her flaking lips parted showing her dark, gummed mouth behind the strings of saliva. Her lips reached out for me. She looked at me and lit up before lying back on her pillow. Her lips opened and closed like flapping gills, filling the room with her sour smell as she gasped for air. Even though she had her eyes shut I could still see my father's blue eyes through her paper-thin eyelids. *She can see me.*

"*Tu no es rei ... tu as mas de que rei,*" she mumbled and smiled.

I looked up at my father, his chest puffed. I looked at my mother's tired face and the adoring smiles around the room. You are not a king ... You are more than a king. It was her pronouncement – her blessing. When I looked back at my grandmother, her head had tilted back, sunk and disappeared into her pillow.

SUNDAY, AND EVERYONE prepared themselves for church.

"Mama, where's Papa?"

"He's getting your grandmother ready."

"Ready for what?"

"For church, of course."

I shifted closer to the doorway and saw my father and my aunt. When my father moved, I saw they had already sat my grandmother on one of the caned kitchen chairs. My father moved around his mother with what looked like rope. He looked as if he were trimming our Christmas tree, holding the string of coloured lights as he wove around and above the Scotch Pine. Her back was rigid against the chair, a combination of rope and pantyhose holding her in place – this would then be covered by a black, knitted shawl.

"Don't worry, *Mãe*, we're not about to let you miss mass," my father said.

My Aunt Candy struggled with my grandmother's shoes.

“She’d die if she missed mass.”

“Candida!” It sounded like my father wasn’t happy with what my aunt had said.

My sister whispered in my ear, “She’s going to die.”

I swatted her away like a fly.

“And when she does ... I’m going to dance on her grave.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “Everyone is. I know they are. I heard them —,” my sister continued.

My cousins came into the house, respectfully clean and dressed in suits that were far too large or uncomfortably snug. They greeted my father, smiled at me and my sister, then moved into the bedroom where each grabbed a leg of the chair. On my father’s count they hoisted my grandmother into the air. My sister giggled when we saw her head jerk and fall onto her right shoulder. My mother gave us both a disapproving pinch as we moved down the dark hallway onto the verandah. They lowered themselves through the doorway and out into the already warm morning just as the church bells began to bong. They turned themselves toward the church and like soldiers they began to march.

We all took our places behind my grandmother, strapped into her chair – floating. Every so often her head would line up with the glaring sun, making it look like she had a halo. As we walked up the unpaved road, the neighbours, who stood on their front porches or were on their way to church themselves, would bow their heads. Even in her weakened state, my grandmother, with eyelids barely open, was still respected and feared in this town.

After mass, Grandmother was untangled and carried to bed.

“Your grandmudder ... want to see you,” my father said. He found us in our bedroom changing out of our Sunday clothes.

“I’ll tell her the story of Hansel and Gretel —,” my sister said.

“Only Antonio.” I could tell that it hurt him to say it, to make my sister feel that she wasn’t important, that she didn’t count.

My sister ran out of the room in a huff. She headed for the women who were in the backyard, chasing the hens for Sunday dinner.

As I walked out of the bedroom room I could see my sister through the back door stuffing her face into my mother’s belly and wrapping her apron to cover her head and tears. My mother stroked my sister’s back and just shook her head. I wanted to stay with the men in the kitchen. They were busy pouring the *agua ardente* into little glasses, wine into clay cups, and lighting their hand-rolled cigarettes.

“*Vamos, filho,*” he urged. “Notting going to happen.” And as if to put my mind at ease: “I leave door open. Okay? ... Okay.”

The room was very dark. The shutters were closed and the only light came from the door that my father had left half opened and her night table, where lots of candles lit up

statues of saints and some black and white pictures. I sat down on the wooden stool beside her bed. Her arm came out from under the covers and slowly shook through the air. I followed her hand until her yellow nail clicked against a picture of a young man who I thought was my father.

“*Avô,*” she whispered.

It was my grandfather and he looked just like the picture of my young father that also sat on her night stand. I could see the blue veins throbbing under her brown spotted hands. I was happy to look at her hands. I didn’t want to look at her face. I could sense she was looking at me so I just nodded. She then pointed to a picture of me standing with a fishing rod in High Park.

“*Você vi de mim,*” she whispered. I looked at her for the first time.

I had come from her?

She was smiling for a while, just nodding her head, but then her smile vanished. The candles flickered and my mother brushed past me. “*Nunca ... nunca ...*,” she said. She rubbed my earlobe, then moved me behind her, out of my grandmother’s view. She leaned over to my grandmother’s ear and slowly whispered, “*Nunca ...* He mine. You not take away him,” she said in her English.

Grandmother’s eyes went crazy but she couldn’t do anything. I looked up at my mother whose eyes had not left my grandmother. She smiled with her mouth closed, and bounced slightly on her heels. My mother forced me out of the room by backing up. Then she closed the door.

“She was a remarkable woman, my mother.”

I was trying to adjust my eyes to the brightness in the kitchen. My father spoke as if she were already dead.

“You’ve been away too long, Manuel,” Augusto, my father’s cousin, said. “Time has healed, or it’s made you forget.”

“I haven’t forgotten. I know we were all denied love and attention. I haven’t forgotten that. But there were crops to sow, animals to tend, an ocean floor to harvest. I remember her storming into class that day – ‘*Senhora Oliveira,*’ she said, ‘school is getting in the way of filling their bellies.’ We left.”

The men began to smile.

“Remember, Manuel, leaving, as a young boy, before the sun rose, plunging into the frigid foaming waters, to catch octopus, eel and red snapper. Sometimes you would waste the day lying in the sun, rolling in the warm black sand. Remember?”

“I remember,” my father said, “she would lock the door if we came home with nothing. My brother Jose and I would huddle together in the barn, our warm beds denied us until the morning, when we would return to the sea once again to dive for food.”

They kept on drinking. My mother was now in the kitchen

karate-chopping at the cigarette smoke. Their words began to slow down, get longer. I sat cross-legged in the corner and played with some kittens. As they continued diving into their past, I heard about my Aunt Albina, who made sure the sheets and clothing were laundered and mended; they were poor but my grandmother refused to have her children dirty. My Uncle Mariano, the shifty-eyed one, as he was known by the neighbours, tended the six cows, two pigs and dozen hens. Uncle Marcelino seeded the land and harvested the crops. Candida was the gatherer – fruit and berries.

My mother began rattling the pots louder and then slammed a cast-iron frying pan on top of the stove. They all turned toward her but it wasn't enough to stop them.

I heard how proud my grandmother was of this well-oiled machine that she had constructed on a foundation of fear. But it also steered the villagers toward judgments and petty jealousies: "She's going to kill those kids ... She's crazy." "They have to work if they want to eat." "They have nothing, yet look at them ... I wish my boys were as well behaved." There was one certainty – not one of them would ever dare speak of these things directly to her. Even Padre Alberto was resigned to her piety; he was scorned by her for giving Andrea Couto too much of his ear, Claudia Almeida too much of his eyes, and, as rumour had it, he had given Rosa Medeiros too much of something else.

The men shook with laughter. My aunt came in with my sister, each carrying a bald pink chicken at their sides.

"While our village gossiped, Maria Theresa Conceicao Rebelo, our mother – would bow her head and pray. He led her on the righteous path; God was her life –"

THUD!

A headless chicken, blood dripping, lay on the kitchen table in front of my father.

Silence

My aunt turned and walked to the counter where I thought I heard her mumble, "The devil was her saviour."

My sister just stood there holding onto her plucked and headless chicken. For the first time I can remember, she didn't know what do. But it was only an instant. In the silence that followed she began to lightly swing the chicken from its legs. She smiled as she made the most beautiful pictures on the kitchen floor with droplets of chicken blood.

BEFORE THE ROOSTER forced us into a new day, we woke to high-pitched wails – yells of anguish and horror. We rushed in; my grandmother lay on the earthen bedroom floor, unwilling to let anyone help her back to her death bed.

"*Em nome do Pai e do Filho e do Espírito Santo.*" Making the sign of the cross with jerking motions. "*Em nome do Pai e do Filho e do ...*" Digging her heels into the floor, dragging her body up against a wall as she pointed in hysteria to my shrunken red balloon, which had settled on top of her

chamber pot. Candida rocked her mother from behind, held tight her arms and, with what seemed like angry eyes, whispered unknown things into her ear. My grandmother turned to face me, smiled as she breathed out her final judgment and sank into her daughter's arms. My aunt dropped her mother's limp head – let it fall and hit the ground.

At first there was silence, and then my aunt's contained chuckle, followed by laughter – her uncontrollable tearful laughter. I looked at my family that had all gathered in my grandmother's bedroom, their eyes dressed in bewilderment.

"Candida, have you no respect? Control yourself. Our mother is dead."

"Oh Manuel, I just couldn't ..."

She tried to compose herself as she sat hugging her knees beside the lifeless body, occasionally touching her mother's cooling forehead – just to make sure.

"After all these years –" She caught hold of herself.

"All she said was – 'I'm dying. My intestines ... all gone ... ripped out of me ... gone.'"

She pointed to the shrivelled red balloon sitting on the chamber pot. My aunt's laughter grew and warmed the chilly morning air.

That very morning, no one would return to the warmth of their beds. The women were left to prepare the body for a short wake and then burial. It was going to be another hot day – things needed to be done quickly. My father rubbed my earlobe between his thumb and forefinger, was about to say something, then shut the front door behind him.

"Let them drink and smoke ... but they better get the coffin!" My aunt's voice grew loud. She wanted them to hear her through the door.

I followed my aunt to my grandmother's bedroom but stood outside looking through the half-opened door. They washed her pale body in a garden of candlelight. Smokiness and the smell of beeswax filled the room and escaped into the hall where I stood. I could see my mother through the haze, passing a cloth along my grandmother's chest, pulling the dead woman's arm out to the side as she washed the white skin on the inside of her wrist and elbow. My aunt, now calm, gathered the burial dress in her fists, like a sock just before it's pulled over one's foot; she placed the opening over her mother's head, struggled and fought to pull it down her already stiffening body. Her black cotton gown was then pulled and poofed. When done, my grandmother appeared to float over the yards and layers of fabric. Aunt Candy brushed her mother's hair, then laid her worn veil over her head. They decorated her with branches of pine and cedar, tucked them under her, framing her. My grandmother – still, her knobby fingers forced together across her stomach and her beaded rosary tangled between her stiffening hands.

AS THE MOON sank into the ocean, the day began to fill with villagers lining up outside to pay their final respects. Some wanted to see it for themselves, could she really be dead? Others just wanted to touch her – a saint, some said.

I didn't know their names but they all made their way in. The women had their lace veils and the men wore no hats, their hair wet-looking and parted. People would kneel by my grandmother's bed and whisper prayers. Some were brave enough to bend over and kiss her waxy forehead or adjust my grandmother's clothing – a collar or sleeve. Some even cried.

They would then make their way around the room offering the family their prayers. They would make their way over to us and continued to whisper things in Portuguese as they hugged and patted our backs. The women would cup my chin in their rough hands and prick my cheek with their lips.

"Ma, the women have moustaches. They're pinchy," my sister said. She also made her "yuk" face and rolled her eyes.

My mother just pretended not to hear. My sister was right. And they all smelled like a mixture of bacon, laundry soap and mothballs. I wanted to say that to my mother also but didn't.

Padre Alberto began reciting the rosary – a sign that the funeral procession was about to begin. I could hear him outside my grandmother's window. I could also hear the crowd gathering and repeating the words he was saying. The final mourners trickled out of their front doors to gather quietly on the dirt road in front of the house, to pray and process and bury her. It had to be done within the day – there wasn't a refrigerator big enough for her – that's what my Aunt Candy said.

My sister held onto my hand tightly and she giggled as my mother pulled back the sheets to reveal my grandmother fully dressed in her poofy black dress and her square-toed boots. They now had to move her to the coffin. My mother held my grandmother's thin ankles and my Aunt tucked her forearms under my grandmother's shoulders. On the count of three they lifted her stiff body up like magic – like the Amazing Kreskin. My sister and I just crouched in the corner of the room as my grandmother floated straight and hard as a tabletop. Kreskin did the same thing, pulled the table from under the woman and had her float with nothing holding her up. My mother and Aunt carried her to the coffin, placed her and then arranged her neatly and properly in the box lined with shiny white cloth. Then they lowered the lid.

OUTSIDE MY GRANDMOTHER'S house, my sister held onto my father's hand. We were just about to begin when my mother let go of my hand and motioned to my father and pallbearers to give Candida a few moments alone with her mother. There was frustration in his face; he wanted to get this part over with. Candida looked confused as she turned

to my mother. It was clear she wanted this all over with also – buried and done with. My mother seemed to be pulling my aunt as both of them went back into the house. I followed. They didn't kneel, they just stood over the casket. I crept up close and nudged my mother. My mother placed her hand on my shoulder but didn't ask me to leave.

"A cold fish. She was no mother to me," my aunt sobbed.

"She took so much from you, Candida. She took from me too, but no more," my mother said.

My mother raised the lid of the box and reached for the photograph of me my father had placed inside, tucked somewhere in the ripples of fabric under Grandmother's pillow. She slipped it into her purse.

"She can't hurt you. She can't hurt us any more," my mother said calmly.

I could see my aunt's shoulders get bigger, as if whatever she was carrying had been dropped. I watched as my aunt looked at my mother and then down to her open purse. She reached inside and pulled out my mother's silver cylinder, twisted it and with wide eyes, lowered her hand to Vavo's face. She smeared her mother's mouth with bright red lipstick. She took a step back, cocked her head to admire her work and engrain the image in her mind. She then rammed the tube between the dead woman's hands where it lay next to the jet bead rosary and silver crucifix. She took one last look, smiled and lowered the lid. I didn't know what they were doing but, with my mother's hand on my shoulder and my aunt smiling, I knew everything would be okay now.

EVERYONE WAITED OUTSIDE. And like the day before, the box was lifted onto the men's shoulders. They carried her, their heads down, up the uneven road, their now dusty shoes kicking at the wild dogs if they dared come near to sniff. As the procession wound its way up and passed Nossa Senhora da Rosario, I remember catching the sudden rustle of curtains, the occasional sign of the cross and the muffled cries and sniffles from the men and women behind me. The villagers had assembled behind the family; my Portugal family. I walked between my mother and my aunt. I looked up into my mother's black veil.

"Mama, how is she going to breathe? Why didn't they put some holes in the coffin?"

My mother smiled.

"Fish need air to breathe too, don't they?" I said.

I could see her turn to look at my aunt's changed face; she smiled and pressed my head down, forcing my eyes to meet my own dusty shoes.

We walked on.

Little light

Six months at least since I've had time to strike
a match – the votive candle on my desk
half-burned and stuck behind the O.E.D.
A cannibal content to feed on dust,
old motes of human skin, the little light
glows darkly, smells at first like whiskers
singed. The heady potpourri of cloves
and roasted cinammon disguises
all the ugly things – the things we know
as slippery, obscene. Great atavistic
fish that rise towards us suddenly
in dreams, the awful slithering of eels
in metal buckets. It also warms that leaves
us cold. The fires the mind is meant to keep.

Sheet iron

The tow-truck driver gives each tire some air,
adjusts the power hoist. So this is how
we say goodbye. There's nothing dignified,
no floral wreaths or orange flags, no veils.
Our makeshift motorcade proceeds past
concrete lots and strip mall dojos – bleak
industrial estates give way to open fields
of beans. It's noon when we arrive
at Nixon's salvage – some toothless mongrel
calls the owner, wipes a hand against
his livery. Last rites. Pry off the license
plate. Sign away the title. Don't look back.
It smells of diesel. Someone fires up the crane.
Take the goddamn money. Get the fuck away.

– *Phillip Crymble*

Cantilever

Sitting across from the old
CP hotel with the bellhop in wait
under the awning projecting out
into afternoon sun and all
my thoughts cantilevering on
the occasion. The sharp lines

of the granite facade, the
way the world seems to stop
and start. And from here
it's easy to conjure up
the cool dark interior,
the chandelier and carpets and
dark tapestries. Or the garden
a block over with miniature
lake and stream, an imagined
middle. And once June

is here the Argentinians begin
to gather each morning just
up from the Hudson's Bay.
Sometimes I sit at a little
distance and listen while
they talk in Spanish. I am
perhaps too fond of sitting
looking at the world. They
are thick-wristed men
mostly, accomplished in
stories with origins down
close to the water, watched
over by churches.

Bibliophily

The Hand and its Mechanism,
London, 1834. The carpus
beginning at the radius and
ending up in metacarpals,
phalanges. And Christ I
like the way these words
come down like bones
through time, the way
the changes in species
come down. This place is
underground. Ideas blanch
and die here but the body
goes on, finds itself in books
piled up and alphabetized
to the ceiling. I think of
the world as residual heat
radiating across borders from
ancestral land: the story of
the Cree contained somehow
in an old book with stitches
running down between rich
blocks of type. I sit here in
fluorescent light with trails
intersecting in woods and
circling back to camp in wide
gyres. They take axes and
chop the animal up right
there, steam rising
from entrails. But first
it had to be dreamt –
one man and one animal, a
medicine bag at the east end
of the place he sleeps, a tent
in the heart of the woods.
That simple yearning always
to be at the centre of things,
the body as pure space letting
the days in and the nights.
I reason about this and then
think vaguely of all
the words I might speak now
if only to myself: *autochthon*,
implement, *brown ink of*
cuttlefish.

– Dave Sidjak

Was It Good?

L

AST NIGHT, MY ex-husband Bill and I screwed like two raging teenagers in the back-seat of his car on I-97; only, this time, three things didn't happen: one, he didn't lay down a towel for fear of my claws scratching his leather interior; two, a police officer didn't interrupt just as Bill rounded home; and three, the night didn't end with me wiping my face clean with a McDonald's paper bag.

In the spirit of a possible reconciliation after seven months of separation, four years when Bill cheated on me and I knew it, two when I didn't, and five years when he didn't speak more than sixteen words (excluding *uhs*, *ummmms*, and *fucks*) to me a night, I've decided to cook my third college boyfriend and ex-husband a feast. It'll be romantic, not unlike the ones he used to cook me for the first three years we were married. Back then, candles would greet me at the door, Bill would greet me at the dinner table with lamb chops and Yellow Tail, and then I would greet Bill in the bedroom with a slip.

After a few years however, 90 watt bulbs replaced candles, cold leftover buffalo wings from Bateman's replaced lamb chops, and Bill reading me that day's Lockhorns comic strip in bed replaced me and my once thought sure-thing slip.

God, how I missed those early dinners. And the early part of our marriage. So before we could even broach the idea of getting back together, I wanted us to have a wonderful dinner.

With Bill showering upstairs and getting water all over the floor, I flip on the television and get out some knives, mixing bowls, and scour the refrigerator to see what I have.

"We're going to need a bigger boat."

Oh, Bill's favorite movie is on. During the early years of our marriage, whenever Chief Brody made his customary July 4th appearance on TNT or TBS or whatever, Bill had to watch him do battle with Bruce (that's what Spielberg apparently named one of the mechanical sharks).

I understand the appeal of this movie, but not his fascination with it; other than maybe he identifies with the main character – if you can call it that.

Damn – there's not much in my refrigerator, and I doubt I have time to go out to the store, other than for a few odds and ends. I've got most of the vegetables I want, like onions and tomatoes, and I already collected the meat this morning, but I'm short on cheese and I have no wine.

Bill can go out and get some.

Then again, maybe we don't really need wine or cheese. Oh, wait, I do have some cheese. This'll do.

I hear the shower shut off upstairs. A few seconds go by, and then it comes on again. Bill sometimes forgets to wash all the shaving cream off his face. When it shuts off again, I hear him walking around upstairs, probably to the dresser in the master bedroom where he'll pull nose-hairs, while dripping even more water all over the hard-wood floor.

I'll have to wipe up later.

As I start to heat up some butter in a frying pan, *Jaws* ends and the local news starts. I grab some meat from the refrigerator and start frying it. The local features reporter comes on the television to do a feature.

Residents of Washington, DC and fifteen states, from Georgia to Michigan, are awaiting a massive, boisterous grand entrance of the insects that make their presence known only every seventeen years. The cicadas are coming. Billions of these little creatures are raring to go. They're ready to meet, they're ready to greet, and they're rate to mate for the next two weeks. Afterwards, nothing will be left but a collection of –

“CON!?!?!?!?!?” Bill calls from upstairs.

“Yeah, hon?” I shout back, not even realizing I called him hon at first. I m not sure if I'm happy I called him that out of habit or terribly frightened that I called him that out of love. Or again – habit.

“Where's my, you know, where's my, ah, shit. Fuck shit, shit fuck.”

“What is it?”

“HUH?!?”

“I said, WHAT IS IT?”

“Ah ... fuck ... shit.” Bill mumbles a few more words I can't understand about telling me not to worry about it.

He was probably looking for his shirt. Or his pants. Or his boxers. Or his cell phone.

I flip off the television and get back to work. After frying the meat for a little longer, I remove it from the pan and chop it into quarter-inch cubes.

Maybe he was looking for his socks.

I season with a little salt and sprinkle some ground pepper, cumin, and oregano in as Bill makes his way downstairs.

“What the ...fuck ... is that ... smell?” Bill asks, sticking his nose out like an anteater trying to swing at a wiffle-ball and missing horribly.

I stop chopping my onions for a second.

“Dinner.”

I go back to chopping my onions and add them in, as well as some sliced chilies and tomatoes pieces. Bill starts looking in the fridge.

“We re going to eat in an hour, Bill,” I say, as I add in the chopped onions, chilies, and tomatoes.

“Then why the fuck you cooking tacos now?”

“Because,” I say as I start frying everything, “I want the spices to set in, that's why.”

“You never done that 'fore.”

“Well, God, I don t know ... maybe I'm doing it because you've always complained about the spices before?”

Bill slams the fridge door shut. “Don't try bullshittin' me 'bout always complaining 'bout your cookin'.”

“Can we just try to have a nice dinner, Bill?” I ask, turn-

ing around and putting my hands on my hips.

“Whatever. I gotta go shit.” And with that, Bill heads back upstairs. Just as it never occurs to Bill to use the toilet before getting in the shower, it also never occurs to him to keep his bathroom schedule to himself.

God, he can be such a pig sometimes.

And with that, I go back to cooking our dinner. I've got to make it taste really good and really spicy or he's going to complain and we're just not going to get anywhere. Tonight has to go just right.

I lay out some cilantro, sour cream, lettuce, and mozzarella Bill hates cheddar cheese on the table. I also put out some hard shells, since Bill loved those in elementary school.

As the spices continue to soak in the meat, simmering over a low heat on the stove, I start baking my meat and rhubarb pie; it's Bill's favourite dessert and was discovered by me a few years ago during The Great Pages-Stuck-Together Massacre Dinner of 98; I cried, Bill yelled, I threw some dishes, and Bill slept on the couch that night after using the word *whorish* to describe my culinary skills.

I preheat the oven to 450, and sprinkle some sugar and flour over a nine-inch double-crust pie. Then I sprinkle some rhubarb over the mixture, and put in a dash of meat amongst it all. Some more sugar, flour, and a small piece of butter are added, before I cover it all with the top crust. I place the pie on the lowest rack in my oven, bake for fifteen minutes before reducing the temperature to 350, and then let it finish cooking for another 45 minutes. When it's finished, Bill finally makes another appearance in the kitchen.

“Was it good?” I ask Bill.

He shrugs his shoulders, signalling that it was time to eat.

“That was all right.”

I dab my mouth and my smile disappears. “Just all right?”

“Yeah, it was fine,” Bill says, throwing his napkin on the floor. God, I hate it when he does that.

“Was it good?”

“Yeah! What the fuck do you want from me?”

“Well, God, Bill, I don't know,” I say, tapping my wine glass between my index finger and my thumb. “I wanted to make this dinner special.”

“All right, it was special.”

“Good, I'm glad you think so,” I say standing up and pushing my chair in.

Bill slams his fork down hard on his plate. “Look, what-dya want from me? You want me be nicer so you'll let me move back in already?”

“That would be a start.”

Bill taps his foot for a few seconds before standing, ignoring what I just said and asking if there is any dessert.

“No, Bill, there is no dessert,” I say, starting to collect

some of the plates. "Not until we're done talking."

"Look, I'm not feeling well, so can I just have a slice of whatever the hell you made, and then I can go upstairs, lie down, and then whenever you putter putter your way up, we can go to bed."

"You think you're sleeping in my house?" I ask, grabbing Bill's napkin off the floor.

"Fine, whatever." Without missing a beat: "Is there any pie or not?"

I throw Bill's napkin in his face. He catches it and aims to put it back on his chair, but it instead slips off the side and falls to the floor. Typical.

I head into the kitchen and retrieve the pie from the window sill, where it was cooling. "So, about last night," I start to say, while I hear Bill move around the other room; he's probably heading over to the couch and turning on the television.

"Here in the top of the 8th, Matsui comes up to bat—"

"What? You say something?" Bill calls back.

"Yes, Bill. I wanted to talk about last night."

"Which part?" Apparently, Bill thinks I want to talk about how I came home to find him rifling through a box of my CDs looking for one of his Neil Young platinum albums. Maybe he thinks I'm going to admit to taking it.

"The part about us making love for the first time in God, I don't know, Bill, three years."

"I hate it when you use the phrase 'God, I don't know'."

"You're avoiding the issue again, Bill," I call back, starting to pile up the dishes in the sink.

"What issue? The sex was great."

"Yes, Bill, it was fine," I say, turning on the faucet. "You were ... you were nice."

"Nice?"

"It was nice. And that's what I wanted to talk about."

"Do we have to talk about this now? If you want to have some sex later, we can, but can't it wait?"

"Some sex?" I ask, almost dropping a plate.

"Yeah."

"That's how you think of it?"

"The heck do you mean?"

"Never mind, Bill," I say, going back to my plates.

"Ughhhhhh. Look, I'm sorry I'm not saying the right things. I'm not even sure what the hell the right things are. But last night ... it was ... like you said, nice."

"You know that."

"I know that."

"I just don't want to make this a big deal. I don't think it changes anything. I don't think we're going to go back to being the blissful couple. We're not going to start having romantic dinners, or go out socializing, or have a kid and take it to the park."

"It was just you and me, last night. Good old Bill, sweet

old Connie. It was nice. Nice. Nothing more."

He delivered all that from the couch. Perhaps if he had gotten up and told that to my face, it would have registered differently.

A long pause. "Was it good?"

Another long pause. "Yeah."

It wasn't spectacular, it wasn't life-altering, it didn't make him glad I was alive, and it didn't make him glad he was alive. It was just good; as he said, nothing more. Nothing I did was ever more than good. Nothing in his life that I did for him was special. Which meant I wasn't special; I was replaceable. Someone else could easily come in with a different hair colour, nicer legs, or smaller hips and could make him a good dinner too. I wasn't and never was the love of his life; I was just the one he picked. He threw his hat into a group of girls and my head was the one it landed on. Or maybe more accurately, he threw his ...

"Is the pie ready yet, Con?"

We ate in silence.

As soon as he finished his next to last forkful, his face started to turn red and cheeks began to puff.

"You okay, honey?"

"Fuck, I feel even worse than before. Maybe I shouldn't have had that third slice."

"Or the second," I say, as I began to clean up the dishes, "Or the first."

"The heck do you mean?"

"My pie taste different to you, Bill?"

"As opposed to what?" he asks as he starts guzzling a glass of water.

"Well, let me ask you this then: did it taste the same as the tacos?"

"What?"

"They both didn't have a similar, distinct, and new taste?" I ask, as I take the dishes to the sink.

"And what taste would that be? Rat poison?"

"Oh no, Bill," I call back. "That would show up on chemical tests. No, sweetie, honey ... I fed you cicadas."

"WHAT?!" Bill slams his fist hard onto the table or as hard as he possibly can in his condition, meaning only a few glasses are jostled.

"Those little bugs. The ones that only pop out every seventeen ..."

"Yeah, I know what they are. You fed those to me?"

"Oh, don't worry, Bill," I say, coming back into the dining room wiping my hands off with a dish towel. "I was actually nice. I served you the teneral, the newly hatched cicadas. They're considered best for eating since their shells have not hardened. They're not too hard to find actually. They normally emerge early in the morning, so after you

fell asleep on me this morning, I used the socks you so gingerly tossed to me last night when I said I was cold to collect them in.

“I could have been mean and gotten the males which have very hollow abdomens, but they’re not very filling. I got you the female ones since they’re filled with so much fat. I removed most of the wings and legs and other hard parts. Not because they’re harmful I would have left them in otherwise but because they’re not very tasty, and I didn’t want you to notice something was wrong.

“The one thing I meant to mention, Bill, is that I also read that people who are allergic to seafood like scallops or lobster are just as allergic to cicadas. Which means any second, your face is going to puff up like a cherry. If you’re lucky, it’ll go down in a few hours; if you’re not, you’ll probably suffocate to death. Either way, I hope you think my cooking has gotten better over the years.”

Bill throws up all over his last piece of pie.

“Well, that’s a slightly better response than the one you had when I made you breakfast in bed that morning after we first slept together in college,” I say, heading back into the kitchen.

I hear the tablecloth and remaining dishes go crashing to the floor. Bill must have started to faint and grabbed the tablecloth to hold onto. I peek around the door and see him, face on the floor, covered in a mess of dishes, red

wine, and cicada-rhubarb pie.

“Bill, can I ask you one last question before you die?” I say, coming back into the kitchen to notice his breathing is getting very static. “Our marriage. Was it good?”

“It was grr ... great. The time you ... you ... took ca, ca, care of me when I drank too much on my, my, my twenty-first birthday was gre ... greeeat. When you ... cagh ... cagh ... cagh ... woke me up every morn, morn, morn for ... cagh ... my first round of job ... cagh ... interviews was great. That ja, ja, jar you made, with all the slips of ... cagh ... cagh ... cagh ... paper saying how much you love, love, loved me and why in a different way on ... cagh ... each one ... that ... cagh ... was great. When you cried after I ... cagh ... asked you to marry me, that, that, that, that ... cagh ... was great. When you did, that ... cagh ... was great. All those ... those ...those ... those ...”

I bend down and touch Bill lightly on his forehead. It’s moist and he’s burning up. His beautiful blue eyes are still the only things that look right. “I wish you had once told me that when we were married, Bill,” I say, stroking his hair. “Because then ... then, it would have been good.”

Bill starts to wheeze as the breathing gets more difficult. I sit down, back at my chair, and have another slice of pie.

Goose thinking

for j.l.

You mention John Locke between gulping pockets and backspin.
You, who I had to coax to the table
with whispers of coffee and skepticism,
are a philosopher,
but it’s distracting to picture you like Descartes
since, to wit,
I’ve got more than a clear and distinct idea
of how you’d look in a bathrobe.

You’ve named your cue David Hume,
and, when I shoot,
the philosopher in you smiles,
hoping the white ball will explode.

– D. W. Wilson

Grief

He finally says his name on the phone
because I can't place his voice. I'm surprised
to hear from him, which confirms my distance even as
I'm drawn back into a world I've never understood.
His wife's been dead for some months now & it's been
a couple of years since we've been neighbours.

As soon as I hear the reason for his call, I know
who's behind it. And I'm on my way out of town. Still:
could I possibly set up a pick-up of the memorial
next week? I say sure. I liked his wife: she was unusual,
generous & out of place.

Sure. I call a guy who calls a guy to do the gig.
I'm glad I'm going to be away: I won't be attending
the event itself. But yeah, this is something tangible I can
actually do. After all. Yes. No matter how strangely
things are dealt with on that street.

I'm surprised again when the dub shows up in the mail.
When I play it the hall is overflowing. This isn't really
a service: more a series of testimonials. I wonder what
either of us would say about the other. Your voice
takes a moment to register.

Everyone has to get a fair turn
but your fear up there is palpable. I don't know
if her favourite song was "The Rose". I don't know
if she ever fantasized about a red sports car.
And I know I'll never know. Anyway
the recording couldn't be better.

– *Bill Howell*

Helen's Birthday

E

VVY NUDGED THE board with her hip. She tamped the edges of the ticking under with the fingers of her left hand, and reached behind her with her other arm to bring the iron over from the stove, setting it on a trivet next to the board. She surveyed the moss-green fabric and ran her fingers along the seams, picking with her thumbnail anything that looked irregular. Snapping the trousers over her forearm, she reeled and blocked them on the board evenly before grasping the iron and setting to work. She paddled and pressed gingerly, with a resignation inclined to recognize the fruitlessness inherent in most activity. She ironed then for the pleasure of it. If he wore the trousers at all, she would be the only one to notice the fresh crease and the perfect hang of the fabric.

Evy's formidable shape rose to almost six feet and claimed the most physical space in the vicinity of her bosom, which demanded considerable performance from the foundation garments of the period. Evvy's were stiff, unforgiving white cotton, greyed from fastidious washings in flowery toilet water, and strained at the metal hook and eye closures across her back.

This robustness was interrupted only by her hands, which were drawn hastily in a few strokes withering at her sides or buckled at her waist. A heavy crop of curly black hair imposed itself upon her skull, and was presumably the sole reason for her growth to have halted before reaching seven or eight feet. She could not help recalling every word of her catechism, the result of inculcation by the Sisters of Mercy during her ten years of formal schooling. However, she no longer retained the defiant character which had most often relegated her to the church boiler room and earned her the nickname of "Boldy Ryan"; one that ironically stuck with her even now as a neighbour, a Protestant to whom she had never spoken, but was taught to cross the street to avoid on Sundays, was returning from a veteran's sanatorium with only one hand and the conviction that he was Pontius Pilate.

As she returned from hanging the trousers in the closet, a hand was thrust through the opening door of the apartment and was followed by a sheaf of white-tipped roses that otherwise matched Jack's hair, which prowed from his head in a gingery jib. Evvy hastened to the door, clucking her tongue. "Droop, you managed it!" Jack handed the bundle over to his wife and turned to close the door. "I did. Rose mating is harder than it looks. You think they'd damn well just go along with it. I'll call it a 'Honeybunch' variety, I think." Evvy crumpled the newsprint covering the stems and with her free hand, reckoned her finger toward his legs and toward the bedroom, a dumb show advisory which Jack understood to mean that he'd better put on the good trousers tomorrow. Jack was slight and sickly but stood to his full height at all times. He could not help the rakish arrangement of his skeletal bones and the fact that he lacked sufficient flesh to conceal them, or that this gave him the appearance of forever attempting to lean against something sturdy that wasn't there. He was born at the

outset of World War I and attended agricultural college in Newton in the years after the depression, against his mother's wishes. His days were now spent in a greenhouse tending Easter lilies and poinsettias to be bought by neighbours, and developing a rose hybrid for his daughter. Jack was allergic to every plant he touched and, as a result, was permanently pined with psoriasis from his feet to the top of his head.

A moment later as she clipped the stems, Evvy heard her man groaning from the bedroom, "My good trousers on for That One. Make me look as though I've got some arse, do they. Well, she could do with borrowing a bit of my arse." Evvy pursed her lips and stifled a howl.

The house was a brown place, one in which heavy evening meals were prepared in sepia, with whole scrawny birds or substandard pork as the centrepiece.

Butter coupons were traded for unfiltered cigarettes wrapped in coarse paper, and a glass of beer was stretched much further by the act of crying in it. Cheap and dear items were paid for on time; in such a fashion that a cherry china cabinet brought home after the youngest daughter was born was given to her on her wedding day the same week as the final payment was made. The rooms were small but deep, and devoured the light that sought between that tenement and the next, eleven abreast from the top to the bottom of Garden Street. On the opposite side, the Dorothy Muriel's Bakery stretched the length of those eleven buildings where more people were living than there were clapboards on the facades. This fact did not stop a man from wearing a hat when he stepped through the threshold and onto the street or a woman from hitching up her skirt to right her stockings only moments before you saw her waiting for the streetcar on the corner.

– Droop. Droop, I wanted to move the gate leg nearer the window for Mary tomorrow. Can you help me move it once you've cleaned up? She's 'sposed to come at noon with Helen's doll.

– How long'll she be staying?

– Two days counting Sunday. Will you have some tea tonight while you look at the papers?

– Evvy, ask her to come again when she can't stay so long. There's no need having That One crowd us in with her stinking talcum powder and big brogans on her feet. Can't she leave once Helen's had her party?

– Droop, here's Helen now.

– How's my Honeybun? Jesus Mary and Joseph, Evvy, I'll need something more than tea after looking at these obits. People are dying now what've never died before. Do you believe how they drop like flies?

– Dadda, when's she coming. Momma, when's Auntie coming with Sparkle? Can she come now? Can we have the happy birthday now?

– God knows she'll be here soon enough. Now go in and clean yourself up for dinner. Go on now.

– Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, will you carry me? I ran all the way home.

– Carry you where? To the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the next room?

Helen demurred and walked to the bedroom she shared with her parents. From her clutched fist she released a folded rectangle of heavy paper, smeared and flimsy from too much handling. She opened it and pressed it down with her hands onto the bed. All of her class had signed it, and several of the girls had carved in pencil, below their names, figures of a stiff looking girl with her hair in two braids and written "Show us on Monday, Helen!" or "Lucky Duck!" Lucy Katz had volunteered to draw the picture on the front of the card, which was of the same stiff-looking girl but this time was larger and in colour, and showed her yellow braids and blue pinafore. Above the picture Mrs. Alvord had written neatly "Happy Birthday, Helen." Lucy had asked to write "Holy Moly!" along the bottom but was refused.

Helen's bed was a child's crib with the sides removed and the palette lengthened by the addition of sofa cushions lashed to two sawhorses. Being on the cusp of seven, she regarded this arrangement with a certain amount of indignation. Helen was born with a lazy right eye two months and five days before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Starting at age three she wore eyeglasses, secured to her head with a black strap. Her inability to grow a full set of teeth vexed Evvy to no end, and was treated with the frequent application of raw milk to the child's gums. The growth rate of her teeth was, by all accounts, inversely proportional to that of her body, which, though short, had the heft and breadth of a child three years her senior.

The decent twin bed and one additional private room were occupied by Helen's older brother, Francis, who was fourteen and had already learned to speak French by listening to ice hockey games on Canadian radio, and tried twice to drop out of school to work in a mattress factory. After being hit in the head with a metal swing two years before, he was not the same, and the private room was a gesture of prudence as much as a concession to his adolescent entreaties for privacy. Disputes over the use of the household's one radio set the tone for many an evening. While deference to Francis was advocated by her parents, Helen dismissed this requirement, turning to Stephanie, her black-haired girl doll for counsel. Wasn't that just ridiculous, she would ask

Stephanie, that ice hockey could be more important than this week's instalment of *Dick Tracy*.

Ever since B.O. Plenty and Gravel Gertie had a daughter, all Helen could talk about was Sparkle Plenty and what she would do next. Around that time, Jack had begun the custom, at Helen's insistence, of allowing her to sit on his lap in the evenings so that they could first look at the funny pages.

Helen's only interest was in one strip, *Dick Tracy*, which now sometimes included the adventures of the young Sparkle Plenty.

– All right then, Honeybunch. Climb up here. Away we go.

– You read it out, Dadda.

– Everyone knows you can read. Put those little glasses to work.

– Please, Daddy. Read it to me. Please read it. Please read it. Please.

– Enough of the mouth. All right.

– Read it all the way three times.

– You'll kill me dead.

– Dadda, what's that!

Helen shot a tiny index finger out from her sleeve and sunk it into an advertisement in the back pages. Jack moved the paper a comfortable distance from his eyes and first noticed along the bottom "Ideal Toy Company™, Chicago, IL," and his shoulders fell a little. In the centre was a photograph of a child's doll, standing, with yellow braids, a blue pinafore and above her head the words "Sparkle Plenty Doll, a limited time only. Every little girl's dream." About a year before, Helen had begun to show a definitive lack of interest in her baby dolls, Robert, Teresa, and Sister McSharry; and instead shifted her favour to dolls more mature in aspect. Stephanie was such a doll. In turn, each repudiated baby doll had found repose in the mausoleum under the sawhorses. To all Helen's friends in the neighbourhood, Sparkle Plenty was the sophisticated young girl's companion.

Helen tacked Sparkle's raggedy picture to the vanity mirror above her mother's rouge pots and toilet water in order to mark the beginning of a yearlong vigil that would deliver Sparkle Plenty to her rightful home. As Helen stood pressing the square of paper to the mirror she watched Francis slowly enter the room behind her. He glanced from side to side and muttered that he didn't have anything. Helen turned to see what he didn't have and by then he had almost reached her. He took one more step toward her and drove one of his fists through the mirror above her head. The room filled with the sweetness of perfume as it poured from the side of the dresser refreshing Helen's shoes, already soaked with the urine that trickled along her legs.

Jack and Evvy had paid out of pocket for Francis to be seen by a psychiatrist when he began to exhibit signs of contempt and unbridled rage towards his bedroom door, the commode, and vacant corners of the apartment. They were told he was a genius and a paranoid schizophrenic. While he undoubtedly possessed the intellect to attend Harvard University, his sanity was tenuous, and they were advised that his future lay most sensibly in military service. With the release of this news and subsequent trips to the doctor, assorted cutlery and household tools began disappearing from the kitchen, and Francis's sway over the household grew. Thus Helen's mounting demands for a Sparkle Plenty doll could not be met with any assurances from her parents. When the intercession of the Blessed Virgin had not borne fruit by the third week of September, the help of Evvy's widowed sister Mary was begrudgingly enlisted.

Most everything Helen knew about her Aunt Mary had been gleaned from her father's heavy-handed method of character assessment, which, conceptually, resembled shooting a cockroach with a revolver. Many of the assets bequeathed to Mary by her late husband were tied up in suffocating velvet draperies, anchored to every window of her house by the weight of more jewellery and silver than could reasonably be employed during nine successive reigns of the czars. This fact was shared hopefully by Jack with his son on more than one occasion. The previous spring, Mary had had a bout with gallstones and was admitted to St. Elizabeth's Hospital for emergency surgery. Helen accompanied her mother to the ward during visiting hours, bearing an issue of *Ladies Home Journal* and a cloying wad of gardenias.

Evvy and Helen had been directed to the room third from the end of the hall on the left, which contained five beds occupied by various elderly women.

The two looked nervously across the faces of the convalescents and determined that they had been misdirected. As they turned to leave, a tiny voice pleaded from a bed beside a medicine cart, "Evvy, I'm here. Evvy."

Evvy and Helen turned their faces, bearing no signs of recognition, to the speaker. "That's not Auntie, is it, Momma?" Helen begged, pressing her chin against her mother's arm. Evvy clutched her daughter and moved toward the bed. She ventured that the thorough bathing and scrubbing her sister had received, at the hands of hospital personnel, had rendered Mary's skin and hair a shade of papery peach not seen in at least ten years. Helen observed that her Aunt Mary ceased to resemble her friend Celeste, or any member of the Scarparelli family, whose house she sometimes went to on Sundays after Mass to eat cookies that tasted like black liquorice. Since then, the facts of Mary's cosmetic transformation had been reserved in Evvy's maternal arsenal; giving weight to her admonitions

that poor hygiene would result in a neck and ears literally black with dirt and suitable for growing potatoes. They'd have had a field day with you during the famine, Evvy would drone, lathering up her children's necks.

Evvy arranged a birthday party for Helen, beginning at noon on Saturday to coincide with the arrival of Aunt Mary and Sparkle Plenty. Evvy stopped over on Thursday to ask Eddie Drabkin to put together a spread that she could pick up from the back door on Saturday morning when the shop front was closed. Jack and Evvy had known the Drabkins for almost eleven years. Next Friday, Evvy would take twice as much out of Jack's wages for the grocer and for Eddie; that way debts would be settled in time for Christmas so they could have a turkey. To Helen, the inside of a Jewish delicatessen held the promise of rewards ordinarily reserved for the kingdom of heaven. She anticipated with triumph that St. Peter guarded a bottomless barrel of pickles available only to those who contemplated each of the mysteries, not just the joyful ones, when saying the Rosary; and that for every time she did not pass gas during Father Kavanagh's homily, Jesus set aside a cheese blintz. Helen was allowed to invite her best friend Lucy Katz, who could stay for two hours after lunch and help Helen take Sparkle Plenty to meet the Finnegan girls, Kathleen Blake, Celeste Scarparelli, Myrna Drabkin, and the O'Malleys on the next block. After that, Sparkle would need a rest from all the socializing and she and Helen could discuss some things, like which of the figurines on the mantel her mother forbade them to touch, and which of Helen's teachers smelled like mothballs.

Helen emerged from the bedroom with Stephanie under her arm and went into the kitchen where Evvy was putting out the dinner. Cringing at the sight of the fried cod, Helen asked if Sparkle Plenty would be permitted to eat hot dogs on Fridays on account of her not attending Mass. Evvy lapped at her dry mouth. Helen wedged in beside her body, tugging at her and saying only the word "Momma" at intervals. Evvy leaned the heel of her hand against the counter to steady the spatula she had grasped overhand in her fist. On the rare occasions that she became angry, Evvy wished upon Helen a fate worse than her own: two daughters. Helen had given Evvy a run for her money, but never before had she pursued any goal as she had the Sparkle Plenty doll.

Over the past year, her devotion to the quest had grown exponentially, and by late summer had prompted Evvy to pray secretly that she herself might be spared, meeting her death at the hands of a maniacal streetcar operator or a sailing piano. Evvy puzzled that their lives were punctuated at the most inopportune times by moments of inscrutable slapstick, but the ability to conjure accidents in the interest of gaining a final reprieve was evidently out of the grasp of mortals. Once Jack

had been walking along the sidewalk in his good suit when a freshly cooked pork shoulder – bone intact, nudged off a window ledge by a slavering dog, had fallen three stories and caromed off his head, covering him in hot fat and flinging him to the ground. Evvy herself was no stranger to sitting down on a perfectly angled hat pin or losing her slip while running for the bus and tumbling squarely into the only spot of mud for eight blocks.

She lit a cigarette and sighed into a chair in front of a glass of beer, grimacing at the scourge of Sparkle Plenty, and her deciding role in Mary's weekend visit. Evvy tried to brace herself for the next eighteen hours until the doll arrived and, thankfully, dinner was made endurable by conversation about Francis's initial success assembling a short-wave radio. His return from school with the annexation of a blow torch had provoked anxious inquiries from his parents, and all were eager to believe that enhancements to their quality of life would be the only outcome. In an effort to prevent predicted levels of nocturnal upset, Evvy sent Helen to bed with a cup of tea, fortified with a trusted palliative. Before falling asleep, Helen exhumed the baby dolls beneath the sawhorse, and with the addition of a folded sock plump with bathroom tissues, transformed the maudlin hotel into charming sleeping accommodations for its anticipated new resident.

Francis returned the dinner plates to the kitchen and, while there, drained two glasses of any remaining beer. He emptied some oatmeal into a bowl and tore a sizable hunk of bread from a loaf on the counter, slipping out the back hall to the attic crawl space, which was damp and unused. That summer, he had taken Helen past the train yards near the river to a poultry plant.

He had told her to bring her doll carriage and two blankets. Upon arrival, he purloined two roosters. Since then, he had kept them in the attic. Helen had named one Algonquin Q. Crookedneck while he called the other The Merchant of Venice, after learning that it was not sanctioned reading on the school syllabus. Occasionally they were loud and the space had long since been entirely whitewashed with foul. Fortunately, most everyone else in the building was too raucous, too dirty, too busy or too idle to be bothered yet. For his parents, Francis assumed it was more likely a case of pride or else their own natural guilelessness.

Despite rather squalid living conditions, the birds enjoyed frequent walks around the train yards and were perambulated throughout the neighbourhood without incident. Francis speculated that, with the arrival of Sparkle Plenty, an alternative method of transport might need to be obtained to smuggle the birds out of the immediate vicinity. He had already begun to fear an erosion of their cover

when Helen's infant dolls fell out of favour, thus rendering the doll carriage unnecessary. Given his sister's already insufferable bragging concerning the arrival of the new doll, eyebrows were likely to be raised if she were observed to do anything but parade the streets with it perched on a dais. Word had even travelled to the Junior High, where some of the girls said how it must be nice for Francis to have a rich old bitty for an aunt, and why couldn't he take them to the pictures?

Helen would be the only girl this side of Beacon Street with a Sparkle Plenty doll; there was no way she would keep it swaddled inside a pram. In all phases of the operation, he felt credulity was paramount.

Francis returned to the apartment and found, as usual, his parents seated in the living room in their housecoats. Two short glasses of whiskey gleamed on the highboy – sugary, warm, replete. His father was assisting his mother to wrap her hair in rollers and tie it up with a scarf and, while doing so, he imitated someone from what he called *The Old Sod*, someone like Pa or Gramps, and she replied accordingly with the *bejaysuses* and the *'twases* and the fussing. He never laughed but she often did, even as her head bowed toward him soberly, and his arms skipped in exaggerated arcs over her head.

Francis appeared as always to notice nothing. Jack shouted: “Goodnight, Himself” to his son as he passed, and thought perhaps his cheek looked hot. Francis ducked away, habitually bevelling his pockmarked chin with the backs of his fingers, his shoulders hitched up to his ears.

Some time after midnight, it began to rain, at first slowly and then purposefully, doggedly. Evvy awoke to what she thought was the sound of the rain, which she could see drenching the panes in sheets and jostling the sash. Instead, it was the sound of Helen running water to make the morning coffee; a skill she had learned in order to draw her parents out of bed for two specific occasions: Christmas and her birthday. It was not the smell of the freshly brewing coffee that drew Evvy to the kitchen, but the blood-curdling terror of an unchaperoned child in proximity to hot surfaces and liquids; a fact with which Helen was well acquainted. Evvy could see that Helen had already set herself up at the gate-leg table. She had dragged up a chair and an afghan blanket, and had made, with a stubby pencil, a sign which read: IN HERE AUNT MARY, evidently meant to be pressed against the window as a navigational guide.

Helen refused the offer of breakfast and instead ran in to fling herself across her father's sleeping body. Meanwhile, Evvy wormed her feet into her rubbers and did up the fasteners around her ankles. Someone would need to accompany her to

the deli, and Francis couldn't be taken from a crucial point in the meringue or his peaks would fall. Evvy waited by the window with her coat on, drinking her coffee steadily and with no signs of enjoyment. Jack suddenly cupped his hand under her elbow and took a step toward the door, producing the umbrella from behind his leg to indicate he had found it where she said it would be. Before stepping out, he stroked Helen's hair and looked in on Francis, who was placing a pan of water on the low shelf of the oven. The origins and depth of Francis's cooking knowledge were not known, nor were they ever remarked upon. Even Helen had learned not to stand by asking questions while he cooked. Her inquisitiveness had once invited a crisp, unambiguous response, in which Francis turned from the counter, gathered a fistful of her hair and placed a whole egg into her mouth, causing it to crack against her back teeth. She spit the shards and chilled ooze into the sink and went to her room to lie on her side, as she had seen ladies do in a professed state of infirmity.

At eleven o'clock a faded apricot tablecloth, rimmed with silvery blue flowers, billowed and then sank over the table, to which a leaf had been added to accommodate the guests. Evvy transferred the pastrami and corned beef sandwiches, a carton of pickles, a tub of potato salad, four beef knishes and six cheese blintzes onto the good dishes and arranged them in the centre of the table, around a lavender Roseville vase capturing Helen's Honeybunch roses. The hush stench of mustardy brine and vinegar competing with the sweet vegetable note of the roses gained on the room, hedging the cigarette smoke and wood polish into the corners and below their feet.

An uneven patter of knocks came from the lower portion of the front door. Helen put both hands on the knob while Francis stood behind her to look out the peephole. He pressed between her shoulder blades to signal that she could open the door. Helen pulled on the doorknob and then wrapped her fingers around the door's edge and walked backwards on her heels as though ceremoniously drawing open a great curtain. She did so with an expressionless face and for her own benefit. Lucy Katz stood in the doorway, suspended inside a kelly-green cardigan that hung about her as from a coat hanger. Helen peered around the door at her friend and both fidgeted like solitary persons biding their time, displaying the unintentional resignation of those who haven't any idea what should or could come next. The girls moved together, greeting like lovers amid a crowd of social acquaintances: at first absorbed by one another, oblivious to the presence of outsiders, their heads cocked in recognition; and then suddenly conscious of the encroaching world, unable to express themselves properly, finally resorting to strangeness and

stilted pleasantries. Lucy placed a greasy paper sack on the floor between them.

– This is from my Bubbie.

– She make it?

– I’m supposed to make sure not to say how standing at the counter makes her legs swell all up. She whispered it and said it might be a cancer. And that’s my Uncle Philip’s fault if it is because he didn’t go to doctor college instead got married to a gentile merchant and that’s how he works in a shoe shop.

– Is it the nuts kind or the not-nuts kind?

– The nuts kind and cherries. Like what we had at Benny’s bar mitzvah.

– We better wait after Aunty comes and the sandwiches.

The girls eyed the bag sitting at Lucy’s feet. They left it sitting in the middle of the dining room floor and went to Helen’s room to examine Sparkle Plenty’s sleeping arrangements. Both girls grew wild and giddy, interrupting one another as they spoke about Sparkle Plenty’s blonde braids, spinning and throwing themselves against Evvy and Jack’s bed. Helen stood against the wall, one foot tucked behind her the way the older girls did when they talked outside the high school. Lucy placed one hand on her jutting hip to join a staged third-party discussion in which extravagant though unspecific plans were agreed upon and conciliatory promises were made after much goading. “Yes, that would be wonderful,” Helen fawned. “You order the giant cake and ice cream and the roasting chickens and tall glasses of pink drinks. It will be lovely. Yes, yes, I suppose we can do that. Of course, Mrs. McLoolinigan, if you insist. I know how much it would mean to you.”

At half-past twelve, Mary had still not arrived and Helen burst in on the growling murmurs coming from the kitchen. Her parents picked up their drinks, shooed her to the table and said it was time to eat; the rain had surely made Mary late. Lucy sat where she was told but Helen protested, saying it wasn’t time yet for the happy birthday because Mary had not arrived with Sparkle Plenty. She put her head down on the table and extended her arms to prevent food being placed in front of her. Jack ignored her and selected a bit of everything, while Evvy pressed her nervously to sit up like a good girl. Helen conceded once she’d had a look at the food waiting for her, all arranged to showcase a giant pickle in the centre of the plate. Jack said grace, offering a typical blessing which would have seemed perfunctory and flip coming from someone less earnest.

– Rubba dub dub, thanks for the grub. Yaaay God.

After lunch, Francis was sent to walk Lucy home because Helen had collapsed in fits of tears when two o’clock came and she realized she would not be setting out, Sparkle Plenty in hand, to circle the block with Lucy to call on their friends. Francis pinched the loose material near

Lucy’s elbow and led her out the door. Helen would not budge from her seat near the window to say goodbye. She kept one hand pressed plaintively to the window pane and the other wedged in under her glasses, which were smudged and askew.

Over the next five hours, Evvy tried to ply her with birthday cake and cups of vanilla milk, but Helen was unconsolated and remained at her post, keening like a widow at a wake. Neither Jack and Evvy nor Aunt Mary had a telephone, and though Mary herself had a car, a bus ride to her house on Saturday would take Jack or Evvy the better part of the afternoon. There was nothing to do but wait and hope she had been delayed or put off until tomorrow by rain, as they’d surmised loudly in Helen’s presence.

Francis wet a knife under the tap and sliced cautiously into the meringue. In silence he centred the wedges on four small dishes, balanced a fork on the lip of each, and lined them up along one side of the table. The lemon curd remained firm, and supported the meringue, which was of uniform thickness across the surface of the entire pie. He did not pause to survey his work but began eating it immediately, finishing his first piece while standing and then taking a second back to his room.

Evvy could hear Francis working behind her, and the blade of the knife against the glass plate. She fluffed the pile of mending in her lap and eyed the pink Brown & Haley’s tin, which held spare buttons and spools of thread in black, white, blue, red and green. She winced under the weight of her own dim assurances that one spool nestled among the mess would match the shade of the blue dress in her lap. She bent low to pick up the tin and as she did the rising whine of Helen’s sobs prompted her to fumble the can intentionally and then kick it several times with her feet, filling her ears with the sound of clattering tin. The look of her fingers unwinding the thread and pinching the needle made her mouth think of unfiltered Chesterfields, which she had smoked as a girl in the alley behind the ice cream parlour where she worked before she met Jack. The cigarette money went to the milkman now and she smoked the same cigarettes as the drunks who gathered up the train yards. With her eyes she placed her coat and purse, and the ten cents resting in the inside pocket for bus fare.

Evvy speculated on the duration of time it would take for a child to blind itself crying. Whether in fact a human eye could cure in its own brine and cook there in its socket like a tiny blue ham, ringed with fat. Perhaps before that would occur she could hem Helen’s Sunday skirt and finish letting out the waist and the two darts in the front of this dress her sister had handed on to her: slender Mary who had

been called shapeless out of earshot. Evvy made thirteen uniform stitches along the hem of the red wool skirt. The journey to the hospital emergency room was almost that, maybe twelve city blocks. She stepped from one to the next in her mind as she dragged her unsteady finger across her work, and confirmed with herself that they were better off taking the bus than walking.

Francis's door was shut tightly but between Helen's shrieks and howls Evvy could hear the hum of the radio and the crackled staccato voice of the announcer shouting excitedly in words she didn't understand. Soon the room would swell to bursting and drone with the sound of classical music – his favourite was Bach, he said. Nothing but dirges, she thought, music to carve your wrists by. Jack was in the living room with Helen, stroking her hair and saying she mustn't go on that way, the doll would come sooner or later, Mary wasn't one to be counted on for being on time. Evvy had by then punctured each of her fingers and the ashtray balanced on the arm of her chair was a clutter of blood-stained butt ends and tangles of thread, the clothing rent and heaped on the floor. She rose and moved across the room.

Evy bent her elbow to secure her black purse strap in the crook of her arm. She put her hand involuntarily to the back of her head where her hair was held back with two simple black combs. It was well past dark and Helen's birthday cake still sat uncut on the table. Mary had not come with the doll. Helen had thrown up twice in Evvy's lap and then woke from a short nap with the faint smell of whiskey and lemon on her breath and began pacing throughout the apartment in her wet and wrinkled party dress, wailing. At half past ten, Evvy herself had gone through all the alcohol they had in the house and that would be the end of it. Jack's nerves were poor as it was, though he would deny it and his heart, weakened by St. Vitus's dance and malnourishment as a child, could ill afford such strain. To gain some respite from Helen's carrying on, and even more from Evvy's frantic pleas that he mustn't allow himself to become agitated, Jack had taken two of his wife's brassieres and knotted them together at the top of his head, stuffing the pockets at his ears with stockings and handkerchiefs, and tried to lie down.

The bus slid up and halted, lifting the hem of Evvy's pleated skirt to reveal her enormous legs as she grasped Helen's hand and pulled her up the steps. Helen snarled and then whimpered, her face bloated and shiny from crying, and Evvy wondered whether it would help to give her a rag to bite on, as Evvy herself had done during childbirth. A rag soaked in ether would be better, she assented inwardly. Evvy thought hopefully of the hospital and tapped distractedly at the perspiration condensing on her forehead.

She pressed her arm across Helen's body and tried to look out the window at things passing them by. Finally she pulled the cord, rolled Helen's body into hers and shuffled down off the bus. Evvy looked at the hospital sign and thought she might run. Her voice, when she spoke to the attendant, came in barely tempered gasps of hysteria and spiked intermittently to drown out Helen. At first the desk nurse was calm, but gradually she started to shake her head slightly and scratch out her writing, squinting up at Helen's face, like a rising red balloon before her eyes. She came from behind the counter with effort to direct Evvy toward a curtained partition in the back. She pointed a fat arm, gathered like an ice bag at her elbow, and then walked over to a group of men in white coats. One man nodded and pushed a pen into his pocket. Helen started to kick and resist getting on the bed as Evvy tried to focus on the man coming toward her.

– Evvy, hello.

– Yes, good evening, Dr. Cooper.

Evy turned away but she could see the needle dimple the flesh. She felt the prick, followed by rush of calm that tanged in her jowls. She thought that if Helen had a daughter like this some day she might kill them both. Evvy tried to think of Sunday morning, and imagined the saliva rushing to drench the host on her tongue.

Evy stayed in with Helen while Jack and Francis went off to Mass. At about 10, Helen woke up and had wet the bed. Evvy drew a bath and Helen sank down silently up to her chest. Nothing was said between them, and Helen even permitted her hair to be washed without argument, even when Evvy pulled at it and let soap go in her eyes. Helen pulled on some clean things, shivering, and Evvy went to the door after the bell was rung three times in quick succession.

Helen was concentrating on the wetness in her bottom, having put on clothes too quickly after her bath. Her arm was lodged behind her, creating a space between her skin and her underpants, which she puckered from the outside with her opposite hand. Her upper body was twisted around for a better view of her backside and was coming around counter clockwise for a look in the other direction when Helen saw her first. She was upside down, braids dangling, staring out from the little proscenium arch created by Evvy's arm. Behind her, Mary's hand moved at her chest level like a bird emerging from a cuckoo clock. Finally Mary was in the room and looking down towards Helen, sending the little bird back and forth as if in frantic restatement of the time. She bent at the waist and turned Sparkle Plenty upright, smoothing her braids and preening her for Helen's benefit. Helen felt that she was being inflated like a balloon. The space inside her grew hotter and pushed at her edges so that her chest and fingers jumped a little every other

second. She heard everything inside out; as if something loud and very far away was hitting her eardrums from the wrong direction. That was how the “no” sounded when she spoke it. It dropped from her mouth like a hammer, sending a weight straight up from her feet to clang a loud bell within her head. She was crying now, saying, “I don’t want it” and both women, shaking their heads, reached for her. Helen turned, her hand still propped inside her pants, and hurled herself into the bedroom, her head swatting feverishly from side to side. Evvy froze, her hands twisted in her apron or in her hair. Inadvertently, she moved to the kitchen to put on the kettle and then returned to reach for Mary’s coat.

– Evvy, there were just some things that needed doing yesterday. And I couldn’t face that rain with my hair newly set. You understand.

– Jack’s at Mass with Francis. They’ll be along.

– She’s best left to herself to sulk. Let her alone and let her go on like that if she’s bent on it. Awfully bold, that girl. Awfully. After all my trouble.

– We’re out of sugar, Mary, and just the tinned milk is what we have.

– Shame. If I’d have known I could’ve picked some up. I can’t stand bitter tea, and there’s nothing worse than canned milk. It seems so low.

Evyv pushed a five-pound sack of sugar into the breadbox and closed the lid. She reached for a glass cream pitcher and jerked her hand away, instead picking up the evaporated milk and placing it on the table in its original tin. She hoped that Jack wouldn’t comment on the four bottles of milk sitting in the icebox.

“Saturday the second of October is my birthday” was all Helen said the two times that her parents and Aunt Mary had gone into the room to place the doll into her unyielding arms. Both times Sparkle Plenty fell to the floor. Jack bent to pick her up and saw that under the sawhorse there was now a stuffed elephant, some newspapers, a throw pillow and one of his good shoes. Helen never glanced once in the direction of Sparkle’s erstwhile sleeping chamber. She positioned herself intently in the opposite direction, tying and retying a flowered handkerchief to her parent’s bedpost. Mary was invited to stay for dinner but stepped out in her rustling coat and hat, carrying the shopping bag she came with, now weighted down with Saturday’s purchase.

After the vigour and charge of the first movement, the second movement of the symphony came *andante*, and over the French horn, Francis could hear Helen bawl and choke her speech against the pillows. It made him sick to hear it, and filled with rage. He turned the volume up.

Francis was already dressed for school when Helen came into the kitchen for her breakfast in the morning. Jack and Evvy were fast asleep. He gathered up his books, and from under them pushed a paper bag onto Helen and said, “Your turn. Don’t get caught.” Before Helen had seen inside the bag he had gone. She made for her shoes beside the door and didn’t do up the lacings.

It was cold in the stairway and she cried a little and hated the birds then; but not going would be worse. She was quiet, even though Francis explained that the attic floor was above the McKeon’s kitchen, not their own. The little window in the corner looked out on the bakery parking lot where a sea of people stood beneath a canopy of umbrellas. Something came into Helen’s head about a dead rat baked into a loaf of bread, and she thought of it, but only partly, as though the thought didn’t belong to her but was a dream or something she had overheard adults discussing. She ground the bag under her heels like Francis showed her and then reached inside to scatter the crumbs. The light from the window was working along the floor towards her eyes. Francis’s bird, which was larger, approached her first and walked straight past. The other bird, Algonquin Q. Crookedneck, came after. He stepped from a blind corner and placed his foot on the bright path. The light caught his red and white throat and she marked how it didn’t grow the way it should. But now, hanging from his neck was a shiny pink ribbon, knotted into a tiny bow at the side. The tattered ends dangled like a pennant. Helen squatted towards the floor and squinted. She reached out dutifully to stroke him then, as though he was her own and she was proud.

The conversation

Some days are sneakers, tramping through the leaves, slowly getting soaked. Others are buses, lumbering from pole to pole, joining dreams with destinations like a giant Lego set. Today was smaller,

a phone, a tinny friend with the voice of a pinprick, doling out solace and advice the way TV commercials offer life.

I love you, he says, or was it just *love you*, the *I* removed like a useless appendix?

Whatever, the ear piece was downright warm, as if it too had come from deep within my body. The rest of the phone fit in my palm like a child's hand, all need, sticky as a half-licked sucker. We talk

about everything, from the mourning dove cooing on his windowsill to my forthcoming suicide where that dove might come in handy, a tender tone. Days that really buzz always include the trivial with the profound, that juxtaposition

where the truth bares its blessings. *I love you too*, I say, watching the syllables squeezed to threads, the sort of sewing that makes corpses' lips look so poised. We go on to discuss the weather, whether devotion is always a sign

of screwiness, or is it true that some people just get lucky? I'm speaking to the world through him, my mouthpiece, my messenger. I'm pledging my very flesh, the dangle of my shoe, the way my lips pronounce

some words exactly like a kiss. These are last confessions, for tomorrow is liable to be a stone skipping across the surface of a pond, or a shovel digging its own deep hole. Can't keep track of it all, can't begin to sing

the dictionary's zillion songs. Eventually, I have to let him morph back into silence. When I say goodbye, I'm left holding a piece of plastic, like a stranger's body once the lust has been consumed.

Thursday cruel

A woman spit from the side window of a black car today, and, on Eglinton, a high-rise was being demolished, a giant wedding cake kicked in. I kept seeing things I didn't want to see. The sky, for example, a cringe of grey, like laundry

hung on a line still dirty. The month of August splayed in the gutter, hardly more than a squirm. A future was on its way and it wouldn't be pretty, morning glories shrivelling on a twisted vine, a breeze picking up enough heft and trash

to qualify as bluster. And me, the stranger in the passing lane, fighting a quibble of nausea, a certainty that something simply wasn't right. Could it be that missing you had finally snatched its toll and rolled that tombstone back in place? Or was this

just a general malaise, headlines snipped from daily papers and pasted psycho-like on a blank page? Maybe Israel had gone too far this time, maybe that baby carriage outside the Science Centre was a bomb, maybe the stick man stumbling from the 7/11

was dying rather than drunk. I wouldn't be surprised. After all, a woman spit today, hit the breeze with a lippy punch and let fly, almost finished off the collapsing high-rise. She made me want you there and then, so we could cry together or I could stroke

your chin, feel something other than lost. Thursday, August 24 will go down as cruel, a day holding its stomach. Not a kiss in sight, not a bit of summer light. Just a case of nerves, a twist of expectations, as if my gaze had found a way to make a fist.

— Barry Dempster

No time

for Carol Gall

It's that time again, the world
speeding on its downturn spin,
leaves with blood in their faces
growing dizzy and letting go,
sky shifting skins. Time to

cancel the garden, call it heaps
or ruins, something other
than faith and flourish.
The Muskoka chairs are heavy
but allow themselves to be

hauled into the garage.
The black hose uncoils and
empties, wrapped back up again
and tossed in a corner
with the watering cans.

It's all summer stuff,
trinkets and tools, things to
balance blossoms, strings and poles,
sprinklers and little rusted spades.
It's time to set the rakes dancing,

swell the paper bags, sprinkle
sweat and seed. Believe that
the spin continues, November
climbing the shadow of May.
And as for you and your hibernation

fantasy, get over it, someone has to
pry open a door and shovel
a crooked path, otherwise the clocks
will stick, the calendars just hang there.
Pick yourself up, flakes of leaves

snagged in your sweater,
tote a hug of wood, wrap the roses,
sing a slow but heartfelt dirge.
It's time to tilt your head back
and watch snow spilling from those

cold bins of cloud, squash a hat
over your own coldness and run
for the cover of a window
where you can wave to grass
before it goes under. It's almost

no time again, that season where
even words freeze, pens casting
blue sleep on white pages
the way the dead still carry colour
in their folded wrists.

— *Barry Dempster*

NORM REYNOLDS

Living in Reverse

THURSDAY AUGUST 5, 1982

CAROLINE IS HOME, writing herself out in her parents' den, watching the final moments of "The Graduate", the last Dustin Hoffman movie she could sit through. It plays across the face of her father, asleep in front of the television. On top of the TV, the mantel of honour, there sits a photograph of Caroline, her husband Ted, and their infant son Joel. The photo is twelve years old, the only thing in the house that celebrates her life since having left here. Ted looks as good as he ever will in a photo. As for Joel, he is angelic. Caroline remembers it amazed her that the photographer had gotten him to smile instead of scowl, like Joel knew that's what you're supposed to do in a portrait. He is staring intently, lovingly, up at his mother.

Caroline's parents' vision of her is that photograph: the holy trinity of mother, father, and son. Ted and she have not had any official ones taken in the eleven years since Joel died. There has been the usual assortment of Christmas and summer vacation shots, any number of which would have been an appropriate addition to the collection. But to her parents, any picture without Joel looks incomplete. Caroline has her grade fives jot in a journal every Monday what they did on the weekend. This is the first time she has felt the need to write things down in order to make sense of them. And what did you do on the weekend, Mrs. Piper? *I left my husband.*

1970

TED AND CAROLINE had not had a break together, away, long since before Joel was born. Since the honeymoon? Mostly, they didn't think they could afford it. Another way of saying they hadn't earned it. Not yet. They had to prove themselves worthy, especially as parents. What kind of parents desert their baby for a luxury hotel in a city six hours and hundreds of miles from home?

They went. To Montreal from Toronto. Caroline remembers gingerly doing the breast stroke in the pool atop the Place Bonaventure hotel, noticing the steam rise off the blue water and evaporate into the bluer sky. It was the closest she got to truly relaxing all weekend. She kept thinking about Joel. She phoned Ted's parents, Esther and Lewis, once, close to what she thought would be mealtime. Mandy, Ted's sister, answered the phone, saying yes, he was fed. He was napping, the phone almost woke him up. Ted told Caroline to stop being such a fussbudget.

On the way home it snowed lightly, wet snow that melted almost as soon as it hit car and pavement. It was a little heavier as they approached Toronto along the 401. They lived in Scarborough, the east end, but they had to drive to Etobicoke, west, to pick up Joel. They decided to go home first. Ted had been driving for six hours and Caroline wanted to get out of the snow – it felt unsafe. As soon as they got in the house, she called Esther's place. Lewis answered this time. Caroline could hear his

toy train set chugging in the background, and Joel wailing a bit. Lewis assured her he was just hungry, Esther was getting him some milk. They told him what a wonderful time they'd had, about the gorgeous rooftop pool and view, St. Catherine's Street shopping, and all she wanted to know was how Joel had been – *really*. Lewis laughed more of his hearty grandfatherly chortle, and told her how agreeable the little guy was. They held Joel up to the receiver, and Caroline tried to calm him down, but her motherly tones didn't carry through. Caroline told Lewis they'd be there as soon as they could.

"Now, Caroline, I know what a doting mother you are. Why don't you and Ted rest and I'll bring Joel back myself?"

As soon as he said it, Caroline wanted to give in. She was exhausted from the long car trip. Now that they had stopped she could hardly face starting up in a car again, the traffic, manoeuvring, paying attention. Lewis volunteered to do that. Despite some not so distant maternal voice resisting or fighting, she acquiesced. She would always wonder why her selfish voice won over the mother's that night. Was it because she had indulged all weekend and was still in that mode? Caroline would forever second-guess herself. How long was it? An hour? Two? It must have been more, for Lewis to be found, for the police to go to the house, and then to hers and Ted's. Caroline wondered if Esther or Mandy wanted to call, or if the police took the choice away from them – for their sake. In all these years, Caroline never asked them about that. For something as swift as a car accident, it's amazing how the details stick. As if the whole thing happened not only in slow motion, but in a deliberately ordered way that allowed one to know things in sequence, and in one's own time. Mandy tried to talk Lewis out of going, volunteered to do it herself. Esther persuaded her to stay and let Gramps go, there was something important to tell her. Part of Caroline still blames Mandy, still blames Esther for her indulgence. For that was the night Esther broke the news to Mandy she was pregnant with Daniel. Watching Esther's youngest grow has been both a joy and a sorrow for Caroline. It should be Joel's soccer games they cheer. Joel whose school play they applaud. If Joel were alive, he'd be a year older than Daniel – a year older than one of his uncles. Caroline and Ted lost a son, Esther gained one – is that why Daniel was born? To fill a gap? Daniel's birth, or the portent of it, seemed to need to occur on the night of Joel's death. Is it going too far to say his birth caused Joel's death? Of course it is. But they seem connected.

Afterwards, Ted and Caroline grew in on each other, she supposed predictably, away from other people. Before Joel died, Ted and Caroline slept entwined. After, they got twin beds. Then Ted took to the guest room, what used to be Joel's nursery, which they'd had renovated after the accident. That was how Ted appeared. A guest in his own

house. A greater toll on Ted, she supposed, having lost his father and son in one fell swoop. As for Caroline? She felt cheated. Robbed. Like someone had kidnapped Joel while they were away in Montreal. When they returned from that week-end jaunt, Caroline no longer had three things – her son, her father-in-law, and the best of her husband. The bearing Ted gained as a father disappeared when they lost Joel. The gangliness, the awkwardness, the hesitancy he had when she first met him all came back. A magic potion worn off. She didn't push for sexual intimacy with him. Even when she'd been able to persuade him, coerce him – it certainly wasn't with the same passion with which he'd wooed her as a teenager. That lasted as long as Joel was around. But not now.

That should be enough for anyone. But it wasn't all. Now Caroline and Ted's house had burned down. Now they were forced to live in Esther's house. Caroline's game plan since that night had been to figure out a way to get Ted and her out of his mother's house as soon as possible. Along with everything else, Ted's absorption, his total immersion in his father's train set had unnerved her. One night Caroline cleared a spot on the table, where Ted was working, for a copy of "The Real Estate News", with some choice residences circled in dark blue pen.

Caroline had given up on speaking about it directly. She started leaving notes. This one sounded wonderfully diplomatic, not in the least way forceful or pushy:

Hon, I've circled a few places we might look at later this week if you've got the time. If you could just mark the ones that interest you, I'll go ahead and set up the appointments.

The train looks like it is really coming along. Love C.

When she returned just before 11:00, there were blotches of yellow paint all over the page, and her note. "Honey, I didn't even notice," he said when confronted. "I thought Mom had put a fresh pile of papers there to cover the table with." That precipitated Caroline's first flight from the house. She couldn't respond to that. If the situation were not so serious that she had to resort to leaving notes in the first place, she probably wouldn't have been so upset. What did she think she was doing, leaving homework for him? He wasn't going to notice because he didn't want to.

Caroline had been taking a summer course in learning disabilities (at least her career continued with some semblance of normalcy, the only thing in her life that did) and she phoned home to explain that she would miss dinner. Ted answered. They were all going to a movie anyway.

"Which one?" Caroline asked. "Maybe I could meet you."

"'Tootsie', we haven't decided. Whatever it is, it'll probably be the early show."

It was just before the dinner hour and she knew better than

to expect a commitment from Ted while he was hungry. She told him to have a good time, and she'd see him when she got back. She was going to mention a lead on a house but decided to let it wait. She was learning to spread her approaches about moving according to Ted's moods and space them judiciously through the week. Never mention it before dinner or at breakfast; it would ruin his day and his appetite. Weekends were time off, and time for them to be together. Recently they had also come to mean driving Daniel to soccer practice. That left weeknights. Tonight was a Thursday. She'd hit him with it when she got in.

At *The Patty Palace*, Caroline toyed with a greasy plate of fish and chips, taking solace in her copy of "The Real Estate News" and swirling her fries in a puddle of ketchup. This was the situation of a university student who couldn't afford to live on her own. Not a forty-year-old married woman forced to live with her mother-in-law while her husband built toy trains instead of working. Whose own son was long ago dead.

What was she doing in a greasy spoon with peeling, yellowing wallpaper on a Thursday night with "The Real Estate News"? She had to talk to her husband. She bought some cigarettes. Craven A's, the brand she smoked, when she was smoking, before Joel was born. Ted began smoking again after Joel and his father were killed in the car accident. Since they moved in with his family, he had stopped again. It was because of his smoking that their house burned down. Caroline had tried to get him to stop over the years, but to no avail. Now his smoking puts them out of their own house, they return to where he grew up, and he stops. Ted has fallen back into a groove, as though he had never met Caroline, never had a life outside of that petrified abode on Harwood Avenue. As if he were meant to eke out his life there from beginning to end, and his time with her was just a brief respite from his true destiny.

When Caroline got back from the restaurant, they were all there. Esther excitedly grabbed Mandy and Caroline each by the wrist.

"Guess what Ted found in the basement today." Both Mandy and Caroline looked at her dumbstruck. She leaned over the edge of the couch and pulled up a heavy object. It was the family's "Amazon" arm-wrestling trophy. Esther's arm cast in clay. It looked tarnished and dusty, but still eye-catching.

"I was thinking we should have another match. It's been years since you two went head to head. Come on, Mandy, let's do it. Caroline, you can play the winner."

Suddenly Esther was up and marching into the kitchen, her clay fist held firmly in her real one, followed by Mandy. After she'd adjusted to what was happening, Caroline got up and followed, too.

Caroline didn't remember a lot about the match. Their hands wrapped around each other's. Caroline realized it had been going on for as long as she'd taken an interest in Esther's son. That's when Caroline stopped struggling. *You win, Esther*. Caroline got up from the table in the middle of the fight and walked out.

If the accident had been the turning point in her life with Ted, the funeral that followed had a similar effect on Caroline's relationship with her parents. In those weary days following the tragedy, Caroline and Ted went over to her parents' place around the corner. They would think she brought him along because of their mutual loss, which she had, but it was also as a shield for whatever her folks would throw at her. She didn't know what to expect. They were hopeless in a crisis.

Caroline's mother served cocoa. They sat in the kitchen, where the real talking in the family got done. Caroline fished out the address of the funeral home, and started reciting a tentative schedule of who would be there when to greet people. They listened without really looking at her. When she finished, they simply nodded their heads in agreement. "Is that okay with you guys?"

"Yes," her father said. "Fine, Carol, honey." Ted just slurped his hot chocolate.

Caroline's parents were to replace her and Ted after dinner that night. At the funeral parlour, Ted and Caroline greeted Mrs. Holt, a neighbour Caroline remembered from her childhood. They were not close, but she knew the Holts from neighbourhood Christmas parties, and other similarly formal gatherings such as this. This was the first time Caroline sensed some affinity, a connection, between them. Mrs. Holt was comfortable with grief. She grasped Caroline's hand warmly, and looked at her directly through teary eyes. "Such a loss, Caroline. I'm so sorry for you." Her sincerity, after a day of nervous and polite respect from others, moved her. Caroline couldn't say anything when she spoke. "A strain on everyone. I don't blame your parents for going out tonight at all. They need to forget for a while."

"What?" Caroline said.

"They were in line for 'Little Big Man' at the Odeon. I tried to wave at them as I drove by but the light was green —"

Ted and Caroline both looked at her dumbly. She didn't dare catch his eye, for fear of revealing their embarrassment all the more. Caroline thanked her again for coming, and turned her attention to a girl who had babysat Joel.

But she wasn't hearing anything any more. After a while she had to sit down. Everyone thought it was the funeral that had drained her.

She went to the house, and knocked until the dog woke them with his barking. She knew that would get them up,

mostly because Mom wouldn't want their neighbours' sleep disturbed, more so than their own.

"Caroline, sweetheart," (all the endearing terms came out under pressure) "we didn't feel up to it –"

"You said you'd come. People were asking for you."

"Your mother just couldn't, honey, you'll have to understand –"

"What about tomorrow? The funeral."

"If your mother's feeling better –"

"She won't be. None of us are up to it. You tell me now that you'll be there." Caroline stood with her arms folded across her chest, defiant, though she was standing that way to conceal the fact that she was shaking. She didn't drop her gaze, either. Like she was at the front of the classroom, confronting a disobedient student.

Caroline's mother had a sweater draped across her shoulders. She clutched it at the neck, holding it close to her, perhaps to block out the draft coming through the front door. She turned and walked up the stairs to the second floor landing, then into her room, closing the door quietly behind her. This was her answer, and Caroline watched the entire motion as she would have listened to her complete response if she had put it into words. Closing the door was the period at the end of the sentence. Her father escaped down the hall into the kitchen while Caroline's attention was focused on her. They were not at the funeral of their own grandson and Caroline's father-in-law. Caroline has never discussed it nor seen a Dustin Hoffman movie since. Perhaps their acknowledgement that the house burned down and letting her come back here is a gesture of apology.

CAROLINE FEELS AN urge to move the picture on the TV set to another spot in the house. Maybe they would notice it was missing, and see things for what they are. Sometimes things have to be rearranged or altered to be truly understood. On TV "The Graduate" is ending. Dustin Hoffman has just spirited Katherine Ross away from her wedding, and their initial triumph and giddiness are slipping into uncertainty and perhaps regret. The credits emerge on top of this scene without inhibiting or affecting its power, and then an anonymous voice announces that it is the end of the programming day. The only sound now is an irritating and constant beeping, as the screen becomes grey and uncommunicative. Caroline stares at the blank image, listening to the tone, and it reminds her of ambulances, and fire alarms, and other urgent appeals that have struck her to the very core.

Gloss

crabbed words
in the book's margin

letters so pinched
they swallow meaning
after the writer leaves

vituperation unheard
behind the mean rune
scratched beside text

as irritant
for the next reader

– *Joanna M. Weston*

Snow falls hard in Anatolia

A chilled wind blows off the Anatolian steppe,
Bringing with it a blast of winter.
People stay at home now, afraid to stay too long
in ice-conquered streets that fill up easily
with smashed souls,
defeated by Third World politics and
elite discussions about Europe.

The cycle is completing itself.
Colour surrenders to drabness.
The sun turns vague and sickly
weak.
Hiding behind black, pregnant clouds that
hang over Anatolia like bombers.
Anatolia freezes, this graveyard of Empires
is stuck in ice and frozen donkey dung.

Snow falls hard in Anatolia
so Anatolia falls hard on the Anatolians.
Grey, banal soap opera day-dreams float unheeded while
models read the news, footballers talk philosophy.
We know that because of poverty's mass production of
mediocrity and overpopulation, winter will always be
welcome in Anatolia.

– *Philip Madden*

November

(for bill bissett)

On the patio outside the kitchen,
juncos and cardinals feed.
An orange-billed female watches me
through finger-marked glass,
pecking the cold grey slabs
beneath her bloodless feet.
Wary of predators, she
flits between the ground
and a rusty iron railing
before all flee
in a cloud of panic
to treetops, hydro lines
and the unobtainable wire
of the horizon.

It is not yet night,
not quite winter.

View from Mountain Avenue, end of summer

Crickets purr along the brow.
Spectres rise over Dofasco.
The motion of trains at 2:00 a.m.;
whine of wheel and rail, wet
finger on crystal.

Searchlights dissect the malignant sky.
Red clouds over Stelco.
Blood in the wind.

The crickets stop like a watch
in an old man's pocket. The city
laps at its periphery, waves
rolling into the night, into a bay
that cannot be ferried.

– Robert Boates

put yr doubt in yr pomes

GREGORY BETTS on two radical poets

A Few Words Will Do

LIONEL KEARNS
Talonbooks 2007

th is erth these ar peopul

BILL BISSETT
Talonbooks 2007

TWO OF CANADA'S most acclaimed writers, Lionel Kearns and bill bissett, launched their literary careers at roughly the same place and time – in Vancouver in the dynamic 1960s literary scene as it briefly merged with (and emerged from) the San Francisco beats and bohemians. Even amidst the throng of talent in the city in the period, the two were immediately recognized as aggressive and potent experimentalists: Kearns as Canada's first writer to embrace electronic media and digital poetics, and bissett as a chant-down hippy sound poet with long-hair, beads, and a shaker. In conservative Canada, these two were a radical presence and quite literally inspired a generation to test entrenched assumptions of literature. Boundaries were pushed, broken, and dissolved into the crystalline radiance of the sixties.

So it is an intriguing coincidence that after almost half a century since their emergence these same authors have both released new books of poetry with the same Vancouver publisher.

The last time they both published a book of new writing in the same year was 1978. bissett has been publishing consistently, nearly a book a year, since the sixties, but for Kearns *A Few Words Will Do* is his first new title since 1984. To be clear, Kearns's work comprises both new and old poems, a kind of *Selected Works* plucked and reworked from his entire career, but the material in the book presents such an anomalous Kearns as to seem wholly new. Rather than the works of an errant experimentalist, the poems in his new book are lyrical, meditative abstractions. For those expecting an advancement of his radical work in digital poetics, or radical in any direction, this selection will be disappointing. The computer has been swamped with meditative clouds that roll in, fog up the place, and leave only the slightly musty smell of a real human being. Poems like "Now" – in its entirety, "If the past is regret / and the future / nothing but anxiety, / what is the present? / Perhaps it is everything else" – are banal enough to be thought inoffensive, but there are simply too many examples of *ars poetica*, poems about poems, that trail off into prettified abstractions.

There are at least two reasons to buy Kearns's new book, though both are old, reprinted concrete poems. In "Canadian Conversation," Kearns captures a playful portrait of two people talking built entirely out of "no," "o," "non," and "on." Such a work perfectly encapsulates an entire era of French-English relations here, speaking through and in spite of the other. The other is "uniVerse," a landmark of international visual poetry when it first appeared: a binary poem with four levels of iteration (previous versions have had five), visually representing the miraculous "BIRTH OF GOD" (as the alternative title claims). There appear other, less evocative visual poems – the playful paronomastic "Writing Block"

and the erasure text "Questions" stand out as the best of this second tier. The rest of the book is given over to imagistic nature scenes and emotional confessionals, creating an overall sense of the musings of a reformed avant-gardist, now content with quiet meditations and soft puns.

IN CONTRAST, bissett's book presents a delightful assemblage of writing that could have appeared at any stage of his career. Riotous, speculative, and positively disembodied, the phonetic language of the poems jostles semantic coherence and teases out their homographic potentialities. In one of many anti-war pieces, "th delusyun uv narrativ," he highlights the disingenuous American "wepons uv mass destruksyun" fabrication by allowing the language to dissolve into a Deleuzian delusion: "th purpose uv th narrativ th / porpois uv th storee storee sorree / toree." bissett conflates the instability of language with political deception, oppression, economics, and finds too the missing apology long-awaited from the Tories (Canadian for "conservative") for advocating war. It is a string of political puns mapped through the liquid unconscious of the contemporary sea/scene.

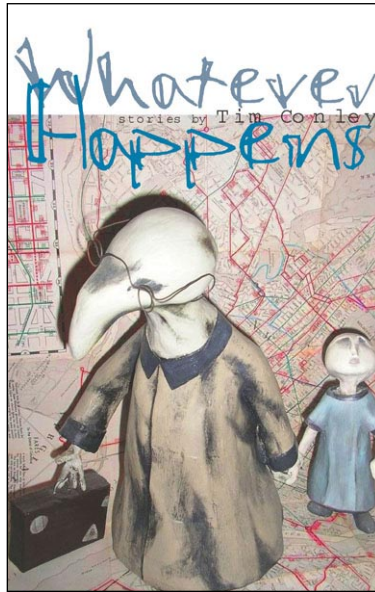
bissett's poems are never exclusive – not to theme, subject, tone, or time. They shake, they vibrate, and they oscillate and spill like the work of a fourth-grade scientist who just discovered chemicals. Consider the poem "star fish pantheon" that swings from imagistic observations of cherry blossoms to an intergalactic community of planets that "have agreed 2 hang / 2geth 4 anothr 24 hours" to a woman with a golden bag who has overcome tragedy to an extended discourse on birth ("at birth we ar in pre menopaws"), poetry ("put yr doubt in yr pomes yr desires"), and the beauty of "molecules." Other poems, such as "dont let aneeun pound" and "th fire

etr on english bay,” revel in erotica; still others, such as “yu know th wayze uv th heart ar so mysterius” and “th exile kontinuez,” in the quiet moments of peaceful abandon after coitus. Fostered by his unique orthography (which has been commented on previously in numerous forums), bissett’s poems express a surrealist, fantastic and, in Steve McCaffery’s language, libidinal eruption that binds all possible things in a holistic milieu where indeed “thots ar / reel.” This cosmic connection, coupled with the political commentary, leads naturally into a rather paranoid conspiracy theory that recurs throughout the poems. While the “lunarian” conspiracy might make bissett Canada’s Philip K. Dick, it is, however, no neurotic expression of psychological trauma – the lunarians among us are the cosmic observers collecting information through people like bissett (“i am a recordist 4 th lunarian / assemblee they take the full disks / out uv my hed evree few months / n ium lite hedid 4 a whil”: from “erth it’s a troubuld planet”) and waiting to assert their control.

Reading bissett is like stepping into a cartoon whirled, where the caustic glare of a cynical world turns a kaleidoscope-rainbow through the prism of his imagination. Some will call it sloppy or repetitive or crazy-indulgent, but the recurrences merely accentuate the integrity of his gleeful insanity. Though the book presents the same vitality that characterizes bissett’s career-long writing adventure, *this is erth these ar peopul* presents his latest report to the Lunarian Assembly in a series of snapshots of the activities and anxieties of the contemporary milieu. The world may be as crazy as it comes off in this book – but if only it were as gleeful and inspired. •

Whatever Happens

stories by
Tim Conley



\$21.95
ISBN 1-897178-13-1

“A clever, inventive, immensely appealing collection.”
– Barbara Gowdy, author of *The Romantic* and *We So Seldom Look on Love*

“Tim Conley’s characters question the boundaries of what can be known – and challenge the reader with the implications of living in an unknowable world. His stories tell us again that the silences are often the loudest notes in the aria. A welcome new voice with a unique vision.” – Michael Bryson, *The Danforth Review*

Whatever Happens is a collection of stories for people who feel that reality is not the best deal going. Tim Conley explores the fragility of our perceptions as well as the illusions that we so badly need. Sometimes spare, these nineteen stories move between the obsessive and the disinterested, the extraordinary and the humdrum. In “Means to an End,” a man who has not quite come to the end of his rope meets a woman who wants to borrow it; in “Constellation,” an unforeseen meteorite destroys an astrologists’ convention; a taciturn botanist confronts his unfaithful wife in “The Greenhouse Effect”; and in “Last One In,” an argument about which man has the better sense of hearing ends in disaster. Influenced by – but expanding upon – the work of Jorge Luis Borges, Raymond Queneau, and the European avant-garde, Conley’s work combines realism with metaphysical concerns to create a comedic, yet always striking, first collection of fictions.

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.

INSOMNIAC PRESS

Contributors

Michael Aird lives on the West Coast. His work has recently appeared in *Carousel*, *Gray Borders* and *Elimae*. He has work forthcoming with *Gestalten* and *Lungfull*. If Scotland doesn't qualify for Euro 2008, his work might be compromised by a serious case of depression.

Phillip Crymble teaches as a Lecturer at the University of Michigan where he earned his MFA in 2002. Recently awarded a Professional Writer's grant by the Canada Council for the Arts, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Arc*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Kiss Machine*, *Michigan Quarterly Review* and *Passages North*.

Alan Danzis works in public relations in NYC. Over the past few years, he has been writing screenplays, short stories, and television scripts.

Barry Dempster is the author of nine collections of poetry, the most recent being *Burning Alphabet* (Brick Books), which was nominated for the Governor General's Award for poetry and won the Canadian Authors Association Jack Chalmers Award.

Carol Hoenig's essays and short stories have been published in a wide variety of magazines. She is the author of the novel *Without Grace*. [www.CarolHoenig.com]

Bill Howell has three published collections, is currently nailing down a fourth *Anything Should Break*. Recent work: *Antigonish Review*, *ARC*, *Canadian Literature*, *Capilano Review*, *Existere*, *Grain*, *Lichen*, *Malahat Review*, *Misunderstandings*, *Nashwaak Review*, *New Quarterly*, *Windsor Review*.

Theresa Lapensže has published her work in *Jones Av.*, *The Breath*, *24/7*, *Canadian Content*, *3AM Magazine*, *Another Toronto Quarterly*, *Progaganda*. While completing her Master's in Library Sciences she works for Brick Books and lives in London, Ontario.

Anthony De Sa lives and teaches in Toronto. His short-story collection *Pharmacle Love* will be published in the spring of 2008 by Doubleday Canada. [anthonydesa.com]

Norm Reynolds has published short fiction in Canadian and American journals, as well as book reviews in the Canadian national press. As playwright, he is the author of *Put Up Your Hand* and is a member of the Playwrights Guild of Canada. He writes and teaches in Toronto.

Dave Sidjak lives in Calgary, where he divides his time between teaching ESL and working with old books. He recently spent a couple of years in Latin America. Before that, some of his poems appeared in *Drechin*, *Antigonish Review*, and *Ink Magazine*.

Joanna M. Weston has had poetry, reviews, and short stories published in anthologies and journals for twenty years. She has two middle-readers *The Willow-Tree Girl* and *Those Blue Shoes*, in print. [www.islandnet.com/~weston]

Kathryn Young lives at the base of the Shulaps Mountain Range, on St'at'imc territory. Her work has been published in *Arc*.



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