

# paperplates

*A Magazine for Fifty Readers*

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Vol. 7, No. 3



**Essays, poetry, fiction, reviews**

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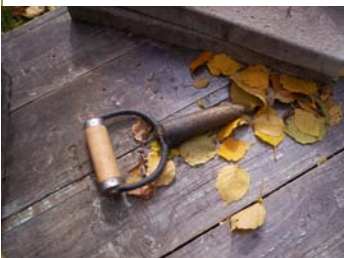
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COVER PHOTO: KAREN BELANGER





“What’s that even mean, anyway? ‘You’re more the Kindle type.’”

## **paperplates**

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Perkolator {Kommunikation}  
[www.perkolator.com](http://www.perkolator.com)

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ISSN 1183-3742

## Snowed under by tropical thoughts of snow

NOT SNOW ITSELF BUT THE THOUGHT OF SNOW. With hindsight I guess that was the attraction. After all, we hadn't travelled across the world to Canada for the skiing or the skating, but to attend a cultural studies conference at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. Still, sometimes the mere thought of snow is enough.

From sun-drenched and sweaty Brisbane (capital of Queensland, Australia) we flew east across the Pacific, into yesterday and into a new season; although at ten miles up it's the same season every day: deathly cold, airless, unnaturally closer to the stars and the moon.

A one-day stopover in Fiji underscored the absurdity of our suitcase wardrobe. My wife and I scrambled through overcoats, balaclavas and scarves for our bathers. The water in the hotel pool held curlicues of ash in eerie suspension – evidence of the fires smouldering in the hills. It was like swimming through a brood of tiny black jellyfish.

A quick touchdown in Los Angeles and we were heading due north at last as night began to fall. Some of our fellow travellers were home-bound to Alaska, and we could sense intimations of snow in their voices. Cubes of ice clinked together in our glasses – a bit of the climate to come, perhaps ...

Our last stopover was in Seattle. From there, we flew north-east for Edmonton over sheets and sheets of snow in the craters of the Rocky Mountains. An almost full moon lit the scene. Almost too much snow. Still, something was missing. I decided that this was only snow in the abstract, snow seen as if on television, forever untouchable snow. I wanted the reality of snow. I wanted a snowman with a pipe in his mouth and a red cap on top! I wanted snow as remembered from the picture books I'd read as a child.

There was no snow on the ground when we arrived in Edmonton, and our taxi driver was more keen to talk about another element of nature – the crucible of the wealth of the province of Alberta: oil. Job vacancy signs dotted the highway into town. Names of finance companies glowed through the frigid snow-less air from the sides of buildings. And not just the economy but also the sporting dreams of the locals are built on oil. The hockey team (no need to say “ice hockey” in Canada!) have as moniker *the Edmonton Oilers*.

Over the days of the conference – making new friends, experiencing new ideas, inhabitants from “down under” walking around upside-down – we confessed our need for snow. Halloween, we were told, is often the day of the first fall. That was next Monday, but we were leaving the Thursday before. Was there even the ghost of a chance that it would fall before we went home? We summoned the spirits of snow as best we could.

Go to the Rockies if you're so keen to see snow, someone suggested. Instead we went to that famous world within a world, West Edmonton Mall. Bad idea. At first sight of the stretch of artificial indoor beach, its shore gently lapped by the waves from the wave machine, we were whisked back to the Gold Coast. A few mall-goers lolled by the water in bikinis. In the middle of Canada, we were further from snow than ever.

On one of our last evenings, I joined the crowds for a jog along the river – snow-covered in every postcard we could find. People all around me were savouring these pre-Halloween days on the very edge of the change of season. I decided that it was unfair of us to demand snow from a city where the thought of snow – its regular winter anticipation – was already so much in evidence.

That night, my wife and I dined out in Edmonton's eagle's-nest revolving restaurant.

## homeplate

It goes around once every ninety minutes, and after a while we got our bearings. Now we were looking towards Yellowknife, where, unromantically, water pipes burst when the snow comes. Forty-five minutes more and we were facing south, the direction of our home in Australia, the direction from which people come to Canada hoping to see snow.

It's true: sometimes even the thought of snow is enough. Enough to remind you that you don't always find what you're looking for.

As we had arrived, so too we flew out of Edmonton in darkness. Something gently buffeted our plane as we lifted into the air. Trick or treat? Snow at last? ■

– *Patrick West*

## The road to Che

A BICYCLE ON AN IRON SUPPORT STANDING ON A rock plinth – it was the simplest monument I'd ever seen. It was a real bike too, one that had been used, not pre-cast in metal or concrete. The monument sits in the Cuban city of Cardenas, where the most of the people rely on their bicycles, due to the flat terrain.

Cardenas is very important in Cuba as it is known as the Flag City. On May 19th, 1850, the Cuban national flag fluttered here for the first time. Cardenas was also the site of the first statue built in honour of Christopher Columbus in the Americas. I was on my way to see another monument, one dedicated to Che Guevara in the city of Santa Clara. I was taking a slightly circuitous route, as I also wanted to visit the cities of Cienfuegos and Trinidad.

Heading away from Cardenas towards Cienfuegos, the road passes through 300 square kilometres of lemons and oranges, interspersed with banana plantations. People were using scythes to keep the weeds down, and concrete

pylons carrying electricity were at the side of the road.

On the six-lane highway that followed, hitchhikers waited under the bridges and in the central reservation to catch a ride. To entice the infrequent cars to stop, people waved money, but the more attractive females just wore short skirts. Other people waved cheese, bread, and what looked like birthday cakes at the passing cars. I am not sure if they were selling the food or trying to entice hungry drivers, with the bright red and blue icing, to give them a lift.

After turning off the highway, the fields of sugar cane became more common. Good quality sugar cane can be harvested four times before the roots have to be pulled up and new plants established. Sugar cane is used in the production of rum, or Ron as it's called in Cuba. Probably the best known rum is Havana Club; around 30 million litres are produced each year. The best rums are aged for at least 7 years, the finest for 25 years. These are then skillfully blended with younger rum for improved taste and colour. Caney, the producer of the finest rum on the island, uses the sugar mills that were vacated by Bacardi when it left Cuba after the revolution. As a general rule, independent farmers are allowed a maximum of two hectares for cultivation. They can sell 70% of their produce to the government at government prices and the remainder at farmer's markets, with 50% of the sale going to the government in tax.

The area around what is now the city of Cienfuegos was called Cacicazgo de Jagua by the indigenous peoples. The city is the only one in Cuba to be founded by French immigrants, who arrived from Bordeaux and Louisiana in 1819. The city's original name was Fernandina de Jagua, in honour of the king of Spain, Ferdinand VII, but after 10 years it was renamed Cienfuegos as a show of thanks to the Spanish Governor, who had given the French permission to settle in Cuba.

In 2005, Cienfuegos was placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List because it was the first place in Latin America to be created using urban planning techniques. There are some beautiful buildings around the Parque Marti, named after Cuba's national hero Jose Marti. These structures include the domed Palacio del Ayuntamiento, the home of the provincial assembly, and the Palacio Ferrer, distinguished by its cupola with blue mosaic decoration. The city is also home to a thermal power station and might have been the site of Cuba's first nuclear power station if the Cubans hadn't closed the project after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. There must be a law in Cienfuegos that states you can't paint your house in the same colour as your next door neighbour's. Sage greens, light blues, faded yellows, and understated oranges all make for a photographer's delight. Cienfuegos is also famed throughout Cuba for its musical traditions; it is the birthplace of cha-cha-cha.

ON THE WAY TO TRINIDAD, CRABS WERE SCUTTLING across the road to return to the Caribbean beaches, visible between the swaying palm trees. Here, the hitch-hiking appeared more organized, with people waiting for a ride in specially designated areas. An official, holding a clipboard and dressed in faded yellow uniform, was waving at every passing car to get it to stop. People gave their name and destination to the official, who wrote the information down on his board. Every car that stopped was taking someone somewhere; it was a sign of the pace of life in Cuba that no one seemed to be in too much of a hurry.

The road passed shrimp farms by the coast and then some old sugar mills in the Valley de los Ingenios on the outskirts of Trinidad. Trinidad was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1988 because of its outstanding collection of buildings, mainly those on the Plaza Mayor. However, UNESCO recognized

that these buildings were only built because of the economic prosperity of the town, which was based largely on its sugar mills. So UNESCO decided that the sugar mills, the cultivated land, and the coffee plantations should also be safeguarded.

Trinidad was not only a major centre for sugar production, it also thrived on the slave trade from the 1600s to the 1800s. The Plaza Mayor, the main tourist attraction in Trinidad, used to be the site of a slave market. The streets here are made from river rock and the picturesque houses date from the 1850s, when Trinidad spent a period of isolation away from the world. Doorways, verandahs, balconies, and window grilles are painted in a contrasting colour to the house fronts (green walls with a light-blue doorway being my particular favourite). There seems to be another unwritten law here, stating that tourists can be pestered, on the streets leading to the square, to buy cigars, necklaces, and bracelets, but that once those tourists are on the Plaza Mayor they must be left alone. After a stroll around this warm and illustrious square, the Casa de Infusiones called Canchanchara is a good place to have a relaxing mojito or, better still, the eponymous Canchanchara cocktail made from rum, lime, water, and honey.

THE FINAL STOP WAS SANTA CLARA. THIS WAS THE SITE of a famous battle during the revolution when Ernesto Che Guevara and 300 fellow soldiers succeeded in defeating a superior number of Batista's soldiers on December 28th, 1958. The next day, just for good measure, Che and his men derailed an armoured train containing weaponry and more soldiers heading for Eastern Cuba.

This was the pivotal battle in the revolution, and its site was deemed important enough to be the final resting place of the legendary guerilla leader, or freedom fighter, depending on your point of view. His image is seen more often than Fidel Castro's. Postcards of Che smoking

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a cigar, playing golf, fishing, smiling, working out how to use a camera, appearing on TV, and even reading in a tree in the Congo can be found in most shops. “Che” is an Argentinean term, which is added to the end of statements and means “mate” or “buddy” – it is derived from the Mapuche for “person”.

The museum to “Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara” is understated. Pictures and personal effects have been put together to help the visitor appreciate that this was a real person, who lived, ate, and breathed like the rest of us. He isn’t treated as a revolutionary, freedom-fighter, or guerilla leader, just as a human being. Guevara was a handsome child, indeed is recognizable as Che at only 5 years old. The books he carried around in his backpack when fighting for justice included a Larrousse encyclopedia.

Imagine being so famous that the bowl you last ate out of is kept and identified for posterity. Other items in the museum include pipes, armaments, and his mate tea holder.

In the tomb of Che and his 38 comrades, the ceiling undulates like that of a cave; the guide explained that “only real revolutionaries would be found in a cave.” Marble and ten woods native to Cuba were used in the construction. Guevara’s remains, minus his hands, were returned to Cuba in 1997 and lie with those of the fighters who died by his side in Bolivia in 1967, including a German woman known only as Tania. A large statue of Che, made from 20 tons of bronze, is the focal point outside the monument. Surrounded by Cuban flags, Che is looking towards South America, a symbolic reference to the hope that the rest of this continent should be inspired by his role in the Cuban revolution. ■

– *Julian Worker*



DAVE MARGOSHES

## Homecoming

So she came home. The old people greeted her as if nothing had happened, as if no time at all had passed, and it was possible for her to imagine nothing had, that life had been just a dream from which she had now awoken. There were calls and letters but she didn't answer, tore them up unread, and as the sun rose and fell in its peculiar rhythm the dream began to fade, a photograph left too long in the sun. Finally, she was allowed to close her eyes again and see only stars.

## Another beautiful day in the nation's capital

LET'S SAY HE WORKS AT A FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AGENCY, IN AN OFFICE BUILDING IN THE middle of a scientific experimental farm in the middle of a city. Let's say that his suit is navy; no, grey-blue. Double-breasted, fewer buttons. It's his best suit.

Let's say that it is the end of a decade, the end of a century, and the end of a millennium. He has started his career at last, after being in school a long time, riding out an economic recession by taking a graduate degree. He has friends who are already married, who have mortgages and children. Earlier in the decade he told everyone he didn't want to do that, the whole conventional life, but now he thinks he was just scared of winding up back on his parents' farm. He's ready now, he thinks. That's why he married the ambitious girlfriend he met in grad school and took this secure job at the agency.

The room: a board room designed in the 1970s. Floor-to-ceiling windows look onto the gently rolling hills of pine trees and the patchwork of cow pasture and crops. Twenty-eight conical lights hang each by a slender wire 3 metres from the invisible, dark, high ceiling. The tables are mahogany. The new chairs are ergonomic. Levers raise you and lower you, tilt the seat pan up or down at the front, adjust the tension of the back. A knob changes the location of the lumbar support.

There are three men at the table. They are all very comfortable in their chairs.

Although he is wearing a suit, his boss – the Deputy Minister – is not. His boss affects a high-tech business-casual look with khaki chinos and a denim shirt. The third man, the Minister, wears a suit that is too small for him. His cuffs stick out too far, and his shoulders pull the collar away from his neck. The Minister comes from a foreign culture in which no one wears a Western-style suit. He does not know how to fit a proper suit. He gets into trouble all the time because he doesn't know which fork to use, or why his staff aren't telling him things. His political life is constant attention to form and details.

The Minister says, "I like people to be honest with me, and tell me right out what's going on. If you'll be honest with me, I'll be reasonable with you."

The Deputy Minister and his assistant nod with sincerity, and the Minister thinks he has made a breakthrough. However, the Deputy Minister has already grilled his junior civil servant on what he will and will not say. They will present a rehearsed response that they will pretend is spontaneous and genuine.

The junior man shifts in his chair, and his face betrays a slight pain. The Deputy Minister is terrified that this could indicate pangs of conscience. However, what he doesn't know is that our anti-hero has simply got a hair caught in his foreskin — an unpredictable problem that must be endured until he can get to the men's room.

"Let me brief you on the background to this," says the junior, touching tongue to upper lip, flipping open the Briefing Document. He pretends to go over it, just

mentioning salient points, but in fact he is reading it verbatim. It bores him so much that he thinks about having sex with a woman who works down the hall, a perky analyst who talks only about the scientific reviews she is doing. He never thinks about having sex with his wife, although that is the only person he does have sex with.

The Deputy Minister touches his lip with a pen.

The Minister licks his lips nervously, a habit he has never been told to stop.

The Deputy Minister interrupts, to ask his junior a question that they have rehearsed. Our anti-hero gives the required response, and the Deputy Minister acts as if this is the first time he has heard this information. He reaches the logical conclusion and asks his junior if that's a fair assessment.

"A fair assessment, yes."

The Minister therefore thinks that this is what happened, although it isn't.

"Who is responsible for that division?" asks the Minister, looking to find out who is to blame.

"It's part of the product approvals branch," answers the Deputy Minister, not answering.

"And who is responsible for that?"

"The Assistant Deputy Minister for product approvals."

"Who is ... ?"

"It's Tamer Al-Maati right now, but at that time it was Janice McCleary, who has moved over to Fisheries."

"Fisheries," responds the Minister blankly, unable to put a finger on the culprit. "Well, at the time, who decided that?"

"It was a decision that was taken," answers the Deputy Minister. He turns to his junior. They both shrug.

"Well, I'm holding you responsible," says the Minister.

"You said you'd be reasonable," says the Deputy Minister without a flicker of emotion.

"I'm trying to be reasonable, but it seems like no one made this decision. It's like at home with my kids, and someone left the front door open. I ask who left the front door open and they all say, 'nobody.' That's what this is like. So nobody made the decision."

"It was a committee decision," clarifies the Deputy Minister.

"Who's on the committee?"

"It's been disbanded. We could go back through the minutes and find out." The Deputy Minister and his junior widen their eyes in an interrogatory. They offer it to the Minister.

"All right. Find out who was involved and get back to me." He stands up. No pleasantries, no wrap-up conversation. Get out of here and back up to the Hill.

They stand at the door and shake hands. The Minister reminds them to get back to him. They say, yes, right away.

"Oh! The Briefing Document!" remembers the junior civil servant. He dashes back to the table, picks up the document and gives it to the Minister.

The Deputy Minister says to his junior, "It's important to establish a good working relationship with the Minister. I think he is learning to trust us on these things." The junior man nods.

Our anti-hero goes back to his desk, another thorny problem tackled. His pay stub for the automatic deposit of his paycheque is on his keyboard. He thinks he deserves his pay *this* week. He thinks the Deputy Minister is learning to trust him, too.

WHEN HE COMES INTO his office the next morning, he turns on his computer and e-mail to ascertain the day's priorities. In a few minutes he will go to the coffee area, hoping to intercept the analyst at her usual coffee time. He has always found it difficult to know what to do in an office day that isn't structured by chores and timetables, the way days were when he grew up. He starts his day by reading from one of the management books on his shelf; he has carefully collected the books, some small and black, with shiny soft covers, others large and hard-bound, with orange dust-jackets. They tell him things like this: "It is important to move noiselessly through the organization."

He thinks he was lucky to work with Jack when he started, before Jack moved on to Transport Canada. Jack was one of the good guys. Jack told him some of the rules. "The rules no one will tell you," he said. "Like, you never do an end-run. If there's a problem, you take it to your boss, and if you have to go higher, you and your boss go to his boss. Never skip a level."

Jack recommended some courses. "Assessing and changing your leadership style" and "Talk the walk: effective communications for results." He took the courses and learned his Myers-Briggs personality type and his leadership style. He feels ready.

He is reading from a book on self-improvement in management. "Discomfort with a leadership role," it says, "may appear as indecisiveness, or lack of confidence."

He wonders why other people around him already seem to know these things. Maybe they learned them from parents who went to offices instead of feeding animals and wiping their hands on the front of their pants, as his father did every day.

His eye catches a movement in the doorway of his office. The perky analyst is suddenly standing there. "Are you going for coffee?" she asks. He looks up, tongue-tied. His dream has come true.

She says, "I mean, don't you usually go for a coffee this time of the morning? I was just walking by..."

"Oh, yes. Sorry. It was just... I was reading about something... nothing to do with..."

"Oh."

He follows her to the coffee machine, too close behind her in the narrow hallway, backing off, smelling something like warm apples coming from her, moving closer...

"I heard that the Deputy Minister's planning a reorganization," she says off-handedly, passing him a paper cup. Biodegradable – in conformance with the department's "sustainable office" campaign.

"Mmm, hmmm."

"You must hear a lot about that," she says.

“Oh, a little,” he says, clearing his throat. It isn’t true; he knows most of it. He is self-conscious of his privileged position, close to the source. “He wants the department to report along functional lines, instead of by discipline.”

“Wouldn’t that break up the labs?”

“I guess so,” he says. He hasn’t thought about it. She frowns a little.

Something has gone wrong with the warm *frisson* between them. She is unhappy, and he doesn’t know why.

Back at his desk, he tries to find the minutes of the committee meetings on the agency’s computer network. When he tries to open the files, he gets a message that the files have been locked by the Deputy Minister. He needs a password to open them. Strange; he opened them a few weeks ago without needing a password.

HE IS CALLED TO the Deputy Minister’s office at 10 a.m.

“What’s in your day?” the Deputy Minister says, his usual ice-breaker.

“I was looking into those committee minutes for the Minister. Trying to get the background on that decision. But ...”

“Don’t bother,” says the Deputy Minister, waving a hand, the usual smug smile on his wide face. The smile stays there regardless of what he says. For example, his next statement: “The Minister doesn’t need to know that.” His tone of finality. Subject closed.

His junior blinks.

“We’ve got a bigger problem. As we anticipated, the opposition is going to ask about this in the House this morning. The Minister’s ready. He’s got the Briefing Document. I’m not worried about that. It’s something else. I got a call this morning from someone I have in the press gallery. There’s a reporter from the National Broadcaster who is trying to imply that this was a fob to the industry. That’s not the way it was, of course. The situation was that there was insufficient evidence to take action at the time. But you know these reporters. They try to turn everything into a scandal and get a scoop. Go down to Communications and fill them in. They’ll probably get some calls from the press.”

“Do we have a spokesperson on this?”

“Tell them that they’re the spokespeople. It doesn’t go any higher, right? Good.”

HE SPENDS THE day in Communications on the seventh floor. The woman who heads up Communications always seems to him a physical impossibility. Her body has the delicacy and transparency of a dancer’s. He thinks that a strong wind would probably shatter her. He can’t understand how she has given birth to the two children in picture frames on her desk. Her cheeks are deep and gaunt, her cheekbones equine, making him think of the qualities his father looked for in breeding animals. Her tufts of short hair form feathers on her cheeks and temples. She talks in perfectly modulated sentences, about “distilling the information down to core messages.”

She says, “Nice to see you. The Deputy Minister has said so much about you. He said your family is in the agri-food industry.”



“Mixed farming, yes.”

“It’s so rare we have someone in policy who, you know, understands the issues. I mean really understands. From the inside. You know what I mean.” He’s not sure he does.

He goes through the Briefing Document with her, and she exclaims frustration over every sentence. “This is not plain language. This will not support our media relations team. I keep trying to explain that we need to craft a message that speaks to the Canadian, the taxpayer.”

“Perhaps the Briefing Document serves another purpose, as the backgrounder for the Minister. Perhaps *you* could work to craft the message,” he says, deflecting the implied criticism, and turning it back to her. That is from the orange book, page 271.

She huffs with a flare of her little fairy nose.

THE NEXT MORNING, the head of Communications sends him the day’s media clippings, including the audioclip of the National Broadcasting story. In the audioclip, the reporter talks to the head of Communications, whose careful voice explains, “There was insufficient evidence to take action at the time. This should not be construed as any neglect of the department’s responsibilities. We provided due diligence to Canadians. Canadians were not in any danger to their health or well-being as a result of this.”

The Minister is questioned in the House. He says, “The department makes decisions like this all the time. They are made by committees of experts including all stakeholders formed to look at these questions. The committee made the decision at the time with the information available. It has since been disbanded. There was no intention to mislead this House or the Canadian people at any time.”

The rest of the week passes without incident.

MONDAY MORNING dawns red. As he steers into his free parking spot under the pine trees, he remembers a rhyme that his mother used to say. “Red at morning, sailors take warning.” One of those sayings from her childhood on the farm. But there is no sign of a storm. The sky is blue and cloudless over Ottawa like it is every day except when it snows gently.

The union representative asks to meet with the Deputy Minister in the afternoon. The junior assistant sits in on the meeting.

“Our members are telling us that you’re going to reorganize the labs so that the scientists report to administrators, instead of senior scientists.”

The Deputy Minister’s smile tightens just a little. The lines in the forehead of his ageless round face deepen just perceptibly. The light is becoming harsher on him every day, as his hair falls out.

“We haven’t released the details of the planned reorganization.”

“But that’s what you’re going to do, isn’t it?”

“That sounds like a rumour to me. Hearsay.”

“These are leading people in their fields. They could be making a lot more in

academe or industry. They've made sacrifices to work here."

"Oh," says the Deputy Minister with a smirk, "thanks to your efforts they enjoy better salaries and pensions than they would in the private or academic sectors. They're not sacrificing anything."

"If you break up the labs or make them report to bureaucrats who don't understand what science is all about, you can expect grievances."

"I'm not afraid of grievances. That threat may work in some other departments, but it doesn't work here."

The union leader stands up and walks out. Our anti-hero wonders what has happened to the world since the meeting with the Minister last week, because everyone has stopped saying thank-you and shaking hands.

"Now, how did they find out about the reorganization plans?" the Deputy Minister asks aloud, and his junior frowns into his lap. He wipes his hands on the front of his pants. Somehow, the question isn't a question. Somehow, the Deputy Minister knows it was him.

That night, asleep next to his wife in his loft condo overlooking the Ottawa River, he dreams that the perky analyst who smells like apple pie is pouring scalding coffee on his polished Oxfords. "Did you suspect I was working for the scientists? Did you know I was a mole for the union?" She clucks her tongue. "You should be more vigilant. Page 183: 'Be discreet about all matters revealed to you in confidence. Others may try to engage you in gossip or speculation. Remember: information is power.'"

Oh, shit. He has forgotten one of the rules. Be discreet. Information is power. He awakens to the prison-break-alert sound of the alarm clock, whispering to himself, his skin a yellow-white, and his sweat smelling like fear.

TUESDAY MORNING. When he comes down the hallway toward his office, he hears voices raised in the Deputy Minister's office, sees a knot of civil servants in white shirts (for men) and short skirts (for women) gathered outside the doorway.

Emotion makes the Minister's voice warble with the accent of his original country he has worked so long to shed. "You will be telling me when you knew about this."

"I'm as surprised as you are."

"Why should I be listening to you? Maybe you have been lying to me from the first moment."

"I assure you, Minister ..."

"I asked you to be honest with me ..."

"And I have been. If one of our former employees failed to disclose ..."

"Failed to disclose? Failed to disclose! You don't know what your staff is doing?"

"I admit that maybe I haven't paid close enough attention to ..."

"You know why I don't believe you? Because you talk like a liar."

The Minister's feet thump across the carpet. The civil servants scatter, each one disappearing behind a doorway of the hall. The Minister appears in the doorway, slams the door behind him, strides down the hall, each footfall heavy, his defeat witnessed around the corners of a dozen doors.

It is on the National Broadcasting radio morning newscast. It is on the front page of the National Newspaper. An anonymous scientist has come forward. He says that the scientists told the committee about the problem. The committee refused to act on it, because it would hurt the industry. The industry lobbyists were meeting with the Minister every week. There is more. There is a risk of cancer. The scientists told the committee that, too. Risk of cancer. That's what it comes down to. Distilled down to a core message: cancer.

The Deputy Minister's junior sits in his office. This is what was *not* supposed to happen. He knows that. He knows the Deputy Minister says it happened because the Deputy Minister didn't know. But he must know ... . He reads all the minutes of those meetings. The passwords ... . the Deputy Minister put passwords on the files because he knows what is in them, and he doesn't want anyone else to. He must know. He must have known all along.

Our anti-hero feels like calling his father, whom he hasn't talked to since three months ago. A conversation about the year, getting out of hay, getting into corn. What could his father help him with? What could he ever teach him? The signs of weather, the habits of animals, the calculation of sales. Nothing he ever needed.

Instead, he calls his friend Jack. "Did you hear about this?"

"Yeah. Tough luck."

"I haven't talked to the Deputy Minister yet. Do you think he'll get fired?"

"Oh, God, don't worry about him."

"Don't worry?"

"He can't get fired."

"He ... he can't?"

"No, the most they would do is move him to another department. You know, that ministerial responsibility thing is for real. The Minister takes the fall. The Deputy Minister is Teflon – nothing sticks."

"That's ... well, on a basic level, it's not fair."

"Life is not fair, my friend."

The Deputy Minister goes to see the head of Communications. She appears on the National Broadcasting television newscast at noon, her cheeks rouged for television, making her high cheekbones and lemon-sucking cheeks look tubercular. "The department has no record of such a meeting between the scientists and the committee, if it ever took place. We can neither confirm nor deny ... ."

The opposition calls for the Minister's resignation.

IT IS LATE IN the afternoon when the Deputy Minister calls him in.

"Quite a day." This is a new ice-breaker.

"Yes. I see that the opposition is calling for the Minister's resignation."

The Deputy Minister looks up at his junior, his eyes squinting more than usual, his Buddha smile intact. "Sit down."

Our anti-hero sits instantly, like a dog.

"How long did you think it was going to take me?"

“Pardon me?”

“Someone in my office leaked the information on the reorganization. It got to the labs. They didn’t like it . . . . Of course they didn’t like it, they had been very comfortable down there doing whatever they liked, answerable to no one. But we had made them all sign something a few years ago. That said they couldn’t divulge their research. Protected information. So they hadn’t. Until one was disgruntled about the reorganization. He decided to screw me. Went to the press.”

The junior takes this in.

“It’s true, then. The scientists *did* tell the committee.”

“*True*. Truth is whatever I say it is. Got that?”

It comes out like an artillery barrage. Like a dragon’s breath of fire. Then the Deputy Minister is all smiles again.

“Yes, sir.” There is a long pause. “If that’s all, may I . . .?”

“Go? Going somewhere? Yes, you’re going somewhere. Health Canada. Communications officer. Press releases on quitting smoking and eating healthier. How does that sound? It’s all arranged.”

Demotion. Banishment.

He feels the cold hand around his entrails. Sulphurous sweat soaks his best suit. He wipes his hands on the front of his pants, then buries them in his pockets.

“Don’t take it personally,” says the Deputy Minister, that implacable beatific smile. “You’ll land on your feet. It’s part of the game. Didn’t they tell you that?”

“But . . . ,” he sputters. He hears in his voice the piping protest of the schoolboy, and stops. *But I did everything I was supposed to*, the schoolboy continues to say.

FROM THE PICTURE window of his loft condo, the sky is a cloudless blue. He picks up one of his books from the shelf, but the letters in it swim together. He cannot read instructions on any of its pages.

Let’s say that he makes a telephone call; that’s all it takes. He knows it means the end, of course. Not even Health Canada will take him after that. “The Deputy Minister,” he says. “The Deputy Minister knew.”

JOHN MAVIN

## Daguerreotype

— CAST OF CHARACTERS —

MRS BOSANKO

*Emily Bosanko, late twenties, new widow and recent mother.*

EDGAR

*Edgar Forbes, early twenties, a professional daguerreotypist.*

— SCENE —

A nineteenth-century daguerreotypist's inner-city studio. The stage contains an old-fashioned box camera on a tripod, a worktable (with a half-eaten lunch), a scrim (behind which is the daguerreotypist's darkroom), and a wall sconce for a gaslight. There is also an armchair, a head stand (used for keeping clients' heads absolutely still) and a small table draped in lace (used as a photographic prop). A few small pillows lie on the floor.

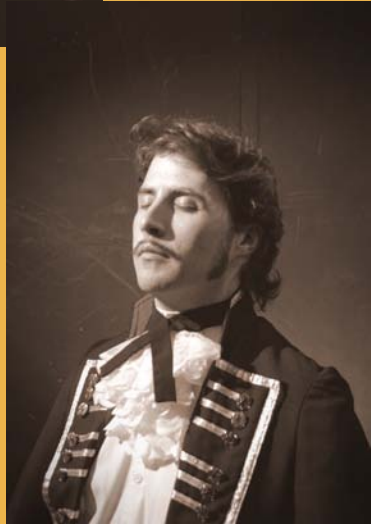
— TIME —

Early summer, 1855. Noon.

IN DARKNESS, A SLIDE PROJECTOR displays black and white daguerreotypes on the scrim: a young couple on their wedding day (Lieutenant and Mrs. Bosanko); the same couple two years later (he has become a captain, she has become pregnant); and a man alone with closed eyes (Captain Bosanko, six months later again). In each photo, Captain Bosanko's brass cap badge should be visible. During the second slide, we hear an offstage church bell toll the hour (twelve noon). A few other nineteenth-century urban noises can be heard as if muffled through a downtown shop door. These noises, which include horses clopping on cobblestones, merchants hawking their wares, and the occasional creak of a passing carriage, continue throughout as ambient noise. The third and last slide fades as the lights come up.

On stage, Mrs. Bosanko kneels and slides an ornate box behind the armchair until it is almost out of sight. She stands and cradles her silent six-month-old baby (Charlotte) wrapped in a white blanket. Mrs. Bosanko's hair is parted down the middle and covers the tips of her ears. She wears a black dress with white ruff at the collar and also her husband's brass cap badge as a necklace.





PHOTOS BY LAUCHLIN JOHNSTON

MRS BOSANKO. I thank you for seeing me with such scant notice, Mr. Forbes.  
*Behind the scrim, Edgar prepares three copper plates. Edgar coughs once (because of the iodine fumes he's inhaling) and places the plates into a wooden box.*

EDGAR (*offstage*). I shall be out presently. Only a moment longer.  
*Mrs. Bosanko wipes her baby's face with her handkerchief. She bites her own lip and brings the handkerchief to her own eyes. She sways her hips back and forth, as if to comfort the baby.*  
*Edgar enters, carrying the plate box (which protects the prepared plates from exposure before they're used in the camera). Edgar wears a workman's apron over a white linen shirt, tailored pants, and suspenders. He places the box gingerly on the work table.*

EDGAR (*cont'd*). Thank you for your patience, Mrs. Bosanko. As I'm quite certain you can appreciate, treating the plates with iodine is delicate work.

MRS BOSANKO. I understand, Mr. Forbes. And, again, I apologize for disturbing your luncheon. (*Indicates the half-eaten food on the table.*) I want you to know how grateful I am for your willingness to accommodate me.

EDGAR. Think nothing of it. You are always welcome in my studio. Your husband regularly referred his junior officers to me, and you've honoured me with your repeated patronage over the years.

MRS BOSANKO (*touches the cap badge necklace*). I cherish the daguerreotypes you have made for me in the past. Especially those of my husband.

EDGAR (*bows, somewhat haughty*). I am a professional. I take great care and pride in my work.

MRS BOSANKO. I was hoping you could do as well for my daughter, Charlotte.

EDGAR. Of course.

MRS BOSANKO. I thank you.

EDGAR (*ushers her to the armchair*). It is an exacting and delicate art.

MRS BOSANKO. A needed kindness.

EDGAR (*careful not to touch the baby*). Mmm.

MRS BOSANKO. The wives of the other officers speak highly of your work, Mr. Forbes. You are to be commended.

EDGAR (*helps Mrs. Bosanko into the chair*). Please, call me Edgar.

MRS BOSANKO (*sits*). I shouldn't.

EDGAR. I meant no disrespect. We've known each other for years.

MRS BOSANKO. I suppose it would be all right, then. There will be no impropriety. As I was saying, Edgar –  
*Edgar nods.*

MRS BOSANKO. (*cont'd*) – you have always been courteous and professional with me. I am most pleased with your efforts.

EDGAR. You are very kind, Mrs. Bosanko. When you came in, you said you would like three daguerreotypes. Are you certain you can sit for three?

MRS BOSANKO. Yes. I am.

*Edgar moves the head stand into position so Mrs. Bosanko can rest her head against it.*

EDGAR. Are you comfortable?

*Mrs. Bosanko gives Edgar a very sad look.*

EDGAR (*cont'd*). Forgive me. That was thoughtless.

*Mrs. Bosanko nods and rests her head against the head stand. She adjusts her necklace so the cap badge will be visible in the daguerreotype.*

*Edgar readjusts her head until she is positioned to his satisfaction.*

EDGAR (*cont'd*). Can you hold this position?

MRS BOSANKO. How long must I remain still?

EDGAR. A count of twenty. The same as always.

MRS BOSANKO. I can manage that.

EDGAR. Are you certain? If not, you will ruin the exposure.

MRS BOSANKO. I must be. You are my only prospect. It would take an artist far too long to paint a portrait. I could not bear keeping still that long. A count of twenty seems manageable. And besides, I know the quality of your work.

*Edgar moves to the plate box on the worktable. He removes a treated plate and inserts it into the camera. He makes sure both camera and box are sealed. Next, Edgar takes a bite of his lunch and moves to a wall sconce and turns up the gas-light, brightening the studio.*

MRS BOSANKO (*cont'd*). Is the price the same as before?

EDGAR (*adjusts the camera*). It is.

MRS BOSANKO. An artist is also prohibitively expensive. A widow's pension will not allow a painting. However, three daguerreotypes are within my reach.

EDGAR (*bristles, as he considers himself an artist*). I understand, Mrs. Bosanko. I shall be finished within the hour. Your discomfort shall be kept to a minimum.

MRS BOSANKO (*looks at her baby*). This is not a discomfort.

EDGAR (*softens his tone*). Of course not.

MRS BOSANKO. I want to remember Charlotte like this.

EDGAR (*composes the portrait he's about to make*). Mrs. Bosanko, if you could please lift your daughter so the camera may see her angelic face? It shall make a much more balanced composition.

*Mrs. Bosanko repositions her baby.*

EDGAR (*cont'd*). Yes. Now, please rest your elbow on the table.

MRS BOSANKO (*puts her elbow on the lace-covered table*). Here?

EDGAR (*looks from the camera to Mrs. Bosanko and the baby*). Yes. I can see her face very clearly. Now please, look into the camera. Rest your head on the stand.

MRS BOSANKO (*settles her head against the head stand*) Like this?

EDGAR. Yes. (*Pause*.) A bit more to the left. (*Pause*.) Very good. (*Pause*.) Just a touch more. (*Pause*.) Perfect. I shall count down from twenty. Please, do not move until I say.

MRS BOSANKO (*sits very still*). Of course. (*Takes a deep breath and holds it*.)

EDGAR. Keep absolutely still. (*Opens the shutter on the camera*.) Twenty. Nineteen.

Eighteen. Seventeen. Sixteen. Fifteen. Fourteen. Thirteen. Twelve. Eleven. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. (*Closes the shutter.*) You may relax now.

*Mrs. Bosanko exhales and looks at her baby. Edgar takes the exposed plate from the camera and places it in the plate box. He removes the second unexposed plate from the box and inserts it in the camera.*

EDGAR (*cont'd*). Shall we make the second?

MRS BOSANKO (*looks back at the camera and rests her head against the head stand*). Please.

*Edgar takes a bite of his lunch and considers her position. He decides it's acceptable for the next exposure.*

EDGAR. Another count of twenty.

MRS BOSANKO. Does Charlotte look pretty? I cannot see her.

EDGAR. Artfully crafted. I think you shall be very pleased.

*Mrs. Bosanko takes another deep breath and holds it. Her body goes rigid.*

EDGAR (*cont'd*). Do not move. (*Opens the shutter on the camera.*) Twenty. Nineteen. Eighteen. Seventeen. Sixteen. Fifteen.

*Mrs. Bosanko starts to have trouble holding still.*

EDGAR (*cont'd*). Please, do not move. Twelve. Eleven.

*Mrs. Bosanko tries to remain still, but is having a very difficult time. She breathes hard through her nose and whimpers.*

EDGAR (*cont'd*). Keep still, Mrs. Bosanko. Seven. Six. Five. Almost there. Three. Two. One. (*Closes the shutter.*) Done.

*Mrs. Bosanko exhales and relaxes. She immediately looks to her baby.*

MRS BOSANKO. Did I ruin the exposure?

EDGAR (*takes the second exposed plate from the camera and places it in the plate box*).

Possibly. It would be best if you were to remain absolutely still. Would you like to rest for a moment?

MRS BOSANKO. No.

*Edgar removes the third unexposed plate from the box and inserts it in the camera. Again, he returns to his lunch.*

EDGAR. For the last daguerreotype, shall we have your baby alone?

MRS BOSANKO. Do you think it a good idea?

EDGAR. Many mothers like this pose the best. It is very popular.

MRS BOSANKO (*touches her necklace*). But Charlotte won't be with me.

EDGAR (*slowly, cautiously, eating*). No.

*Mrs. Bosanko stands and turns to face the armchair, getting ready to set her baby down.*

EDGAR (*cont'd*) (*rushes to get the pillows*). Just a moment.

MRS BOSANKO. I don't know about this.

*Edgar places the pillows on the armchair, arranging a nest of sorts for the baby.*

EDGAR. I assure you, this shall look quite natural.

MRS BOSANKO (*starts to put her baby on the pillows*). I want to hold her.

*Mrs. Bosanko straightens and cuddles her baby close. Mrs. Bosanko starts to cry.*  
 EDGAR (*pats her shoulder*). There, there. No need for tears.  
*Mrs. Bosanko glares at Edgar.*  
 EDGAR (*cont'd*). Maybe it would be best if you were to stay with her.  
 MRS BOSANKO (*cries and nods*). I cannot put her down.  
 EDGAR. Would you like a moment to compose yourself?  
 MRS BOSANKO. No.  
 EDGAR. But – (*Pause.*) your tears.  
 MRS BOSANKO. I know.  
 EDGAR. But –  
 MRS BOSANKO. Make the daguerreotype.  
 EDGAR. Are you certain?  
 MRS BOSANKO. It feels right.  
 EDGAR. Most mothers want only a happy remembrance.  
 MRS BOSANKO. I want to remember this moment, today. How it feels, now. I don't ever want to forget.  
 EDGAR. I'd really suggest –  
 MRS BOSANKO. This is how I want it.  
 EDGAR. But Mrs. Bosanko –  
 MRS BOSANKO. Look, Edgar, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm paying you to make this daguerreotype for me.  
 EDGAR. But my work – (*Pause.*) people will talk.  
 MRS BOSANKO. Make it the way I ask, please.  
 EDGAR. But –  
 MRS BOSANKO. I am not interested in your artistic opinion, Mr. Forbes. (*Pause.*) Only the technological abilities of your camera.  
 EDGAR (*with barely-disguised resentment*). Of course, Mrs. Bosanko. Please sit down.  
*Edgar removes the pillows from the chair. Mrs. Bosanko cradles her baby and sits. She does not rest her elbow on the table. Instead, she looks directly into her baby's face. She does not use the head stand.*  
 MRS BOSANKO. I am ready.  
*Edgar returns to the camera and composes the shot.*  
 EDGAR. If you could at least look up. (*Pause.*) Please.  
*Mrs. Bosanko shakes her head.*  
 EDGAR (*cont'd*). Are you certain?  
 MRS BOSANKO. I am.  
 EDGAR. Keep still then. (*Opens the shutter on the camera.*) Twenty. (*Pause.*) Fifteen. (*Pause.*) Ten. (*Pause.*) Five. Four. Three. Two. One. (*Closes the shutter.*) Done.  
*Mrs. Bosanko exhales and hugs her baby. Edgar takes the third exposed plate from the camera and places it in the plate box. He takes a last bite of lunch and turns down the gaslight, reducing the brightness in the studio.*  
 EDGAR (*cont'd*) (*picks up the plate box*). I can have your daguerreotypes ready for you tomorrow, say after four?



MRS BOSANKO. If you do not mind, I would like to take them with me now.

EDGAR (*resentful, but civil*). Of course. It shall take but a few minutes to fix and seal the images.

MRS BOSANKO. I do not mind waiting.

EDGAR. I shall not be long.

*Edgar exits to the darkroom with the exposed plates. Through the scrim we see him develop the daguerreotypes concurrently with Mrs. Bosanko's monologue. Edgar lights a match, coughs while he inhales heated mercury fumes, bathes each plate twice, and seals the plates under glass.*

MRS BOSANKO. All done, Charlotte. All done. (*Begins to cry. Beat.*) I am so sorry. (*Beat.*) I remember ... I remember when you were first born, how I was disappointed the first time I saw you. I had so wanted a son for your father. Maybe you could have been an engineer like him. (*Beat.*) But you were a girl. A beautiful, tiny, darling little girl. And right away I felt so awful. So mad at myself. Here you were, this cold, shivering little thing without a friend in the world. And your mother wanted someone else. (*Beat.*) I've never forgotten. Never forgiven myself. Not to this day. And I swore I would never tell you, but here I am doing just that. I want you to know you were loved. I am so sorry, Charlotte. From that terrible moment, I've done nothing but wish that hateful thought undone. (*Beat. Fingers the cap badge necklace.*) Your father wouldn't have cared if you were a girl. He would have loved you from the moment he met you. He was such a good man. He would have shown you things. Protected you. From anything. From the dangers I couldn't. I am so sorry. I was only gone a moment. (*Beat. Composes herself.*) You have such a pretty face. (*Pause.*) Oh, Charlotte, I was so afraid I would forget your face. (*Beat.*) But that will not happen now. Not now. (*Beat.*) Mr. Edgar Forbes and his wonderful camera have saved you.

*Edgar enters through the curtained doorway with three daguerreotypes, sealed in glass cases. He overhears Mrs. Bosanko's last few lines and is touched by them.*

EDGAR (*gently*). Finished.

MRS BOSANKO (*wipes her eyes with a handkerchief*). May I see them?

EDGAR. Of course. (*Shows the daguerreotypes to Mrs. Bosanko, opening one after the other.*)

MRS BOSANKO (*smiles at Edgar*). These are beautiful. Thank you so very much. I apologize for my harsh words earlier. Can you forgive me, Mr. Forbes?

EDGAR. It is you who are owed an apology, Mrs. Bosanko. I sometimes forget the people on the other side of my camera. Please, can you forgive me, Mrs. Bosanko?

MRS BOSANKO. Yes. Of course. (*Indicates the daguerreotypes.*) These are ...

EDGAR. I think, in the end, the portraits turned out quite well. Even the second exposure.

MRS BOSANKO. They did. I am most pleased.

PHOTOS BY LAUHLIN JOHNSTON



EDGAR. As am I. Shall I wrap them for you?

MRS BOSANKO (*hands Edgar the daguerreotypes*). Please.

*Edgar takes the daguerreotypes to the worktable and wraps them in paper.*

*When finished, he gives them to Mrs. Bosanko.*

EDGAR. About the bill ...

MRS BOSANKO (*takes the wrapped daguerreotypes from Edgar*). Send it to my home address, please.

EDGAR. Of course.

MRS BOSANKO (*looks at the ornate box, but does not attempt to lift it*). Mr. Forbes, if I might impose one final time?

EDGAR. Edgar, please.

MRS BOSANKO. Edgar.

EDGAR. How may I help you?

MRS BOSANKO. The boys who assisted me earlier had to return to the church. Would you be so kind? (*Indicates the ornate box.*)

EDGAR. Of course. (*Bends to retrieve the box. It is a small coffin.*) Shall I open it?

MRS BOSANKO (*cradles her baby a last time and nods*). Please.

*Mrs. Bosanko covers her baby's face in the blanket she's wrapped in. Edgar opens the coffin and helps Mrs. Bosanko put her baby inside. He closes the coffin and lifts it with both arms.*

MRS BOSANKO. (*cont'd*) We're going to Trinity Church.

EDGAR. I shall follow you.

MRS BOSANKO. I thank you.

*Together, Mrs. Bosanko and Edgar, carrying the tiny coffin, exit. We hear the sound of the shop door opening and closing, with the ambient noises getting louder for a moment while the door is open. The church bell can be heard tolling once (it's now one o'clock).*

*The lights fade as the slide projector once more displays black and white portraits on the scrim. This time, the pictures are of Mrs. Bosanko and her baby. The second slide is slightly blurred while the third and last is the image where Mrs. Bosanko is looking into her baby's face.*

*The ambient sounds fall silent on the second picture and the projector fades to black after the third slide.*

*Blackout.*

#### NOTES

*Daguerreotype* was first produced for the Brave New Play Rites Festival in Vancouver in 2008 with the following cast and crew:

MRS BOSANKO	Joanna Rannelli
EDGAR	Evan Frayne
Director	Lauchlin Johnston
Stage Manager	Breanne Jackson

## Things unseen

FEY IS A WORD COMMONLY USED TO DESCRIBE SPRITES, ELVES, PARA-HUMAN CREATURES. But it would also describe her. A darting innocent, like something that glows when caught in a glass: Tracy.

Her family had religion, mine did not. Once, after a sleepover, I fell into the bad luck of having to attend church with her. I remember chipped stacking chairs and smeared beige walls, a sermon as flavourless as mashed wheat. There was no mystery or grace in our town, just a kind of stolid getting-by on everyone's part. Church brought these facts home.

*Good sermon, Reverend.*

*Thank you Bob, and good to see you. How is your knee?*

*Holding up, Reverend. I see they got the new lectern up there for you.*

*So they did and they did a nice job. It's good to see you.*

*Good to see you.*

Childhood in Finmoss, AB, was a dry field: not bad, exactly, but not to be envied either.

It wore at Tracy though. She had pigtails and a good wool kilt but was eager to trade them for the gold, frankincense and myrrh of a more exciting life. When I told her I'd been to Paris (I hadn't) she clung to the revelation and begged for details. When I told her I'd smoked opium (I was ten) she wanted to know about all of it: the den, the Chinese women, the pipe, the languour. Though the stories were flimsy and the details all wrong, she could not get enough of them. She needed to believe.

In fact, you could tell her pretty much anything and she'd buy it: that you had committed murder, that your father had invented communism, that you had one day to live. People came to think her stupid. It can't have been true – her marks were consistently excellent – but her trust in people never ebbed. She expected the truth; she made you almost want to tell it.

As time went on she became achingly beautiful, too, so her lack of conventional braininess seemed a logical fit: nature's way of evening things out. Her parents reacted violently to this dawning beauty and placed her in Christian lockdown. She was not allowed to watch television or see commercial films. Her bookshelf thinned to nothing but inspirational works by Pentecostal youths who'd survived diving accidents or six-month encounters with marijuana. She couldn't go out on weekends.

She would vent her anger by tromping over the broadloom in her house, getting all the way to the fridge before her mother noticed – “Hokey pokey, Tracy, take those filthy boots off!” – and take them off she would, looking all the while with pleasure on the trail of destruction she'd wrought.

Some time later she found her ticket out: a week-long student exchange to Montreal, sponsored by a Pentecostal youth organization in Edmonton. On a stolen

break during a skating excursion, coasting dreamily on the aural caramel of French, she met a girl of pan-European parentage named Manon Kirrmaier. Manon had long russet hair and wore an Arab *kafiya* scarf. She offered a cigarette but Tracy dared not take it. Instead she started to talk, let all the boredom spill from her.

Manon was moved by her plight. “Tracy,” she said, “you must come live with me after graduation. We’ll get our own place, anh? If you stay with those awful people you’ll die.”

So Tracy escaped – ran away, really; her parents cut her off. She got a job in a pet store and things went fast. Within several weeks she had surrendered her virginity to a married bongo player, then posed for nude pictures taken by a photography student she met in a bar. It was Manon’s idea. She said it would be freeing.

On Thanksgiving break from university in Toronto, I went to visit Tracy and she showed them to me, these pictures.

“They’re tasteful,” I said, thinking she would like that. After all, it wasn’t just Tracy on a cold slab or anything. There were scarves, pillows, an unlit candle in the corner. “How much did the guy pay you?”

“Nothing.”

I stared at her.

“It’s Montreal,” she explained, with a little soft laugh. We put the pictures away, drank tea from pretty Moroccan glasses. The afternoon was rainy but there was yet enough light to catch their blue and red light, diffuse it across our frail teenaged hands.

Then she told me that between the bongo player and the photographer, something happened to her that had shaken her faith in men.

She was walking down St. Catherine Street when a guy pulled over in a sedan and called to her. “Excuse me? *Excusez, mademoiselle?*” She leaned into the window, blue eyes wide.

The man said his name was Charlie and he had been following her for several blocks. He operated a modelling agency called “For Blondes Only” and thought she might be a good fit. She had a great walk and a nice build. If she got in the car, they could go there right now, sign some papers, and then he would take her home.

Tracy was intrigued. Ever since her arrival, people had been telling her she was beautiful. Why had her parents hidden this from her? When it was such a desirable thing to be? Snow White was beautiful, Cinderella, too; beautiful was a jackpot, whatever the trials along the way. She got in.

They drove for a few blocks and a few more blocks after that. They were not downtown by this point, and Tracy was slightly nervous, since downtown was all she knew. The buildings were larger now and farther apart, surrounded by giant parking lots. Night had long fallen and the lots were deserted. Charlie pulled into one.

He reached over her lap and opened the glove compartment. “Before we go in,” he said, “I just have to take some measurements.”

“In the car?” she asked, startled.

“It will save time,” he said, snaking a measuring tape around her waist. He seemed to be breathing with some effort as he moved the tape upwards, tried to get it around her bust. “It would be easier with the sweater off,” he said, hoarsely.



Here, Tracy froze. Charlie was smiling and she noticed now that the gums above his teeth were spotted, like those of the springer spaniel she used to own. “No,” she said. “I think I’d rather not.”

Charlie’s grin collapsed. “I said *it would be easier with the sweater off*,” he said slowly. “Now. Do what I said.”

Tracy was used to that tone: hokey pokey, she’d heard it all her life. Take your boots off. Take your sweater off. Take your books off, your clothes off, your friends off. Now. Do what I said.

But she’d gotten out once and she could get out again. She reached for the door handle.

Charlie grabbed a handful of sweater and bit into her hair. She pushed at his forehead with the hand that wasn’t pinned. But his skull was big, its fall inexorable. It pressed her down and she felt the rock of it against her collarbone. Pain ate will, pain ate sound. Pain ate every weapon she had against him and now he had both her arms.

His chin dug into her breast, hard. All she could do was open her mouth.

Then, suddenly – a rapping sound. Someone was at the car window, bashing a glove against it.

Tracy threw her head back and saw a middle-aged man wearing a huge ring, suggesting his status as company president, winner of a football championship.

“Uh ah,” she heard him say. She knew they were words but she wasn’t sure which ones. She grabbed the door handle again and fell out of the car, yanking her purse behind her and sniffing. Shame stopped her from looking at the man.

Charlie gunned the ignition and screeched out of the lot, leaving the pair of them standing under the lights.

“Did you know that man?” The football president asked. He sounded, she thought, like God.

“No.”

“You have to be careful. There are a lot of bad characters around.”

“Yes.”

The man’s wingtips were freshly shined. An attache case hung from that meaty, beringed hand. “Now,” he said, “I would offer you a ride home, but I think you’ve had enough riding in cars with men you don’t know, wouldn’t you say?”

She looked up. He had a white pompadour, a massive crease between the eyes. She laughed a little, then sniffled again. Oh I look like such an idiot, she thought.

“So you’ll make your way home, right?”

“Right.”

He pointed to an unmanned booth a hundred yards away. “The exit is down there. Now get along and go home. I don’t want to read about you in the paper tomorrow.”

Tracy thanked the man again, buttoned her coat and strode uncertainly off. It was Montreal. She did not know where she was, but she did know that much.

THE STORY ANGERED ME. Didn’t she have a clue? True, she’d spent most of her formative years cut off from anything that might have formed her. She was like a shining gold

coin now, newly sprung from an undersea trunk. But surely this kind of knowledge was in the air?

Of course I felt guilty too. I had infected her with notions of this life, little thinking it would be something she'd need to medicate herself against. If I'd ruined her, I could not bear it. I begged her to come to Toronto, to stay with me, but she said they needed her at the pet store. I left, in disgust.

On the train home, however, I found myself missing her. Admiring her, even – the way she'd opened herself so completely to this new life, offered it everything she had, even as it kicked her in the teeth. I'd never have the guts.

In the springtime I visited her again.

She met me at the station, her lank blond hair now rivered with pink streaks. The long arms that encircled me were desperately thin and jutted from a tank top bordered in silver glitter. Her dry lips kissed me twice, in the French way. She took my hand.

She was wearing white boots and shorts. "Excuse my outfit," she said. "These are my work clothes." She worked in a car wash now, since her French hadn't been up to the requirements of the pet store: she was always selling eel food to cat owners, that sort of thing. We went back to her apartment, which was now lavishly decorated in the way of a casbah, with luxuriant homemade cushions and kilim rugs, a huge blue bookshelf spilling with astrology and self-help tomes. I tried not to stare at the painting above the fireplace, which was large, and nude, and of Tracy. I looked down but her breasts hovered scarily at the top of my vision, like hanging bats that could sail into your hair if you weren't careful.

"Elias did that," she said, noticing my discomfort. "He's my lover."

She explained that she'd had two lovers this year, the second one occasioned by the fact that the first one, a poet named Alain, had waded into the St. Lawrence and drowned himself. I felt a twinge of jealousy here. I had only had one lover, a chemical engineering student named Todd, who sometimes waded into Mac's Milk to drown himself in toaster pastries.

But Elias was a good find, a poet, photographer and textile artist (how he got it all in I wasn't sure). Tracy went to the bookshelf and picked up an eight by ten of him for me to look at. He looked like a roadie for a southern blues-rock band.

"God, the man is so free," she said, sparking up a joint. Tracy said "free" the way I would, with sulfur in her voice. "You could never imagine him voting, or owning a house, or having a family. He's like you." She blew smoke toward the ceiling, watching through faded blue eyes as it disappeared into the ceiling cracks.

I didn't know she thought of me in this way. "He looks like a roadie," I retaliated. "For a southern blues-rock band."

Maybe she thought this was a compliment, or maybe she didn't care. She passed me the joint and stretched herself across a loveseat, long bare legs dangling from the armrests.

"I'm glad you came," she said, then went on to tell me that she'd been feeling home-sick, "though not for home. Does that make sense?"

I told her that's how I felt, most of the time. I asked her where I'd be sleeping and

she said I could have Manon's room, since she was away.

"Where'd she go?"

Tracy curled fetally into the loveseat, her back toward me. "Somewhere with Elias. We share him," she explained. Then laughed her crispy little fairy laugh, the one that emerged when things were darkening.

We were both quiet for a while, stoned, thinking of nothing. Finally she spoke. "I went to see this psychic ... it was wild, you should have seen. She had a vision of my old duvet cover, you remember? The one I got when I was twelve."

This struck me as advanced clairvoyance indeed. I thought psychics often conjured vague pictures that described everyone ("You have a scar on your knee"). But a duvet cover ... especially one as particular as Tracy's, what with the scottie-dog pattern. I was almost impressed.

"Do you think it means I should go back?" she asked. "Do you think it was a sign from home?"

I could only imagine what her parents would have to say about the streaks and glitter, the Satanic hoofmarks all over her pretty pink flesh. And always the thought that I had had some part in this, I with my current rap sheet of dropped courses and two-week boyfriends, I who believed in nothing. She might have been all right had she never known what lay beyond. But she knew now. I thought it was impossible to go back and I told her so.

She nodded and rolled over, facing me directly. "I know what you mean. But, you know, things haven't worked out for me the way I thought they would."

I could suggest to her that she stop caring so much, that she see the parents and the suicides and the Pentecostals and the rapists for what they were: clowns, beneath her, cards to be played. But that was my view of life and it would never be hers.

"Anyway, I've already bought the plane ticket, so don't try and talk me out of it."

We spent two more days together, shopping and drinking tea, laughing about the two or three things we had in common, but I knew the obituary for our friendship had been filed. She would go back, try to navigate the isthmus between opium and Christianity. Though if she ever succeeded, who would know? Who would want to?

WE DID NOT SEE EACH OTHER for three years, but one day she managed to track me down at my parents' house in Finmoss, where I'd come back for the summer. When I heard her voice I yelped, like an animal or a child. You don't know how much you've missed someone until the missing of her ends.

"I'm getting married," she said. "Will you come?"

Nobody got married at twenty-one anymore. "Holy shit, are you pregnant?" I asked. No, she said uneasily.

"Actually ... Dwayne's in my bible study class. He drives me there and back."

I flinched. All of a sudden it felt like I was not talking to Tracy, but to a death mask of Tracy. The episodes of our youth burned as we spoke; before long they were all forgotten, a carpet of ash underneath our words.

Dwayne was two years ahead of us at Finmoss Composite, but he wasn't the type to

make an impression. Their current acquaintance was into its third week. Two nights previous, Gordon told Tracy that he'd been talking to Jesus, and that Jesus had told him that he, Gordon, was in love with Tracy.

Tracy was surprised. The young man had been treating her respectfully, but he had never gone all shy, held her eyes a second too long, stolen a look at a knee as it travelled south of a hem; there was nothing remotely "in love" about him, if you went by the checklist. "And he was okay," she said, "But the truth is I didn't much like him, either".

I jumped, as if given a chance to change the outcome. "I know – you go for those poet guys more, right? With the turquoise jewellery and the, and the, the hookah pipes and the Carlos Castaneda and ... anyways, that kind of guy."

Silence. "No."

"Oh."

"But," she continued, "I wouldn't even have gone out for a coffee with Dwayne, wouldn't even have taken a second look at him – if Jesus hadn't dropped into my house too!"

"He did?"

"Yes! That night I had such an awful feeling – Dwayne was so nice, and I didn't want to let him down. I was thinking of ways to do it. I mean, I couldn't exactly say he wasn't good-looking enough. I couldn't exactly say he didn't make enough money. I couldn't exactly say he was boring. I couldn't exactly say –"

"You couldn't say those things," I said, gathering courage, "but it wouldn't stop them from being true."

She wasn't listening. "No, I couldn't say anything. But just at that moment – when I had just about given up and was going to quit bible study and, I don't know, pack it all in – just at that moment, Jesus came to me. And he convinced me, totally. I know how that sounds to you, Cyn. I know. But that's what happened."

This was all gruesome to me, but fascinating too. I had never known religion, after all, and had always wondered what it would be like to have Jesus pay a call. God knows, I invited him, many times, but he never even RSVP'd. For years I would kneel beside my bed in a little white nightgown, hands pressed in prayer and eyes squeezed shut – night after night I did this, and still nothing. Later, I sat in my room with pharmaceuticals coursing through my veins, thinking I might conjure him that way (the Zoroastrians used drugs to bring God on, and the three wise men were Zoroastrians: such went my reasoning). Still no Jesus, though, and I was surely too hardened and awful for him now. I had a summer job placing stickers on furniture for the Department of Housing and Public Works down in the city, and the only thing that made it half-tolerable was the affair I was having with my supervisor. But before this, Jesus might have come, and he didn't.

And yet he came for Tracy, who was, in effect, getting two guys at once. "Will you come?" she asked again. Next Saturday at the Church of the New Abundance, she said, thirty miles north off the highway, just south of the Arby's sign but if I hit the outlet mall then I'll have gone too far.

Sure, I said weakly. I'd love to.

Saturday morning looked like a wedding morning, sunny June and new leaves on the trees. The phone rang. It was Manon, who, in her capacity as maid of honour, had the sad duty of informing me that the wedding was off.

“We can’t find Gordon,” she said, with a sarcastic jounce in the “Gordon”, as if she did not believe it was his real name. This was no surprise to either of us, really, just another instance of evangelical charlatanism. Perhaps there was a special casino in Florida where these apostates all repaired for restorative hits of baccarat and vodka – Gordon, Tammy Faye, Jimmy Swaggart, Kathryn Kuhlman ....

“But – so – how’s Tracy?”

“Good. You know her, she doesn’t fall apart. Of course you-know-who is helping her get through it. You’re normal, though, right? Not into this bible shit?”

(“Shit”, when pronounced with a European accent, sounds like a crunchy treat you might buy at a *konditorei*: schitt.) I told her yes I was normal.

“Thank God. In any case, I’m getting out of here. Maybe you could give her a call in a couple of days, see how she is doing. If Jesus answers – hang up.”

“I will.”

Which seemed to be the end of it. Several weeks later, however, I was in Edmonton at the apartment of my old schoolfriend Mavis, getting smashed on a dreadful bottle of homemade apple wine. We were lying under her stained-glass coffee table and the effect was oddly spiritual. My boyfriend troubles were mounting; it turned out the Sticker Supervisor already had a girlfriend, who looked exactly like me but was a diplomat based in Zambia. “You have nothing to worry about,” Mavis reassured me. “All things being equal, if a guy has to choose between a diplomat and a woman who tags bookshelves for a living, he will definitely pick the bookshelf girl. Especially if she’s from a dickshit town and works for him.” This had the ring of truth and relieved me somewhat.

“Hey – not to change the subject – but did you hear what happened to Tracy Mallard’s fiancee?”

A sick feeling spread through me, because I hadn’t called. “Is he all right?”

“If you think being a bible-thumper is ever all right. You know this new church they belong to, it’s really way out, kind of a cult. They’ve got this pastor from Montana who’s a total sleazoid. So get this, Dwayne’s mother hires Nestor Krawchuk and some of his rig-pig friends to kidnap him.”

Nestor Krawchuk worked in the oil fields but came home sometimes to visit his mother, when he wasn’t in jail for brawling.

“They take Dwayne to Vancouver and lock him in a hotel room, deny him protein, whatever. Try to de-program him, probably with their fists. And then old Dwayne gets away from them, escapes through a window. He runs back to Finmoss and now they’re getting married again! It’s kind of romantic, in a wacko born-again way. I don’t know what happened to Nestor. I’m sure he took the money and had a party. Anyway, you’re invited, right? We’ll sit together, it’ll be a panic. If you come here before we can get stoned.”

THE CHURCH WAS A WINDOWLESS BROWN CUBE. You could hear an organ, christly ululations from within.

Inside it was hot and plain. There was a large dais at the front, where Tracy and Dwayne were sitting with several other relatives in a row on either side of them: birds on the wire of God. When I'd phoned, finally, Tracy let me know that this was just going to be the reception. The ceremony had taken place in secret, directly upon Dwayne's return.

There were five of us there from her former life, in addition to Mavis's beau, who was an affluent-looking corporate lawyer. The back row had been claimed by a couple of Dwayne's old friends, impious rowdies in Hawaiian shirts. These were the wild, older guys from Finmoss Comp, the ones who got suspended for shooting out the lights on pick-up trucks in the school parking lot. It made me feel better, that Tracy had ended up with a former sinner.

The event was as bad as we'd imagined it might be. First, the seedy-looking Montana pastor took the microphone, and actually saw fit to tell that awfulest of wedding-night jokes, the one that ends: "*Shall I carry your bag sir? No thanks, she can walk.*" Everyone laughed, especially we the non-saved, though we were laughing at the others laughing – meta-laughing – which had a different sound to it.

Then a man in white loafers sang "Hava Nagila" while his wife played the organ, except the lyrics had been translated, and most creatively so. It now went:

*Trust in Lord Jesus*

*Trust in Lord Jesus*

*Trust in Lord Jesus*

*Jesus is Lord!*

The crowd got up and did an impromptu folk dance around the chairs, and the faux-Hawaiians joined in delightedly. Beside me, Mavis spluttered.

"Seafoam chiffon," she hissed, gesturing at a bridesmaid. "That dress represents everything we've gotten away from."

But I could not laugh, could not even meta-laugh, because the sight of this extinct friendship whirling around me in a cloud of white was impossible to take. Tracy was radiantly dead – the most beautiful corpse anyone ever saw, but that didn't make it any easier.

Our group repaired to the pool hall later, after the fruit punch and jellied salad, the promises to Tracy that we would keep in touch. We ordered a bottle of slander and uncorked it thirstily.

Did you hear? My dears, did you hear?

CATHY: "I heard they destroyed these bird figurines on his mom's mantelpiece because they thought the devil was hiding in them."

ROBIN: "I heard she cashed in her savings bonds and sent all the money to Oral Roberts so he wouldn't die."

MAVIS: "She was never that bright to start with."

ALL: "Amen".

"You could tell her anything," Mavis went on. "Remember the game we made of it,

seeing how big a lie you could get away with? Too much like Monopoly, though. No end to it.”

“She did make the honour roll, though,” I put in guiltily.

“Oh, a dog could do that,” snarled Mavis. She had gained early admittance to law school and was almost finished.

“And she *is* happy.”

“Dumb people are always happy,” Robin reminded me, “because they’re oblivious to what’s really going on. I mean, she spent most of high school in her room with those Christian books. What does she know about the world, anyway?”

Mavis agreed. “It doesn’t take much to erase a brain, when there’s not much of a brain to begin with.”

We were grown up now, and only the slimy threads of groupthink still bound us together. One minor contretemps and they would snap for good. It might already have happened.

“Why did you – why did we go to this wedding anyway?” I asked.

“Because it was the polite thing to do, of course,” said Mavis.

Successful people are always wiping the slate clean, of course. In time, when Mavis became a mother, she’d forget she ever was a lawyer; when she found macrobiotics, it would be as if she’d never eaten macaroons. A long time ago, she too had re-fashioned her toque into a beret, made cigarillos out of her pencil crayons and taken a “recess name” of Madeleine Madelescu: but such things must pass, and so they had.

WE LOST TOUCH, OF COURSE. I mean Tracy and me. The others sort of flared up, like war wounds, from time to time, although we all ended up scattering across the globe as young people too big for their hometowns do. There were still Christmas reunions, though.

It was at one of these, several years later, that I next heard news of her.

“You have to see this death announcement,” said Cathy, running for the paper. “I mean, it’s so ghoulish.”

I had entered the conversation late, had not yet found my bearings in it. The only words I’d heard were “Tracy” and “death”. My face burned.

Robin shook her head and sighed. “You heard about it? Tracy’s baby?”

It was a girl, born dead two months before. Cathy’d run over immediately with lemon squares and kind words. She was surprised – disappointed, actually – to see that Tracy and Dwayne were gracious and mildly cheerful, not prostrate with the grief she felt they owed her.

“Dwayne told me that when they’re tempted to feel upset,” Cathy said, shaking her head, “they just picture little Ruth dancing in heaven with Jesus.”

“Vile,” said Robin.

It was generally decided that Tracy was so grossly religious as to have transcended the need for even the most basic condolences. She already had all the help anyone could ask for. “And I did leave some Tupperware there,” said Cathy, “but I can’t risk going back – don’t want to get gotten by them, if you know what I mean.”



“Praise the Lord.”

“Amen.”

I lay abed later, the effects of drink travelling darkly through me like a funeral cortege. Thinking about Tracy. Not buying it, somehow.

When she opened the door to me that afternoon, she took me in a hug that let me know the tragedy had branded her in the expected way. We sobbed together in the hallway, about the baby, about lost time, about things we could not define exactly.

She sat me at her kitchen table and busied herself making coffee. Dwayne was at work but would be returning home soon, and she kept looking at the clock, hoping to get in everything she wanted to say.

“I should tell you, I have a lot of doubt now. About things.”

“That’s understandable.”

She sat down, played with the salt and pepper shakers as she talked: a little man and woman, tiny totems of domestic cheer. “Dwayne and I belong to a church that seems ... weird. To some people.” She looked at me warily. I tried to be neutral but she knew.

“And I,” she said, “am one of those people.”

I asked her how Dwayne felt. She shook her head.

“I can’t talk to him about it. Pastor Mike is his best friend. He would never leave, not in a million years. And since the baby it’s worse.”

“So what will you do?”

She looked at me directly. “Actually, I’m thinking about getting out of Finmoss.”

“And going where?”

“Well ... do you remember – before, when you asked me if I would come live with you? In Toronto?”

“Sure,” I said, breezily. “Except I travel a lot, now, for my work. And my boyfriend and I are thinking of getting a place. So I really don’t know.”

“Oh. Well, it’s nothing. It was just a thou–”

“– but you could go down to Edmonton,” I insisted. “Go back to school there or something.” She smiled and said she’d think about it.

We ate devilled ham sandwiches and she laughed at the irony. Then talked for another two hours, but everything she had to say about her life with Dwayne depressed me. She worked at the Credit Union and none of the other tellers would eat lunch with her, so scared were they of Pastor Mike and his works. The only hopeful stretch she’d spent was her pregnancy, which had been perfect, right up until the freak senselessness of its end.

I was heartsick for her, but disappointed too. No more chances for that sparkling innocence to rub off on me, since it was all spent. She was no believer anymore. Just another quitter, like me.

“So who is this guy?” she asked.

“Guy?” I replied, looking at the clock. I was eager to bring the meeting to a close, but also glad of the chance to talk about myself. “Well, there’s no one serious,” I laughed, “but then, you know how I am ...”

She watched with undue tolerance as I tried frantically to retread. “Except ... that one I told you about ...” But the bottom had fallen out and we both knew it.

“I see,” she said. She did seem a little angry – to be expected in anyone else, I suppose, but I had always thought her impervious to cynicism.

“I guess that figures,” she sighed.

I OFTEN THINK I SEE HER, walking around downtown Toronto. I’ll note the ashy blond curls of a woman standing ahead of me in line at the video store, and glare hopefully, until she turns her head slightly to the left and an unfamiliar nose protrudes. I’ll see a knot of girls loitering outside a coffee shop, the tallest one giggling, wide-eyed, hanging on the words of all the others; and then I’ll remember that she is twenty years older than that now.

I will see her again, though. I know it. Faith, as they say, is the evidence of things unseen. It’s the thinnest slice of faith one could have, but it’s faith all the same. And faith is all I ever wanted for either of us.

CHRIS YURKOSKI

## **A gentleman toasts the woman who takes his money at the liquor store**

Though you never asked me what I needed but  
kept so casual, over each tender transaction

of plastic and skin, that rubyred shivering  
into a paper bag, then the receipt -- what

it's really all about is how our incomes always  
meet so suddenly in the addiction.

## **Mouthful of whiskey**

Half  
moons of fingernail  
snapping along a supple  
sinew that flexes the  
language.

Bankercut  
cuffs. Cloth dark  
as the mysteries of commerce

for the layman. Hair  
slick with skill, so  
salt-and-pepper  
wise.

The mouthful  
of whiskey hits like an arrow;  
numbs this whole system  
as it pierces an animal heart.

SHAUN ROBINSON

## The first word

The three letters in the corner  
were no more meaningful than usual,  
and the scene was simple enough, an ant  
clinging to a thick spear of grass,

in a trembling rectangle of light  
pinned by the overhead projector  
to the wall of my five-year-old world,

a world still uncertain enough  
that it could vanish when the lights went out,  
so that all it contained was myself and this  
light, vivid and ominous as a dream.

A story went with it, the dark room  
told it in the teacher's voice,  
the word "ant" chiming like  
a bell once, twice ...

and history snaps

on the third chime, though all I feel  
is a brief stab, like the word  
crawled up my leg and bit me;

the letters speak, the alphabet's  
ventriloquism, crossing dark space  
to make my mind say its lines;  
the endless now of childhood  
is breached, becomes a then, a word,  
isolated by significance.

In the moment, I'm still me,  
a boy with velcro shoes who cried  
when the car left him on the front steps  
this morning, an animal with wet eyes,

but in the dark labels are being prepared  
and affixing themselves to my future,

the alphabet is being demolished  
to make way for words, and "ant"  
is branded onto my being  
even as its image flickers out.

In the aftermath, the room is quiet, waiting.  
The black air swarms with meaning.

When the lights come up  
the walls are made of language.

RAY SUCRE

## Hot beast

The lead orangutan in his pen at the zoo  
is making an obvious advance on my wife,  
blowing kisses, showing off, reaching his  
wide, coarse hands on the glass to meet hers  
print to print, minutes of looking  
into each other's eyes, sadly, romantically,  
swinging his dick between his feet.

He's an animal, so I'm not guarding.  
He's just an animal. He's in a zoo.

But the way he's looking at her ...

I know that look.  
It's a no-good look.  
And he does it better than me.

Eyes so bright, wife, moths encircle them.  
Feet so sympathetic, wife, they keep  
bringing her home to be near me.  
All the sudden things she can say,  
and the best of what she won't.

"Oh, you're so sweet ...," my wife says to him,  
and look now, I'm jealous of the orangutan,  
the lead orangutan in his pen at the zoo.

## Swimming with Nile Perch

THE FISH HAVE THEIR OWN AIRPORT. THE SIGN ON THE RAZOR-WIRED FENCE SAYS NO TRESPASSING at the request of the National Fisheries Commission. Makwetu watches three large cargo planes from outside the fence. The planes are loud. Makwetu thinks the planes look like Nile Perch, big round bellies, with deep mouths, but at the wrong end. The idea of an animal with a mouth for a behind makes the boy laugh.

“What is funny?”

Makwetu tries to run. A man with dark hair and green eyes has him by the neck. He leads the boy through a gate and pushes him in the direction of a plane. He smiles. “You like plane? I am pilot.” His European accent dribbles onto Makwetu’s face along with the odour of alcohol.

“Yes,” the boy responds.

The pilot beams.

Large trucks and vans roar across the tarmac to another plane. They look like military trucks, but the trucks don’t have any Tanzanian markings. Makwetu thinks that if he should reach 15, then he would like to join the army and fight. It would be a good job.

“I take fish from your country to my country. You like fish?”

Still watching the rumbling trucks, Makwetu nods. A scowling man, whose belly hangs over his belt, yells as the other skinnier men chuck large heavy cases into the trucks. The aluminum crashing onto the steel decks sounds like the rain storms that have just left Mwanza.

“What is in those boxes?” Makwetu asks.

“Boxes?” The pilot looks over his shoulder to the green uniforms feverishly toiling to empty the plane. “Oh, empty; ready for fish.” Makwetu stares at the pilot. The pilot’s green eyes flit away and return, over and over. His shallow green eyes match the twisted downward corners of his mouth. The pilot begins to play with his fingertips, scraping his dirty nails with his thumbnail.

Makwetu looks back to the ruckus: the fat one with his rifle straight up in the air is yelling louder. He is remembering the many fish trucks driven into Hisani by men with tired skinny faces. The tired men in blue coveralls sometimes yelled, but they never waved rifles. The fish trucks sounded like cattle rumbling in the distance, running from a storm. The tailpipes coughed out black clouds, choking the hunched women, who took up the leftovers, slapping away what maggots they could.

The pilot directs Makwetu back to his plane with a stiff finger under his chin, “My plane here.” A folding table and chair, with a cooler, stand under a wing. A half-empty Kilimanjaro, a coffee tin with cigarette butts, and a walkie-talkie are on the table. Makwetu stares at the large coffee tin.

Makwetu, forgetting the angry men in green uniforms, points. “Let me have that.”

“I need.”

“No you don’t – you just put cigarettes in it.”  
“So I need.”  
“Toss them on the ground like I do,” Makwetu says.  
“You smoking?” The pilot looks at the boy. “How old?” Makwetu shrugs. “How not?” “My family –” Makwetu is whispering now as the pilot interrupts: “You are alone?” Makwetu drops his head with something resembling a nod.  
The man grabs his belt and reels him in, eyes probing inside his shorts. The boy punches at the man.  
“You are baby. Why smoking? My seven-year-old, he eat from Maty breast still.”  
Makwetu looks at the fence and gate, a couple of hundred metres away, then back at the coffee tin. The pilot pulls a Fanta from the cooler: “You take.” He tucks the cold drink into Makwetu’s belt line, its frostiness almost painful against his swollen belly. “I am nice guy, no?”  
Makwetu pulls the drink free and gestures for the pilot to take it back. “Let me have the tin. I need it to cook.”  
The pilot gazes sideways at Makwetu’s face. “You take soda pop. I am nice guy, you will see.”  
The boy looks away towards the fence. The pilot grazes Makwetu’s cheek with the pad of his quivering thumb, slicing a line towards his temple. Makwetu steps away from the pilot, his body rigid with an explosiveness building in his weary knees and ankles, the same kind that can take a boy in and out of alleys away from gangs of other boys looking for money, but again he looks at the canister. Then he looks at the Fanta that the pilot has taken back and placed on the table. He flexes his toes, checking his shoes without looking. He hears a voice on the walkie-talkie with the same rolling Rs as the pilot. The big trucks, now full, roar away.  
“Anhel.” The pilot dumps the butts and hands Makwetu the tin. “Merry Christmas. I am Marko.”  
Makwetu thinks about Amali, his sister.  
“You know Christmas – ho, ho, ho?”  
Makwetu does; half of Mwanza has up decorations.  
Makwetu also knows the promise he made to Amali. “Makwetu, you must leave tonight. Promise me you will go to the city – stay away from Hisani.”  
The pilot returns his hand to Makwetu’s face, his chin. Makwetu’s arm shoots forward, knocking over the beer, snatching the Fanta. Makwetu never looks back, but could swear he hears the pilot laughing.

THE HEAT FOLLOWING THE RAINY SEASON HAS steadily brought the dust back. Makwetu runs down the street’s dirty edge on the outside of parked vans and trucks. Taxis honk at him. Three women in dresses exposing their knees and shoulders laugh almost too loudly with their companions. One of the women performs a simdimba dance, everything from the waist down vibrating with an inviting smoothness. The men smile and speak with elbow nudges. The women smile widely, laugh, and make up for the spaces in between their dates with supple palms falling tenderly on the



men's shoulders, chest, cheeks. They all stand under the black and white awning of King's Casino. Across the street European techno beats and heavy bass shake the windows of the dusty Toyotas out front.

Makwetu's shirt billows with the warm air racing in through a tear, a tear earned in a fight lost over fish heads. The fishermen had tossed what they did not want, rice and fish, at the young boys and girls, who had gathered up the fishing nets, untangled them, cleaned them, repaired them, folded them. Children were marching away with unequal portions; others were crying from the violence or the hunger pangs. Kutisha is an older boy, a pickpocket, who gathers with many other boys at the dalla-dalla stands in the market. Makwetu had a fish head, but Kutisha grabbed him by his pocket and smashed him in the head, the pocket tearing as he fell.

Amali had made his shirt for him from three other shirts. She could have just stitched the shirts together, but she did not. Amali knew how others, like those outside the casino, would look down at Makwetu, so she meticulously trimmed hundreds of diamonds from the cloth and stitched them together, making an original pattern. He wore the shirt every day. He had held onto the fish head for all he was worth until he heard the tearing.

Makwetu stops outside King's. His heart and heavy breath fill his ears, keeping out the music from across the street. The men and women cast looks over shoulders at the boy with the corked Fanta bottle gulping in air. Most of them look away, placing hands over wallets, feeling for money belts, gripping purses. Makwetu stands up straight and looks down the street, before looking over his shoulder towards a European accent seemingly addressing him.

The words sound like "Anhel, did you enjoy your soda pop?"

He takes a breath and clutches the bottle, pressing it to his sternum. Then he cuts between two arguing taxis – they honk – and continues running down the street. He remembers his knees hurt, but he persists, looking down alleys, many full of floating cigarette cherries, until finally, between the whitewash of a Chinese restaurant and the mint green of an office, no cherries, just boxes.

Makwetu lets the alley swallow him. Stumbling towards the cardboard citadel, he grips his bottle, he checks over his shoulder, he holds his breath, and he stretches his neck as high as he can as he approaches the boxes. Another boy. He is asleep. Makwetu knows this boy, Mtoro, from Hisani. Makwetu sighs, his spine loosens, his shoulders fall over the bottle, and he sashes towards Mtoro. A long cut lies on the cheek of Mtoro from his jaw to his lip. It was not there three days ago. Makwetu looks at it. It's not deep, almost as though Mtoro scraped it on a tree branch while running, but it's too straight. A razor, Makwetu assumes. He knows of other children with these scars on their cheeks. Poor Mtoro, he thinks, checking over his shoulder out the mouth of the alley.

Makwetu's stomach bubbles and creaks. It feels like he's swallowed gasoline. His legs and knees are trembling, and he can feel his kidneys heavy like anchors. He looks again over the boxes out the mouth of the alley. Still staring out onto the street, he pulls the cork out of the Fanta bottle and plunges his nose into the opening, taking in a deep breath. Older boys on the beaches gave the concoction to Makwetu. They told

him he would need it to protect himself from stronger boys and men if he were to sleep on the beaches or in the alleys of Mwanza. And now more than ever Makwetu wants his rest. He needs rest for he will be working the fishing nets tomorrow to collect enough shillings to repair his shirt so he can look presentable when he returns to his sister. The sharp sour smell washes over his eyes, pinning his ears back, spilling down his spine, over his bulbous knees, before pooling at his feet. Almost immediately his arches hurt less.

Makwetu spills down the stucco wall. He takes another huff. The stars he can only see outside of the city feel as though they are twinkling behind his eyes. He can feel them plucking a lullaby.

He's not on the dusty ground any more. The fabric of his shorts feels like warm lake water swirling around him. He feels for his belt. Amali gave him the belt after they buried Makwetu's father. Makwetu usually folds his waist band down three times over the gift. It's still there. He stands once more and looks over the boxes before pouring himself back into a puddle of shorts. He sighs and nudges Mtoro. The boy jumps, bumping the boxes, skittering into the open alley, his eyes wide looking into Makwetu's narrow slits. Mtoro chokes on his own spit, his head darting back and forth at either end of the alley. Makwetu holds out the Fanta bottle. Mtoro snatches it and breathes heavily in a way that would suggest he's testing to see if he still has a sense of smell. Makwetu giggles.

"Where did you get this?" Mtoro asks. He looks once more down the alley and returns to his friend's side.

Makwetu stretches and wiggles, his mind following the Fanta bottle away from the alley. He yawns. "I traded a coffee canister for it."

"Where?"

"At the beach. Some of the boys hacked up a plastic crate with machetes and cooked it down."

Mtoro takes another sniff. "Was there fish?"

"Yes. I stole a fish from a dog. I struck it with some boat planking. What happened to your cheek?"

"Mzungo. Last night near the King's. He came upon me; I was asleep . . ." Makwetu jumps to his feet and looks down the alley, both directions, staring hard into the dark. He can't see anyone. Mtoro, looking as well, takes the Fanta bottle for another deep breath, followed by several short ones as Makwetu tries to take the bottle back.

The boys just sit, back and forth with the Fanta bottle, until they drift towards sleep.

IN SLEEP, MAKWETU IS TAKEN INTO THE GIANT MOUTH of a fish. He struggles to find a way out. The barbing points of the fish's ribs, pointing inwardly, slice at him. He uses his belt to lasso a rib barb and breaks it free. He uses the rib to cut his way out of the fish's belly. The fish must be ten times his size, but he is able to swim it ashore, where he breaks it down to deliver to his sister.

In this dream Amali walks, even dances, and she presents him with a new shirt

before they feast. But he cannot put it on. He sits to eat, but she is no longer there.

Makwetu eats and eats. He swallows giant handfuls of fish. His stomach is like the belly of that Mzungo's plane.

"Anhel."

Makwetu looks around for Amali. Still, she is not there.

Makwetu looks back at the feast. He doesn't want any more, but more fish, more fish. It all fits in his belly, filling him to discomfort.

The angry pilot's voice bawls over Makwetu, but he cannot see the European. Where is Amali?

Makwetu guts ache. He looks for relief, but only more fish, more fish. He cannot close his mouth. The corners of his mouth feel like they are cracking. Makwetu cries out, "Amali." But only more fish, more fish.

MAKWETU'S EYES FEEL SLICED OPEN EVEN IN THE shade of the alley. Shards of his Fanta bottle litter his space. Mtoro is gone. He hears a door's hinges followed by the Asian accent of the restaurant owner yelling, "Go away – you go away now!"

Makwetu stumbles away from the voice. His shorts fall down. He yanks at something draping from his neck. He falls. The echo of pain pulses through him, holding onto his breathing. The Fanta did not protect him. Makwetu falters further down another alley, one hand holding his shorts, the other freeing his belt.

He whimpers for Amali. And he remembers when Amali worsened – his mother worsened, too, but he was too young to fully recall her suffering. Amali could not even stand the day Makwetu left Hisani. She bruised like fruit, covered in purple blotches.

Makwetu eases his shirt off now and places it on top of his shorts and belt. He squats and feels his insides fall out. Two weeping breaths escape, but Makwetu pulls all others in and pushes them to the bottom of his lungs. He stands. The weight of a hundred pounds of fishing nets fall from his shoulders. There's blood. He steps away to a newspaper under a garbage bin. Makwetu picks it up. The headline talks of layoffs at the fish plants. His bottom feels squishy and hollow. When he is done, Makwetu tosses the paper in the bin.

He steps into his shorts, then he slides his belt back into their loops before rolling his waistband three times. He then picks up his shirt, with his palms minding the tear, inspecting it. It's no bigger. It's no smaller.

He gazes at the blood again and doesn't understand. Then he touches his cheek, and he sees Mtoro's scared scarred face. The Fanta did work.

A FEMININE VOICE, ACCOMPANIED BY LOUD PERCUSSIONS, sings across the beach from a radio. Many of the children are kicking a ball around the beach, laughing and cheering as they score goals. Makwetu's belly still bubbles and churns. He picks up a pebble off the beach and places it under his tongue. He thinks about the day-long trek to his sister, and he wants to sit down. He grabs a folded net and drags it to a fisherman who watches him. Vuai's eyes are spongy with age. He yawns before coming over to help the pathetic boy, lifting the net into his boat. Makwetu throws up. Vuai offers him

water. Makwetu finishes swallowing. He looks to take up more netting.

Vuai shakes his head. "Go. I do not need your help."

"But I need to fix my shirt so that I can return to my sister – she lives in Hisani."

Vuai sighs. "How much to fix your shirt?"

"I don't know, but I must work a full day."

"Here." Vuai digs in his pockets and hands Makwetu a few notes.

Makwetu's eyes are huge as he looks into his hand counting the notes, five 200 cent notes – that's one shilling.

Vuai grabs Makwetu by his shoulders, and with a hard glare says, "Do not tell any of the other children what I have given you. Do you understand?" Makwetu nods, "Now go. Get lost. I do not need your help." Vuai shoves the boy off.

Makwetu scurries around the football game, children cheering, pushing. The children too young to play in the game stand by a fire. Some of the younger fishermen tend to the fire, cooking fish and rice. The men yell at them to stay back, slapping reaching hands. Three men laugh as one of them shoves a child to the ground. The child has managed to snatch a handful of rice. He jams the spilled grains from the beach into his mouth and scuttles away from another boot.

An older girl, her hips still not curvy, sits with the younger men. She is relaxed, watching the children play.

Makwetu goes to the older girl. She has a sewing kit and a small box of beading. One of the young men pushes him back. "Get lost."

The girl looks up and smiles at Makwetu. When the man realizes the boy is not interested in trying to get rice or fish, he lets him approach the girl.

Makwetu, looking at her feet: "Do you know how to sew?"

"Do you need me to stitch your shirt?"

"Please. I am visiting my sister in Hisani today."

"Your shirt is beautiful. It should be stitched, shouldn't it?"

"Yes."

"I can, for 400 cents."

"But I only have 200." Makwetu toys in his pocket, separating one of the notes from the rest. Other bills follow the 200 cent note out of his pocket, and Makwetu jams them back in quickly.

The girl chuckles. Makwetu pushes the note to the girl. She takes it but just stares. Makwetu knows 400 is too much for her services, let alone 200, so he ignores her scornful eye, favouring her sewing kit, and begins unbuttoning his shirt.

The girl giggles again. "You win, boy. 200."

Makwetu smiles and places his shirt at the girl's feet.

AMALI WAS NOT WRONG. THE MENNONITES HAVE BURIED HER. Makwetu stares at the white-washed lumber that marks his sister's grave, while ironing the front of his shirt with his palms.

Somewhere in his chest Makwetu feels happy for his sister, but he also feels as heavy as a giant perch and can barely drag his feet away from her. This weight reminds him

of the wheelbarrow, which he had taken the several miles to the shores of the lake three days earlier. The trek took half the night. Makwetu had to pull the wheelbarrow handles up to his shoulders to get the rests off the ground. Amali sat as centred as possible, but still he chased her weight all over the road, dropping the handles every couple of minutes to recover his strength. Amali tried to massage the labour from his arms and shoulders.

Makwetu trudges towards Amali's home. He enters the hut, falls into crossed legs, lies back, and stares into the roof. The browns of the timber, the wave of the thatching, the blackness of the peak, it feels like he's behind a giant eye. He could be looking out of Amali's eyes. He sees a delicate white scarf of fog strewn over the clear black waters of Lake Victoria.

Amali was very calm when she said, "It will be like swimming. Do you remember when I took you swimming? We would swim to the bottom and hold our breath. Do you remember? You could always stay on the bottom much longer than I could, Makwetu. Do you remember?" Makwetu remembered. "You have to help me win tonight, Makwetu." She barely moved. Her weight from the wheelbarrow did not exist in the water as she hovered in her brother's arms. The rounds of Makwetu's shoulders shivered as a white scarf of fog fell upon them. Its chilliness worked itself under his skin, contrasting with the tepid waters. "Thank you, Makwetu." Amali took a deep breath as Makwetu's palm pressed down on his sister's forehead.

Makwetu pulls himself off the floor. He promised Amali he would not return. He snatches a blanket from the bed. His hands trip across Amali's bedside table, taking up a small canister. Three 100 cent notes. He pockets it. Then he jams Amali's medications into his pockets. He looks around the room. He drops to his knees and looks under the bed. A book. He reaches for it. He smiles at the cover, a girl in a paper bag staring at a dragon. He walks out of the hut. He stops. He flips through all the colourful illustrations. He cannot take this book with him. Once in the city, surely it will be stolen.

He remembers the fun his sister had when she changed the name of the girl to "Amali" whenever she helped Makwetu read the story. They read together every time he returned to her with the money he made at the lake. Amali had traded a dress she made for the book. She had traded a Mennonite woman who worked at the orphanage for it.

"Amali is dead," Makwetu says.

He wraps himself in the blanket and returns inside. He puts the medications back on the table and returns the notes to the canister before crawling into his sister's bed. He opens the book and begins reading: "*Amali* 'was a beautiful princess ...'"

ANNE O'HEARN

## Caught in the wind

I am halfway home, perched high in a  
city of western architecture, smack on the  
corner of Portage and Main, lost  
like the teenager below – crimson  
under the glow of street lights.

\*

Small birds come west for the grain – golden  
husks sway like old drunken men waving  
their arms to the sky as if calling out.  
I come for no reason at all, merely passing

through – my fish are far from home, claws  
empty: stomach full of rodent. My feathers  
rustle violently in the wind as I ascend.

\*

The confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers  
provides dinner: Bullheads – long whiskers drooping.

Aroma of fresh Atlantic salmon drift from the indoor  
market like dreams floating on air. I suck in the air  
as I glance down on the festival park, its celebrations,  
statically electric, like dazzling fireworks.

The blue horizon beckons me – high  
pitched squeals, from my ancestors beyond.

## Pelican's progress

### *Bird Eat Bird*

Katrina Best

Insomniac Press

KATRINA BEST'S DEBUT COLLECTION DISPLAYS A GIFT for mimicry, a fondness for elaborating on the absurdities of (a woman's) life, a good, occasionally superior grasp of comic pacing, and an immigrant's (or newcomer's) sensitivity to changes in the social and linguistic registers. (Best is from Britain.) Her stories are most often comedies of misapprehension, her narrators not so much unreliable as overly reliant on their unworthy supports.

"Bird Eat Bird" may have been an alternative title for the opening story, "Lunch Hour," in which a pelican's torturous swallowing of a live pigeon is witnessed and commented upon by various (perhaps too various) characters. (There are several YouTube videos of this ghastly phenomenon.) Or it may truly be what author and editor thought best summed up the predator/prey cycle more or less evident in the stories that follow. It had the unfortunate effect, for me, of drawing attention to the weakest and (as I later saw) least representative item in the collection, even if (as I see now) this was to be but a curtain raiser.

Fortunately, the strongest story and, I think, the one most indicative of Best's real talent arrives next: "Red" is as precise (and vague), as straightforward (and dissimulating) as its narrator Maureen (aka Crafty Christina). We begin with the tiniest detail, a "shiny jewel" become "a false fingernail, flame red, an oval of fire on black pitch." Maureen is a jewel herself, observing (as if from our safe viewpoint) the oddities

around her: the "avocado-shaped figure," first of all, whose unattached fingernail this was; then "lunatic sister Lou," who, in her excessive anxiety ("I suspect she might need to get her meds re-adjusted"), broke into Maureen's apartment that morning; then the disabled woman into whose toilet stall Maureen bounds by accident ("I used to be shy," she tells us, "but I learned how to make good small talk and put people at ease"); then the francophone mother ("rough faced and uncaring") with two small children, who appear to have stolen her sunglasses; then a little person, Wayne, who "says he's from 'Norf-East London' – a place called Barking" and who "manages to hide his disappointment" while she "decline[s] his invitation due to a prior commitment."

It is only when she describes her preparations for this "blind date" that we have reason to think Maureen may be a little odd, too, and Best so skilfully administers the remaining doses of reality that we don't know for certain how much we've been misled until the very end. This isn't simply a neat trick of deferral. It's a matter of style, of inhabiting a character with conviction and giving her a voice that sounds so lucid, so self-aware we must accept her world

as our own. Maureen easily wins us over, just as she would if she were standing on a small stage, a microphone in her hand. She is a natural, one might say, at stand-up.

Carol (maiden name: Cope) tried stand-up once but was told her delivery was "too caustic," too British, in effect. Now, in "At Sea," the again (but secretly) pregnant mother of little Abby and Charlie, she is holidaying with them, and bickering with her husband Martin, on "this renowned Coronado Cays bathing beach," off which (see title) a rip-tide awaits her. She and Martin are "tired and worn down." If they weren't, they might laugh about the "irony" of their situation.





## reviews

“She did miss laughing, and she missed being funny, but being funny and being a good mother didn’t seem to go together ....” Best’s efforts are frustrated here by the imprecise nature of Carol’s feelings (close third person may not be close enough), perhaps even by her (unfunny) normality. “Sad sad Mama,” says Charlie. The (motherless) reader, however sympathetic (or not), can only silently agree.

Ellie, in “Tall Food,” had “never been much good at telling jokes. She couldn’t get the rhythm right, and also had a hard time remembering punchlines.” She and Rob are on their second date, and it is Rob who prides himself on being funny, on saying “witty things” (as in his opening seinfeldian rant about tall, hence overpriced, food). Ellie’s blundering attempts to match wits with him merely provoke resentful silence or puzzlement. The joke, for us, lies in seeing what Ellie can’t: that she is making the situation worse – a situation not too promising to begin with. “This evening was going better than [she] could have possibly imagined. None of her dates had ever given her a business card before.”

Might Ellie’s haplessness be her parents’ fault? (She still lives with them.) They met on the QE2 while emigrating to Canada. “Your dad was funnier than the ship’s hired entertainment,” according to her mother. “Had me in stitches the whole way across.” Met and married and settled in Hamilton, where Ellie was born. Soon “her dad was making both his girls laugh on a daily basis.” He played pranks (“apple pie bed”) and Ellie, as she recalls, was ever the good sport. (“Ha, ha, Dad! Good one!”)

Or might it be that Best was unable to decide whether to allow the tone to shift (producing a changed Ellie, not so plucky) or to persist in what more and more resembles a milder than usual lashing by Neil LaBute? Something in the technique used here (that of having Ellie unconsciously reveal her plight) prevents us from supposing (as we would wish) that she is

anything other than ... slow. Which leaves our sympathies (such as they are) dangling somewhat out of her reach.

In “Tea Leaves” (rhyming slang for thieves) we return to the first person feminine and to England (Brighton). It is 1987. The nameless narrator has been working for about three months as a clerk in The Peacock Trading Company, where the merchandise is fifty per cent clothing and fifty per cent “ethnic ware.” Again, the precision is important for both humour and characterization. The narrator remembers being caught (she and her younger accomplice) “stealing sweets from a corner newsagents” when she was ten: “chocolate bars, packets of Hubba Bubba and Bubblicious gum, tubes of Refreshers, Spangles and Fruit Pastilles, fistfuls of Drumsticks, bags of Sherbet Dip Dabs and rolls of Sherbet Fountains (even though we hated the licorice).” And here she is, nine years later, about to tell us how she “transgressed” a second, more serious time. “The pungent odour of seaweed mingled with the smell of cod and chips, and my eyes stung as I pictured myself incarcerated, recalling this complex aroma as representational of Freedom Lost.”

In “Tripe and Onions,” Meredith, 17 years old, is also a clerk, a grocery clerk at “shabby old Quik-Stop with its outdated cash registers and ancient scanner guns.” What preoccupies her, though, is not the impending discovery of theft but a package of tripe, “trembling slightly” as it moves toward her (and us) on the checkout conveyor belt. “Long repressed childhood memories flooded her mind and her senses felt assaulted anew as she recalled the sight, smell, taste and texture of her grandmother’s relentless recipes: tongue sandwiches, neck stew, fried liver, steak and kidney pie.” Her horror is scarcely mitigated by the thought that this “strict but loving old omnivore” has recently died. More helpful are her fantasies about kind-hearted Jamie, stocker of shelves, saviour of “droppage” and “spillage.”

“Sometimes,” she fantasizes, “she would say something dead funny and smart, which would make him laugh and realize that she had brains and wit as well as natural beauty.”

In *Bird Eat Bird*, Best frequently says something “dead funny and smart.” The five girls or women she portrays aspire, it would seem, to a modest kind of selfhood, in which jokes earn laughs and men (or parents) lead the way (out, generally, of the current predicament). The past intervenes (if at times too abruptly) to offer either an explanation for the present or an illustration of how derivative that present must be.

I only hope that in her future work she will (and “Red” proves she has the “brains and wit” to do so) make her characters, and her handling of them, a little more ambitious, a little less (or should that be *more?*) birdlike. ■

– *Brenda Keble*

## *On first looking into ...*

### *Zong!*

M. NourbeSe Philip

The Mercury Press

*ZONG!*, THE BOOKLENGTH POEM, IS, ACCORDING TO ITS author, the story that must be told, that can't be told, that can only be told in its untelling. *Zong*, the slave ship, is to the history of slavery what a concentration camp is to the history of the Holocaust, except there are no survivors to provide witness. In lieu of a story, we have only a brief account of a trial, in 1783, between a shipping company and an insurance company: *Gregson v. Gilbert*. The Messrs. Gregson, the owners of *Zong*, claimed that they were owed insurance on the loss of their “cargo”: 150 slaves thrown overboard in order to preserve the rest of the “cargo” when faced with dwindling supplies. The voyage, intended to last six weeks, had gone off course due to the inexperience of its captain, and had instead taken four months. “Sixty negroes died for want of water ... and forty others ... through thirst and frenzy ... threw themselves into the sea and were drowned; and the master and mariners ... were obliged to throw overboard 150 other negroes.” The claim was successful, and the Messrs. Gilbert were ordered to pay. They appealed, but there is no record of that trial.

Out of this dry account, Philip, one of Canada's leading poets, has fashioned almost 200 pages of “untelling”: fragmented phrases, fractured words, incantations – an anti-narrative, an anti-canonical text which subverts the canon of English literature and thus, paradoxically, earns a place in it.

For Philip, a language that can state “... were obliged to throw overboard 150 other negroes” is a violent speech; language as a legal construct excludes the very being-ness, the humanity of the murdered slaves. Grammar, and particularly

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## reviews

the grammar of the law, is a forcing of meaning, when to contemplate Zong is to fall into meaninglessness, into *Mysterium Iniquitatis* – the mystery of evil. To imagine the state of the slaves ordered overboard – did they even understand the language in which the orders were given?—is to have one's face pushed right into a blank, arbitrary, random and nonsensical universe. In such nihilism the very self is annihilated – one risks madness. *Zong!*, seven years in the making, is not only a magnificent literary feat, it is an act of extraordinary personal courage.

*Zong!* is a very visual poem – words float and tremble on the page, adrift on the sea. To read it is to feel yourself drowning, then you get a breath, then you go under again. “My mind it slips / falls in be / tween alpha and beta”. The mind is a meaning-making machine, and as you read, you put back the fragments, make words out of letters, strive for wholeness, until it all falls apart, or transmutes into pure incantation. In addition to Greek and Latin, Philip employs many languages that may have been spoken on the ship – French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Fon, Shona, Twi, Yoruba, and West African patois. Words in one language are written the same in another but mean something else, as in “sang/le sang.” Many words are anagrammed: Slave/salve. Letters are dropped, and the reader reconnects them. The voice of, presumably, the captain of the ship addresses his African lover and slave, t ruth. We add the “g” to sin to get “sing”, the “s” to “kin” to get “skin,” and so on. It's a linguistic *tour de force*, a dance on the high wire of language.

In some purely technical respects Philip works like the Language Poets, who strive to strip language from its referents, to play with words and sounds separate from any objective meaning. Yet her project is entirely other – smashing words

until only sound, the sounds of rage, of incomprehension, of sobbing, remain. She intends to use a violently fragmented language to stare into the heart of un-meaning, of un-telling, until the meaning and the story emerge, somewhere beyond logic and reason. In the beginning, the earth was without form, and void. And in the beginning was the Word. And both things were true, and co-existed, and do so to this day.

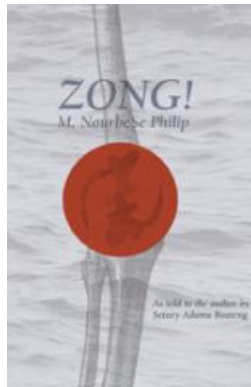
Walter Benjamin believed that “God made things knowable in their names”, that “every human language is really a failed and garbled translation of a divine language that speaks in things.” Or, as Margaret Avison would have it, language is “sense / and sound of the immense.”

If Philip takes this already “failed and garbled” speech and further garbles it, is she in some sense working her way back to some kind of divine essence of language, through chant and moan and prayer? There can be no exhumation of bodies drowned at sea, yet I think finally her poem is an incantatory re-incarnation of those lost Africans, and even of their murderers, who, in annihilating them,

murdered their own souls.

Grief is something that happens to us, it is a multiplicity of experiences – sorrow, rage, confusion, helplessness. Mourning, on the other hand, is the expression of loss through shared social rituals, most of which this secular, globalized, de-cultured culture has lost. *Zong!* compels us to participate in Philip's act of mourning, to co- and re-create those souls whom murder – and the language of colonial law – has obliterated. In one of the last lines of the poem, she writes: “my name is you.”

The deep pleasure and astonishment Keats felt when first reading Chapman's translation of Homer resulted in one of the iconic sonnets of our language, written in 1817, 34 years after the



Zong trial. He compares his sense of discovery first, with an astronomer finding a new planet, and then with Cortez “discovering” the Pacific ocean and the new world:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
 When a new planet swims into his ken;  
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
 He star'd at the Pacific – and all his men  
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise –  
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

This is an excellent example of what NourbeSe is critiquing – a colonial metaphor seemingly innocently embedded in a sonnet studied by high school students. Bold adventure and “discovery” mask the brutality, pillaging, and murder of the civilization being “discovered.” Although we know so little about the Zong case, it became a flashpoint in the struggle to abolish slavery, which was finally achieved in 1838. Today there is a growing international movement to provide reparations to the descendants of the transatlantic slave trade. This can only be done if slavery is judged a crime against humanity; otherwise the statute of limitations prevails. *Zong!* the book, like *Zong* the ship, has a role to play for those of us who wish to join our voices in the great and ongoing struggle to make reparations for colonial crimes and to continue to work against racism itself. ■

– *Robin Pacific*

HOWARD SMITH  
*Diary of a Sinner*

A COLLECTION OF POEMS

*Includes Native artwork by BC artists.*

*Foreword by Eden Robinson.*



Howard Smith is a Native writer  
 from Kitimat, BC.

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