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Essays, poetry, fiction, reviews

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*Of course there's an audience for your poetry reading.
She's waiting just outside.*

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**THIS ISSUE IS DEDICATED TO
THE MEMORY OF JOAN LAMB,
ONE OF OUR VERY FIRST
CONTRIBUTORS [1:1].**

Loyalties

I AM THE CURRENT OWNER OF MY MOTHER'S WHEAT Pool elevator salt and pepper shakers, her vast array of Saskatchewan sports teams' ball caps, and one Gordie Howe signed commemorative postage stamp. Also a certain Chintz-patterned salad bowl.

My parents received the silver-rimmed bowl as a wedding gift in 1938. Probably one of their grander gifts, considering the Depression. Neither family had money to spend on wedding receptions or on gifts not deemed useful. Nevertheless, my father's uncle Otho, a bachelor farming his parents' land near Asquith, gave them this beautiful Grimwades bone-china bowl. He had likely ordered it from the Eaton's catalogue.

My mother hated the bowl, despite its beauty and pedigree. The pattern, Cranstone, had first been issued in 1934. Recently, a knowledgeable friend told me that it could be valuable. My mother, if she'd known, would still not have sold it. For loyalty's sake.

A gift from someone she very much disliked, it sat unused, its rim unpolished, in her china cabinet for over fifty years. Uncle Otho had been a bit of a scoundrel, was rumoured to have chased after married women. The worst humiliation had come when he was fined for urinating in a public place and thus got the family name into the newspaper. Some loyalties are particularly hard to maintain. But she did keep the bowl.

She was loyal to family, blood family. She was loyal to the Wheat Pool, where my father toiled as an elevator agent. She was loyal to John Diefenbaker, though not necessarily to the Conservatives. She endured the teasing when her loyalties sometimes contradicted each other.

My mother did not hold it against anyone, other than me, who'd left for greener pastures. My leaving made me disloyal, while she admired

expats who continually attributed their successes in life to having been brought up with Saskatchewan values. She loved Pamela Wallin, a news anchor at that time, because Pamela was always mindful of her roots. To my mother's way of thinking, I was not mindful enough. As I was her only child, there was no one else to blame.

My sons would tease their grandmother for her extreme devotion to things prairie. Proudly and unfailingly, she wore those ball caps embellished with the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool logo, alternating them with ones bearing the Co-op emblem. She collected spoons from Wheat Pool towns and supported the Rough Riders and sports teams whose players originally hailed from Saskatchewan. She closely followed Gordie Howe's career, since he had grown up near Floral, just outside Saskatoon, where she and my father had spent their working lives.

The sole exception to her local boys rule was Wayne Gretzky. Maybe it was because the Edmonton Oilers were the nearest NHL hockey team to Saskatoon. Her grandsons lived in Edmonton. Maybe it was because she knew that Gordie Howe admired Wayne too. Loyalty doesn't have to be logical.

She owned a copy of Robert Collins' memoir *Butter Down the Well*. It sat on the shelf among other prairie classics published by the Western Producer, beside Tommy Douglas biographies and coffee table books extolling the province's landscapes. Collins himself pointed out that *Butter* was about a way of life gone forever. My mother vigorously saluted the latter, but she never accepted that it was gone. She believed that both her daughter and Gordie Howe would someday return to Saskatoon to live.

I continue to call myself an expatriate, even after forty-odd years away. I seldom call myself an Edmontonian, though I've lived in Alberta longer than I ever lived in Saskatchewan. My understanding of the province is biased and deeply coloured by memory and, of course, guilt.

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I am closer to my mother's philosophy now than she would ever have believed. Have I inherited at least some of her loyalty to place? No doubt I have. In equal measure, I cannot avoid the glare of my own disloyalty, certainly during her later years, when she was on her own.

I stop by antique booths selling prairie nostalgia – plenty of them in Edmonton – in the guise of butter churns and rusty wheat sickles. I grow no wheat, but I buy a sickle. My poems and essays are as often as not about “the imagined real place ... remembered places, even dreamed places” identified by Robert Kroetsch in his original introduction to *Seed Catalogue*.

MY MOTHER NEVER RECONCILED HERSELF TO MY having moved permanently away from both her and the province where I was born. After my father died, she came to Alberta unwillingly. Two weeks later, she was ready to return to her empty house. She insisted that she'd manage through the winter. She did, but the next spring she reluctantly agreed to move to an apartment – in Saskatoon, not Edmonton. There she doggedly remained until dementia set in.

Her grandsons and I then overrode her loyalties and brought her back to Alberta. No seniors' apartment was to her liking and neither, certainly, were her rooms with us. She begged her grandsons to take her to familiar territory. We answered that we'd take her to Saskatoon as soon as a vacancy in an assisted living facility came up. Ten minutes later she would ask again. Dementia's advance held no sway over her loyalty to Saskatchewan. She intended to live and die where she'd been born. She definitely remembered where that was. Most of all, she was terrified that she would not be buried next to her husband.

A vacancy finally came up, but within the year a major stroke brought her once again to Alberta, this time to a nursing home. The following year, on a bitterly cold December day, we,

her Alberta family, accompanied her back one final time, in a funeral hearse, via Highway 16 East. Never had the road been so icy, the fog so intense. Following an early service, we travelled out to the country cemetery before it became dark and conditions got even worse. We laid her to rest beside my dad.

At the service, her grandson and her godson spoke movingly and eloquently about the virtue they most admired in her, that unflinching loyalty to the people and the place she loved. They mentioned her ball caps and her scrapbooks documenting the demise of prairie elevators. They mentioned Gordie Howe, too, but omitted the salad bowl story.

Can loyalty be inherited? Does it dissipate? How much remains? As well as the hats and the postage stamp and the salt and pepper shakers, I should factor in the Norwegian/American elements. We dared not criticize Americans in front of her, especially the Minnesotans/North Dakotans. Descendants of her ancestor immigrants from Norway still resided there.

My own offspring live nearby in the same city, same province. I realize how lucky I am. What used to be regular – too regular, I thought at the time – trips home to Saskatchewan have slowed to brief annual, even biannual, visits to my parents' graves. I am uneasy if I delay or excuse myself from going.

When I do stand at the graveside, I can almost hear my mother saying what she never would have uttered aloud when alive. *Why now? Why didn't you come more often before? Why didn't you stay?*

And like grownup children everywhere who have packed up and established new homes and new lives away from their places of birth, away from those who bore them, I truly cannot trust myself to answer. ■

– Myrna Garanis

Brownies or jazz

WHEN JAZZ DANCE CLASS WAS MOVED TO TUESDAY nights, it suddenly conflicted with Brownies. My mother told me I had to choose between the two. I was eight years old at the time, and completely unaware that this was my very first existential crisis.

My mother is Jewish, and my father is regular. They were, and still are, very much in love, and so from an early age I was taught that religion didn't matter when it came to things that actually did. I was happy and loved, and was never told to thank God for that. The only reason I liked religion was because it got me the token Hanukkah solo in my school's Christmas pageant.

But I have now realized that religion ghostwrote many of my childhood stories. I was a mongrel who carried on like a wasp, and sometimes it mattered.

WHEN CABBAGE PATCH KIDS WERE WHAT MATTERED, my Zayde Charlie got one each for my brother and me on Hanukkah in 1985. As far as toys of the day were concerned, this was a very big deal, and having this cherub-faced rubber and cotton creation would really help me ascend the echelons of my Senior Kindergarten class. They were hard to get your hands on at the time, but somehow my Zayde managed it. He knew a guy.

The dolls came with their own adoption papers, meaning they arrived pre-named by Xavier Roberts and his gardeners of children. Mine was a "preemie" and in Cabbage Patch Land that means bald, not struggling for life due to low birth-weight. My father opened up the adoption papers and announced to the room of Jewish family that I was the proud mother of little Zoe. I couldn't have been happier, and my Zayde glowed with overwhelming *nachas* (a Yiddish gem for which the inadequate English equivalent is "pride").

Kevin, my brother, unwrapped his doll next. It was a little boy with brown, curly hair and ruddy cheeks – clearly a member of the tribe. My father opened the adoption envelope, took out the card, and inhaled to make the name announcement to the room. But he didn't exhale. Upon reading it, he didn't speak. Instead, he scanned the room, smiling awkwardly until he met my mother's gaze. I think he mumbled something about "not having my glasses" and walked the card over to her. She read it, gasped, and joined his verses of clumsy verbal filler. As their mouths moved, their eyes had an entirely different conversation, until eventually my father spoke.

"Adam!" he proclaimed, as he accidentally ripped the paper into tiny pieces. "The doll's name is Adam!" Everyone in the room seemed pleased by the appropriate nod Xavier Roberts had made to the Old Testament, and that was the end of that.

I later found out what the card really said. The name listed on the adoption certificate of the Cabbage Patch Kid that my Jewish grandfather gave his grandson for Hanukkah was Adolf.

Adolf.

Nobody ever told Zayde.

A FEW DAYS LATER, ZAYDE CALLED TO SEE HOW THE new parents were getting along with their kids. My mother put Kevin on the phone, and he rattled off all of little "Adam's" hockey achievements, naively believing that the NHL was a realistic dream for a Jewish boy.

My mother then passed me the phone. I didn't have anything to say, so my brother helped me. He's older than me, and I foolishly trusted his counsel. He whispered in my ear precisely what I should tell Zayde about my new doll.

"Zayde," I repeated, "Zoe never cries, just like the baby Jesus." That instant, my mother hurled a plastic cup across the room, hitting the phone like a bull's-eye, and knocking it out of my hand.

homeplate

My brother started cackling, either because I was clearly in deep trouble, or because the fifteen months he had on me allowed him to privately enjoy his very first use of irony. From there on in, all holiday chats with Zayde were heavily scripted.

MY PARENTS WEREN'T ASHAMED OF THEIR HEATHEN union, but they were respectful enough to not flaunt it in front of their parents. When the moon decided that the twenty-fifth day of Kislev (the start of Hanukkah) and December should overlap, my house became a farce. The problem was hiding the Christmas tree from Zayde when he came for a Hanukkah visit. The other problem was hiding the menorah from Gracie (my paternal grandmother) when she visited us on Christmas, but that was as easy as one of us keeping her occupied in the basement while the others lit the candles upstairs, whispered the dedication, and put the whole thing outside to safely burn down.

A Christmas tree is far harder to conceal. One year, Zayde announced a drop-in a few minutes before he was to arrive. In a wave of panic, we pulled all the decorations off the tree, put it in the backyard, and pretended the pine needles littering our floor were "the look of the rug." When his car had cleared the end of our block, we hauled the naked fir back inside, put her clothes back on, and tastelessly appropriated the Holocaust mantra. *Never again*. From there on in, all holiday visits with Zayde were heavily choreographed.

FOR MY JEWISH MOTHER, CHRISTMAS MATTERED. Growing up an Eber in Hamilton, Ontario, she had been envious of her Clark and Smith friends who celebrated the Nativity, and so when she married my dad, she whole-heartedly embraced the tradition. Our banister warped a weft of holly threads, and my mom hung all the Christmas cards on string above each doorway.

We always had a real tree, none of these *facacta* fake ones, and beneath it was an embarrassingly large pile of gifts wrapped in Santa paper. The way she trimmed that tree, you'd swear my mother was a regular *shikse*.

Mommy refused to hang holiday lights outside, though. It was her stronghold on the Christmas front. I think she thought if she publicly put up lights, it would signify to the neighbourhood her complete surrender to the Christ child, and my mother is nobody's disciple. She'd make a point every year of serving *kugle* (Jewish noodle pudding) with our Christmas turkey and stuffing. It was her side-dish resistance.

AND HANUKKAH MATTERED TO MY FATHER. HE WASN'T as excited by the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem as he was by the *Great American Songbook*. My dad is the kind of man who learns enough about hockey and football to be convincingly conversant, but if you want him to speak in the stream-of-consciousness that one can only ford when talking about something one's blood needs, talk to him about Irving Berlin.

His first love is Berlin's music, but what he loves almost as much is his story. The idea that a Jewish boy came to America from a *shtetl* in Belarus, and grew up to write songs that would define a *Nation Under God*, was astounding to my dad. My Zayde Charlie also immigrated from Belarus, and he grew up to raise a Jewish daughter who would define our family with the Whitest of Christmases, and make her husband feel like the finest fellow in every Easter Parade. My dad reveled in that connection. So I think, for him, honouring Hanukkah really meant honouring people like Irving Berlin, Zayde Charlie, but mostly his wife.

Watching my dad try to say the Hanukkah dedication with the proper Hebrew pronunciation became as much a part of the tradition as lighting the candles. For reasons I can't explain, I can make the voiceless uvular fricative necessary

to speak proper Hebrew, but my brother can't, and my father is genetically programmed to be hilarious when trying. My mother and I would say the dedication very quickly while lighting the candles, and then encourage the boys to try. My brother would declare it stupid, and then deliberately fart. My dad, however, was always willing to give it a whirl.

He'd be three sounds in, and my mother and I would have to hold one another so as not to fall over from laughing. The poor guy was doing his best, but his earnestness was so funny. We'd make the proper sound; then he would fail at repeating it; we'd give him gentle correction; and he'd fail again. After each phlegm-inducing utterance, he'd look to us for approval, and we'd laugh so hard our faces hurt. Eventually, my mom decided it would be a good idea to write the words down for him phonetically. The worn piece of paper was kept beside the menorah, and it came out every year for the same purpose. It was no help, and every Hanukkah, Mommy and I let my dad go on trying, all the while enjoying the fact that the girls in our family were just a little more chosen than the boys.

MY MOTHER WORE A BEIGE SUIT TO HER CITY HALL wedding. My father took the afternoon off work. My mother wrote the cheque for her wedding band. My father cashed it. No cleric confirmed them, and God did not bear witness. He wasn't even invited. Their wedding looked like their marriage: honest, simple, loving, and perfectly pagan.

Still, it mattered to my mother that her dad knew that I appreciated, and was not entirely devoid of, Judaism. She told him any story that involved friends I had whose surnames ended in "berg", "stein", or "baum." She made me buy him something stamped "Made in Israel" as evidence of my visit. At her behest, I sent him a copy of an essay I wrote in university, exploring the linguistic interplay between Yiddish and Hebrew.

It was a real page-turner; I'm sure he couldn't put it down. My mom didn't do all this to show her father she was a good Jew. She did it to show him she was a good mother. Good mothers make sure their children know who they are.

PEOPLE LIKE TO TELL ME WHO I AM. THEY ALWAYS have. It makes them feel more comfortable. They like to draw a rough outline of me to quickly mark my boundaries. When anyone asks me my religion, I almost always answer that "my mother is Jewish and my father is regular," hoping they'll key in to my irreverence. Some do. Some, however, persist. "If your mother's Jewish, then so are you," they inform me. "You're Jewish. That's how it works." Then I watch as their eyes finish my portrait, knowing that the finished product will lack the nuanced shading of a subject drawn in all its dimensions.

MOST OF MY CHILDHOOD LOOKED LIKE BROWNIES. There, at school, at camp, and in my neighbourhood, the girls were generally fair and thin. I am neither. The Brownie moms were reticent, and often didn't greet their daughters with hugs and kisses. We ate stale cookies and drank watered-down punch. We marched around a church basement that reeked of repression, singing "there's a reason here, and a reason above, my honour is to try and my duty is to love." They had me until "reason above."

The girls at jazz class had curly black hair, and some of the older ones even had breasts – big ones like Mommy's. They wore bright colours and sequins, all the while smiling at their own reflections as they step-ball-changed around the checkered floor. Their mothers were audible, warm, and felt entitled to be double-parked out back. The studio was in a plaza near Toronto's epicentre of Jewish activity, and sandwiches at the bakery next door were three inches high, five if you included the bagel.

I made my choice. As I finished my final

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cross-drag, step-leap combination on that first Tuesday back, I looked at the front window to see my mother casting shadows with her beam. When I went outside to her, she accosted me with kisses, and asked how my class was.

“It was fun,” I said.

Smiling into my eyes, she cupped my cheek in her beautiful hand, gently traced its apple with her thumb, and told me that’s all that matters. ■

– *Ashley Botting*

On pornography and fanfiction

WHEN I WAS THIRTEEN MY MOTHER CAUGHT ME LOOKING AT INTERNET PORNOGRAPHY.¹ I didn't know it at the time, but that was a turning point in my becoming cool.

I should clarify that statement. I'm still not cool. I probably never will be cool. My body type, skin texture, hair colour and general personality don't lead many people to consider me cool. But I'm way cooler now than I was when I was thirteen. And not just because I learned to redirect my sexual voyeuristic habits to venues more appropriate than my parents' kitchen. I'm cooler because I'm not the only one who likes to look at Internet porn.

In fact, a recent Kinsey survey suggested 83% of Americans watch some form of Internet porn at least once a year.² People have become addicted to the relatively cheap, plentiful pornography the Internet has produced, and this addiction with the message (porn) has become entwined with a deeper addiction with the medium (the Internet). And that, really, is the reason I'm cooler now than I was fourteen years earlier. People, generally, are a lot more like I was then. And I was not cool.

COOLNESS IS ONE OF THOSE sociological terms that have absolutely no meaning because its meaning is so obvious and blatant. What is cool? Cool things are cool. Who is cool? Cool people. Try digging into specifics and what's cool and what isn't gets really garbled. My first-year philosophy professor introduced me to a great term I now rely on every day: subjectivity. Coolness is subjective. Ask a hundred different people what's cool, and you'll get a hundred different answers.

But that's not really how coolness works at all. Coolness isn't completely subjective like the stoner's lament: "How do I know if the red I see is really the red you see?" It isn't subjective like that. But it's definitely not objective either. You can't pull a hundred scientists together to confirm the coolness quotient of a given object-of-cool either. Cool is one of those throwaway adjectives that can either be meaningless or the most powerful word in a sentence. Coolness is, to borrow from my philosophy professor again, a definition that requires inter-subjective agreement. Something isn't cool just because I say it's cool, it's cool because me and a dozen other people all agree it's cool.

With that definition in mind, I have it on good authority that at thirteen, I was

¹ When I think back on the mix of awkward shame and unrepentant embarrassment I associate with that evening, all I can think of is the overall shittiness of the porn in question. It consisted of a few images I'd found, some not more than a hundred pixels in size. The pictures wouldn't even be good enough to serve as thumbnails on even the shadiest fetish-niche site based out of eastern Europe today, but in early 1999, they were serviceable enough. That this is what I fixate on should really have you questioning the sentence following the origin of this footnote.

² 83% of statistics are, of course, complete fabrications.

not cool. I don't think anyone's really cool at thirteen because it's probably the most awkward age concocted by a mix of hormones and society. There are likely a few genuinely cool people in any group of thirteen-year-olds, but for the most part it is the worst kind of currency: nobody has it, everyone thinks everyone else has it, and it has to be acquired through whatever means are necessary. This is what leads to the pecking order that haunts most thirteen-year-olds – the few unassailable youths who determine what is cool, and the rest who are trying to figure out why the fuck that stuff is cool and not the stuff they think is cool. When I was thirteen, I was one of those kids trying to figure out why men in boots and white jeans were cool.³ And I couldn't. I tried, hard, but it didn't matter, I was not born to be cool, despite my best attempts. Those possessing even slightly more coolness than me did not hesitate to remind me of this fact, and so I spent most of my fourteenth year on the planet reconciling myself with the fact that I was not cool.

I did this in many ways, including the aforementioned sexual self-discovery, but the one that stands out to me for its complete lack of coolness, is fanfiction.

WHEN I WAS TEN, MY PARENTS worried that I was too focused on trying to make a living doing something with words.

It was clear even to ten-year old me that I wanted to be a writer. While my parents were generally supportive of me, they had justified cause to worry about my future

³ My standpoint is essentially that beautiful women determine what's cool.* I've thought this since I was thirteen and I still think so now. Female beauty is one of the things so deeply mined in our culture that it's basically impossible to hide. The premise of a "beautiful woman underneath the glasses" seemed stupid to me in 1999 when Freddie Prinze Jr. recreated Pygmalion by choosing the most beautiful girl in his school to remake in a more desirable image. Beautiful women, regardless of their social standing, socio-economic background, or other minutiae, are largely perceived as one group. And here is how their power works (or at least did work for 13-year-old me):

1. They are desired, by almost everyone.
2. They choose who of the desiring will be given access to them.
3. Those that are denied access become jealous of those that achieve it.
4. Those that have access become cool, by the jealousy-cool inversion described above.
5. The wants, desires, interests and other drivers of the newfound cool people become the cool accoutrements that define cool within this particular social circle, regardless of the people by then possessing coolness.

In at least the semi-tribal world of seventh to ninth graders, this tends to be the case. The variety of those who are cool around the country is good evidence for this system taking place. In some schools, the ethnic kids are cool; in some, everybody but the ethnic kids are cool. In some, the skaters and punks are cool; in some, only the rich. Now standards of beauty and style can play a large role in determining which women are determined beautiful by the masses of any social group, but not really. The biggest problem with *The Breakfast Club* isn't that Anthony Michael Hall is capable of bringing a loaded BB gun to school, but that anyone would find Molly Ringwald more attractive than Ally Sheedy. Some things simply do not compute.

*This may, of course, say a lot more about a looming inferiority complex where females are concerned, which would only be compounded by the incident described at the beginning of this essay.

monetary prospects. Especially given how the world looked at the time.

In 1995, words were a dying thing. Numbers and science were the only routes to a good living. People didn't communicate with written words very often at that point, not with the invention of the telephone and television. Computers weren't seen as an equalizer in that regard, because computers were only good for crunching numbers and solving complex scientific problems. That was why my parents had invested a great deal of scarce familial financial resources in a personal computer. Not so that we could write stories or play video games, but so that my brother and I could learn the hardware and programming languages that would let us build the next great, scientifically boundary-pushing application.

That same year, Windows 95 was released. I don't remember many other specifics from that year, but I do remember watching on the news as electronics stores across the continent filled with people, all buying brand new \$2,000+⁴ computers with the latest Microsoft product installed, or paying \$300+ to install Windows 95 on their old \$2,000+ machines. It was a revelation to ten-year-old me to see so many people spending so much money on these "computer" things. I instantly had two thoughts:

1. Who the fuck were these people?
2. What the hell were all of them planning on doing with these computers?

The two questions were connected of course. Foul-mouthed, cynical, lower-middle-class, ten-year-old me was confused as to who could have afforded to spend thousands of dollars on a computer: a device that had, until then, been of interest only to geeks and their shorter, more often bespectacled cousins, the nerds. I knew all about those people; I was one of them. I'd had a computer for a year already at that point, and when I ranted and raved to my school-yard friends about how awesome *Doom* and *Leisure Suit Larry* and other computer games were, I was laughed at. Yet the day after Windows 95 came out, everyone was talking about how cool computers were. I was thrown for a loop.

I thought for a while that computer games would soon become something everybody at school would play, and I, having the most experience, would be king of the geeks. It never happened. I remained a social outcast. Which brought me back, again and again, to the second question. What did people do with their computers, if they weren't playing computer games? I had no idea.

Sure, you could write on them, and aside from trying to get a digital avatar of a thirty-something loser laid, writing is probably what I did most on my Windows 3.1 computer (we couldn't afford Windows 95 for several years). Parents might use an early version of Excel to ... what? Do taxes? Plan budgets? The adult world was a swirling mystery of stupid to me, but even fifteen years later, I still have no idea what value adults saw in those early personal computers. They were shelling out \$2,000 for a screensaver that reminded them of the Led Zeppelin/Pink Floyd laser shows they used to see at planetariums across the nation, almost never because of the lasers. Except in 1995 there was no music, and the lightshow broke all the time. And the kids? Two

⁴ Adjusted for inflation. 2012 dollars. Kind of.

weeks after their parents had all gone out and bought those Windows 95 PCs, after they'd watched all the cool videos on *Encarta 95* and realized how hard it would be to learn how to type properly, they admitted to me, one by one, that the computer sat in the corner of their living room or basement, covered by a blanket so the dust wouldn't destroy their parents' \$2,000 investment.

And for about two years, it stayed that way. I kept writing on my computer, because I was not cool and that's what I thought was cool, but nobody else seemed to do much of anything with their computers.

But then, around 1997, as the dot-com bubble was forming, the World Wide Web and Internet⁵ started to become household terms. People paid to have a second phone line installed in their homes, or, if they were really forward-looking, signed up for high speed Internet access,⁶ all so that they could connect to visually atrocious, horribly designed, slow-loading and at times downright dangerous, websites. Websites that had information and pictures and shitty music files for listening, all for free.

Suddenly, point two had an answer.

IN THE VIDEO GAME WORLD, console systems tend to either thrive or die.⁷ Some, like the original Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) of the mid 80s, are remembered forever and successfully enter into popular culture. Others, like Sony's original console, the CD-i, aren't remembered by anyone. While the success of a given console system hinges on many factors, most of them hard to pin down, there is one piece pundits always look for: the killer app.

The killer app is the one game, the one piece of software that is so good, so entertaining, and receives so much positive publicity it can actually drive a consumer to pay three to six times as much as the cost of the game for the system it is played on. The original *Super Mario Bros.* was the NES' killer app. The CD-i never had one. For those that bought the system originally, the killer app is the one they invite their friends over to play, and that drives those friends to buy the system.

The Internet was the personal computer's killer app. The Internet and email brought those friends of mine back to their \$2,000 investments and gave them something to do. Windows 95 was hyped as the killer app of the decade, but it was slightly premature. The Internet made the personal computer personally useful, and the world quickly set about scrambling to figure out whether or not it was cool.

It turned out the Internet was cool, but it took a few years for it to really sink in. Even up to 2004 or so, I knew people my own age who didn't use the Internet, and didn't see the point. Web 2.0, especially Facebook, seemed to change that for a lot of them, especially the cool ones. But there was a long period of time between Altavista and Google, Geocities and Wikipedia, Friendster and Facebook. What exactly happened in those seven or so years? What kept people thinking of the Internet while they tied up their

⁵ Nobody really knew what the difference was – still don't as it turns out.

⁶ The speed of which, by any modern measure, was not at all fast.

⁷ At least so far. The most recent generation with three financially viable systems doing well in the wild is a new development.

phone lines and dreamed of using a laptop without a phone line plugged into it?

Two things. The two things that history, I believe, will remember as being the genesis of the modern Internet. The two things that the Internet was invented for, that the world could never again do without. Pornography and fanfiction.⁸

FANFICTION, IF YOU'RE NOT COOL enough to know, is exactly what its name implies. It is fiction written by fans.

Fans of what? you ask. Pretty much anything. Any previously invented TV series, book, comic, movie, play, video game, even real people that are a part of pop culture in some way, may be fair game for fanfiction.

Fanfiction is generally any piece of writing in which the characters, setting, technology, or ethos of something already created is expanded upon by fans of the original. It most often takes the form of prose, though poetry, screenplays, fan-made comic books, and other formats can also be covered by the term.

While it gets a little messier when real people and events are involved, already extant fictional universes (called "fandoms" in the lingo) are the bread and butter of fanfiction. Fanfiction.net, currently the world's largest collection of user-submitted fanfiction, has over 800,000 stories on its website in the category of television series alone. A few relevant and random samples of the kinds of TV shows that receive the fandom treatment:⁹

Glee: 79,953 stories

Pretty Little Liars: 2,941 stories

Boardwalk Empire: 77 stories

Law and Order: Special Victims Unit: 11,474 stories

All in the Family: 21 stories

Power Rangers: 14,576 stories

Tales from the Crypt: 2 stories

Dragnet: 8 stories

Parks and Recreation: 161 stories

Young and the Restless: 221 stories

It would be easy to draw general conclusions about what fandoms receive attention based on this random sampling, but usually the numbers won't hold up to any real scrutiny. Do shows marketed to the young get more fanfictions written about them? Yes, but I don't imagine there are too many tweens who diligently watch *Law and Order SVU*, not to mention the high numbers of several longer-running, more elderly targeted shows like *The West Wing* (4,751 stories). Is science fiction as prominent as you would expect? Yes and no, as evidenced by *Stargate: Atlantis* (17,688) and the far

⁸ There is, of course, among geeks at least, a well known counter-proposal on the history of the Internet, propagated by Michael Piller, executive director of several *Star Trek* TV series during the 90s and early 2000s, who claimed that the Internet was invented for *Star Trek* and porn. But that claim is probably more deserving of its own socio-philosophical essay, especially given the obvious Marxism present in the *Star Trek* universe.

⁹ As of September 17, 2012.

superior in every way *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (2,836). Dramas tend to capture the minds of more fanfiction writers than comedies, but a series like *The Office* (no distinction made between the British and American versions, though it could be argued they exist in the same fictional universe anyway¹⁰) nonetheless manages to produce 2,485 stories and *That 70s Show* a respectable 2,098. The only consistent predictor of fandom expression seems to be vigorous exposure, as cult successes that were quickly cancelled and only canonized by critics in recent years (*Twin Peaks* and *Freaks and Geeks* come to mind) receive relatively little attention, given their quality and other traits that might lead you to think otherwise.

And what makes up the content of most fanfiction? Almost exactly what you would imagine. And I mean that in every sense. If you ever thought, “Hey, I wonder what the story was behind that one elf who was eyeing Frodo a little weird in *Lord of the Rings*?” – don’t, because there’s a story about that. If you got home after finally watching James Cameron’s *Avatar* and said to yourself, “I want to write a sequel where those little environmentalist blue bastards finally get theirs!” – don’t, because there’s a story about that, too. Go to fanfiction.net first and see for yourself.

Fanfiction is almost always bad. Badly written, badly conceived, and badly controlled.¹¹ Aside from the *Harry Potter* series, the most popular fanfiction is based on either television or feature-length cinema. Trying to reproduce the style of a heavily visual medium in pure prose is difficult for even experienced fiction writers. For amateurs who thought, “I bet Kirk and Spock secretly wanted to bone all along,” it is a winding path directly to readerly pain. Yet the average reader review on stories involving Kirk/Spock slash (more on that particular term soon) is overwhelmingly positive. Part of the reason for this is that fanfiction, like many passive mediums, only shows itself to those that seek it out. The average *Star Trek* fan who never once considered either Kirk (with his obvious affinity for green women) or Spock homosexual is never likely to find a Kirk/Spock fanfic, and so is likely never to leave a negative review. The other part of the reason for the overwhelmingly positive reviews most fanfiction receive is that most fanfiction readers are fanfiction writers, and the positive-feedback heuristic is very obviously in play here. How hyper-critical can you be of anyone taking liberties with characters when that is precisely your own trade?

Yet if you dig a little further in, gems start to appear. Genuine pieces of worthwhile literary activity. Which brings about a small, important realization: fanfiction is something the world has never seen before. It is a genuinely new field of literature, and that alone is amazing for two reasons:

1. It’s a new fucking field of literature, and
2. It’s a new fucking field of literature that uses the written word.

¹⁰ And which raises all sorts of questions about the meaning of the universe if Michael Scott and David Brent were allowed to exist in the same reality at roughly the same time.

¹¹ Trust me, I know. I’ve read a lot, and I’ve written enough of the bad stuff to see how easy and convenient it is to slip into a shit-spiral that only stops spinning when you hit shit bottom, which is usually composed entirely of clichés, bad metaphors, and scatological humor (see this footnote).

While we will get back to point two later, point one and the unique properties of this new field of literature are worth examining in their own right. Particularly its divergences from traditional literary and genre fiction. The most striking, obviously, is audience. All fanfiction is written for fans who are already well acquainted with the principal source. As such, many of the ancillary bits that can cause a writer crafting his or her own universe unending migraines and diarrheal experiences are foregone entirely.

How do I describe this character? What does this character even look like? How much time to I devote to a setting? How much backstory of this particular character do I disclose? In fanfiction, these problems are dealt with automatically. This is one of fanfiction's allures to both writer and reader – there's comparatively little mental effort required. It's easy. The writer simply begins with a set of characters and backgrounds, even conflicts, and then adds his or her own perspective to the ethos of the series, whether that is a solution to a series-long love triangle or a new super-villain that poses a distinct challenge to a comic book hero. When the writer can take for granted an entire breadth of specific knowledge about the topic at hand, it's simply easier. Historians writing a book for other historians invariably find it easier than writing a general textbook on a given period. It's no different in fiction.

Fanfiction is also known, perhaps even in some small circles of popular culture, for another aspect that is, in many senses, its defining characteristic: The Mary Sue.

A Mary Sue is any character written in a fanfiction who is either (a) perfect in every way or (b) an obvious stand-in for the (female¹²) author of the story.

The Mary Sue is an interesting literary device for a number of reasons, firstly for the frequency with which the author is oblivious to its existence. Authors¹³ often see their Mary Sue as a necessary, wholly relevant, and material character in the fictional universe. Secondly, and in a related point, the Mary Sue is essentially the epitome of fanfiction writing, in the sense of literally inserting oneself into an escapist reality, apart from any other considerations. In a field where the whole point is to make your own thoughts part of someone else's already imagined fiction, what can be more fulfilling than having your own self partake in the action?

The presence of a Mary Sue is different from the practice of many fictional writers (in whatever medium – film, TV, novel, etc.), creating either a semi-perfect protagonist or an obvious stand-in for their own person in two regards:

1. Mary Sue's somehow do not feel right. They are interlopers in the world they inhabit, partly because of the need for extensive descriptions to properly place them in their readers' mind. Even if a number of new characters are introduced throughout a long piece of fanfiction, the Mary Sue always stands out and is usually quite poorly developed compared to other characters. In an original piece of fiction this

¹² The male equivalent is a Gary Stu. They're just as prevalent, but for the purposes of this section I'm referring to Marys, not Garys, and so to the female writers who usually create them. No sexism intended, just more so that I don't have to say "his or her" every time.

¹³ Authors, in this sense, referring especially to mostly younger teenagers, although even the eldest of fanfic writers have fallen victim to the lurking menace of a Mary Sue leering at the reader from across a backlit screen.

is harder to distinguish as, often, the writer's self will be imposed over a number of characters and so the impact of a Mary Sue-style imposition is lessened.¹⁴

2. The writer's inability to discern that they're writing a Mary Sue makes them boring and unsusceptible to meaningful change or danger. A writer writing a book about a writer writing a book will likely have that character undergo some sort of change, because if they don't there is not only no book, but there is no sense of growth which the principal writer (the one writing the book where the main character is a writer) can then reflect back towards themselves. The fanfiction writer's inability to fully immerse themselves in their Mary Sue is, ironically, the thing that keeps them from forming the Mary Sue into a worthwhile character in her own right. There is a sense of backwards investment where the fanfiction writer doesn't want anything bad to happen to their Mary Sue because the Mary Sue is so obviously a stand-in for themselves, but since this renders the Mary Sue directionless and boring, the writer fails to consider what that may be saying about herself. It's all very confusing and meta.

There are other elements of fanfiction, especially elements that often lead to (the prevalence of) bad fanfiction, which will be covered in due time, but as a general overview of fanfiction, this is a good beginning.

Now it would be disingenuous to ignore the basic fact that for several well-known fandoms, including *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, fanfiction has existed for decades. Novelizations of the original films or television shows have existed since the 1980s and in many senses lay down the framework for modern day fanfiction.¹⁵ However, for the purposes of this essay, I'd like to propose that the published TV series tie-ins, movie novelizations, and video game-to-book adaptations that can be purchased on Amazon today are not fanfiction in the same sense the user-generated content on fanfiction.net is. The reason for that is quite simple: fanfiction, in its purest sense, is free. And free is the one thing the Internet does better than any other medium.

IT'S PROBABLY HARD TO IMAGINE something less cool than fanfiction. Indeed, even as a teenager, when I wrote heaps of the stuff, I did so in seclusion and fear that my real (ie. not online) friends would find out and shame me into a translucent, redheaded spiral of puddledom.

So imagine my surprise when, near the end of the hell that was high school, I discovered not just one, or two, but many individuals who all wrote fanfiction of their own. And these people were not just the geeks I'd already been associating with my whole life, but even those on the edge of objective levels of cool.

¹⁴ And in some cases, like Tina Fey's "Liz Lemon" character on *30 Rock*, the character/creator's self-identification is in many ways principle to the fictional universe itself. *30 Rock* without Liz Lemon/Tina Fey is just an unfunny documentary about *Saturday Night Live* and the inner workings of NBC. With her, it's a funny one.

¹⁵ This is, admittedly, ignoring the reams of fanfiction that existed prior to the Internet, mostly spread through homemade printing presses publishing fanzines and fan-made comics. These profitless collectives are the true precursors to modern fanfiction but lacked the mass-consumptive qualities of modern fanfiction and officially produced novelizations *et al.*

At the time I brushed this off as those people being just as uncool as me, but on reconsideration I think there may be something integral to this collusion. We'll get there soon.

WHILE IT IS EASY TODAY, WITH the dozens of websites offering free pornography, to clump porn into the web of things the Internet has de-monetized, the history of porn on the web is actually a lot more convoluted, and a lot more connected to the history of the Internet itself.

Porn on the Internet has essentially existed since the first popular Internet browser (Netscape) achieved that early popularity in the 1990s, around the time Windows 95 was released. Early on, Internet porn was limited to the use of the tag that let people put pictures on the web so that anyone with the right browser could download and see them.

And it didn't take long to realize that people (and by people I mean men) were willing to pay money for porn, especially if the eggheads behind the tag could be bothered to figure out a way to make porn websites usable and if they could figure out a way to make the transaction from customer to provider hassle-free for both parties. While it took several more years, until eBay's acquisition of PayPal, to provide a semblance of ease-of-payment online, it was porn websites that first instituted the secure HTTP system we use everyday to process credit card numbers.

Similarly, it was porn websites that could first afford to pay for the nascent group of geeks who called themselves "web designers," and who realized that placing one image on top of the other in a never-ending list was not the best way to present information on a computer screen, whether they were noted works of historical art or pictures of vaginas. While the lead in web design is now taken up by online behemoths like Google, specialized and highly talented design firms, and moonlighters with a knack for the visual, it was porn that laid the groundwork for websites that no longer used scrolling marquees, nested tables, and a little pink unicorn that followed your cursor around the screen.¹⁶

In fact, it wasn't until the web 2.0 and social media revolution in the 2003-06 range that the history of the Internet diverged from the history of porn on the Internet. The technical requirements, usability principles, and commercialization which characterized the dot com bubble as well as the early web 2.0 aftermath were conquered by porn first.

And why was that? A lot of it boils down to that key fact that people were willing to pay. Prior to web 2.0, the Internet looked a lot like Dave Chappelle's characterization of it on *The Chappelle Show*.¹⁷ The Internet was a shopping mall, with distinct stores offering different products. Most of those stores were porn, but the idea was there: the Internet was just like the real world, except virtual. The money in the Internet in those

¹⁶ Even today online pornography continues to lead in some web-interface implementation, including tagclouds, user-generated content, search of video, video recommendations, and mobile-site variants.

¹⁷ Season 2, Episode 6: "If the Internet was a real place." Awesomeness. For a quick summary: Dave Chappelle enters a suburb shopping mall that stands in for the Internet, and is instantly deluged with offers of increasingly strange pornography.

days was in offering things cheaper than you could get them at a physical store, since the nature of the Internet meant the overhead was lower. That's how Amazon.com operates, for example.

But with porn, it didn't have to be cheaper (it did eventually get cheaper, but due purely to huge levels of competition), it just had to be anonymous and easy.

Porn before the Internet was painful to get. You had to get dressed, you had to go to a sex shoppe with creepy people behind the counter. You had to pay hugely inflated prices for one magazine that had very obviously been flipped through by a bunch of perverts just like you. You got one type of porn, and if you paid for a video, you had to watch it on what was likely the only TV in the house with a VCR (unless you were upper middle class in the 90s and had a TV/VCR combo in the bedroom): the one in the living room. Porn was not cool, in other words.¹⁸

Internet porn was infinitely better. You simply closed the door to the office, and, assuming you had a decent Internet connection, you could even watch videos instantly. No waiting, and no embarrassing drive to the neighbourhood sexporium (and no awkward questions from your kids, wife, or roommate on what was in the black plastic bag). If it cost \$49.95 a month for a site that only updated its cache of images once a week, and only added a new 55 second video clip once a month, it didn't matter. It was cheaper and better than what was available elsewhere. The Internet made porn cool.

On top of being better, Internet porn was also freer, in a number of ways. While most sex stores had a variety of different pornographic genres, the sheer variety available on the Internet was overwhelming. Almost as soon as a fetish came into existence, there was a site to exploit it for \$49.95 a month. And there was no creepy clerk to rush you in your decision on whether to go for the Japanese-animated hentai porn or the equally shaming German "Urine-mania" series. The anonymity of the Internet freed the porn-loving populace from what had been instant, unrepentant shame. The first time someone downloaded the most disgusting, deepest-desiring sado-masochistic porn they could have ever imagined, climaxed, and then didn't hear any sirens from the morality police or receive a disapproving look from their spouse upon discovery of the video, the sense of freedom must have been unparalleled. Here was a system where individuals could be absolutely free in their sexual expression.¹⁹

¹⁸ This may be the most contentious statement in this essay, and while I don't know if dealing with it via footnote is actually good enough, it will have to do. Essentially, to help make a broad-level definition of cool as pertains to a topic like pornography, it's necessary to consider the general public mores and pop-culture depictions of them in the film, literature, and other cultural relics of the time. Consider pornography as it was depicted in the 1980s, the last decade before the Internet, and how it is depicted in the Internet world. In the earlier age, pornography (especially hardcore pornography) is still a hidden, secret scourge that is symbolic of badness, evil, and general licentiousness. "Only losers need pornography" is, essentially, the moral overtone. Then think of pornography as displayed now – ubiquitous, normal, even blasé. The moral shift is as clear as can be imagined. Everybody watches porn now. Not just the losers but the cool kids, too.

As mentioned, that freedom did eventually take on an economic aspect as well. At first through unlicensed sites that simply hacked into paid websites and reposted their content on a free to access server, but eventually user-submitted porn, whether acquired legally or not, became the foremost source of free porn. Just like the rest of the Internet, crowdsourcing (the use of large numbers of unpaid users to generate content) became the preeminent way to amass the best content and, short of censoring, the worst content as well. If the Internet is the Wild West, porn and fanfiction are right on the edges, killing people indiscriminately and not in a million years about to be policed.

THAT FREEDOM IS THE COMMON THREAD between the two Internet phenomena. Both fanfiction and porn thrive on the Internet due to its ease of concealment and its indulgence of pleasures usually too guilty to admit. They are also both helping to mainstream the consumption of themselves. Just as the annual Adult Entertainment Expo held each year in Las Vegas grows and attracts more “normal” people, including straight women in healthy relationships (once thought to never watch porn), fanfiction is openly shared by writers in small groupings across the country.²⁰ These fanfiction writers even come out as single, attractive women (once thought to never have an imagination). Cool people, the inter-subjectively cool, even, are being openly exposed to the peripheries of geekdom.

The other places where fanfiction and porn interact are also noteworthy. The most obvious one has existed since at least the 70s²¹ – the always cringe-worthy/hilarious field of porn parodies. Many of the modern parodies of blockbusters have decent production values, try to stick to some sort of plot, and are genuinely better crafted than most other porn. And just like fanfiction, they serve to fill the gaps that people’s imaginations naturally want to fill. In lieu of a slow pan away from two Hollywood starlets, we get a close-up of less talented (or at least less well-connected) actresses’ nether regions. The audience of the original already knew what was going on; porn parodies simply show it to you in all the detail regular cinema isn’t allowed to.

Another interesting intersection is the still nascent field of cosplay pornography. Cosplay, a shortening of “costume play,” is essentially visual, sexualized fanfiction that

¹⁹ Now this freedom has obviously been dangerous in that some people’s sexual desires touch on sex advice columnist Dan Savage’s four no-noes: pedophilia, necrophilia, bestiality, and shit-eating. “Two Girls, One Cup” isn’t as devastating to lives as child pornography, but the fact that visual depictions of dangerous sex acts are common on the Internet is worth noting. With the freedom of Internet porn came responsibility. And luckily for the libertarians, anarchists, and closeted, gay-bashing, gay neoconservatives of the world, the Internet has thus far managed to avoid becoming a dangerous place for one to seek out sexual acts between consenting adults. Many YouTube-like upload sites include a link to alert the webmasters to child pornography or other such porn, and local, national and international law enforcement agencies have set up anonymous tip lines to help catch criminals, while leaving alone those, for example, who like to see animated characters get peed on.

²⁰ Though obviously they usually meet at anime, comic, and *Star Trek* conventions.

²¹ This was as far back as I dared look. Though surely *Gone with the Wind*’s enormous box office results merited a highly racialized 1930s pornographic take on the Jim Crow South. If not, a 201X one is in order.

focuses more often on the female characters in a fandom and is a still burgeoning field in porn's vast armament of money-devouring apparatuses.²² The connection to fanfiction is fairly clear-cut, especially when many of the sites that feed the fetish do so by soliciting scene requests from fans. This intercession by pornography in the fandoms of the geeky isn't really surprising, though; the somewhat surprising is waiting back in the land of fanfiction.

Most geeks have wondered just what happened after one particular scene of the role-playing game *Final Fantasy VII*.²³ In the scene, Cloud (the male main character) and Tifa (the female) are left alone on a deserted landscape by a slow pan of the camera upwards, just prior to the conclusion of the game. The nature of the pan effect and the fact that the two characters have been dancing around as love interests for the whole game leave the scene open to interpretation. Fanfiction writers, however, take it upon themselves to describe, in vivid detail, just how each character, they believe, behaved. For example:

But his hands have ventured towards my underwear, fingers slipping underneath the hem and pulling them downwards until they came across my knees. I kicked them off and he brought back his lips to mine. The kiss was different; this one was not chaste, not romantic. It fuelled our need and was all lust. I had my legs around him again and he pressed his evident erection that was still constrained by his clothes against my lower abdomen. I placed my hand on his bare chest where I could feel the pounding of his heart, moving faster and stronger than the last time I'd heard it. I wondered if mine was doing the same.

– From *Insomnia* by Ava Chanel on Fanfiction.net²⁴

The graphic nature of this Tifa/Cloud fiction is typical of the more mature, sexually advanced realms of fanfiction. While not a large majority of what is available on Fanfiction.net, “adult” or “mature” fanfics are prevalent enough to demand their own unique type of disclaimer. Deprived of the more raw, sexual elements that are obligatorily omitted in the original television show or video game, fanfiction fills the natural void of information and can be as detailed, direct, and dirty as wanted.

Where it really starts to get dicey is fanfiction's other defining predilection: alternate relationships. Whether it was a dream couple that very obviously should have dated on *The Office* or incestual romances in *Dragonball Z*, one of the defining niches of fanfiction is the depiction of relationships that never happened in the original series. And many of these relationships become very, very explicit and very, very sexual in

²² It should be noted that cosplay is not by nature pornographic. Nonsexualized, though highly fetishized, cosplay is practiced safely by tens of thousands of fans who enjoy going to conventions and other meetups dressed in their favourite characters' garbs. Generic cosplay is actually closer to wearing the jersey of your favourite sports team than anything sinister or inherently dirty. But the porn version is definitely worth noting.

²³ *Final Fantasy VII* is also notable in my memory as the first item (whether game, movie, whatever) that someone I considered cool took a natural interest in. They “borrowed” my game player's manual, and never returned it. This was a further landmark in the geeks-as-cool disease.

²⁴ <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/7565683/1/Insomnia> – Accessed Dec. 8, 2011. Although it should be noted the scene quoted didn't actually take place after the fade-away featured in the game. But still, it's the characters getting it on.

the hands of fans with little regard for character continuity.

Sexuality, according to all the latest science, operates as more of a spectrum of interests rather than firm, fixed ends that never waver. Yet even the most open-minded sex therapist would likely be amazed at the fluidity with which fanfiction writers move characters' sexual orientations. Captain Kirk and Commander Spock are probably the most famous and easily pointed-to example, as their canonical relationship bears all the trademarks of being ripe for fanfiction *slash*.

Slash describes a type of relationship in fanfiction in which two previously unattached characters of the same gender are romantically or sexually linked. Usually, the characters that are paired together in a slash fanfic have some strong bonds of friendship in the original fandom, which fanfiction writers invariably interpret on a level obviously not intended by the original creators of the characters.²⁵

So whether it's Kirk and Spock sharing longing glances across the bridge on the Enterprise or Spider-Man and Venom in a very sticky sex scene, slash is yet another outlet for the unencumbered and redirected creativity that seems to sit in a lot of us.

But it's not just fanfiction that serves up that sexually charged creativity. Various pornography sites now post user-submitted sex stories. Essentially mature, purely sexual fanfiction removed from a fandom, these stories rarely bother with characterization and make even the worst slash fanfics seem well planned and obsessed with character. Reading the most popular sex stories reflects the purpose of the stories themselves: masturbation. Like most porn, written porn doesn't waste much time with preamble: it gets down to business. Some stories appear to be nothing more than a string of verbs, adjectives, and adverbs describing various genitalia and the interactions between them. And if you're looking for something a bit softer, there are less direct, less in-your-face erotica collections available online too.²⁶ Between these multitudes of sexual verbiage a rather deep and nuanced spectrum of erotic material is available to, and created by, your neighbours, bosses, church-board members, and the like.

And that's the lynchpin binding all these disparate aspects together: just how dependent they are on the Internet for their success. All the properties that have come to define the modern web – managed anonymity, collaboration, creativity, instant gratification, etc. – are uniquely positioned to work best for fanfiction and porn. Most of the other services the Internet supplies best, including research and media consumption, are lacking at least one of the qualities that pornography and fanfiction leverage so well. It's for this reason that my basic thesis holds true. The world is a less cool place, and the Internet is to blame. Fanfiction and porn are just the two examples that show this best.

²⁵ And before you ask, yes, slash can include the graphically intense sexual encounters described above. But it can also be rather tame, even almost subliminal. There are, naturally, no rules.

²⁶ A great example of this type of literary porn is the recently popular *50 Shades of Grey*, a piece of work that started off as *Twilight* fanfiction and owes its mainstream acceptance mostly to the ubiquitousness of porn in even the most conservative of bedrooms. In other words, it owes everything to the Internet.

AND WHAT'S AT THE CENTRE OF this general loss of cool? Is it the general empowerment of the geeks that my parents were sure was coming seventeen years ago?²⁷ Some sort of cool death-drive from the collective unconsciousness?²⁸ My proposal is much simpler than all these and again drives back to the mass addiction the Internet has conditioned people to and, most importantly, the form the information which makes up that addiction takes.

Words.

The world is a lot less cool now than it was in the 1990s because people have to use written words to communicate once again. Written words take away about 83% of all the factors that go into real, physical, face-to-face human communication. Those were the 83%, I'm convinced, that cool people used to communicate their coolness. But the Internet doesn't need them. All the Internet needs is written words. And what better training to excel in an uncool world than watching porn and writing fanfiction?

Obviously, it's not just these two portions of the Internet that are dependent on the written word. Anyone who's fallen victim to Poe's Law²⁹ knows how dangerous and important writing has become on the Internet, and how the ability to write for the Internet is a unique skill befitting the medium and the expectations of readers. Even in day-to-day life, posting something on your own Facebook wall, or someone else's, is dependent on the ability to express yourself in writing. While Skype and webcams and camera phones and all manner of other new technologies have altered, and will continue to alter, the fundamental makeup of how people interact with information in the coming years, the overwhelming wealth of information available on the Internet as well as the simplistic, static nature of text and technical limitations of the Internet itself mean text will continue to be an important format for a generation of content generators.

That is why there were cool people writing fanfiction even ten years ago. Why pornography has become commonplace in the public psyche. The human brain is having its literary and pornographic muscles flexed more often than anyone in 1995 could have predicted. The Internet has created a new cool, and a new normal, and neither of them looks like anything anyone could have predicted just fifteen years ago.

So while my parents may have had many fears about me in the 1990s, at least one of them, my desire to do something involving words, worked out okay. More or less. After they read this essay, they may have some second thoughts.

²⁷ To a certain extent I think this is an even more interesting examination regarding the devolution of cool. Since geeky skills, generally, are more valued in today's knowledge economy than they were even in the mid 1990s, the fact that the rich kids are now the children of geeks may have more to do with it than anything else. Once genuinely smart, uncool people overwhelm the financial sector, the era of alpha-male testosterone-driven creations of cool will be unstable due to those individuals lacking the resources to support their definition of cool.

²⁸ And, having used up all the psychology terms I know, I'll move this along quickly.

²⁹ Look it up on Wikipedia. Or Google it. Or, if this is the year 2048 and there is a chip in your head as you digitally imbibe this essay, perform some sort of search to discover Poe's Law. Or at least the 2012 Wikipedia entry on it.

DARYL SNEATH

Hidden scars *a suite of poems*

No scar

Lulled by the pendulous thwunk
of wipers & quiet rain
we glide over land like wind over water
& the road is the rope that pulls us home
through the city by the sea

Closed, your eyelids flicker with the forecast of storm & you dream

his brown sweater the cigar smell a cliff by the sea

Against the gust
you hug yourself & squint

A dory appears
bobbing in the black water, unmanned

The sea fills with searchlights
& men in their boats of rescue

When they return to shore
you see nothing but sad wet faces

The wake: black clothes & bagpipes & beer
old photos arranged on a table in the living room

You steal one & run outside
stand in his garden like a scarecrow in the rain

The stolen picture: you on his shoulders at a parade
watching the fisherman Santa in a boat pulled by reindeer

You yawn & rub your eyes, remember the sturdiness of lookouts

On the cliff, we went where it said not to

I cut my hand on a rock stepping down

We lit a candle you had waterproof matches
The wind blew it out the sea's breath you called it

It was the anniversary but that's not why we went
We don't celebrate those you said

Driving away you wiped the window with your sleeve
watched the lighthouse shrink away in the fog
then the city then the island

At home, before you left, you wrote this in the book of Cohen poems:
I wish everything was that greyed green & blue

So you & I encounter

The field by our building is not a park
but people walk there

Dogs tear down the foot worn path by the river at night
unhurried owners without leashes behind

There's a sign
but I fish the river anyway

part of this stamp of undeveloped green
cut into the city streets
a collector's item you said

I see you Sundays the woman who wears dresses
spread on a blanket under a tree with your book

One morning I walked by & a breeze ruffled the pages
Your toes curled & you shivered

We were neighbours first
I borrowed a candle once
We strolled in the park

That's what you called it

It felt like home & you asked
Isn't it strange how we seem so unbothered by the space

As many nights endure

That was the summer we met I held up my fingers like a frame
"to capture stilled essence"

the summer we surrendered our shoes
bathed naked in rivers & shallow bays

ate berries & the flesh of fish we snagged
with hooks of sharpened wire

fell asleep after sex in the sun
entangled lulled by the warmth of suntanned skin

We gave life to campfire characters
made a game of it & became drunk on stolen beer

& now the power's out again
I find the box of candles & blankets you packed the matches

The book you used to read from during storms
opens in my hands to the poem about the mist

a sunfaded photograph of summer stuck there

the musty tent our rusted red Echo a canoe
you in the bow on one knee
searching in earnest for signs of water

I remember when you said this:
Some memories are like the ache of hidden scars on days of rain

RON EVANS

St. John's diary

1.

Gwen said, twice,
nothing matters, nothing dies

and so, I drink (and drink)
appeasing these few stubborn liver cells
still left,
what matters, dies

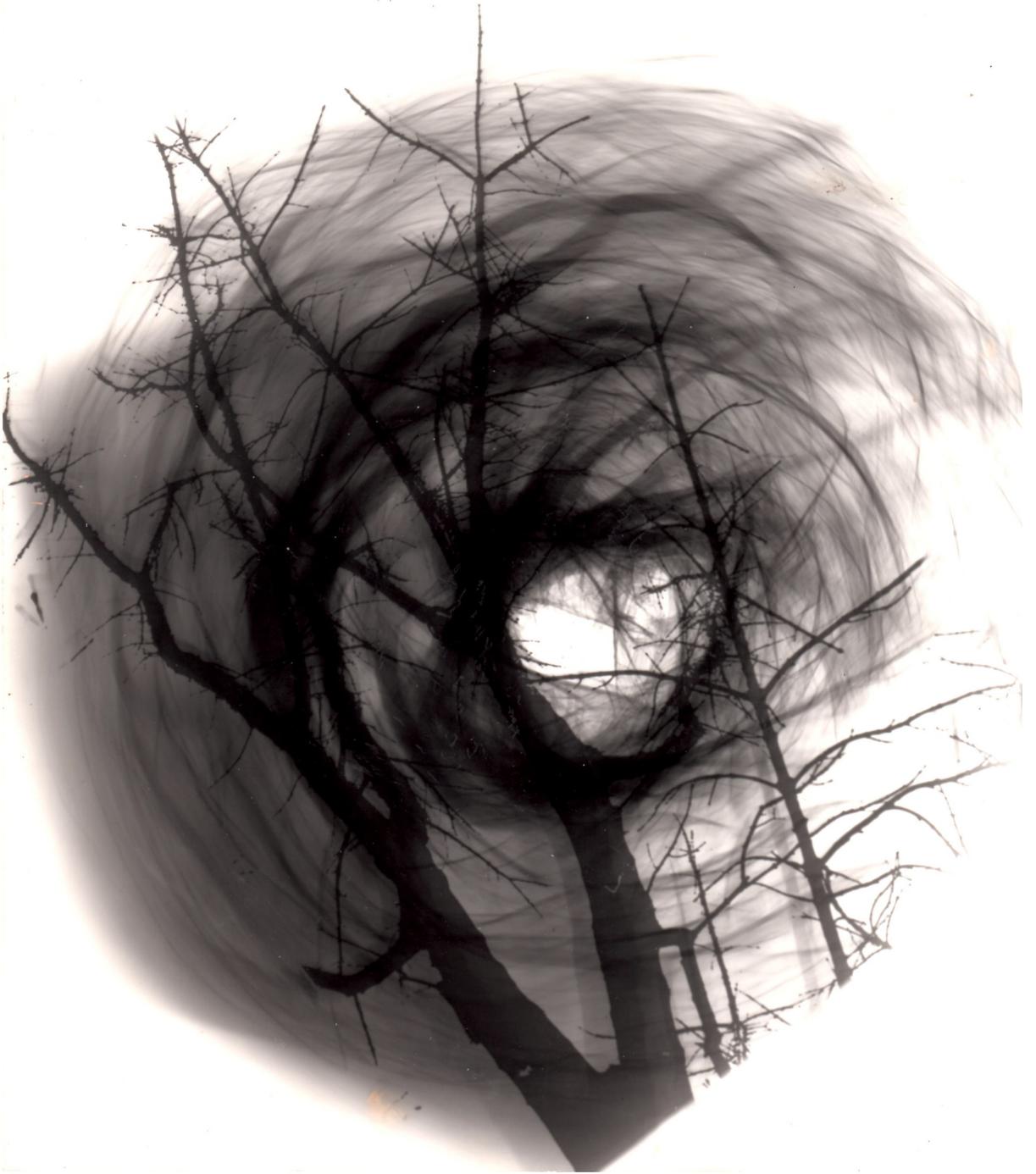
and yet
I remain, drinking,
alive,
not
mattering ...

2.

I taste
the tongues of this wind
there is no
effing Bay Street
bloody Danforth;
this is a breeze
I, my sneakers,
can
work with

the feet discard their
mean bony hooves
of urban paranoia,
and
sleep, until

dawn



... the eyes speak all they are brown going off
directionless belonging to him submerged she whispers
smoky ginny borrows me and returns me in the morning ...

and the quiet ensues,
the irregular
gentleman
sighs,

wanting to
buy a round
for the whole
wink of a province
and die from
second-hand
hospitality;

buy

the song
off
the ocean.

3.

lapping the salts these
ancient hands
ripe with the grace of
shield-green sunrise I blink in
Gord Downie sleepless beauty I become
horizon in reverse
paying the old man a
victory nickel a
very fair fare for this
spontaneous tourist
with a shimmer'd Tuesday morning
dangling on these needy lost lips,
ridden shotgun at thirty-eight thou
dropped in the
spleen of beauty.

4.

up up more up
pooped Queen for a day
all for country

Victoria Avenue

rigored,

unquenchable,
moose-stained and pot-holy,
I dig your chub

and

I climb these
sheer insufferable hills to
foggy heart attack,
hunkered

you have never stopped
shivering.

5.

riding th' byke
circling, screaming
I've come to take you home;
the shudders
the clarity the
yes ...

the smoke fogs this
pale Ontario nose and
I am
healing,
I
am ...

and everything is 2x4, chipping,
duct-tape couture,
Monet-leached,
burning the ancestral eyes
the basic improvised grouts long since
gone,
held up by muck,
nicotine
and now,
bladder deep in Blue Star territory, I fail, into
jagged rustle, salted
vocabularies

and today
I'm merely a trickle
but one day I will be a Harbour
with a U
not an American concrete bunker
the groggy sun will be my
morning's
first lover,
earlier than the sailing mists,
and I will look back on you,
invent

my own
way
home.

TIM LEHNERT

Not a good fit

JUST BEFORE ELEVEN STU CALLED ME INTO HIS OFFICE AND SAID IT WASN'T A GOOD FIT.

I returned to my desk and called Maintenance Level to see if he'd come pick me up. I didn't feel like waiting for the bus after I'd just been canned.

ML said he and Short Arms Short Legs were writing songs, but that he'd swing by. Twenty minutes later they showed up: ML at the wheel of his ancient oversized Buick, Short Arms Short Legs riding shotgun, plentifully tattooed and wearing a cap composed of mesh and foam. I'd known ML since elementary school and Short Arms Short Legs almost as long, although not nearly as well.

I slid into the car behind ML. His hair was freshly cut, and I could see beads of sweat just above the collar of his golf shirt. He leaned forward to put in a CD, and the seat's headrest bisected the smoke streaming from his cigarette.

ML asked me what happened; I wasn't in the mood for talking but reprised my conversation with Stu anyway. Short Arms Short Legs snorted and said "Stu" was a gay name. He repeated it over and over, "Stew, Stew, Stew." He thought it was all a big lark, getting fired.

WE STOPPED AT THE BANK TO cash my final paycheck. Since I was now flush, I sprang for lunch at the Penalty Box. I'd planned to treat ML, but was annoyed that Short Arms Short Legs didn't offer to help pay when I took the bill from the waitress. He was on EI and never threw in for anything; he felt he shouldn't have to.

We ordered a pitcher of beer with our meal, and I felt dazed when we emerged from the restaurant. I was looking forward to a nap, but before I could ask ML to take me home, Short Arms Short Legs suggested we buy a case of beer and drink it in the park. ML quickly agreed. His shift at the casino wasn't until eight that night, and he needed to relax. I shrugged okay; I didn't want to be a killjoy, and it's not like I had any pressing engagements.

Maintenance Level and Short Arms Short Legs argued over what beer to get and as an afterthought asked me, since I was the one who'd just lost his job. I said I didn't care and they settled on Heineken, which Short Arms Short Legs allowed that he would drink, even though he thought it tasted like piss-water. ML explained that he wanted a beverage that wouldn't take you too high, or too low.

We got back in the car and Short Arms Short Legs said a little weed would be in order and he had some at his place, if his roommate hadn't filched it. This was a new word he'd taken up and he used it any time he could, telling ML, "Don't let that dude filch your parking spot," exclaiming when I mistakenly grabbed his fork at the restaurant, "Don't filch my utensil," and elbowing me as the clerk rang up the beer, "These prices are nothing short of highway filchery!"

WE PARKED OUTSIDE SHORT ARMS SHORT LEGS'S building, and he raced in while ML and I waited. I was about to ask ML how things were going at the casino – his last job, pre-paid funeral arrangements, hadn't worked out – but Short Arms Short Legs was back with the pot before I got the chance. We drove to Grosvenor Park and lay down on the far side of the tennis courts underneath a large tree, our case of beer obscured by some shrubs. It was very hot, and nobody was playing, except a few kids hacking around, chasing balls all over the cracked green cement. Eventually they got bored and left, and for a while the courts were empty, until two girls, university students probably, showed up and started playing. One had a great body and wore a tennis skirt that flapped up whenever she ran, providing a great view of her ass, which we discussed at length.

When the girls had finished playing, Short Arms Short Legs called out and offered them a beer. The one with the ass said, "No thanks, guys," and clanked the court door closed without turning around. ML told Short Arms Short Legs to shut up, because, who knew, these girls could go running to the park attendant crying about some guys drinking beer and bothering them, and we didn't need that. Short Arms Short Legs called ML a fag and an old lady, but quieted down.

IT WAS ALMOST SIX WHEN WE LEFT. We'd finished the weed and were out of beer, even though I'd gone on foot for more just after the tennis girls had left. Before we got to the car, I went for a piss in the clammy washroom. I felt drunk and weavy, and tried to remember if the latter was a real word. ML walked in, washed his face and hands, and said we needed to get going.

Maintenance Level piloted the Buick expertly, as if he hadn't drunk beer and smoked pot all afternoon. I sprawled in back, and the vehicle seemed to move on tracks like a train rather than drive like a car. The maroon upholstery was soft and warm like velour. It felt good against my arms and smelled of smoke, and I asked for a cigarette, even though I'd quit months before. I thought of the song "Velouria" and tried to remember if it was about velour or a woman or something else. How could there be a song about velour? Unlikely, but "Velouria" wasn't a name. Or was it? Short Arms Short Legs threw me a cigarette from the front and said, "Now you're even filching my smokes," as if he'd given me something before. I didn't respond. I thought about how intricate it all was: the streets, the cars, the telephone poles, the traffic lights. I marvelled at the way the sidewalks had been placed ingeniously in between the stores and the street, just so.

SHORT ARMS SHORT LEGS WANTED TO get a pizza, but ML vetoed it – he needed to get home and shower before work. A few minutes later, ML pulled up in front of Short Arms Short Legs's building. Short Arms Short Legs got out, pushed the car door closed with his foot, and, standing on the sidewalk, pantomimed playing guitar while scrunching up his face and uttering, "Nuh-nuh nee-nee nuh-nuuuh neeh." Maintenance Level told him to write it down. It was only a little further to my place, so I stayed in back. The car moved forward, things began to spin, and I couldn't speak.

I remembered my conversation with Stu earlier in the day and wished there weren't so many stops and starts. Things were swaying too much and were weavy, and I didn't care if that was a real word or not or what "Velouria" was about. I wanted to say unpleasant things about Short Arms Short Legs to ML but didn't, because it seemed like they had become close friends. I wondered when that had happened and was disappointed in Maintenance Level. I guessed it was their band, Antwerp, or whatever it was called these days, that provided the glue.

ML let me off in front of my building. As I got out, I saw the 6:19 bus I usually took home go sailing past two blocks away. It was a coincidence that I wanted to share with Maintenance Level, but he was already pulling from the curb.

LUCILE BARKER

Fog

The other side of the street has become a mystery,
the buildings rumours.

We go to the beach,
past the grey boat

 that carries grey stone
 to make grey concrete
 to pave grey streets.

It slides out of the harbour and into the white mist.
We park and the spit across the channel has disappeared.

I am sure that we are at the edge of the world,
that if the water was frozen,

I could walk out on it,
 step off

 fall
 into another universe.

There is a plane high above us, running on radar.
A truck rumbles in the distance,
probably loaded with landfill to make the spit bigger,
if not more visible.

Then out of the white cotton a row of sailboarders appear,
their masts sharper than the downtown towers.

A sailboat under power pulls by.
I wish it had glided though the mist to us.

The sailboarders disappear,
a chorus line hidden by special effects.

The cormorants sing,
 a tribe banging drums
 to chase an eclipse.

We are lost but know where we are.

A blade of grass

A BLADE OF GRASS, BRUSHING REBECCA'S THIGH.

It can only be Sebastian. He's lying behind her on a beach-towel. No one else but the gulls drifting overhead can see what is going on, which suggests to Rebecca (who does not usually philosophize about things) that the truth requires not the right information but simply the correct perspective – a perspective which Evelyn, Sebastian's wife, lying on the other side of her, does not have.

"Nobody would have guessed he was that kind of a man," Evelyn says, plucking a raisin from a Tupperware. "An abusive man. Lilly had no idea until they were married."

"How awful," Rebecca says. Glancing over, she sees her own figure reflected back in Evelyn's sunglasses: a sprawled-out woman in a bikini, overshadowed by Sebastian's outline.

"By the time they were married, of course, it was too late. Lilly felt she had to stick with him. God, the things she put up with. Sultanas?"

Evelyn is offering the Tupperware. Rebecca does not like raisins, least of all fat ones like these, which remind her of flies, wrinkled old flies whose wings have fallen off, but she pinches out a cluster. Reaching back, she casually passes a few to Sebastian, relishing the moment that her fingers brush against his palm, though wondering if she shouldn't have done that, wondering if it looked suspicious to Evelyn – because, of course, even a little mistake could give away the truth: *I've been fucking your husband since last October.*

Evelyn is gazing toward her children: "David, Matthew, are you hungry?"

The boys are two-and-a-half-year-old twins, digging holes by the shoreline with Rebecca's husband Patrick. In the distance is an iceberg, a bluish-white mountain of crystal, haloed by a whirl of gulls.

"Beautiful day," Rebecca says.

"Mm," Evelyn says, and calls out more loudly: "Are you hungry, boys?"

SEBASTIAN IS BRUSHING HER THIGH AGAIN. A blade of grass, yes, or something like that, something which in the hands of anybody else might tickle her or annoy her. What Rebecca senses, though, is not really the grass but Sebastian's fingers pinched around the stalk, and Sebastian's hand leading up to his arm, and his shoulder and neck and handsome head; what she perceives, in fact, is the silky brush of Sebastian's mind tracing itself over her skin. Her goose pimples are rising, tiny volcanoes of thrill, erupting everywhere.

"Boys!"

The boys, rebelling against their mother's call, have abandoned their buckets and pails and are running along the shoreline. Patrick is jogging after them, waving reassurances to Evelyn. She gives a sigh, smiling, and turns back to Rebecca.

The bright sun has brought out the age in Evelyn's face: the deep parentheses around her mouth, the paleness of the lips, the wrinkles stitched about her neckline.

"Is she all right now?" Rebecca says. "Your sister."

"Lilly's fine, I suppose. Of course it took her years to stop blaming herself. She thought everything was her fault. Even the fact that he tried to kidnap the children."

"Kidnap?"

"He tried to take them back to Africa."

"God, I can't imagine."

"It wasn't kidnapping from his point of view," Sebastian says, tracing the blade of grass a little higher, nudging Rebecca's bum. Ripples of pleasure spread through her belly and across the sand and the waters of the bay and the ribs of the clouds. The whole earth is shivering because of Sebastian's touch. Evelyn has begun fingering her raisins, probing something with a ruffled brow. Rebecca scissors her legs apart a little, inviting Sebastian to carry on, to take it further, to risk getting caught.

To risk: to explode the truth.

She imagines it, the exploded truth, splattered over the beach, black as tar. Everybody dripping in the ugly truth.

"It was culturally reasonable from his point of view."

"A hair," mutters Evelyn, plucking it out of the container, holding it up against the breeze. "Disgusting."

"Yuck," Rebecca says.

"Wait, it's only Matthew's." She lifts up her sunglasses, inspecting closely. "Yes, it's his colour. Thank God. And I thought it was a rat's." Evelyn smiles at Rebecca, then glances at Sebastian: "How could it be reasonable from *any* point of view? I mean, really?" Pushing her glasses back up, she turns and looks down the beach.

Rebecca draws up her legs. For a minute they're all watching Patrick and the boys making their way toward a low cliff.

"And those poor children of hers," Evelyn murmurs, leaning back on her elbows. "The way he just took them. Thank God they only got as far as the airport. The police caught him just as they were boarding the plane. A matter of minutes and they would have gotten away."

"Lucky," Rebecca says.

"Lucky is right. But you know, that was just one of the things he did to her. She put up with years of abuse. Years and years. You would never have known. Never have guessed."

"Lilly is a passive woman," Sebastian says. "That didn't help things."

"*Was* a passive women, you mean. In the end she fought back. Almost scratched his eyes out, for goodness' sake. Serves him right, though, he pushed her too far." Evelyn waves to Patrick and the boys, who have reached the cliff and are gazing up at the sandy ascent.

"Who's coming for a swim?" Sebastian says.

Rebecca notices his shadow rising to its feet and peeling off its shadowy tee-shirt, casting it aside. As he walks down toward the beach he comes into full view and for

a moment both women are watching him intently: the thick shoulders and back, the Rodin musculature. A man carved from rock. He strides into the cold water and continues without flinching until he's up to the waist. Then he dives in and begins swimming.

"It must be freezing," Evelyn says.

REBECCA REACHES BACK WITH HER HAND and immediately finds the thing that was brushing her – though what she feels is not a blade of grass but more like a thread, as if from a rope. An old, discarded fishing rope?

Flicking it aside, she wonders if it wasn't really Sebastian who was brushing her, or even the wind, but something else, something almost unbelievable: what if Evelyn, through some secret power, a kind of jealous magic, had willed the thread to tumble up against Rebecca's thigh and to brush her and make her think it was Sebastian? What if Evelyn has been toying with her all along?

Don't be paranoid, she thinks, turning toward Evelyn's bug-eyed glasses: "Freezing, definitely."

"Amazing he can take it," Evelyn says.

They look toward the cliff. Patrick and David are standing at the top, squatting under a plateau of grass that is jutting over them like a misaligned toupee. They wave, and the women wave back.

"Sometimes I think I've got Lilly's problem," Evelyn says. "I'm passive, too passive."

"You think? I've never seen you that way."

"Oh yes, and the worst thing is, it can be so *comfortable*. Like a state of surrender. Rather than taking charge you just let things happen. You become content with apathy."

"Well, I suppose I can get pretty apathetic too," Rebecca says, digging her toes into the hot sand. "Perfectly normal, isn't it?"

"Really? Doesn't it get to you after a while? I'll find myself angry, sometimes, furiously angry but for no reason at all. And I'll get irrational thoughts that are completely unlike me. Completely! That's how it is with feelings, I guess. You get swept away. You fantasize about things that you shouldn't be fantasizing about, like hurting people. Poor Lilly, she almost blinded him. Here they go, now."

PATRICK IS BOUNDING DOWN THE SLOPE in long lunges while holding David under the armpits in front of him. Leap, leap, leap. Within seconds they reach the bottom, tumbling into a pile of sand where Matthew is waiting.

"Patrick is so good with children," Evelyn says. "He'll make a devoted father."

He will, Rebecca thinks. I only wish I loved him.

The two women look toward the bay. Sebastian is still swimming straight out toward the faraway iceberg, his arms cutting vigorously through the glinting waves. There are more gulls in the sky, circling widely and slowly like vultures.

"But Lilly's better these days, much better," Evelyn says. "Divorced, her children safe."

"Good to hear."

“And maybe, if we were in her situation, we’d lose control too? Sounds crazy, sure, but after somebody pushes you far enough maybe that’s what happens? You’re hanging by a thread, then something snaps. You attack. Perfectly normal.”

“I guess it could happen.”

“Oh, I’m sure it could happen,” Evelyn says, reaching into her Tupperware. “I’d scratch out somebody’s eyes if I had to. Isn’t it crazy? But thank goodness Lilly’s got her life together. She’s very fortunate. So are we, I suppose. After all, what do we have to complain about?”

“Nothing, really,” Rebecca says.

“Exactly. Sultanas?”

“I’ve got some, thanks.”

“Oh, right, you do – in your fist. You must have squished them to death by now.”

Rebecca opens her palm and regards them, a clump of fat flies. She pops them into her mouth, swallowing them altogether.

“Gorgeous day,” Evelyn says. “Isn’t it?”

CINDY CLARKE

Denial

I wish I had a quarter
for every time I promised myself
this is the last time
I hide from you behind words
like a thief searching for
an unlocked door.

I guard this fortress diligently,
alert, listening, waiting

always waiting for you
to undermine all my best intentions.

I want to make one giant metaphorical act
count for everything except
no one would notice
least of all, you
dancing your way through life
like a sacred truth wrapped in cellophane
safe from everything.

I don't think I ever believed
but I pretended sometimes
that we could read each other's minds
when our eyes met.

I wanted a kindred spirit.
I got Starbucks and a personal ad.

KAT CAMERON

Cutting Edge

"RIGHT, IT'S AGREED. FRIDAY, WE INFILTRATE *CUTTING EDGE* AND TAKE BACK OUR WORK."

Harry had joined the writing circle after reading a notice in the weekly free paper, *Look*, calling for local writers to share their work in a nonjudgmental format. Their hang-out was the Red Dog, a Whyte Avenue bar with beer-stained oak floors and a high black ceiling. At the first meeting, Harry read his latest song lyric, about a truck driver from Beaver Lodge who experiments with mushrooms and pines for a stripper.

"Awesome. You should send that to *The Fern*," said Rob, a weedy man in baggy jeans and a tee-shirt with the Statue of Liberty holding a gun. Anarchist chic, from his matted blonde dreads to his mud-stained Doc Martins. He'd had work read on CJSR, and two years ago *The Fern* had sent him an encouraging rejection letter.

"Don't send it there." K'lyn, the only woman in the group, had established her credentials immediately by reading one of her published poems. "The editor's an alcoholic, only takes stories about Guinness and bars. Why don't you send it to *Cutting Edge*? It's a local journal. Hell, we should all send something. We're local writers. I wonder what they pay?"

Harry sent his lyrics, disguised as poetry with some odd line breaks. Rob sent a twenty-page story about a one-legged cocaine addict who burns down a newspaper office. K'lyn submitted nine poems about break-ups, complete with creative ideas for dismembering old boyfriends. They sat back and waited. Five months later, they were still waiting. Rob fired off some emails and then called an emergency meeting.

"This is bullshit," he said. "They won't even reply to my emails. What kind of journal are they running?"

The plan was simple. Rob was a member of an anarchist group that had ties to the local Small Press Association, which shared an office in the downtown public library with *Cutting Edge*. Rob had gone to the monthly meeting of the Small Press Association and palmed a key.

"We'll break into the office on Friday night. No one has meetings on Friday."

Harry said, "I have a gig on Friday." He played fiddle for a Celtic group. Maybe K'lyn would show up. After all it was Celtic music, and she was from Saint John. K'lyn had rippling red hair, pale skin dotted with clots of freckles, bright blue eyes. A classic recessive, created out of generations of Scots, Irish, and Acadians inter-breeding with impunity, she was just what Harry imagined an Irish lass should look like, with a temper to match the red hair. He could impress her with his solo in *McGinty's Reel*. Harry tried not to think about the fish net draped in front of the stage at the Trap and Swill to deflect the beer bottles that drunks threw when the band didn't play *Great Big Sea* covers.

"So we'll go early."

"I work until nine on Friday." Drew worked at Staples. Each meeting, he'd read one of his bitter vignettes about work at an unnamed retail outlet, full of repetitive dialogue

from a couple of Neanderthals, then get shit-faced on a pitcher of beer.

“Look, we don’t all have to be there,” Rob said. “I think Harry, K’lyn and I can manage.”

Harry glowed with pride. Rob preferred his help to Drew’s. At three-hundred pounds, Harry was usually discounted from any physical activity. “So when’s the hit?” He felt like a member of Al Capone’s gang. He saw himself with his violin case loaded with a tommy-gun, blasting his way through the library. Redistributing those fat-cat government grants. Getting some for the little guy.

THAT NIGHT, HE TOLD HIS LANDLORD ABOUT the planned heist. Marc, a functioning drunk who repaired musical instruments, had called him up to sample a twenty-five-year-old Scotch.

“Sweet talk yer throat and burn yer arse it will!” Marc promised.

Pulling over an old chrome kitchenette chair, Harry settled his girth, the chair legs bowing under the strain. He placed his bag of MacBaren Danish Burley amidst the remains of a dismantled accordion and pulled his favourite meerschaum from the inner pocket of his fleece. Marc, unlike the anti-smoking fascists at City Hall, encouraged indoor smoking.

After they’d debated the merits of single malt, Harry lamented the state of Canadian publishing.

“No one appreciates good writing. It’s all part of the dumbing down of society. Like that shithole of a Christian school in Grande Prairie. They didn’t teach, they just shoved Bible lessons down our throats. I didn’t read *Hamlet* until university. Plus, they beat the crap out of us any chance they got.”

“Just like bloody England,” Marc agreed. “My headmaster treated us like conscripts, tried to beat some sense into us. He’d been a commando in the marines, you see. Not that it didn’t do us good. I can still remember some of the poetry he spouted.”

Harry listened to Marc recite Tennyson’s *The Kraken* from memory, awed by this grasp of the great works of English literature. He’d been born fifty years and twelve hundred miles from where his soul truly belonged. No wonder he couldn’t get any work published here. His work was too deep. Editors, like magpies, were attracted by the simple and shiny.

“Oh, and you’ll be owing me this month’s rent,” Marc said. “Just leave the money on the table, there’s a good lad.”

Harry pulled out his wallet. Four lonely twenties stared back at him.

“I’m a bit short this month, Marc.”

“Are you now? If you wouldn’t be splurging on that fancy tobacco, you might have the money. Well, pay me what you can now.”

Harry pulled out the eighty dollars, woefully aware that it was less than a quarter of what he owed. “I’ll get you the rest on Friday, after my gig,” he promised. Well, he would have some of the money, if he remembered not to drink during sets. The last time the band played there, they’d ended up owing the bar money for the tab. It would be KD and tuna for the rest of the month.

ON FRIDAY, HE TOOK A BUS TO THE downtown library, threaded past the panhandlers guarding the front door, and waited twenty minutes in the reading area on the main floor, where old men slumped wearily on black couches, waiting to be thrown out into the night.

K'lyn and Rob arrived together at seven-thirty. K'lyn insisted on browsing the poetry stacks before they went upstairs, so they would seem like regular library patrons.

They hit a snafu at the elevators. The office was on the sixth floor. Rob pushed the button. The doors closed, then opened again.

"What the fuck?" Rob went over the check-out desk. Harry and K'lyn loitered by the elevators, trying to look inconspicuous.

Rob came back with a bullet-headed tattooed security guard in his fifties.

"I didn't hear about any meetings tonight." He glared at them. "You're supposed to book meetings a day in advance."

"We just have to pick up a few papers." K'lyn turned on him with a wide-toothed smile.

"Well, I don't know, little lady. What organization is it again?"

"*Cutting Edge*. We're on the poetry collective," she lied coolly. "We have to pick up a batch of submissions."

"Well, if you're quick about it." Pulling a thick key ring from his belt, he slowly sorted through them, making them wait. Inserting a key into the electronic panel, he twisted it, and then pressed the sixth floor button.

"Thank you so much," K'lyn gushed. As the elevator doors closed, her smile blinked out. "Could you believe that? 'Little lady.' What a sexist pig."

On the sixth floor, Rob lingered by the elevators in case the guard decided to follow them. Harry and K'lyn walked past a line of doors to the end of the hall. At the door to the *Cutting Edge* office, Harry inserted the key and slowly twisted it in the lock. It stuck.

"Hurry the fuck up," whispered K'lyn.

He twisted the key harder. The key bent. Harry let go. "Shit. I think I've broken it."

"Ahh, get the fuck out of the way." Pushing her way past his bulk, K'lyn jiggled the key back and forth, muttering, "Damn it, damn it" under her breath. She twisted too vigorously and the key snapped in her hand. "Christ! What the fuck did you do to it, Harry?"

"I just turned it."

Rob came down the hall. "Aren't you guys in yet? The guard will be checking on us any minute. How hard is it to open a door?"

"Harry broke the key."

Harry started to protest, and then realized this wouldn't help him in K'lyn's eyes. Instead, he held up his hands, palms outstretched in apology.

"Great, just fuckin' great," said Rob. "It cost me five bucks to copy that damned key."

The elevator pinged its arrival.

"The guard's coming." Harry looked frantically down the long bare hall. No place to hide. He saw them, like rats in a maze, going endlessly round and round the corridors, the guard always one step behind. He started wheezing with anxiety.

Rob pounded the door in frustration. It swung open. They spilled into the room.

LONG TUBES OF FLUORESCENT LIGHTING flickered slowly to life. Partitions divided the room into three sections. Rob led them to the back corner, where *Cutting Edge* had its office. Bookcases lined two walls, sagging under the weight of past issues. Brown 8 x 11 envelopes were stacked around the edges of the computer monitor, obscuring the printer.

“Christ, do they ever answer their mail?” K’lyn shuffled through a stack, pulled out an envelope at random and opened it. “Look at this cover letter. ‘May 2005.’ That’s over a year ago and they haven’t even opened it.”

“Look at their computer,” Harry said in awe. “A heavily modded, fully loaded Dell XPS 700 in fire-engine red. That’s a three-thousand-dollar machine. And they have a multi-function HP LaserJet 4345. And a flat screen.”

K’lyn nodded sagely. “Canada Council grants. Someone must be a gamer.”

“What if we take some old issues and sell them?” Harry wondered. “They wouldn’t miss them.”

“Don’t be so stupid,” K’lyn said, laughing. “Old issues won’t sell.”

“We said we’re taking the submissions.” Rob took charge. “Let’s take them all. Then we’ll leave ours and a few of the really crappy ones. They’ll have to publish our stuff.”

“Awesome idea.” K’lyn beamed on Rob, like a teacher with a prize pupil. Harry sulked.

They stuffed envelopes into K’lyn’s Guatemalan book bag. Harry dug a plastic Safeway bag out of the garbage for the remainder.

“What if the writers ask about their stuff?” he asked.

“We’ll have to send them rejection letters. Hack into the computer and find the form.”

While he was searching, K’lyn and Rob read over some of the submissions.

“Listen to this,” K’lyn giggled. “‘Dear Sir, I am sending you some of my immortal prose. I have been writing for several years now, but just began sending it out this year.’ We’re definitely leaving this one in. How *not* to write a submissions letter.”

“Here’s the form.” Harry looked over to where K’lyn and Rob sat on a tweedy orange couch. The sleeve of K’lyn’s filmy red blouse brushed against Rob’s arm. Both of them turned their heads at the same angle. Synchronization. Harry had watched a nature show on the mating habits of birds, how they mimicked each other’s moves. Here it was, right under his nose.

“Just print up some copies. We’ll fill in the names later.”

“How many?”

“Christ, Harry, make a decision on your own for once.” K’lyn stroked Rob’s arm. “Here’s another great one. ‘Love / a hummingbird / sipping from my heart.’ That’s gotta hurt.”

As the final copies of the letter spat out of the printer, Harry thought of something else. “What about the key in the door? If the envelopes are missing, they’ll ask questions.”

“Damn. And the guard will remember us. A red-haired woman, a guy in a Che Guevara T-shirt, and a fat man with a violin. Sounds like a fucking joke.” K’lyn looked to Rob for answers. “What do you think we should do?”

“We’ll sort these at the Red Dog tonight,” Rob said. “I’ll bring the rejects in tomorrow morning. They won’t be meeting on the weekend. As long as the guard doesn’t

notice the door is broken, we'll be fine."

"I can't go. I have the gig." His visions of the way the evening would play out had evaporated. The signs were clear. Thin anarchist trumps fat musician.

He pulled open several drawers, looking for envelopes. In the top left-hand drawer was an envelope with the word "Float" written on it. Harry gave it a surreptitious shake. Coins jingled.

Checking over his shoulder, Harry saw that K'lyn and Rob had moved to the next step of the mating dance. He casually slid his hand into the float, extracted some loonies.

"Hey, can you guys give me a ride to the A&W?" He'd feast on a double burger combo before the gig, courtesy of *Cutting Edge*. If he was sending their rejection letters, the least they could do was buy him a burger.

A YEAR LATER, *CUTTING EDGE* PRINTED five of K'lyn's poems and Rob's story and sent them each two contributors' copies.

Harry's lyrics came back with a polite rejection letter.

SUSAN IOANNOU

Jinn

Over here.

High on a shop shelf strewn with old figurines,
side by side, two little white rabbits
whispered to me, *Pick us.*

And even though formed from roughened plaster,
each rounded body, grounded on big paws
curled comfortably into my palm.

How soothing to slide my thumb
around plumped cheeks
and under
long curved ears,
one pair tilted, as if to listen,
the other flopped back, cavalier.
Four small pink eyes bored into mine,
as if both flat pink noses had scented
a succulent lettuce leaf.

And so I carried them home.
to crouch on the table and watch,
still and silent, where I write and read.

Last night,
across the window's full moon
one leapt toward me in a dream.
Tall as my knee,
with glistening fur,
it hopped at my heels from room to room.
Pink eyes, like moistened crystals, stared up
as if to be held and spoken to.
Snuggling into my arms,
its now-silk whiteness stroked me calm.
All the while, its eyes kept burrowing
deeper. I couldn't shake free.

In sunlight, at the back of my table,
still the plaster pair stare at me:
Do it. Is that what they say?
Rabbits are symbols of fertility.
– Not only in flesh,
but also in words?

After everything

MY PROBLEMS WITH THE NUMBER FOUR BEGAN SHORTLY AFTER MY FAMILY MOVED TO CANADA. The country of promise. The country where, my mother had been told, you could get a bacon-and-egg breakfast just by pressing a button on the stove. It wasn't quite that advanced, but it was wonderful. The people were colourful. The food was exotic and delicious (pizza!). The language was quick and foreign. Although we loved it, none of us belonged. My mother couldn't find work because she didn't speak the language. My father had to take a lower position than the one he was qualified for, because his degree was useless here. My sister and I had no friends and no way of making any until we assimilated. It wasn't easy, but each member of my family coped and learned, and this brought us closer together. We were one family of outsiders against an entire culture that belonged. We were strong. Because we were four.

Four. Four. This became my symbol. Four. My comfort. Four. My responsibility.

"KURWA." THERE ARE THREE OF THEM. We go to the same school but these boys are even older than my sister. Probably eighth-graders. They wear their hair long and, I am sure, blow farts that smell like bologna. One of them – the kid who swore at me in my mother tongue – wears an Alice Cooper tee-shirt.

"Kurwa," he repeats and leers at me. It's the only Polish word he knows, heard somewhere and memorized for only this purpose. I wonder what makes this kid so mean. His lips kiss out a spit wad that explodes between my sneakers.

I'm not sure how to react. Not here, where there are no friends or teachers to back me up, or even understand me. Not in this deserted schoolyard with its foreign games painted on the pocked pavement, where kids chew candy I've never seen before.

Alice Cooper spears my shoulder with the tip of one flat hand. It isn't much of a shove, but it sends an ache deep into the muscle below my collarbone, and I am forced to take a step back. His henchmen snort.

I know what I want to say, but don't have the English words. My eyes feel hot.

I inhale with the intention of biting back in Polish. Just to say something. Anything is better than standing here waiting for a beating.

"Kurwa! Kurwa! Kurwa! Kurwa!" Like a rabid dog I bark the profanities. Once for me, once for my sister, my mom, and dad. It's a reflex. More a battle cry than a clever bit of reverse psychology.

To my surprise, the outburst amuses my bullies. They guffaw like kids I've seen on television. Alice Cooper even braces himself, forearm on his friend's shoulder, to help him not fall from laughing. I figure this is it. They'll pounce on me with their Canadian fists and feet as soon as they regain their composure. I will fight, I decide, still tasting the remains of my heinous outburst inside my sinful, foaming mouth.

Instead, Alice Cooper wipes spittle from his hilarious chin and with the same flat

hand spears my shoulder again. I don't step back this time, just to show him I am tough. The ache crawls all the way into my spine and spreads across my back. He says something to me before they all turn and leave. I only understand one of the words he uses.

Fucker.

I walk home kicking something along the sidewalk and carrying under my arm homework I don't understand and know I won't do. I feel like watching *Happy Days*.

At home I eat a bowl of Lucky Charms. I save all the marshmallows on the side of the bowl for a last hurrah of sugary fortune. I decide that Arthur Fonzoelli, Ralph Malph, Ritchie Cunningham, and Potsie Webber are the coolest English-speaking guys I've ever met. They come up against bullies all the time, but the four of them never get beat up, especially Fonzie.

I wash my cereal bowl in the sink and wander from the kitchen into our living room to play the game that has become my habit. Click the power button on the converter once to turn on the TV, then again real quick to see if I can turn it off before the screen lights up. *Click. Click.* I get it on the first try. What fun! But I realize I didn't make a wish.

I wish I had a set of those plastic vampire teeth that Chinese boy was playing with at recess.

Again. *Click. Click.* Success.

It's easy, really.

Except at the last second I thought about Alice Cooper. If I stop now, he might show up at my door, before my sister or mother or anybody else comes home.

Once more. *Click. Click.*

Again.

And once more.

Still not right. I feel the heat rise in my eyes, a sensation that was so new a half hour ago is now familiar. Unlike most things here.

Again. *Click. Click.* My father might never come home at all. *Click. Click.*

The doorbell squeaks in frustration.

Fucker.

No, not the bell. Only just the door. A key. Not Alice Cooper then for sure. He wouldn't have a key. He would –

“Eva!”

“Hi, what are you doing?” This is all in Polish, of course, as with my sister enters a fresh breeze of everything good into the house.

“Nothing. Just watching TV.”

“Okay. What's on?” She takes off her shoes.

“I don't know. Maybe *Happy Days*. Is that on today?” I play my game again. This time knowing it will finish here.

Click. Click.

“Yes.”

That makes eight times I played and won. “Hurray!” I yell. Half of eight is four.

“It’s on every day,” says Eva. “You know, like the song at the beginning says. *Sunday, Monday, Happy Days. Tuesday, Wednesday, Happy Days.* Like that. You’re so dumb.”

THAT NIGHT MY MOTHER COMES HOME and asks us what we want for dinner.

“Perogies with sour cream and onions on the pan,” my sister says.

“Not perogies!” I shout. “Pizza! I want four slices of pizza!”

MY OTHER RESPONSIBILITY IS SCHOOL. I hate it. Every morning I peek through the windows into our grade two classroom. The board displays each reading group’s lessons for the day. I check to see if we’ll be doing something I understand. I’m in Group Number Three officially, but really I have no group, because I can’t read silently or aloud in English.

Inside my school bag I carry a *Fantastic Four* comic book. On the cover is Susan Storm, the Invisible Girl, and a blond kid who might be her son. I ignore this and only use the pages where The Thing throws down with Doctor Doom. But never here. Never at school. If somebody should see that prized possession, they might know me. As much as I want to belong and look and sound like the other kids here, I can’t let them that far inside.

Today during reading time, I pretend I am Ben Grimm, The Thing. I sit like he might, rocky shoulders slumped over, both ham-hands drooping over the edges of my desk. My teacher, Mr Wyne, walks by and slaps one of my arms and utters two words I do understand.

“Sit up!”

When we are given time to work on questions about the story we just read, the other students’ heads go down. They work. Except for me and the kid who sits beside me, Gianni Bruno. He hates school too but for different reasons. We have nothing in common.

I stare at the chalkboard puzzling over how Ben Grimm might hold a pencil. Gianni Bruno pinches my thigh and twists until I double punch him in the knuckles. He thrusts the affected joints against his lips and sucks. Pain is the same in any language.

Mine has just begun. I don’t understand the story Mr Wyne read to the class. Worse still, only two pictures accompany it: one features an overweight rat holding hands with a cat, the other depicts a droopy jam sandwich. No clues to plot there. The questions make no sense either. I stall by copying from the board today’s date. I purposely write as slowly and, by default, as neatly as possible. This only takes two minutes. Recess is half an hour away. I repeat the ritual mindlessly, trying to look busy.

Moments later my sister’s teacher knocks on our classroom door. He and Mr Wyne talk. I watch to see if perhaps Eva is hiding behind them as a surprise for me. I can almost see the corner of her skirt behind her teacher’s suit jacket.

Mr Wyne points and motions for me at the door. Could I really have guessed my sister’s joke? I walk over and my teacher explains I’m to go with Eva’s teacher for drawing or something of that nature. I am confused but thrilled. No more stalling with today’s reading assignment, and maybe Eva has won an award or something

– she was always very smart – and asked to share it with me. Maybe it’s a set of plastic Dracula teeth! Anyway, what luck.

While this – or the details of whatever situation awaits me – is being explained, I notice GianniBruno craning over my notebook, his face a mess of confused amusement. I run over to see what I might have left behind to attract his curiosity. The page on my desk is blank except for today’s date. Perfectly neat and straight. And printed four times.

I feel violated for some reason. I shut my notes and shove them in my desk. Although I know it’s childish even for an eight-year-old, I stick my tongue out at GianniBruno as I follow my sister’s teacher out of the room.

MY FATHER’S RESPONSIBILITY IS TO GET HEALTHY. One of the reasons we moved to Canada was his heart condition. Just like everything else, the medicine here is better; that is the way it was explained to me. Just like everything else, this turns out to be untrue.

My father goes into the hospital two months after we arrive in Canada. We visit often, but my sister and I become distracted by the pool table and the cafeteria and naively ignore our father during the last days of his life.

The funeral feels like a sombre parade. People are everywhere; my mother, sister, and I sit at the front. My entire grade two class shows up. It doesn’t mean anything. I miss my dad. Out of all of us, he spoke English the best. Out of all of us, he was the only one even remotely as strong and heroic as Ben Grimm. I think about how he is safe in heaven now.

I think about how we are three.

I stay home for a week not watching television or anything. Every evening I turn the lights in my room off and on forty-four times. My mother, alone in her grief and her bedroom, doesn’t notice. One night I go through the ritual forty-four times – forty-four times forty-four. Still, each time I close my eyes to sleep, I see my sister slicing off the tips of her fingers with the bread knife.

Everything else happens.

The following Monday I am again peeking through the window of my classroom before the first bell rings. My nerves convince me the words on the board change each time I step away from the glass. I check and re-check in sets of four until some kid asks me what I am doing. By now I know enough to say, “Nothing” and walk away.

This first day back I think my classmates are watching me, but I can’t catch any of their eyes. Mr. Wyne doesn’t say anything to me before or during class. But as soon as my hand shoots up he lets me go to the bathroom, even though it’s reading time.

I meander down the hall toward a set of glass doors, running my finger along the groove in the wall formed by the pattern of painted bricks.

I stop at the doors. They are being held open for me.

Alice Cooper stands inside the doorframe. I look up with casual eyes at my former aggressor.

“Hey, kid –” He says it without emotion, to get my attention, not as a greeting.

“Huh?”

“Your father’s dead?”

“Yes.”

He pauses a moment and flicks the hair from his eyes.

“My mother too. Since I was in grade six.”

Confused, I watch my sneakers. And his. Alice Cooper steps aside, and I pass through the open doors on my way to the washroom. Once inside, I wash my hands four times before using the toilet.

I AM MY MOTHER’S RESPONSIBILITY. She notices I’m struggling with something, but she says nothing for the longest time. Then: “Are the lights bothering you?” she asks. Again, this is all in Polish. “Why do you keep doing that?” She motions with her hand as if flicking a light switch repeatedly.

I shrug. The truth is, I don’t know. I think if I don’t, something might happen. Something will happen. Maybe to my sister or her. But I can’t be sure. Regardless, the task of protecting my family falls to me.

“I don’t know.” I breathe a heavy sigh. “It’s just for fun.”

Her worried eyes watch me.

“Will you stop playing this game?”

“Okay.”

THAT NIGHT I MANAGE FOUR CLICKS OF MY bedroom lights before she calls my name from downstairs.

“Okay, sorry. I’m going to sleep now.”

In bed I impress myself with my own cleverness by figuring out that using my eyes to blink the window in and out of existence is equal to flicking the lights. Actually, in the most horrible ways, it’s even better.

MY MOTHER THINKS I’M NOT TALKING TO her because I’m embarrassed. That I’m not telling her about whatever is bothering me because I simply don’t want to. She asks if I might talk to a priest. This is about the same time I start a new habit of asking my mother every night if I will die.

This usually happens when my sister is already upstairs. I linger behind purposely, or maybe Eva rushes to her room to give me privacy. I know my sister loves me, because the idea that she is granting me this favour is not foreign or even a surprise. I know my mother loves me, because she answers my question with a simple “No” each time, then kisses my forehead. How could I not do whatever is needed to protect two such people?

Father Marek comes over one Wednesday after dinner. He has a warm voice and works in the Polish parish near my mom’s factory. Naturally, he knows nothing about me.

“Why are you so afraid that you are going to die?” he asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Is it because your father passed away?”

I produce a gesture that implies uncertainty.

“And your mother tells me you sometimes do things. Like play with lights. She’s worried about you, you know.”

Suddenly my mother pipes in with a revelation. “His cousin Yvonne in Poland, she used to do the same types of things when she was a girl. She’d get up in the middle of the night and check the locks on all the windows and doors before going back to bed. Then get up and do it all over again.” I know none of this until that moment. Yvonne is the most responsible person I have ever met, next to my mother.

“You are so young,” says Father Marek. “You shouldn’t think like this. God doesn’t want us to think like this. Do you understand?”

I nod obediently, thinking instead that Yvonne must have taken care of us for so long in this way. All four of us as well as her own family. What a burden. And now when we were too far away –

“Will you promise me and your mother not to think like this anymore?”

“Okay. I promise.”

And the consequences –

“Good, good. That’s very good.”

Father Marek stays for a little while talking to all of us, mostly my mother, then shakes my hand and waves to my mother and sister at the door. After he leaves, I flick off the porch light and slide the front door lock in place with my thumb. My eyes begin to burn momentarily. I feel an urge to flick the lock back and forth three more times. But this passes. I am different now. Thanks to this new information, I am new.

“Well, that was lucky that he could come and talk to you,” my mother says as she tidies the kitchen before going to bed.

“He was so nice,” Eva says. “Do you feel better?”

“Yes,” I answer. “A lot.”

“See,” says my mother, “sometimes things come from God that you wouldn’t get from anywhere else.” I know she’s right.

THAT NIGHT I WAKE UP WHEN THE HOUSE is dark. If anyone asks, I plan to tell them I got up to get a drink. Giddy with anticipation, I creep downstairs and complete my business with the front door. Back in bed a few moments later, I realize I might have missed something.

Fucker.

I return downstairs to repeat the ritual.

Again.

And once more.

Eyes aflame, I think about my cousin Yvonne before I fall asleep, and how she doesn’t need to worry any more. How she’s still in Poland while we are not. How I am here and that I know what to do. And how everything and everyone I love are safe as a result.

Anytown USA

I DRIVE A HONDA PILOT BECAUSE MARY INSISTS THAT WE NEED AN SUV TO PICK UP FERTILIZER, fountains, bathroom mirrors, bookcases. I hate landscaping and home improvement, and I hate this Pilot.

My Blackberry is sitting on the passenger seat; I haven't turned it on since leaving the doctor's. I used to be addicted to it like everyone else. Now I just don't care. Sometimes, if I can't sleep at night, I turn it on and try and guess who the next email will be from. At this time of day they will be flooding in. And Mary will be trying to phone me with a small grocery list.

Sorry, but I just had a cleaver taken to my balls. Secret afternoon vasectomy.

I pull into our neighborhood, passing a strip mall with a Dunkin' Donuts, a 7-Eleven, a Jackson Hewitt Tax Service, a UPS outlet, and a Subway. I love America. When I first moved here and I still kept in touch with friends from Canada, where I was geographically mattered. I told my friends about the differences in California and Seattle. I don't keep in touch with anyone in Canada any more, but even if I did I wouldn't care. America is the same everywhere. The climate is different, but who spends enough time outside to care? House to car to mall to car to house to car to work to car to airport. You see the same stores, restaurants, and people – the franchising of Anytown USA has been a huge success.

I turn onto our street. It's an upper-middle-class street, so the houses aren't all exactly the same. Driving down it the first time is like looking for where the wallpaper pattern repeats in a seafood restaurant. The lawns are bright green, the cars are washed and new, and the neighbours are out landscaping or preparing for the next weekend home-improvement project. I wave as I pass, knowing which ones have heard Mary and me screaming at each other.

I hit the button to open the garage and pull the Pilot in. I grab my Blackberry and ease myself out. I walk in through the laundry room entrance, kicking my shoes off. I listen for the kids.

They're both out; the house is silent, except for the fridge and the air conditioner.

I go to the bar in the living room. Beer and straight liquor are for alcoholics – something I learned from my dad. Cocktails are for the social drinker, and I enjoy a social drink, especially on my own. Right now I feel like a key lime martini, so I pour vanilla vodka into a martini glass and then shuffle into the kitchen for some lime juice, a splash of pineapple, and a teaspoon of syrup.

I'm thirsty, and the first one goes down smoothly, so I make a second.

I sit in my armchair, and I turn my Blackberry on. The light flashes as I see emails from Thanos, Jack, Marvin, Jack, Kayla, Jack, and thirty or so others pulled down. Nothing from Samuel.

MY DAUGHTER ALICE IS THE FIRST HOME. She comes in the front door with her boyfriend Dylan. She's surprised to see me, and I wonder if they were coming here to have sex. Her sexual status is a great mystery for her mother and me right now. I suppose it is for her as well. Alice has her mother's frame, my face and eyes. She's smart, athletic, a high performer in everything she does. But her circle of friends is small and has been the same for years. Dylan is her first real boyfriend.

He is a gawky idiot who speaks too fast and doesn't enunciate. Decrypting his statements is never rewarding. Alice thinks he's hilarious. When he's not over for dinner she is constantly telling us what he said.

The two graze in the kitchen for a while and then go upstairs to her room and turn some music on. I'm supposed to tell them to keep the door open, but I don't see the point. If they're having sex, it's too late to stop them. And anyway, he's seventeen, which means he'll be popping in five seconds – quicker than I can make it upstairs if I suspect anything.

Mary will expect me to barbecue tonight.

My Blackberry is still flashing away.

KYLE COMES HOME NEXT. He's in summer school. He's surprised to see me, too, but happy. He even straightens his posture by an inch or two. Kyle is fifteen. He doesn't do badly in school, but he doesn't excel, and for Mary they're the same thing. So he's in summer school.

After he's dumped his bag, he instinctively collapses in front of the television, where his Xbox is. His controller appears in his hands. He asks me if I want to play NHL 2K with him. I say yes, and he makes a second controller appear, which he tosses to me.

I select the Leafs as my team, he selects the Red Wings. The puck is dropped, and I'm scrambling on the buttons, trying to remember the controls. We play three games, and he wins them all, but they're not blowouts.

Kyle thinks it's cool that I work at Digital Damnation. When we play games we created, I beat him. When we play everything else, he beats me. It's a nice balance. It's strange being in a business where you have to determine a button or keyboard combination to skate and drop a puck between your legs or wheel around, pump a shotgun, and blast a zombie. Some combinations feel natural: when you learn them you know them forever. Other combinations never feel natural, and Marvin and his playtesting group piss and moan about it – but they're always right.

WE HEAR MARY'S BMW PULL INTO her side of the garage. It's a 528i sedan with 230 horsepower, a low air intake, and an edgy grill. She has it in the five speed, and it drives like it's on rails. There are no lawn fertilizer bags or fountains for her trunk.

Mary is a business professor and corporate consultant on mission statements. She does everything with intensity and drive. She works hard to keep an amazing body and attractive features. She dresses conservatively but with sex appeal. She intimidates colleagues, students, maids, dogs, children.

She doesn't intimidate me. We will argue until our voices are hoarse and every

nasty, cruel word has been stabbed, twisted, and broken off in the flesh. I often consider that fighting is what we do for sexual release. When we're done, there's an almost post-coital sense of calm.

Her first words to me are: "Why are you home now?"

"I left early."

"Why is Kyle playing video games and not doing his homework?"

"He just got home and he needs a break."

"Like you need a break from work?"

"I came home early."

"You are a project manager nearing an industry conference."

I'm sure she has all of my project deliverables and deadlines committed to memory.

"Good day, honey?"

"Is the meat out?"

"No."

"Did you consult the menu on the fridge?"

"I did not. Would you like a martini?"

She yells up the stairs, "Alice: keep your door open!"

She carries her attaché into the kitchen. I drop my controller, pick up my martini, and tenderly follow her. She takes thawing chicken breasts from the fridge and slams them on the counter. I forcefully open a counter drawer and take out my barbecue tongs. We argue through the percussive use of the kitchen's cupboards and tools: slam, crash, hit, sigh.

As I'm leaving with the plate of chicken and the barbecue tongs, she questions me: "How did the new maid do?"

"She came today?"

"Yes. You didn't inspect the job?" She crosses her arms.

"I didn't notice any mess, I didn't remember that she'd cleaned at all, so she must have done a good job."

"I have higher expectations than that."

"I'm supposed to get a magnifying glass and crawl around on my hands and knees to see if your expectations have been met?"

She closes her eyes and unfolds her arms. "I'm sorry, David. I had a tough day teaching and I haven't got to this newest consulting job I've picked up."

It's as close to a peace offering as I'm going to get from her, and it's probably a trap. But before I can respond to it, her Blackberry rings; she checks and indicates with her eyebrows that she has to take it.

I take the meat outside onto the patio, place it next to the uncovered barbecue, and go back in for my martini. I turn the gas on, ignite the flames, and shut the top. It hisses and crackles as it heats up.

I'VE NEVER HIT MARY. I'VE FELT THE URGE. I'm able to restrain myself. It's hard on those occasions when emotion and the concept of consequences conflate and I think: if I hit her, not only will I get that moment of satisfaction but this will be over. My marriage,

my job, my life in the suburbs. I'll go to jail and have to start a new life when I come out. It's tempting, because no other action could change my life so profoundly so quickly.

I hit the kids when they were growing up. I didn't beat the shit out of them, but I did hit them. I didn't want to. I always felt sick afterward. But I smacked them, spanked them, hit them.

I remember how I was coached on my first day of kindergarten about the bruise on my arm. My mom made me repeat what I was going to say when the teacher asked me how it happened. But the teacher didn't ask that first day. Or any other.

WHEN THE BARBECUE IS HOT, I USE THE scrubber to clear the grates of crusted carbon, and then I put the chicken breasts on. I can hear Mary back in the kitchen organizing the rest of dinner.

I'm sore and stiff, but so far no one has noticed anything.

I stay outside the entire time the chicken is cooking, as if it needs my full attention. When I bring it in, Kyle and Alice are sitting at the table Mary has set. Dylan had to go home. We all sit down to dinner. There's bread, a cold bean salad, potato salad, and the chicken. The kids drink pop; Mary and I have wine.

Mary and Alice talk about world events. Kyle and I answer direct questions when asked and negotiate the apportionment of seconds. When we're done, Alice and I help clear the table, while Mary washes the dishes and Kyle rinses and dries. Then we sit back down at the table, because we have to reach a decision about our vacation. We've narrowed it down to: Olympic National Park, Washington; Memphis, Tennessee; Orlando, Florida. Mary wants to go to Washington. We decide on Orlando but agree we will not go to Disney World. We've been there twice before, and there are many other Orlando attractions and destinations we've missed.

A decision made, we are freed. Alice gets on the phone with Dylan and then says he's coming by to take her to a movie. Kyle says he's going upstairs to "study." Mary is doubtful but says nothing.

SO THE TWO OF US ARE ALONE AGAIN. I ask Mary if she wants a drink, she says yes, and I decide to make New Yorkers. I rinse out my martini glass and get one for her. I mix six parts gin, vermouth, and then return to the kitchen for a splash of orange juice in each.

"The Honda is acting up," I lie, to say something.

"Do you like Dylan?" Mary asks. "They spend too much time together."

"It won't last."

"Of course not but this coming academic year is important for her."

"Give them to the end of the summer. Then we'll hope for a breakup."

Silence.

"I've got to do a little work on this consultancy job. Maybe an hour's worth. Then we could watch some TV together or go for a walk?"

I kind of nod. "I'm going to read some emails."

She takes her drink into her study, which is off the kitchen on the main floor. I drain mine, make another in the living room, and then ease down the stairs into the

basement, where my study is. I sit at my desk, feeling the dull pain in my groin.

There's no way I'm going for a walk.

I fire my email up, but I don't read any: there are the ones that I've already seen on my Blackberry and the new ones: the quick, the urgent, and the dead. Listening for any creak indicating weight on the stairs, I undo my pants and look down at my battered and bruised ball sack. The bruising is much worse than it was when I left.

Thinking that there are no more kids for me makes me want to look at videos of Kyle and Alice when they were young. It's stupid, because I know it will make me feel sentimental and maybe even regret what I've done. But I do it anyway.

WE BOUGHT A CAMCORDER WHEN MARY WAS first pregnant with Alice, and we have three-hundred hours of video. I bought this computer to begin editing them, but I've never gotten around to it. I transferred them from the tapes to the hard drive. I selected some music. But I never began editing. It's sad: I often think I could have fulfilled my dream of becoming a director if I hadn't had kids. And yet I can't even edit the home movies.

I watch Alice, at two, looking at her amazed image in the mirror. I watch Kyle, at four months, on his stomach on the floor, arms and legs working so hard but taking him nowhere. I see Mary, younger, softer, nicer.

Mary wants another child and I do not. When we had that pregnancy scare last month, I insisted she have an abortion. She said it was her body, and it was her decision. Then we found out it was a false alarm.

Well, they're my balls, and I made the decision. I like the basic franchise family I have: a boy and a girl properly spaced, both parents bringing in good incomes, vacations, big televisions, and a home alarm system.

Why mess with what works?

SARA SADDINGTON

I hope

A few nights ago
I brought you a beer
to the stage
where you sat before the keyboard
presiding over the manic ceremony

and I wanted my eyes to tell you

thanks for the times
and I'm sorry for your wife
and I hope
your baby girl
never develops
a predilection
for musicians

Impotent

I am ripe

breasts swollen
fingertips
drenched
in potential

*Bukowski was showered with young bodies
though he was notoriously ugly
because he knew that women want to be held by poets
more than they want to marry football players*

and I
with my young prettiness
my ripe strength
my able haunches

have exhausted my fingers
and have travelled the night
in search of a man
who wants to be held by a poet

all my fantasies are losing meaning
with repetition

I am held
I am held down
I am lifted up

now my sheets are twisted
and my toes are cold

my body remains
tense

unhandled

Credit check

"JUST CHECK HER OUT FOR ME, WOULDYA, HON?" JACK'S SAYING HON MAKES IT SOUND LIKE WE are in the kitchen of a home we share, and he's asking me to pick up his laundry. Jack married me at the end of a six-month bender, when he was looking for a mother, and I was looking for a project to get my mind off being forty. Today, however, we are on the phone long distance. Very long distance.

"I always value your opinion," he says. "You have good taste." This makes me snicker. When we were married Jack had trusted me to buy the house, pay the bills, set up our IRAs, and interface with his deranged relatives. But he complained constantly about my clothes – frumpy, he said, the same term he used for the Queen of England.

"I don't think it's appropriate," I say, "for me to vet your latest pick."

"Look what happened last time," he whines. He's right to be cautious. Like a magnet, Jack's big-spender vibes draw gold diggers. After the careful division of property I had worked out with our lawyers, his share was vacuumed up within eighteen months by his next wife. She would have gotten his car agency if I hadn't found him a good lawyer.

"If you're not sure, don't marry her, and don't waste my time."

"Don't be a selfish b—." He doesn't say it, just goes right on. "I'm really in love this time. We almost went to Vegas last weekend. If she gets up a head of steam, I could be a married man by next Monday. Besides, hon, I'll be in better shape to repay you if she's a good little earner."

Jack owes me the \$15,000 I paid the lawyer who saved his dealership, and it sounds like he thinks I still have hope of being repaid. "Do you have her social security, date of birth, mother's maiden name?"

"Yeah, I got them last night."

"Poor girl, probably thought you were about to make her your beneficiary. Is she the trusting kind?"

"Sure. She's only twenty-two."

THE NEXT MORNING, BEFORE THE BANK OPENS, I slide off my frumpy suit jacket and roll up my sleeves. I'm a loan officer and have access to information about everyone.

Her name, Brittany Williams, is an immediate red flag. Williams is more common than Jones and often used by con artists. But her social security number does bring up a Brittany Williams, 34. My, my. *Clickity, click*. And carrying over \$200,000 in credit-card debt. *Clickity, click*. And behind on child support by \$9,800. Isn't banking wonderful! What to tell Jack?

I don't pick up the phone until late afternoon. "Jack, hon," I say, "I think she may be perfect for you."

A. MARY MURPHY

Four poems

I touch your face
you rest your eyes
let me stroke your skin
like sitting at a table
with naked people
the room is on fire
I melt ice cubes on your leg
you feed me meatballs
with your fingers
drink ceremonial bourbon
imported from Tennessee

woman in tidy red letters
on the tunnel wall

woman doesn't tell me enough
a *woman* wrote it maybe
as a battle cry
or a declaration
or a claim
or a man wrote it
maybe as a command
or a plea
or an epithet

wrote it
with derision or defiance
woman doesn't tell me enough
or tells me everything

irony of ironies
she met him
in a gay bar
driving home
in his truck
after a first-date movie
he pops open
the glove compartment
displays a varied
and presumptuous collection
of erotic supplies
her composure lost
she actually calls him
Bub

her mouth knows his body
acquires a taste for his flesh
teeth scrape his tenderest
to make him remember
this speech fluent tongue
her breathless skin listens
for the articulate response
his mouth owes her body

The argument of fact

"I FIND MYSELF THINKING OF YOU AT THE MOST INAPPROPRIATE TIMES."

The phone remained mostly silent on the other end, the only transmission the short pools of her breath as she waited him out. Freddy could picture her, lying languid on the orange loveseat in her pink-walled living room, watching a thick lock of hair roll between her fingers. She called him seven times a day, and it was always like this: buying time for a spontaneous conversation that never happened.

He cupped his hand around the mouthpiece and glanced furtively out into the hallway. "Last night I was sitting with my great-grandmother. She's very sick. And I thought of that time you stole a stop sign and then we made love against the sign post. I don't know what made me think of that."

Still nothing but the grating nylon whirr of her clothing against the sofa. When he first touched her skin, years ago now, it reflected the green quasi-moonlight of the fluorescent bar sign outside her bedroom window; her skin had the texture of chilled dough beneath his fingertips. She was portly and pompous, an inverse reflection of the other women he'd been with, especially Constance. Without much effort, Marlena became the mythological stage mother of his other lovers: loud, vulgar but funny. Easy to be with, and easier to be away from.

Freddy tried again. "My son returned my call this morning. He's dating a girl named Jenna. He says I can't meet her yet, but he invited me to his graduation party. And I remembered the time we went driving along the coast and you crashed us into the fence, with that fierce little mouth on you."

The office across the hallway had been dark since noon, which meant that Mr. Johnson had been struck down by one of his mysterious afternoon illnesses. Freddy opened his notepad and made another stroke in the unlabelled tally. Mr. Johnson was frequently unwell. He was lucky that this end of the hallway didn't get much traffic since the kitchen had moved to the front of the building, or else the whole office would notice his absence.

Finally, with a long exhale, she spoke:

"I have a terrible fear of dying too soon, and having my mother go through all my things. She'd find everything. The box under my bed, the letters, the dirty magazines. She'd know what kind of a person I really am."

It was a successful exchange of ideas, as far as these calls went. Conversations with Marlena since they'd last coupled frantically, last week in a bar bathroom: 23.

FREDDY GOT TO THE DRUGSTORE ONLY five minutes before it closed, thanks to the ungainly busybody behind him on the subway. She vacantly described the night before to an unseen friend, painting in lurid detail. The distraction made Freddy miss two stops, and he communicated his distaste to the girl with a pointed glance.

He glanced at the clerk in what he hoped was an apologetic manner; in turn, the clerk failed to do a very good job of hiding the exasperated cast that fell over her face. Freddy scoured the first aisle while she edged slowly closer.

“Can I help you, sir?”

Freddy was studying a stuffed yellow bunny. This might be nice for the unmet Jenna; he pictured her as a tiny flat-footed gymnast, with a mane of curly hair and dimples – a more temperate Constance. “Oh, yes, I’m in a hurry and I’m looking for a gift.”

“A gift?”

“Yes.” Freddy placed the bunny aside and chose a box of chocolates, expired by a week. He tried to remember if Constance ate chocolate or not. Her hips would not suggest it, and he couldn’t remember her ingesting something other than an orange or cup of tea in the eleven years they’d been married. Regardless, it would be a nice gesture. He put the chocolates back. “A graduation gift. It’s for my son.”

The clerk skipped a few beats formulating a reply. “Well, sir, this is just a drugstore. There’s a department store down two blocks, and a card store nearby. Wouldn’t that be a nicer place to get that kind of gift?”

“This is my favorite drugstore,” Freddy said. He had a habit of answering questions that no one had asked. The clerk, having proved she was of no use, went back to tidying, and Freddy was left in peace.

THE WALLS OF CONSTANCE’S HOME WERE lined with pictures: vacations, events, holidays, memories that didn’t include Freddy. Their old home on Sweetwater Avenue hadn’t featured him either, even after Freddy had old photos specially printed and framed. The frames remained upright in the dining room for months, only moved after the house was packed up and sold. It was a shame, because there was one in particular he liked: in line for a movie, Constance’s blond curls pinned by prayer to the top of her head and Jonas small enough to fit into the bright orange Big Bird tee-shirt. Freddy held him by the waist, but the boy had wriggled free: everyone looked happy. He checked his watch: 4:14. He had sixteen minutes until he needed to find a phone.

Freddy noted that Jonas and Roger seemed to share a jaw line, which must have been impossible, and that these pictures left no discernible gap where Freddy would neatly fit. These new pictures, containing people he knew but places he had never been, reminded him oddly of mistakenly waking up early for work on a Saturday and the deflating relief of realizing this in the shower.

With a small flurry of attention, Constance, followed closely by Jonas, appeared in the thin crowd. Jonas was still dressed in the shirt and tie from this morning’s ceremony, though both had been loosened considerably. He was being led by the elbow.

“My boy, the graduate! Congratulations!” Freddy performed a frantic combination of gestures that ended with his son’s wiry frame in his arms. “How does it feel?”

“Uh, the same. More money. And Roger got me a new microscope.” Jonas’ attention was already on something beyond his father’s shoulder, with a mutable focus that made Freddy think he was being mouthed his responses offstage. “I didn’t see you at the ceremony.”

“No, no, I had to work, of course. Look here, I got you something,” Freddy said, holding up the orange-brown gift bag. He turned his attention to Constance. “Hey *you*.”

She smiled beatifically. She wore her hair straight now. “Hi, Freddy. Glad you could come.”

Jonas folded the top of the gift bag down. “Thanks, Dad. I’ll open it later, when it’s just us.”

“Oh. Well. You’ll probably want to put it in the fridge, then.” That comment provoked Jonas to investigate, uncovering the two Porterhouse steaks that Freddy had bought in a last gasp of inspiration, still wrapped in the butcher’s brown paper, prices in chubby black ink. Then came the yellow bunny, stained on one ear by the juice from the meat.

“That’s great.” Jonas looked at his mother, and a rapid-fire page-long conversation took place in three blinks. Freddy tallied the number of times Jonas muttered something under his breath at their weekly breakfasts (approximately 7). “I’ll just go put this away.”

“You can freeze it if you don’t want it right away,” he called out as his son walked off. He turned his attention to Constance, wrapped smugly in a white cardigan that failed to hide the canary tattoo on her wrist. “Where’s Roger?”

Constance looked to the back of the house, or at least what Freddy assumed was the back of the house. He’d become disoriented somewhere around the coat rack, given that everything was a variation on the same “beachfront” decorating scheme. “Making drinks, I think. Did you want anything?”

“Oh, no, no. Wouldn’t want to be a bother.” He glanced at his watch. “Connie, can I use your phone? I’ll just be a minute.”

Constance flinched. “Of course. Use the one in the guest room.” She cast a glance downwards, at his shoes. This was a tendency she’d developed in the last year of their marriage, as if they could answer questions Freddy would not. She was still so lovely, and still sad. “Close the door. You’ll have a little more privacy.”

WHAT FREDDY FOUND MOST INTERESTING about the guest bedroom was the thin layer of plastic covering everything, a practice he’d also seen in his Austrian grandmother (currently hospitalized). The idea of covering furniture rendered it sterile, and, especially in terms of bedding, seemed counterproductive. There could hardly be enough dust, dirt and otherwise domestic dangers in this house to justify the molten quality of the bedspread, warmed from lying in the afternoon sun. He dialed the number.

The phone clicked after five rings, and he knew that she’d picked up. She didn’t always answer right away, so he often had to prompt her. It was as though she’d forgotten why she’d picked up the phone. “Marlena?”

“Yes.” She cleared her throat, a low, pronounced rumble over the fuzzy echo. “Freddy?”

“I’m just calling to say I think I’ll come over today.”

“I called you all afternoon. You didn’t answer.” She sounded far away and groggy, like she’d just woken up, but her tone was also clipped, like she had enough time in

between sleep and lucidity to become angry. “Don’t come here.”

“Marlena, please.”

“Don’t come here.”

He sat on the bed, noting distractedly the deflation of several layers of blanket underneath him. “I was at Jonas’ graduation party.”

“Jonas?”

“Jonas. My son, Jonas.” He vaguely considered covering Marlena in plastic, given that most of her day was spent finding new ways to perch on her tangerine loveseat, not unlike idle furniture. It would maybe get her to quit smoking.

“Oh. Are you at her house?”

He tightened his lips, hesitating to answer that directly. “No.”

“You are. I can see the number.”

In the panicked rush of conversation, Freddy often forgot how technology worked against him. He checked the phone to ensure there was no way Constance could trace the number. She probably could; she could be ruthless when information was kept from her and had already done it once.

Later, after the papers had been signed, he’d been told the whole story at Marlena’s idea of a celebratory dinner: how Constance had called her number on redial, that she and Marlena had chatted for an hour, and that both women had been very forthcoming with information. Freddy had tried to summon up remorse as the story came in chunks; Marlena had giggled. Up until that point she had been sympathetic, a collection of gushing reassurances endorsed by her embellished bosom. But he’d only been allowed to talk about the state of his marriage until it ended; after everything was official, she tolerated no further discussion of this or certain other topics on Freddy’s mind. He had yet to internalize the change.

“Fine. Come over. Now.” Her next words came out smudged, and Freddy guessed she had pressed the phone up against her face to make her request convincingly urgent. “And go into her bedroom. Steal something for me.”

“Marlena, come on.”

“No, it’s your penance. Steal me something she’ll miss.”

This is how Marlena acquired the pale pink slip, trimmed with scallop-coloured lace that, even after the seams came undone, only fit her in the loosest sense of the word, but did seem to make her happy. He stuffed it into his coat sleeve and left without making a fuss.

NEXT WEEK’S NUMBERS HAD COME IN EARLY from Accounts, and didn’t need attention until Tuesday, but Freddy opened the folder anyway, taking out the fat purple pen he used for notations. These statistics would soothe his nerves, frazzled from last night’s marathon argument with Marlena, which had ended with Freddy picking overripe strawberries out of his attaché case. He’d overslept, arriving at work in a rumpled shirt with berry stains under the armpits at 9:07. He took a moment to brush the dirt off his shoes, left over from the ground outside Marlena’s apartment. It always seemed covered in this cakey wet paste, even in a drought.

He knew Marlena was still annoyed at him. He'd hear from one of her friends soon enough, purposely by accident. Marlena was like a bumblebee in that way – her version of events rubbed off on other people and got carried away, like so much pollen.

It was as he calculated the weekly mass percentage that he gradually built a working theory: his life had become a series of intersecting numbers. Go to work at 8:23; leave at 5:15. Number of trips to the grocery store in a week: 7. Years alive: 43. Length of divorce. Age of kid. Beers in a day. It gave him a certain peace to realize this; he had difficulty arguing with a numbered fact.

The phone rang, and Freddy picked it up knowing who would be on the other side. "Marlena," he breathed into the mouthpiece when she didn't speak. "I'm sorry about the strawberries."

The silence that followed this apology told Freddy that this week would be longer than usual, and that his magpie would need a grand gesture or two to let him back into her ripe bosom's familiar nook. It occurred to him, abstractly, that arguments with Constance had been easier to navigate – furtive, scheming and waged in the night, but linear, at the very least. Marlena quietly hung up the phone.

They had not slept in the same bed last night. He slept on the couch downstairs, at her insistence, and had woken up with the floral pattern of the embroidery pressed into his cheek. Neck sore, erection throbbing. The banishment was a tactic she had learned from a 1930s screwball comedy, the kind where the men practised being exasperated over women to fill in time between pratfalls. Her favourite.

It was too bad, after all that bickering. Freddy had wanted nothing more than to crawl back into her arms and fall asleep, amid the smell of powdered skin and the sweet edge of milk – like Jonas when he was just a baby. Freddy lay his head down on his desk, confident that no one would be able to find him all the way back here. It was cool and filmy against his face, and he remembered that soup had been spilled there two days ago, soaked up with a wad of paper. No: it was three days, because it was the same day as the new stapler. He sighed: these details would be so easy to forget without the right framework.

He called Jonas to congratulate him again on graduating and apologize for leaving so early, but no one answered. Freddy declined to leave a message, lest he say the wrong thing.

Proper use of the apostrophe

"OH, FOR THE LOVE OF CHRIST," PENN MUTTERED UNDER HIS BREATH.

On the overhead screen flashed the first slide of a PowerPoint presentation – "Proper Use of the Apostrophe."

"Did you say something, Penn?" Richard asked, looking up from the laptop at the front of the conference room.

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "Just clearing my throat."

Richard stared a moment, his face twisting and twitching, unsure what expression to hold, and then turned back to the computer. He was in his late-fifties and had a beachball-like bulge above his belt always on the verge of popping the lower buttons of his shirt. His round face, large glasses, receding red hair, thick moustache, and dated blue suit completed the picture of mediocrity. He also had disturbingly large nostrils from which hairs constantly crept.

Richard turned to the screen and began. "Proper use of the apostrophe."

Penn caught only tidbits of the hour-long presentation. "The difference is between plural and possession ... It is also used to indicate contractions ... The exception, which of course proves the rule, is its and it's." At one point, Penn began to doodle. He attempted to draw a dragon and failed miserably.

"Penn, please wait a minute," Richard called to him, as the others filed from the room. "I noticed," he continued, when they were alone, "that you didn't take any notes during my presentation."

"Oh, yeah. No need. The apostrophe and I are old friends. Friends, plural, no apostrophe. See?"

"That presentation came from management."

"I thought you were management?"

"Higher management," Richard snapped back, a little too irritably, his nostrils flaring wide. "I think you could have learned something today."

"Possibly. But then I would have felt an overwhelming need to return my Master's degree in English Literature."

"A Master's degree in English Literature," Richard said, crossing his arms in an exaggerated, self-satisfied fashion. "How's that working out for you?"

Penn opened his mouth, hesitated, then shrugged and blurted out, "Well, I don't need an hour-long presentation on the fucking apostrophe, if that's what you mean."

"HE FIRED YOU FOR THAT?" THE BARTENDER ASKED.

"That," Penn answered, "and I may have also asked him if there was much leg room on the short bus."

The bartender laughed – a deep roaring laugh that caught Penn by surprise. The

bartender, maybe thirty, stood only an inch or two above five feet and weighed at most a hundred and twenty pounds. The laugh echoed off the walls of the near-empty pub.

“Good for you.”

“Yes,” Penn said raising his glass, “good for me.”

“And what do you do now?”

“What the overeducated and unemployable do at eleven-thirty in the a.m. Order another drink and lament.”

“Scotch again?”

“Please. But something higher up the shelf, if it can be had.”

“Higher it is,” the bartender nodded, and pulled a red milk crate from beneath the bar with his foot. He stepped onto it and took the bottle of Lagavulin from the top row. With a familiar and distinctive pop, the cork was pulled and a generous glass poured.

“I’ll keep the bottle handy.”

“Much appreciated,” Penn said. He smelled the scotch, inhaling deeply, and then drank. The smoke and peat of Scotland slipped warmly down his chest. And for the briefest of moments, the morning’s events faded away. The shrill ring of a phone shattered the peace.

“Like a hungry misplaced infant,” the bartender said, and answered the phone. “West of Kerry... Katie, where are you? It’s almost noon ... He did what? ... Holy shit! Was anyone hurt? ... That is incredibly lucky ... Is there much damage? ... He drove it home? ... No, no, it’s all right, I understand. We’ll manage. Don’t worry ... Okay, take care.” The bartender hung up, hesitated, and turned to Penn. “That was one of our waitresses. Her boyfriend went out to go buy cigarettes, but the car wouldn’t start. So he walked instead. And left the car in the driveway in neutral.” He paused. “Needless to say, they live at the top of a very large hill.”

“Needless to say,” Penn repeated, and emptied his second glass. “Sometimes I worry that retard is contagious.”

“THAT’S WHY YOU ALWAYS USE A CONDOM,” a pleasant voice put in. A grey purse landed on the bar, and a young woman, late-twenties, slid onto the stool beside Penn. “Scotch before noon,” she said. “Impressive.”

“It’s the good stuff too,” Penn responded.

“I expect no less. And how are you, Hank?” she said to the bartender.

“Right as rain, Lee. What’s your pleasure?”

“What he’s having, please.”

“What I’m having, please,” Penn said, pushing his empty glass across the bar.

Two glasses were poured.

“Thank you, fair enabler,” Lee said, lifting her glass.

Hank smiled and nodded. Behind him, in the kitchen, there was a loud crash, followed a second later by a colourful string of curses. Hank excused himself and disappeared into the kitchen.

Lee clinked Penn’s glass with her own and swallowed a mouthful of scotch. She

was, by any measure, beautiful – tall, slim, fair skin, dark sharp eyes, and long brown shining hair. She smelled of vanilla and carried a hint of haughtiness about her that added to her appeal.

She looked Penn up and down. “Nice suit.”

“Put it on myself.”

“So, an early liquid lunch to ease the hours?”

Penn shook his head. “Fired.”

“Really? Why?”

“The apostrophe.”

“The apostrophe?”

“The apostrophe.”

Lee shrugged. “Works for me.”

“Also,” Penn continued, “at times I’m a bit of an arrogant asshole.”

“Really? You? Colour me aghast,” she said.

“Hard to believe, isn’t it?” He glanced at her clothes – a grey skirt and jacket with a yellow blouse and uncomfortable-looking shoes. “And how about you?”

“The semicolon.”

“Really?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

“Punctuation can’t be the downfall of us all,” Lee said. “No, mine is a time-honoured classic. Consecutive bad quarters, the company cuts back, departments merge, and my position is declared redundant.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“I’m not. I fucking hated that job. But it just paid too damn well to quit.”

Penn raised his glass in a toast. “Well then, to being redundant.”

“To putting the super in superfluous,” Lee added. “And to Lloyd Baxter, whose empty and meaningless life kept him from accepting the early retirement package that would have spared my job.”

“A job you hated.”

“A job I fucking hated. The most unbelievable part of it all,” Lee went on after a sip, “is that they actually wanted those they just laid off to stick around for the day and bring the chosen few up to speed on our files. To help ease with the transition. You almost have to admire that type of gall.”

“You were the only one who left, weren’t you?”

“No, a couple of others did as well, but more stayed. Just smiled and bent right over. Probably even thanked them after the fact.”

“If you must be something, be polite.”

“If you must be something, don’t be a fucking doormat.”

The noon hour arrived, and the pub quickly filled. Tables and booths were claimed by groups of well-dressed men and women. The air busied with voices, laughter, the clatter of dishes, and the sound of chairs being dragged across the floor. The bartender, Hank, handled every drink and even waited on several tables himself. All the while,

he never neglected Penn's or Lee's glass.

"Busy in here," Lee remarked, as her glass was filled for the third time.

"It's the warmer weather," Hank replied and slid the bottle back under the counter. "It drives people out of doors to come indoors someplace else." Looking around the room, he raised his eyebrows and shrugged, in a gesture of amused indifference, then headed into the kitchen.

Lee again clinked Penn's glass with her own. She leaned back on her stool and glanced at the floor. "Where's your stuff?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean a box of junk from what was once your desk."

"Oh." Penn reached into his pocket and pulled out a two-inch-tall, bronze-coloured Darth Vader key chain. He set it on the bar. Vader stood with arms crossed tightly against his chest, helmeted head raised high, immutable smug glare, cape flowing to the ground. The very image of the anger and arrogance of the dark side.

"Two and a half years," Penn said, without sentimentality, "and this is what I left with."

"I mostly stole office supplies," Lee said. "Need a stapler?"

"Nah. I've stolen a dozen or so over the years."

"Why in the hell would you steal a dozen staplers?"

"The computers and phones were bolted to the desk."

A cellphone rang in Lee's purse. She found the phone and switched it off without checking the call.

Hank came over, shaking his head, but still with an amused look about him. He lined up a half-dozen glasses on the bar.

"Have either of you ever been to Scotland?" he asked. "The sheep there," he continued, with the ease and grace of a practised storyteller, "have no natural predators. The farmers, or I guess the shepherds as they would be, let them roam freely across the countryside. They're all marked with different colours of paint to identify the flocks. It's a strange thing to see – sheep streaked with orange, red, or blue, grazing together in a field." He walked off, carrying a tray loaded with six glasses of tomato juice.

"I like him," Penn said.

"He's a writer."

"Really?"

"Published and everything."

"And here he is." Penn rapped his knuckles against the bar.

"Have to do something. Can't pay the rent as a writer. And this," Lee said, rapping her knuckles against the bar, "is less crushing than a cubicle among cubicles."

"Far fewer problem alcoholics in here too," Penn replied. "There was one guy in our office, Druziak. I don't know how many times that guy showed up drunk or so hung-over that he did nothing but put his head on his desk and moan. Sometimes someone would just drive him home and he'd take a sick day."

"Over fifty, been there about twenty-five years?"

"Of course."

"I think every office has one. Like a really bad mascot. Ours actually passed out at

his desk one morning and pissed himself.”

A nearby table erupted into boisterous laughter. Four men and a woman, roughly the same age as Penn and Lee, shook and jerked in their seats, their faces twisting at some hilarity. One of the men, eyes wide and hands held in the air, said something, and the table again roared with laughter.

“You think they know something we don’t?” Penn nodded towards the table.

Lee turned back to her drink. “No. We know it. We just don’t find it funny.”

“Well, let them have their delusion. Leaves more reality for the rest of us.”

THEY SAT WITHOUT TALKING FOR SOME TIME. The lunch hour passed. Tables and booths emptied, and a measure of calm returned to the pub. Hank whistled to himself as he cleared away dirty dishes.

A woman came into the pub carrying a boy of about four. He was red-faced and chubby and squirmed as the woman struggled to hold his weight. She made for a table by the windows overlooking the sidewalk and all but dropped the child to a chair. She plopped herself down, flipping open a cell phone. The boy fidgeted in his seat, craning his neck in every direction, his eyes darting from one thing to the next.

“I feel I should make a vasectomy joke,” Penn said, “but nothing good’s coming.”

“Did you notice how her purse matches the boy’s clothes?” Lee said.

“Oh, sweet Mary mother of God.”

The boy’s brown pants and beige shirt indeed matched the coloured pattern on his mother’s purse.

“The ultimate accessory.”

Two other women came into the pub, each with a small boy in tow, and joined the first woman. The three boys were seated next to each other.

“Sometimes,” Penn said, “I think people have children just so they have something to talk about.”

“All three of those boys,” Lee said, her gaze fixed on the table, “are exactly the same age. It’s like they had a conception party.”

“I prefer the term orgy.”

“Let’s make our babies at the same time,” Lee continued, her voice bristling with contempt. “That way they can play together while we drink sherry in the kitchen and bemoan our sagging breasts.” She paused long enough to swallow a bit of scotch. “And look how all the women have the same hairstyle. The twelve-year-old boy look. Short, plain, tidy, easy to manage. Efficient, inoffensive, and utterly asexual. Like as soon as you pop one out and become a mommy you cease to be a woman. You’re no longer a sexual being, you’re a caregiver, and you should look the part.”

“My God, you’re sexy when you’re caustic.”

“I’m glad you think so. Finish your drink.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Penn replied, and emptied his glass.

“Meet me downstairs in a minute.”

“Why?”

“Use your imagination.”

It came to him quickly. "Oh. Really?"
"It's not like we haven't done it before."
"Not in a public place, we haven't."
"My God, just leave your purse on the bar, hike up your skirt, and meet me downstairs," Lee said, and left.
Penn watched her disappear down the stairs, waited for the hand on his watch to count off exactly sixty seconds, and followed.

THE BASEMENT OF THE PUB WAS A SINGLE narrow corridor with two storage rooms, an ice machine, and the washrooms. Pictures of Irish castles and posters for Guinness hung along the walls. Lee was nowhere to be seen. Penn hesitated a second, glancing around the corridor, and went into the women's washroom.

"Lock the door," Lee said.
"Why is it I can lock myself inside the washroom?"
"Hmm?"
"Nothing."
Lee struggled to remove her pantyhose. "Get a condom."
"Afraid I got retard?"
"What?"
"Nothing."
Penn took a toonie from his pocket and went over to the dispenser on the wall. Suddenly, he burst into laughter.

"What?" Lee asked. Penn stepped aside so she could see the dispenser. On it, in black marker, someone had written: "For refund, please insert baby."

"Oh, that's just genius," Lee said a full minute later, wiping tears from her eyes.
Penn slipped his toonie into the machine. "Well, what do you say? The sink?"
It was brief, awkward, terribly uncomfortable. Lee, a faucet jammed against her lower back, had to devote much of her attention and energy to ensuring her balance on the sink. The sink being a few inches too high for Penn, he had to stand on tiptoe to reach his target. His calf muscles cramped all the while. And right when he was about to climax, someone pounded angrily on the door, startling him and nearly sending them both crashing to the floor. Penn still managed, however, to finish. Lee was left nowhere near a proper finish.

A short time later, he reclaimed his seat at the bar, and soon she was again beside him, flush and trying to hold back a grin.

"I feel like someone's been punching me in the back," she said, grimacing.
"I should have brought a phone book to stand on. My calves are killing me."
"Slightly lacking, wasn't it?"
"Yeah, sex in a room that stinks of pee – not so hot."

Hank came over. "Back so soon," he said, with a slight smirk, pulling the cork from the bottle of scotch.

A sudden ear-splitting scream: one of the boys at the table near the window had launched into a tantrum. He wailed with stunning volume, seemingly without stopping

to breathe. His face turning bright red, he banged his hands on the table and kicked his feet wildly underneath. His mother pulled a chocolate bar from her purse and handed it to the boy. He immediately quieted.

“I fucking hate children,” Lee remarked to no one in particular.

“WHAT TIME IS IT?” SHE ASKED.

“Seven-thirty,” he answered, glancing at his watch. Above them the West of Kerry sign creaked in the last light of the cool spring evening.

“Are you drunk?”

“Not really,” he answered, with more than a little disappointment.

“No, me either.”

“A hundred and fifty dollars on scotch and I’m not even drunk.” He shrugged. “Well at least I got laid. Hey, you got laid after you got laid off.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Already did it,” he said, winking.

She rolled her eyes. “Where do you have to catch your chariot, lover?”

“The International Exchange Plaza.”

“There’s a liquor store in there, isn’t there?”

“There is, but it closes at six.”

“Of course it does,” she sighed.

“Well, shall we?” he asked, and they started.

The streets were near empty, few cars and fewer pedestrians, the final trickle of a normal weekday. The vendors and peddlers had long disappeared, and even the panhandlers had migrated to other parts of the city. The air, though, still held the daytime stench and taste of cigarettes and exhaust. A light breeze shuffled bits of garbage along and among the grey concrete of the office towers. The towers crowded and soared into the dark, silent, immovable, and intimidating.

“Like giant tombstones,” Lee said absently, staring up.

“And what does that make us?” Penn asked.

“Mourners,” she answered.

They crossed in the middle of the street and hopped a guardrail to cut through a large parking lot. Halfway across, he stopped, laughed once, and made for a red Mustang convertible with a white soft top.

“A 1964½ Mustang,” he said, rather excitedly.

“1964½?”

“1964½,” he repeated. “Richard – the red-moustachioed wonder who fired me – this is his car.”

“How do you know?”

Penn pointed at the vanity plate.

“Who’s Grace?” Lee asked.

“That would be the car.”

“Oh. Oh, really? Oh, that’s just sad.”

“And sadder still. He actually keeps a picture of this thing on his desk.”

"I don't even know how to respond to that."

"I do," Penn said, with a sinister snicker. He pulled his keys from his pocket and squatted close to the driver's side door. There followed the whine and screech of metal. The parking lot was unattended and poorly lit, and they were a good hundred feet from any street or building. But Lee, leaning casually against the hood of the car and feigning a search through her purse, tried to appear as inconspicuous as possible.

"Are you writing your fucking manifesto, or what?" she asked several minutes later. Penn was squatting beside the car.

"In a manner of speaking."

"Well, workers of the world unite, blah, blah, blah, and let's get the hell out of here."

"Almost," Penn replied. He added the finishing touches and stepped back from the car. Scratched into the door, surprisingly legible: "You don't own the car. The car own's you."

"Very poignant," Lee said, her voice flat with sarcasm. "What's with the second apostrophe?"

"Misdirection. He'll never suspect me."

"Oh, yeah. Back to the beginning, I guess."

"Proper use of the apostrophe," Penn said. "Truly."

"Why would Richard still be around at this hour?" Lee asked, as they finished crossing the parking lot.

"Bottoms Up."

"The strip club?"

"He loves to watch the ladies."

"And invisible little insects crawl up and down my skin."

THEY TURNED DOWN A SIDE STREET, AND LEE, on the inside, nearly collided with a grey-haired man walking a chocolate lab. She let out a startled gasp and jumped to the side. The dog took this as a sign of play and, leaping up, tried to lick her face.

"Rainer, no!" The man yanked the dog away and gave it a light rap on the nose with the newspaper he carried. Bowing, and in a sedate, almost affected tone: "Please allow me to apologize for my dog," he said.

"It's all right," Lee replied, smoothing out her skirt. "She just wants to play." But the man had already rounded the corner. She shook her head. "Your dog accosts someone, you could linger a second or two for polite chit-chat."

They continued down the sidewalk.

"How are you doing for time?" Lee asked.

"Still good," Penn answered, glancing at his watch.

Suddenly, Lee stopped. "Ah, fuck!" she cried angrily. She turned and screamed down the empty street. "Asshole!"

"What?" Penn asked, and then laid eyes on it. Not fifteen feet from them, in the middle of the sidewalk, was a large steaming pile of dog shit.

"That is possibly the biggest pile of dog shit I've ever seen."

"What in the fuck is wrong with people? He carried the fucking paper to pick it up

with; he hit the dog with it! Asshole!” she again shouted down the empty street, and began rifling through her purse. “You don’t have a plastic bag, do you?”

“No,” Penn answered. “What? Wait, you’re going to pick it up?”

“Not without a bag, I’m not. Fuck!” She threw her purse to the ground and stormed off a dozen paces, where she stood with her back to Penn, her hands on her hips, her shoulders and head rising and falling with each breath. Penn picked up the purse and waited. It had grown quite cool. Not a car or a pedestrian went past. A minute later, Lee turned to face him, and Penn walked to her.

“I’m so happy you keyed that asshole’s car.”

“Yeah, it’s just too bad we couldn’t see his reaction,” he replied, and they crossed to the other side of the street.

“Maybe I should go to work in retail,” Penn said, after they had covered several blocks in silence. “Move from one major chain to another – you know, Wal-Mart, Blockbuster, Starbucks – and do as poor a job as possible, be the biggest asshole possible, in the hopes of pissing off customers and driving them away. Affect their bottom line. Strike a blow against big business and the corporate world. Attack them with gross incompetence.”

“Wouldn’t work. Gross incompetence already abounds and profits soar.”

CROSS-LEGGED ON THE SIDEWALK, JUST BEYOND the doors of a drugstore, was a young man. Even seated, he was clearly extremely thin – narrow pointy nose and dark eyes bulged from a long face; his shirt sagged on his shoulders.

“Spare any change?” he asked, as they approached. His hair, flecked with grey, was short and neat; he appeared to be clean-shaven.

“Sorry,” Penn replied. “Spent everything I had on the hooker here.”

“Then what about you, beautiful?” the man asked, offering Lee a crooked smile.

“Sorry, but I’m going to need it to buy a shoehorn to help pull my foot out of his ass.”

“Kinky.”

They went past, but after a short distance Penn turned and strode back. He pulled off his suit jacket and handed it over.

“Wow. Now I’ll really dazzle them in the interviews,” the man said.

“Sell it,” Penn said. “New, it’s worth about two hundred bucks.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“I am.”

“Then thank you.”

Penn lingered, staring blankly a moment, then nodded and walked back to Lee.

“Very symbolic,” she said. “If not a little dramatic.”

“You know, sometimes words can hurt.”

“So can violence,” Lee said, and punched him hard on the arm.

“Christ! You’ve got a ring on!”

“I certainly do.” And she punched him again.

The bus stop was crowded. Two dozen people, most with clothes and faces wrinkled by the day, huddled still and silent around a single unused bench. Penn and Lee

waited apart from them. A bus approached, and the crowd stepped closer to the curb, relief shining in their eyes, until the “Out of Service” sign became visible. The bus zipped past, and the silent dejected wait resumed.

“That was actually pretty funny,” Lee whispered.

“It would have been funnier if ...,” Penn began, also in a low voice, but stopped abruptly. His face was flushed, his mouth had fallen open. Frantically, he patted his pockets, front and rear. Then he took off at a run back the way they had come.

“That was funnier,” Lee said.

PENN KEPT UP A FULL SPRINT UNTIL HE ROUNDED the corner near the drugstore. He then slowed, stopped, and let loose a great sigh. The man seated on the sidewalk, now wearing the grey suit jacket, had not moved an inch.

“You forgot something!” the man called, holding up a brown leather wallet. He tossed it.

“Thank God!” Penn, breathing heavily, flipped it open.

The man frowned. “I’ve got my problems, but I’m no thief.”

“Shit. Sorry.” Penn snapped the wallet shut, slid it into his pocket. Blood pulsing in his head, feeling rather dizzy, he bent forward, his hands on his knees, and took several deep breaths. “You ever have one of those days?”

The man gave him a curious look and laughed. “You ever have one of those lives?”

“Shit. Sorry. Again” Penn couldn’t help smiling. “Enjoy the jacket.”

“I will. Enjoy the wallet.”

PENN FOUND LEE SLOUCHED, ALONE, ON THE bus-stop bench, her gaze tilted skyward. She brought a cigarette to her lips and took a long draw, the tip glowing bright. She held onto the smoke a moment, then slowly sent it into the unnatural yellow light of the street. Penn dropped himself beside her.

“Can hardly see the stars in the city,” Lee said. “All these damn lights.” She took another draw, exhaled, and added, “You missed your bus.”

“Of course I did. Seems a fitting end, doesn’t it?”

She didn’t answer. Two cop cars, sirens wailing, screamed past. Tires squealed in the distance, and all was quiet again.

Lee flicked the cigarette into the street.

“Well, what do we do now?”

Penn shrugged. “I don’t know. Wait for our parents to die?”

Running the show

Difficult Men

Brett Martin

Penguin

303 pp

THE SUBTITLE OF *DIFFICULT MEN* INDICATES FIRST OF all its import – “*Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution*” – and then its range – “*From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*.” Above the title is a photo of the porkpied Bryan Cranston; below the author’s name is a photo of the late James Gandolfini, whose death occurred shortly after the book was published. This is notable, because Martin spends a good deal more time on the latter than the former and uses Gandolfini’s sometimes erratic behaviour to underline how stressful the making of a teevee series can be. I suspect there would have been (a little) less tut-tuttery had the death occurred before.

But the stars aren’t the focus here; the show runners are. And it is they, rather than their Tony Sopranos and Don Drapers, whom Martin is asking us to recognize as “difficult.” The exception, perfectly bland in comparison, despite *his* Walter White, turns out to be Vince Gilligan. The others, however, beginning with David Chase, are portrayed (portray themselves when interviewed) as men who have had to grapple with their choices (Chase would still rather be a film director, for example), who have, in ways no one ever thought to condone, acquired (and leerily accepted) success – enough success to substantiate Martin’s claim that theirs is the “third golden age of television.”

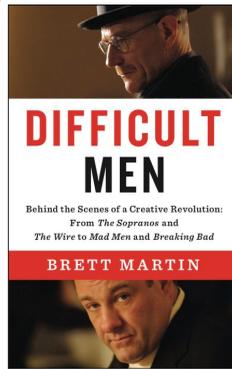
If you hear rumbling, it’s the bandwagon beneath us. And it might be as well, before we’re carried along any farther, to consider just what that pumped-up accolade is supposed to mean

and whether being third doesn’t, after all, on the contrary, indicate something of a degradation, an honourable mention, in effect, the only prize left to hand out. How many “golden” ages of television can there plausibly be? By that greedy measure, quite a few.

Perhaps to call this a silver (soon to become iron) age was thought more strictly mythological than required, the objective always having been to equal, i.e., surpass, our elders. Harsh, indeed, the judgement that would find this current era inferior to the one, however gilded, during which Sid Caesar and Milton Berle (and, okay, Rod Serling) are remembered to have flourished.

“Creative revolution” is a somewhat more useful term, in that it alerts us to a significant change not only in quality (which is generally undeniable) but also in access (a claim one might call the bandwagon of bandwidth). Martin doesn’t entirely escape the obvious in recounting teevee’s evolution from network to cable (and thence perhaps to online) broadcasting, but he does provide the details that make “the business” a business. And once that’s over with, he sets to work justifying his assertion (one can’t see it as an argument) that ours is (to use yet another formulation) the age of the “auteur.”

A WORD, YOU MAY BE THINKING, FROM A DIFFERENT past, the *passé surcomposé*, from the New *Vague*, Godard, Truffaut, Resnais, Chabrol, etc., transformed metaphorically into the persons of Chase, Simon, Milch, Ball, etc. Certainly there’s a lineage, of admiration if not ambition, and certainly the power (to say nothing of the budgets) that show runners now wield is what the earlier group would have wanted (and did, in fact, strive for) for itself. But is there any art form that whines as much as this one does? Has television incorporated the inferiority we used to label it



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with to such a degree that it cannot, even now, leave off comparing? Does all teevee constantly aspire to the (seemingly more solid or unified) condition of film or novel? Does it always have to be their analogue, be flattered into thinking its true destiny is to replace them? Yes, yes, and yes, apparently, if Martin's own attitude is to be taken as representative.

Which is a shame, because television is most to be admired, in my judgement, when it most resembles itself and is forced to contend, as valiantly as those other art forms, with the circumstances of its creation. There is something inherently good about *The Sopranos*, all six pulpy seasons, that there would not have been about (let's imagine) *Sopranomania: The Musical* (yet a possibility) or Jonathan Franzen's *Tony & Carmela* (God, no). There is something, that is to say, uniquely palatable. Rather than comparing, we should be emphasizing the singularity of a medium that has only been around for a little less than the length of a (once average) lifetime. (Chase and Milch were born in 1945, Ball in 1957, Simon in 1960, Gilligan in 1967.) And perhaps we should be asking our critics to remain critical:

Long-form TV drama is the most significant storytelling form of our time. The most magnificent examples transcend mere storytelling or entertainment. They reach for and grasp sociological importance and psychological depth. *

WHAT BLARNEY. THE BEST TEEVEE IS ROOTED IN THE *merely* good enough, as the best of other forms are. The shows receiving the most attention, in Martin's book and elsewhere, are of a piece with those only tangentially referred to, the shows we watch without much surprise but (really) with the same kind of pleasure. Whether episodic or continuous, network or cable, all are built to

*John Doyle, *The Globe and Mail*, October 15, 2013

withstand commercial breaks and viewers' inattentiveness (the show's salient characteristics being reinforced by brute repetition or expository dialogue, i.e., self-to-self avowal), all are assigned a place in an easily identifiable (often soundlot, sometimes Albuquerque) teevee landscape of conveniently absent (real-life) constraints. All entertain, tell stories, strike chords. And so forth.

The best teevee is better because it participates in the same cultural offering of immediate, plentiful, various, and more or less inventive popular fare, not because it ascends to some higher floor of uncontaminated Art, where may be found a choicer buffet. Martin's "difficult men," however privileged, seem to understand this, even if he, in his excited account of them, can't help prodding that very large (hyperbolic) elevator button. ■

– *Ida Kohl*

The beautiful shots

Pollen

Tom Abray
DC Books, 183 pp

The Jesus Year

Jani Krulc
Insomniac Press, 144 pp

Entry Level

Julie McIsaac
Insomniac Press, 162 pp

The Barista and I

Andrew Szymanski
Insomniac Press, 131 pp

NOW THAT ALICE MUNRO HAS WON THE NOBEL and Lydia Davis the Man Booker International for their short stories – or for their contribution, with them, to the world of literature (or to the literature of the world) – it may be wondered whether the status of the form and those who cultivate it has at all changed. You know the (routine) question: Wouldn't she have better spent her time writing a novel? And the (routine) answer, somewhat wanly given: Oh, golly, they're altogether different, those two – the novel's no more a longer story than the story's a shorter novel.

Are we (so) sure?

Quite a few authors have tried to advance the notion that the novel is – or can be made from – a stack of stories. These story cycles or sequences (or composite novels) present the reviewer and perhaps the reader with a difficulty, in that he/she must strive to find therein (as hereunder) the expected amount (a novel's worth, say) of textual coherence. That the joins are visible, that the characters come and go (and come again), that one plot might not ever converge with another, such things matter less, I think, than that the same gathering hand be immanent throughout.

Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, for instance, marketed as a "novel in stories," passed the test well enough with some reviewers (the title character figuring in all but two) and yet was seldom allowed to call itself simply a novel. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, in which each distinctly calibrated pastiche injected (or ejaculated) a dose of further intrigue into the next, was never allowed to call itself anything else. Even Munro, so closely identified (*qua* saint and martyr) with the shorter form, is being praised for having often written stories that had the longer one's temporal expansiveness.

Is this merely an entrenched prejudice? When short story collections compete with novels for the Giller¹ and the GG², are we really (reasonably) rooting for them? Or do we discount their chances immediately (unless, of course, "they" happen to be Munro's), because, when weighed together, only the novels have ... *weight*?

To which the collector might object that collections, in offering up their essence four or five times over, have surely a quantitative advantage, the superiority of so many fresh starts.

Where *did* we put that non-compete clause?

A friend, literary and alert and able-minded, a former poetry editor, indeed, of this very journal, turned to me recently while we were struggling to assume our 3D glasses in time, at least, for the closing credits and said, "No one reads short stories." *Meaning*: she didn't. *Meaning*: those pesky random collections, which, she went on, publishers were more and more commercially unwise or even (and hence) reluctant to publish. I ventured to reply (before talking became inadvisable) that

¹ That Lynn Coody should have won this year's Giller for her collection *Hellgoing* was, I would think, for most of us, however glad we were of it, a surprise.

² That Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* should have won the Governor General's Award (after winning the Man Booker) was no surprise, but it could be argued that she, too, had chosen to construct her novel out of a number of discrete units identifiable as stories.

reviews

she was (did I say “thoroughly”?) ill-informed. (Shouldn’t I have said “overly pessimistic”?) Many people do, some even preferring to. Read them, that is. And most publishers continue to collect and publish them (acknowledging, frequently, their original appearance in wee journals like ours).

Each of the books under review is the author’s first. All four authors have studied creative writing at Concordia, three of them with the esteemed Mikhail Iossel. Three (not the same three) include what (always) looks (to me) like a class exercise, a “you” story. One (this one, the one imperiously reviewing) would expect (for rhetorical purposes only) a certain sameness, the whiff of the MFA lab, perhaps, a predilection for inornate, unexcessive (inhibitory) prose, the scar of an adverbectomy faintly showing, barely, so pale are we, there. (“Barely there” being the more pronounced MFA stylistic hallmark.) One would (of course) be wrong. They do have some things, as mentioned, in common, but otherwise they are unlike.

TOM ABRAY WRITES LONGER THAN THE rest, possibly because he’s also a filmmaker (“Swarm,” the longest story, has, at times, despite its plot, the mesmeric indeterminacy of mumblecore) but particularly, I think, because he likes to linger (as in “La Garderie,” “Throttle” [see *paperplates*, Vol. 7, No. 4], “Good Investments”) over the details encouraged by a realistic mode of representation. This (generic label-sticking) is not to suggest that *Pollen* (a title truly adrift) lacks variety or humour or a sense of experiment. Several stories take a turn, sharp or gradual, toward the unreal (“A Spot of Bother,” “Wendy, Field Guide,” “Snow”). And the avowedly historical “Tako Kichi” [kite crazy] is so compressed and cut up it defies the standard shape of a good old tale, although there may be a tale-teller’s wink and

nudge half-concealed nearby.

“Moussaka” combines and demonstrates several of Abray’s virtues: an ability to stay upwind of the subject, i.e., the subject narrating; a slyness, all the same, in dealing with point of view; the confidence to break off when (or just before) we no longer need explanation. The unnamed narrator himself knows everything from the start but in the recounting proceeds as if discovering his own story anew.

One character (the featureless “my opponent”) disappears from sight on the very first line, to be replaced as suddenly, “a few [tennis] courts down,” by another, stranded, he, but amply supplied with a sadly comic accent (“... do you layk ayr?”), a physiognomy (“Eastern European”), a past (in Kazakhstan), a profession (unemployed chemist/salesman), and a name (Vladimir). Our first glimpse of him, we may (not) recollect later on, will have encompassed the three (tennis) balls settled “in a triangle” at his feet. The

opponent has been exchanged for a partner. (“I’m always looking for partners,” says the narrator.) They agree to meet regularly. Vladimir is a powerful player, but:

[...] for every beautiful shot, he made two that were ugly. I learned to wait for him to make mistakes. The strategy paid off. Still, he played the same. I don’t think he minded losing sets.

He went for the beautiful shots.

The other partner, off court, is the narrator’s girlfriend Calli, with whom Vladimir, once introduced, turns shy but attentive. He, the immigrant, has the ambition (the “dreams”) that the narrator had somehow, too early, forfeited (“abandoned”). With, one presumes, no intent to wound, Vladimir says to the latter, “You are perfect Canadian, I think.” The irony resounds nonetheless. That the next developments should



seem to the reader both surprising and inevitable (“strategy” again, but reversed, paying off) is a tribute to Abrey’s restraint, the lightness, overall, of his touch. Our “opponent,” perhaps (not) the same, reappears for another game of tennis, which the disabused narrator, he/she notices, is now playing differently:

“You made some great shots.”
 “I’d rather win.”

The more cynical, or better adjusted, opponent replies pointedly:

“I’d rather do both.”

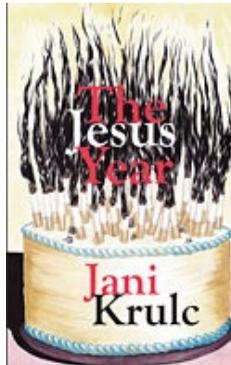
JANI KRULC HAS A GIFT FOR CALCULATING, TO A NICETY, the reader’s comprehension – wastes, it would seem, not a word. There is no narrative “drag,” as such, and yet no impression of curtailment, either. She conveys the thrumming psyche of her characters in and through (their) action; rarely are they left alone for long; and when they are, they’re only obliquely thinking of themselves. Their energy pulses outward, carrying a message neither entirely loving nor entirely hopeless. Their world, as a fictional entity, is shaped more or less exactly to the dimensions of the one we live in, which allows us to make a good many assumptions about what we’re not being told. The dominant note, even in these familiar circumstances, is slightly macabre, decidedly amoral.

In “A Guide to Decorating” the opacity of the main character, Sheila, prevents us from making a sentimental (never mind moral) distinction between the ending of a life (her mother’s) and the choosing of a colour (“blooming rapeseed, or mustard,” in this case). We might call one merciful and the other redemptive, but we have no reason to believe either qualifier that clearly

indicated. From the window of her new condo, Sheila watches “the little blond boy across the street” react, first jubilantly, then more distractedly, as marathon runners pass by. A few pages later, again as if from afar, she learns that the boy has been the victim of a hit and run. Her partner Hank and the boy’s parents may express, in word or witnessed gesture, the appropriate emotion, but she refrains so consistently and to such an extent that we are left with nothing but ambiguous inferences. Is her reaching for Hank, at the end, something we might fashion to our own (conventional) expectations, i.e., the fulfilment (merciful/redemptive) of her biological destiny? Or is it yet one more example of her ego’s (darwinian) rapacity?

There’s a Hank in “The Evaluators,” too. A Henry, to whom Olivia is soon and plainly wed on a beach in Tofino. She’s an academic; she looks “at nineteenth-century advertisements for domestic products and the way they depict women.” He’s a city planner; he “mostly reject[s] development bids.” They both, they decide, “evaluate merit.” What Henry’s merit is we can’t truly say; he’s a bit of a duffer, but he seems to satisfy Olivia. Seems, at least, to want to. He’s reckless, however, and that, when faced with an evaluation from oceanic Nature, is cause for a very bad mark indeed. Olivia’s given span of life projects her, briefly, into a future outside the story, her sorrow – for whose consolation but the reader’s? – compared with its eventual abatement.

Couples and their colloidal naïveté (as in “Going to Market”) may absorb Krulc’s attention, but she brings in other kinds of duality as well. There are parents fretting about their children (“Familia,” “A Raising”); there’s a woman haunted by the bizarre behaviour, foolish (and perhaps premonitory) death of her brother (“The Jesus Year”).



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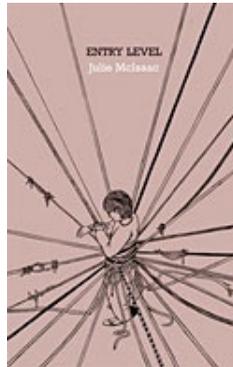
“Hasard” presents a more technically interesting variation, with two couples (three, if we count the adulterous one) and a POV that leaps like a flame from head to head, in the course of a crowded, eventful Christmas party at which no one, except possibly – “her belly the size of a barrel” – Maryanne (upon whom the flame does not alight), is having anything but a dismal time. She and Angela and Julie once made a pact to get pregnant; all but Julie succeeded; now, for the latter, even adoption is “blocked,” and her partner George, so passionate about woodworking, has “dismantled the cradle [he built] and repurposed the wood” (some of which, it may be, went into “the wooden heart on a golden chain” he gave her and she never wears). Angela and Derek, the hosts, have a five-year-old, who is sleeping in one of the four bedrooms upstairs in this “three level hugging the mountain” (Mont-Royal, presumably). Derek, though, is hiding from the revelry in another of the bedrooms, intent on brooding over the revelation of all too fertile Angela’s unfaithfulness with – oh, but let’s stop there. These and similar details we happen upon are assembled for us as much by Julie and Angela’s own (separate) brooding as by their (separate) movements throughout the house. And the farcical (retributive) accidents (the chance/mischance signalled by the title) that occur so punctually are evidence of something more, shall we say, like fate. Not, by any means, the tidiest story, it seems to me Krulc’s most daring.

JULIE MCISAAC’S STORIES DISPLAY A TOUCH MORE class-consciousness, perhaps because the subject matter is almost entirely taken up with the pressures of “entry level” work and life. Three of them have for protagonist the just-entering Kathleen, whose first days at Toys-O-Rama are described, from her point of view, in “The

Cashier.” We read of Kathleen’s first panicky hours at the register, her experience of the perils of “double scanning” and the treachery of the paging system. At home, her shift finished, we meet the loud-voiced, cribbage-playing, *Jeopardy*-watching parents. This slightly caricatured set-up changes in aspect when we enter Kathleen’s bedroom, which has “bare walls and empty bookshelves,” indicating that she must once have escaped it, and we are told that her mother has left her some rather ghastly “reading material” in the form of an anti-abortion pamphlet. Later, she wakes to a pang of longing: “I missed him so much my bones ached.” The second day at the store is no easier: we learn about gift receipts and get a hint of management tyranny (“This break room is DISGUSTING!”) and witness her humiliation from the sexually charged teasing of a male customer. By now, we’re beginning to realize that Kathleen, as vulnerable as she may be, is protected, essentially, by her desperation to keep going.

In “The Baby Section,” a month has passed, and the Christmas season is upon us. Kathleen is being reassigned to the department named in the title, to replace Molly, who, just returned from a leave of absence (pregnancy, then stillbirth), has suddenly and understandably (given the constant reminder of her surroundings) fallen ill. The challenge here, for Kathleen, now becomes not only to acquaint herself with the merchandise but also to ingratiate herself with the two much more experienced employees Debbie and Connie. The arrangement of the items on sale is unfamiliar, and their use in the care of a child is sometimes mysterious:

This was all new to me. It occurred to me that there was a whole world of things out there that I didn’t know about. There were so many things



I hadn't thought of, didn't even know enough about to know that I hadn't thought of. I froze in one spot and moved my left hand to my breast. What the fuck did anyone need a nipple shield for?

As for her faraway (unblamed) ex, Jason, he doesn't know she's pregnant. Thoughts of whom and which serve to precipitate, perhaps, the more visceral kind of disclosure (she vomits) and bring us back to that same unfailing desperation/determination of hers.

In "Red Earrings," two months have passed since Kathleen moved home, and the bedroom has acquired more furniture, her equally passive-aggressive mother a little more dimension (she, too, is a "working stiff," a Molly Maid). The rediscovered earrings, forbidden by the Toys-O-Rama dress code, are a rebellious afterthought, to be worn to and from but otherwise pocketed. A correlative, perhaps, of her fluttery self-confidence:

I imagined them drooping from my ears, with my hair swept up off my shoulders and the earrings showing off a feminine curve in my neck. I thought of how I might look to someone else, coming through the line. How they might see me and think, "That is the prettiest cashier I have ever seen."



It is her bad/good luck to identify one of the counterfeit bills they've been warned against. Good, because, had she not, her pay would have been docked. Bad, because it makes her afraid of reprisal from the "twentysomething" boy/young man who evaded capture. Still, when she is congratulated (by the desirable Derrick and the usually stern Pam, managers), she responds as any earnest little employee should, the art-student attitude forgotten. Of her pregnancy, terminated or continuing, we hear nothing, can

only presume that the concern she feels over the scheduling problems of a fellow employee, a single mother, has its origin in a (somehow justified) excess of empathy, the other term in the dilemma created by her mother's urging that she "stand up" for herself.

These, the Kathleen stories, are the beginning, middle, and end of McIsaac's seven-story collection. Tanya, the telemarketer in "Team Players"; the unnamed hotel cleaner in "The Falls Side"; the dutiful stepdaughter Elizabeth, whose employment, though not specified, is a factor, in "Sam" – they all share a sensibility with Kathleen, an awareness, if we may generalize, that work sets limits on life early, even earlier than we ourselves are set – i.e., upon entry – and that it might well be a lifelong struggle to reconcile ourselves with them.

ANDREW SZYMANSKI, WINNER OF THIS YEAR'S *Concordia University First Book Prize*, approaches

reality from another quarter, the syntactical one. His style, though no less straitened (or disciplined) than his co-debutants', is notable for its distinctive tone, which (we can only guess) might be borrowed from a second (or third) language or from any number of authors read and digested, including (as referenced) the 100-proof David Foster Wallace. Which is not to say derivative. On

the contrary, there is a freshness to be heard in the voice recounting these sometimes deadpan comical, sometimes openly feverish stories.

In "The Recruit (The Flower and the Bird)" the male narrator, of student age, has been abandoned by his lover after six years:

Likely it had been planned all along. Monopolize the best years of my young life then disappear into oblivion, or Mexico, or some other place.

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He hopes to find her again, suspects, from the clues given him, that she has fled to Taiwan. But:

So truthful-seeming, transparent-seeming, so goddamn plausible that I might have believed her if I'd ever encountered a woman who was not cunning, not duplicitous, not dubious or round-about or evasive. My girl was all of those things.

The man's a misogynist, evidently, and full, for that matter, of duplicity himself. His scheme is to recruit a travel companion (a "bird") with whom to while away the hours before he replaces her, at journey's end, with his reformed "flower." The painstakingly described seduction, though not as straightforward as planned ("[s]he made me work for it"), does eventually succeed:

She fell asleep. [...] I did a good job picking this one out, I thought. A great choice. A bargain. Look at her: so peaceful it was making me tired. I wanted to be wherever she was right then. If only I could meet her in sleep.

This tenderness of feeling, if such it is, shouldn't deceive us: it has to coexist with the seducer's urge to reacquire ascendancy over his "little flower." The sojourn in Taipei, sparsely summarized, resolves nothing and (unless I'm misreading) serves only to increase the mystery (some would say the irony, some the dread). ("She might be here, I thought. She could be anywhere.") At a jewellery stall in the market, he contemplates buying a necklace with a jade gemstone for his former lover, tries, in fact, to have it put away, but for his current lover, back at the hostel, he does buy on impulse ("nothing was too much") a string of golden cultured pearls.

The story derives its force, as do several in the collection, from the (tyrannical) first person, so plain and assertive and yet not, for all that, gratuitously forthcoming. Contained, in

a word. Suspicious of its own romanticizing tendencies. The graduate of "Graduation" finds himself among "a congregation of strapping upright future successes" with whom, it seems to him, he shares very little. So alienated is he that he can't see anyone else celebrating: "Where were the drunken revellers?" A beery solipsistic nostalgia irradiates the campus. He notes the bench on which "years earlier [he] had weepily finished reading *Frankenstein* late one night after the library had closed, as the rain soaked me through and dog-eared the pages." Other landmarks inspire a chain of such reflections ("... where we had spent ... where I had put on ... where I had worked ... where we had uncovered ... where I used to play ..."), disturbed, briefly, by the anomalous "where the mustachioed middle-aged man had ogled me in the shower," only to resume and conclude with: "where we had played orientation games, all bright-eyed and eager to know each other."

*

COLLECTIONS, UNLIKE NOVELS, HOLD TOGETHER SO many independently moving parts that attempting to rate the former as we do the latter can only lead us to (mis)apply the worst sort of avuncular (Uncle Isaac) physics. (The worst sort of condescending *reviewerese*.) The unity looked for isn't, ultimately, of effect but of intention. And that intention has to be to stretch – without discarding – the (platonic) form of the short story, however broadly this category is defined. Each of our authors has understood the task somewhat differently, but no reader of their stories will ever doubt that they *have* understood it. ■

– Karl Buchner

Not so modern Audrey

Umbrella

Will Self

Grove Press, 397 pp

THE EARLY PAGES OF *UMBRELLA* ARE AS ELLIPTICAL AS anything ever written. That impression (of difficulty) no doubt changes as the three strands to the plot, here so heavily interwoven (and summarized as such on the front endpaper), come unravelled:

It is 1918, and *encephalitis lethargica*, of which there's been an epidemic, has infected the barely adult Audrey, condemning her to a "living death" in a mental hospital. It is 1971, and Dr Busner begins his L-DOPA experiments upon the now elderly Audrey and other post-encephalitic patients; the results are remarkable, but they don't last. It is 2010, and Dr B, now retired, revisits the hospital building, now a "luxury building," convinced that he was, in part, responsible for the experiment's failure.

It's a truism to say that there were perhaps as many modernisms (historically) as there were modernists, but Self's version, to judge from his reviews and interviews, is strictly sub-Joycean. Polyphonic. Psycho-geographic. Humanistic. Rather than, say, Woolfish, in which (very roughly speaking) the foreground is given to a singular (though fairly distributed) lyrical consciousness and the background to a series of tenuous abstractions (those flat bands of colour representing a totality of which the details are already known and thus need not be described).

Here we might bring in, for further comparison, F.M. Ford (whose *Parade's End* – fullStop-pard – ran on HBO earlier this year) and D. (Dot) Richardson (whose *Pilgrimage* has long awaited such treatment). That, however, would

perhaps be premature, since Self has spoken of adding another volume or two in the same line, bulking up, as it were, for the *faux-mo* games. Ford, in any case, is an exemplary influence; Richardson, inventor of "the psychological sentence" and the first, we're told, to have published a "fully stream-of-consciousness" novel, only, it would seem, a distant one.

I was delighted, I'm not entirely sure why, to come upon a golfing scene in *Umbrella*. I felt the same ... levity when reading (long ago) the aforementioned *Parade's End* and J.F. Powers' *Morte d'Urban*. Are there others? [Pauses to google.] Yes, there are. *Goldfinger*, most forgettably. A ton of mysteries (e.g., *Trent's Last Case*) and what are called sports novels, which, I gather, have golf at their centre, not off to one side. Golf, here, I should add, is elaborated upon (with Wyndham Lewis-like fierceness) purely as a class signifier. (Audrey's ambitious brother has only two clubs to play with.)



I'm tempted to say that Self's appropriation of modernist techniques fails to take into account their historical necessity, their place in the narratological continuum, as well, obviously, as what succeeded them (but preceded us) – that, in attempting to demonstrate modernism's legitimacy (currency), he is committing a kind of literary fraud.

But then again I finished the novel almost convinced of the very opposite – that this truly is how we should (still) be portraying human consciousness (assuming that's what we, in literature, are supposed to be doing). Mimetic fallacy: his fondness for representing dialect/ accent/lisp phonetically, however irksome (to the reader) that might become, is surely strategic; modernism, this type of it, didn't depart entirely from realism, and the real world is made up of differences, is, in fact, all those differences gathered together.

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One would expect him (now, this century) to be carrying out such a project with something less than seriousness (than Self-regard). And yet no, the stream flows on without the least trace of procedural irony, pushing past us not only the memories of doctor and patient but also largely angular facts and references (to illness and treatment). So swiftly, indeed, does the stream flow on that we would be well advised not to look back, lest we lose our place in it.

After finishing *Umbrella* I began *Reality Hunger*, David Shields' amusingly tendentious anthology, in which he quotes Vivian Gornick thus:

Modernism ran its course, emptying out narrative. Novels became all voice, anchored neither in plot nor circumstance, driving the storytelling impulse underground.

Is this true? *Umbrella*, it seems to me, *does* have a plot (threefold); we *are* concerned (more or less) with the development of the principal characters; the voices *don't* float free of their circumstances. Was she describing the decadent period of modernism? Is Self's version that of an earlier period, when it flourished? Or is the novel he wrote simply (and forgivably) *ersatz*? ■

– *Brenda Keble*

Cheating at math

Sweet Tooth

Ian McEwan
Knopf Canada

"You know, what amazes me about writing is this," said Emma, "what an amazing organization of all corners of the spirit goes on, if you see what I mean, to concentrate on what's being written. When it's good, I mean."

– Malcolm Bradbury, *Eating People is Wrong*

I KNOW OF SEVERAL PICTURES IN WHICH, PARADOXICALLY, the hand or figure doing the drawing is also the hand or figure being drawn. The most famous is surely the one by M.C. Escher (*Tekenen*, lithograph, 1948) that, many years ago, seemed to hang on the bedroom wall of every culturally composite undergrad. It illustrates quite expertly what (I now learn from Wikipedia) is to be called a "strange loop" or "tangled hierarchy," in which the levels are so ill-defined that the eye of the viewer, perforce, ends up where it began.

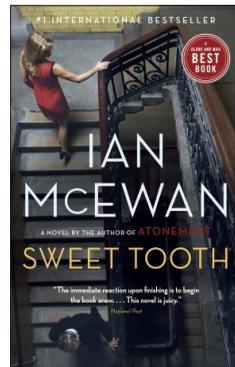
Another artefact also frequently encountered in that bedroom of the early 80s was Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, which dealt at length with just such "heterarchies" and their relation to the development of human consciousness. (Indeed, a more recent work of his makes the point with its title alone: *I Am a Strange Loop*.) Our "I," as it is in this case, travels (nervously) back and forth over a closed cycle, taking in whatever (symbolic data) will contribute to a sense of self, make it, seemingly, whole: creating thereby the weft and warp of a "narrative fiction." This same pattern of activity, we may assume, occurs in our fellows and (thus) might eventually be replicated.

Another familiar and possibly useful example of a "strange loop" is the venerable liar's (joker's) paradox: "This sentence is false," which, to be true, must be false, etc.

I was a mathematician and a former chess player, and I was a girl in need of comfort. Dialectical materialism was a safely enclosed system, like the vetting procedures [of MI5], but more rigorous and intricate. More like an equation of Leibniz or Hilbert. Human aspirations, societies, history, and a method of analysis in an entanglement as expressive and inhumanly perfect as a Bach fugue.¹

SO SERENA, THE HEROINE, TWICE OVER, OF IAN McEwan’s novel *Sweet Tooth*, as she accounts for her absorption in the obligatory lecture that she and other (less wide awake, less mathwise) functionaries of MI5 are being subjected to.

Serena is recounting this and other events in her life, re-experiencing them, via the form of a memoir, maintaining, that is to say, a persistent, particularly female point of view and casting a glance back from some (posterior, superior) temporal plane (our own). We, however, have the advantage of knowing, cannot be prevented from knowing, that this is a novel like many others we’ve read, in which the facts, as presented, have been arbitrarily chosen and the voice we must imagine ourselves hearing is that of a woman more or less believably imitated by a man. That would seem to be elementary, a thoroughly unoriginal starting point, but McEwan (I’m giving him the benefit



¹*Wikiparenthesis*: Hilbert was intent on laying the foundations of modern mathematics, using a “provably consistent” system of axioms. Gödel, in his *incompleteness theorem*, demonstrated that any such (internal) proof of consistency was impossible. Leibniz believed that human thought was essentially calculation; he formulated the principle known as *the identity of indiscernibles*, i.e., objects having all their properties in common cannot be said to be distinct, and its converse, *the indiscernibility of identicals*, i.e., objects that are not distinct will necessarily have all the same properties.

of the doubt here) wants us to notice, at least subliminally, a certain tension between Serena as narrator (the present) and Serena as character (the past), wants us to be aware of a curious discretion in the former, an uncommonly passive strain in the latter. (Wants this, I’m charitably and for the moment supposing, because otherwise the book might as well have been entitled *Quod erat demonstrandum, dear boy*.)

We also know, or think we know, that this is a spy novel, which tends (our knowing does) to be a bit of a disadvantage, as the exciting things we can’t help anticipating (or associating with the genre) hover still, disappointedly, over the things we can’t quite accept as their equivalents. A similar ennui, of course, trails after many a genuine memoir. But here the mechanics of suspense are nonetheless brought to bear, so that we might continue to follow Serena’s progress (our interest, it is to be hoped, undiminished) through a landscape as beset with menace as anything created by Deighton or Le Carré.

Or Dickens (Monica). Or Byatt or Drabble or Bowen or Spark. Serena, after all, is a “girl of slender means” sharing a house with three similarly situated, friendly (but irrelevant) law students and (so as not to yield to penurious boredom) taking refuge, upstairs, in the paperbacks she has bought from “charity and second-hand shops,” escaping (like the reader suspended above her, perhaps) from sadly imperfect surroundings. Watch, however, we should the magician’s cynical left hand: she is reading, we are told, as if she were “consulting a reference book ... looking for a version of [her]self, a heroine [she] could slip inside.” No innocent reader, then – she is steeping her psyche in the atmosphere of Dickens’ offices and kitchens, Drabble and Bowen’s bedsitters and teashops. Which is to say no more than that she has (already) become what she (or her author)

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chose to absorb from so much avid research (notwithstanding her (or his) almost immediate disclaimer that these “versions were too educated or too clever, or not quite lonely enough in the world”).

The only “heroic” version she is willing to contemplate (at this low point) belongs to memory – her “best self” a “fast young woman” sitting beside the older man she was having an affair with, speeding in his sportscar to their “rural hide-out.” This, despite that man’s ultimate betrayal as a lover, his greater, more lasting (more troubling) function as her (now vanished, possibly corrupted) recruiter. The sort of heroine she thought herself then might well, we catch ourselves thinking, have turned out like Lise in Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat* (one of the few books of Serena’s that Tom, her loving assignment, will later take any interest in), speeding, that is, towards her doom, her long-foretold annihilation.

It is thanks to her reputation as a reader that Serena is finally lifted somewhat from the ranks and given a real task: to watch over this very person, Tom, a promising young writer, who is to be encouraged, with suitably veiled funding, to adopt MI5’s anti-dialectical stance.

A basic feature of dialectical thinking is the liability of subject and object to turn into each other, for the way a thing is looked at to become part of the look of the thing.²

TOM IS YET ONE MORE (MALE) MENTOR (THE FOURTH, if we include her father, the bishop), as repressive as the rest. (Serena plays the part of Justine in these semi-sadistic relationships, her power to act, such as it was, being constantly diminished.) He is also, you might say, an intruder from a genre, the campus novel, with which McEwan’s

own mentor, Malcolm Bradbury, made his reputation. (Another book among Serena’s collection that Tom deigns to approve of: Bradbury’s first, *Eating People is Wrong*.) He is, finally and more ambitiously, McEwan’s decidedly unironic self-portrait as a young careerist.

I was presenting myself in the guise of the typical hero of an English comic novel – inept and almost clever, passive, earnest, over-explained, urgently unfunny.

It will be argued that the parody implicit in the excerpts from Tom’s writing, not to mention the dupery to which he falls victim, should be taken to have provided irony enough. But the shadow career is, for all its comic possibilities (and Tom’s intention, as above, to exploit them), timidly developed, not really so fun-poking, and as to the dupery, well, one need only point to the smuggest of smug conclusions, in which, among other drolleries, we are reminded (as above) that Tom was and is no fool. (The more fool, he.)

That, indeed, is where whatever faint desire I might have had to concede *Sweet Tooth*’s literary value – as an “entertainment,” say – evaporated. The author(s), not content to show us the strangeness of their “strange loop,” do their inartistic best to straighten it, going on in deplorable detail to explain every manner in which we (and vacant Serena) have been so easily deceived. The twinned hands, one drawing, the other drawn, are now there, too plainly, for all to see. Unlike the Escher lithograph, though, which, no matter how often we traced its lines, retained (or even increased) our fascination, *Sweet Tooth* has the inertness of an ill-made puzzle that, once solved, can never be considered with anything like the same pleasure – as little as that was – again. ■

– Bernard Kelly

² Benjamin Kunkel, review of Frederick Jameson’s *Valences of the Dialectic*, in *London Review of Books*, vol. 32, no. 8

Contributors [cont'd]

Peco Gaskovski is a fiction writer and therapist, among “other peculiar things.” He lives near Toronto and is working on a novel.

Aidan Hailes is “one of only seven identified twenty-somethings born, raised, and educated in Edmonton who still lives there.” He is the author of *The Emulator* (What We Write Publishing, 2013), from which “On Pornography and Fanfiction” has been reprinted. [www.whatwewrite.ca / Twitter: @aidanhailes]

Colin Hluchaniuk lives in Halifax with his partner, Nicole, and their Husky, Duchess. He has been writing fiction for more than a decade and has the shoeboxes to prove it. His work has appeared in *Dalhousie Review*.

Susan Ioannou has published poetry, stories, and articles in literary magazines across the country, and two composers have transformed her words into musical performances. She is the author of two children’s novels, two nonfiction books for writers, and the short fiction collection *Nine to Ninety: Stories across the Generations*. Her most recent volume of poetry is *Looking Through Stone: Poems about the Earth*. [<http://www3.sympatico.ca/susanio/>]

Tim Lehnert grew up in Montreal and now lives with his wife, two daughters, and dog, Zeus, in Cranston, Rhode Island. He is a freelance writer/editor whose short fiction has appeared in several journals in the U.S. and Canada including *Prairie Fire*, *Descant* and *Wascana Review*. He is also author of the book *Rhode Island 101*. [www.timlehnertonline.com]

A. Mary Murphy has published widely and is the author, most recently, of *Shattered Fanatics* (BuschekBooks). The founder of *Writing Life*, she teaches online at *Story Circle Network* and occasionally at the University of Calgary. [www.writinglife.ca]

Robert Piotrowski is a writer and educator. His work has appeared in *On Spec*, BOLDPRINT educational texts, and Marvel Comics publications. He is also the author of *Banana Ninja* and numerous other graphic novels.

Sara Saddington is a writer who lives and works in Toronto. Her work has appeared in *Open Heart Forgery*, *ditch*, *Antigonish Review*, and *Dalhousie Review*. She is the founder of Euclid Press by day and a server by night. [euclidpress.wordpress.com / Twitter: @SaraSaddington]

Daryl Sneath was raised in a small town by a lake. He currently shares his days with his wife Tara and their three children – Ethan, Penelope, and Abigail – in another small town by a river. His debut novel, *All My Sins*, is due out in April 2014. [www.darylsneath.com / daryl.sneath@gmail.com]

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