

# paperplates



*A Magazine for Fifty Readers*

Vol. 8, No. 3

**essays  
poetry  
fiction  
reviews**

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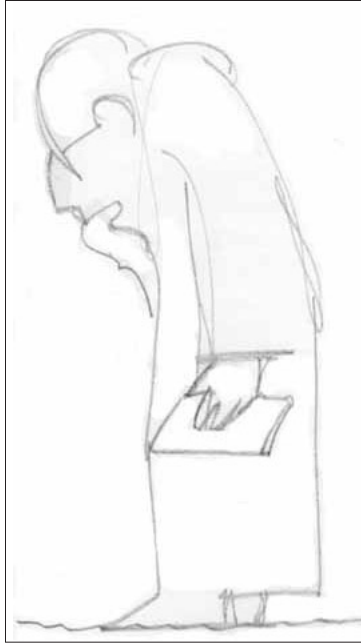
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KAREN BELANGER

*In my other life, he thought, I'm a russet pear.*

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## I am not a boy

MY FATHER SAID HE WANTED A BOY. I REMEMBER hearing this when I was young – maybe six years old – standing in the Grill Room at the country club. I was most likely wearing Bermuda shorts, a cotton collared shirt, and sandals in a “Kennedy-esque” style, which was my mother’s preference.

I was not a boy.

My younger sister told her kindergarten teacher that Mom had been spayed. How she knew this I do not know. That is the story my father was telling in the Grill Room, and the men were laughing. The Grill Room was filled with men.

My sister was not a boy. I was not a boy.

I also wasn’t the girl – the little lady – my mother wanted. My exuberance was too much to be tolerated in a female form. My insistence on cowboy boots with my bathing suit, candy, and adventure spilled out over the pretence of propriety. This little-girl shell, this thing I was supposed to fit inside of, but didn’t. Late 60s, still buttoned-down, white, middle-class country club and life. “No coloured people allowed,” the sign said – not as members anyway.

I played in the grass near the kiddie pool. Caught a bee in my hands and it stung me. I didn’t cry.

I will prove I am as good as a boy.

I positioned this decision like a grain of sand in my Keds sneakers. Encouraged its irritation. Accretion. Accumulated toughness with a thick, glossy finish.

I will prove I am as good as a boy.

And so I did. I pretended not to care about things and people. Got upset silently. Played golf – which I hated but was pretty good at – and that made my father happy. Cut my hair short and wore boyish clothes.

With occasional, unladylike bursts of outrageousness. Performing my new gymnastic rou-

tine for the neighbors upside down with panties showing.

And then came puberty. The day I walked down to Tony Hall’s basketball court in his driveway, as I did every afternoon after school. His cousin, Jimmy, was asking about me ... and not about riding dirt bikes. Tony thought it best to cut loose. And that was that: I was no longer one of the boys, and we were no longer friends. I walked back up the hill to my house alone.

I couldn’t be a boy.

I heard my father say he wanted a boy, forty years ago at a taken-for-granted tidewater country club – most memories of which are pungent and sweet, the substance of clouds and humidity in the eddy of Washington, DC, in the summer.

I am not a boy. ■

– Kelly Graham

## Triplets

AS A THIRD-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENT, I DIAGNOSED A patient with a bowel obstruction using sophomore clinical skills and *Cope’s Early Diagnosis of the Acute Abdomen*. The patient was being treated for the stomach flu. I had them reconsider their diagnosis. I saved her life.

I was an instant hero.

The faculty of the medical school was very happy with me. They gave me excellent recommendations. Despite the hype, and my new MD degree, I knew I couldn’t take care of patients. Not yet anyway. It was important for me to find an internship that provided a degree of supervision. No VAs and no inner-city hospitals. I didn’t want to hurt anyone.

I interviewed at a very famous hospital and was informed that seasoned physicians provided the primary teaching and supervision. My exposure would be gradual. I was reassured and chose to go to that famous program.

The joke was on me.

## homeplate

The experienced clinicians were in the hospital for only a couple of hours a day; the remaining twenty-two hours I worked alone. There were no senior residents. I was told we were all equal. Their words, not mine.

Nights were a lonely, frightening threat to the patients and the young physicians.

Hopeful, affluent, insured people came from all over the world to have their case taken care of by me, a doctor now for a few days.

I don't think I hurt anybody except maybe one patient. That patient was dying of advanced cancer. She lost her intravenous line, and there was no way to administer fluids.

An unsupervised inexperienced surgical resident came to the bedside, and I told him that the woman was dying, in a coma, was not to be resuscitated, but I thought we should insert an intravenous line to provide comfort medications and fluids.

The resident said he would place a line in her jugular vein. I told him a cutdown on her arm would be a better idea, because the patient had a prolonged bleeding time. It would allow us local control of any bleeding that might develop. He complained that a cutdown was a time-consuming, tedious procedure. He attempted to place the line in the jugular, but he hit the carotid artery. We watched the patient bleed to death.

It sickened me. I'd had enough.

I went to the head of the medical department and told him there was something wrong at the hospital, and I believed the lack of supervision was institutionalized malpractice.

The administrator of the department became very offended and hostile.

Bloody administrators.

I was history. I was out.

Perhaps I wasn't cut out to be a physician.

I needed a place to finish my medical training, so I called several programs. A few remembered me. A very prestigious Southern university accepted me.

I was required to repeat my first year. I would have to come to the program as a resident in medicine and anaesthesia. I would spend six months putting people to sleep.

Today, anaesthesia training programs are very competitive. But thirty years ago medical students wanted a patient-centred career in medicine, surgery, or pediatrics. The anaesthesia program had a vacancy.

Today's medical student endeavours to score high enough on the national Boards to comp out of being a doctor. If you score high enough, you can be an anaesthesiologist, dermatologist, radiologist, ophthalmologist, something with limited patient exposure. It's the long-white-coat flight away from the bedside. Only the students who don't score high enough on the national Boards, or the foreign doctors, go into patient care.

I ENTERED THE UNIVERSITY PROGRAM AS A RESIDENT in medicine and anaesthesia. The anaesthesia training was a pleasant surprise. I learned to do stuff. It gave me the confidence I needed. I felt I could raise the dead. Anaesthetized patients are often close to death, so it's good practice. If you suffer a cardiac arrest, you should hope an anaesthesiologist is there.

I learned to put in central venous lines, arterial lines, Swan-Ganz catheters, and intubate patients and put them on a ventilator. I did it as an intern, supervised by second- and third-year residents. I developed a deep respect for the unsung anaesthesiologist, and second- and third-year residents, and their ability to teach.

I learned and nobody got hurt.

I was committed to be a doctor who took care of patients. Not just ancillary. Medicine fascinated me and it still does.

The anaesthesia department needed somebody to work in the surgical ICU. Real anaesthesiologists want to be in the operating room, not in the ICU. Also, anaesthetized patients produced flashbacks of that woman in a coma who bled



to death before my eyes. I wanted to avoid any reminders. I volunteered to work in the ICU and help the comatose wake up.

The surgical ICU was located on the first floor of the hospital, adjacent to the operating rooms. The doors to the ICU opened and closed giving a vacuum sound. I was ziplock-sealed into a world of alarms, flashing monitors, ventilators, and the critically ill.

The ICU was a large, open space about the size of two basketball courts. An aisle bisected the space. One side of the aisle was reserved for the post-open-heart-surgery patients, and the other side was for general surgery or obstetrical patients. I was responsible for the management of the post-open-heart cases.

I was not to cross the aisle.

Taking care of the open-heart cases was routine, and the nurses guided me through. The major difficulty was the temperament of the cardiac-surgery residents. They weren't very affable, nor were their attending bosses. But opening a man's chest and fixing the heart is a high-stress, highly scrutinized occupation. It leads to a short fuse and decompensation.

I understood.

IT ALL CHANGED ONE NIGHT WHEN THE NURSES TOLD me I had to examine a young woman who had just delivered triplets. It was a time before fertility medications turned women into "octomoms." Triplets were rare.

"I'm supposed to take care of the hearts," I said.

"The nurses can take of the hearts. We've got a sick girl who just delivered triplets. She's in a coma."

"Okay," I said. "I'll take a look at her."

I crossed the aisle to the other side of the ICU. Several nurses huddled around the girl. Her abdomen remained distended. Another flashback, another reminder, another woman in a coma. This one wasn't terminally ill; this one

could be saved if I had the skills.

"How old is she?" I asked.

"Twenty-one."

"What are her vitals?"

"Her pulse is 50, her respiratory rate is 10, and her blood pressure is 240 over 135."

The nurse pointed to the Foley catheter draining her bladder.

"She has no urine output. She's in kidney failure."

I looked at the patient and noticed her breathing had slowed.

"We have to put her on the ventilator."

I went to the head of the bed, pried her mouth open, and used a straight-blade laryngoscope to visualize her larynx. Her vocal cords were white and glistening. I slipped the breathing tube into her trachea and attached her to the ventilator. Her lungs filled with oxygen, her chest moved up and down. Her colour improved.

With her safely on the ventilator, I could focus attention on the high blood pressure.

A nurse said, "You've got to get her blood pressure down. She could have a stroke."

She had malignant hypertension, which led to the kidney failure and the coma. Pregnant women with hypertension have a high incidence of stroke. Her extremely high blood pressure and low pulse rate were indications that the pressure in her brain was dangerously elevated.

To control her blood pressure, I decided to put her on nitroprusside. At that time, it was the most powerful antihypertensive drug available. It still is, but you've got to be careful.

I returned to the girl's bedside. I put a catheter in the artery at her wrist, and attached it to a pressure monitor. We could now have second-to-second feedback of the blood pressure. Once the line was sewed in, I started the nitroprusside.

I slowly brought her blood pressure down. You can't bring the pressure down too fast; that, too, can cause a stroke. There was still no urine output. A nurse approached.

## homeplate

"The family and husband want to see her."

"It's okay," I said.

The girl's mother and father and husband walked in. All three cried. The husband fell on the bed holding his wife and sobbed. He was a big kid with a farmer's tan. The blood pressure was coming down, slowly and controlled.

The family left. The husband's tee-shirt was wet, stained with tears and slobber.

A nurse said, "He looks younger than his wife. How would you like to be a young widower raising triplets. All three are girls."

"Girls," I said. "They've a better chance of making it than boys."

"Not if they're raised by a grief-stricken father. He'll blame them."

"How are they doing?"

"I'm told they're in the neonatal ICU but they're doing okay. One had to go on the ventilator."

"How much do they weigh?"

"They're between three and four pounds. They have a good chance."

I wanted this girl to survive. I had four lives at stake; five including her husband's. God knows what would happen to him if she didn't make it. The girl's parents didn't look so good either.

I left the general surgical area to survey the condition of the post-open-heart patients. The nurses gave me the thumbs-up. I went back to the girl. A gurgling sound came from her throat. Her eyes opened. She reached for the tube in her throat. A nurse grabbed her arm. The girl used her other arm and removed the tube from her throat. Patients coming out of a coma are very clever. More gurgling and snoring sounds.

I got another tube to put down her throat.

"Wait," the nurse said.

We watched. She took a few breaths. She went back into a coma, but now she was breathing on her own.

The family came in. They watched her breathe. The husband broke down and hugged his wife.

"She's doing better," I announced.

"Will she wake up?" her husband asked.

"Of course," the nurse said.

The family left.

I asked the nurse, "Why did you tell the family she would wake up?"

"Because that's the only thing that will keep her husband together. That boy can't take much more. Look at him. He's simple, but nice. His life, his future, his faith rest on what happens."

"What if she doesn't wake up?"

"She will."

"How do you know?"

"I've been praying."

I forgot I was in the Bible Belt.

"I'm leaving; I'll be back in the morning."

I went home. My wife met me at the door. She was very pregnant. I didn't tell her about the girl.

I returned in the morning. The woman was sitting up. She was awake. Surrounded by her husband and parents. Her eyes transiently focused on me, then returned to bewilderment.

She remained in the ICU for a week. Her neurologic status remained tenuous.

On the tenth postpartum day, it happened.

The girl sat up. Her confused eyes scanned the room, stopped, and focused.

"Who are you?" she asked. Her voice was slow and thick. I started to reply but the nurse said, "The doctor who saved your life."

As if on cue, the girl's family walked in. Each held an infant. The babies wore pink hats and pink booties. They looked a little small, and orange-yellow, but they had healthy, loud survivor cries. It made me feel real good.

The babies must be in their mid-thirties now. I think about them and what happened a long time ago. I hope they've had a nice life.

The girls taught me how to be a doctor. ■

— *Olaf Kroneman*



## Dream on

What if the sleep state is a return to a home base, not another planet but to another state of mind?

THE TROUBLE WITH DREAMS IS THAT YOU SPEND HALF your life in them. That means that half of your life is amnesia. Dreams have only some of the reality of waking life, but they use the imagery and vocabulary of waking life. And dreams don't use the rules of waking life, things like gravity, or time, or space, or body parts, or language, or terror, or bliss. And nothing works predictably. In fact, predictability plays no part in dreams – it's the unpredictable that surfaces. Dreams are

... a form of thinking that occurs under minimal brain direction, external stimuli are blocked ...  
– Wikipedia, *Definition of Dream*

So the physical – meaning what we see, hear, taste, feel, smell – is all blocked from our dream world, and we have left the earth for another plane of existence. We are dropped into another reality: one that is mostly memory – collective memory, perhaps – and a universe we spent most of our time in as infants who dreamed through most of their infancy rather than being conscious of this sensory world. Slowly we humans adjust to this un-reality, it seems.

Then, of course, there's that dream-sense that everything is real and nothing is real. All is a mystery, but you somehow know, or pretend to know, what is real – that's the dream's crazy logic. But its logic and coherence in both the beatific and the terrifying is more real than real. It is as if the dream world's reality were a supernatural reality that exists alongside the physical realism of the waking world. But it seems the supernatural undergirds the physical, so you are not sure which to trust.

... the part of the brain that recognizes self shuts down ... but some [memorable experience becomes an] interpretation of experience by the self. – Wikipedia

The self is turned off, and another Self starts to interpret the experience and creates a landscape and cast of characters according to experiences (small s) self had as the palette of imagination for (capital S) Self. Freud's psycho-analytic model suggests that the dreamer dons a deceptive mask that enables the fulfillment of instinctual desires. The mask gives a mirror image of the (capital S) Self's interpretation of the (small s) self's authentic image of Self. Think of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Everything is not what it appears to be, or rather everything is its opposite. Perhaps the image in the dream is the primal originating source of the sense, the feeling, the arousal, that led Alice to the Glass to explore an unexplored world or images – magical and terrifying, without recourse to what she had been taught or led to believe as true. Herself.

Mythology, symbols, and motifs provide language for dreams.

– “The Origins of Dreaming: Perspectives from Science and Religion,” Kelly Bulkeley, *Where Man and God Meet: The New Sciences of Religion and Brain*, Praeger Perspectives: 2006

In the symbolic world, there are secret meanings only you know and no one else. But even the meanings have so little to do with the physical world, and trying to articulate them makes you sound loony, as if something inside knows exquisitely what will shock and horrify you awake, screaming for help, and no one is ever, ever there to save you from yourself.

And the faster the scenes move, the more your body is still, but you wake up with a start, and the sooner you wake up, the sooner you forget everything you promised yourself to remember.

## homeplate

Except for “memorable” dreams.

The term “apex dreaming” is adopted to refer to a subcategory of dreaming that is distinguished by exceptional vividness, intensity, or complexity ... Apex dreaming [is] vivid, intense, and complex forms of dreaming: e.g., nightmare, sexual, archetypal, transcendental, titanic, existential, lucid.

– ibid.

And typical apex dreams? Chasing dreams, flying dreams, sexual dreams, sensing-a-presence-in-the-room dreams, some dead-coming-alive dreams, superior knowledge dreams, seeing-one’s-self-dead dreams, travelling-to-another-planet or universe dream, encountering-God-in-some-form dream.

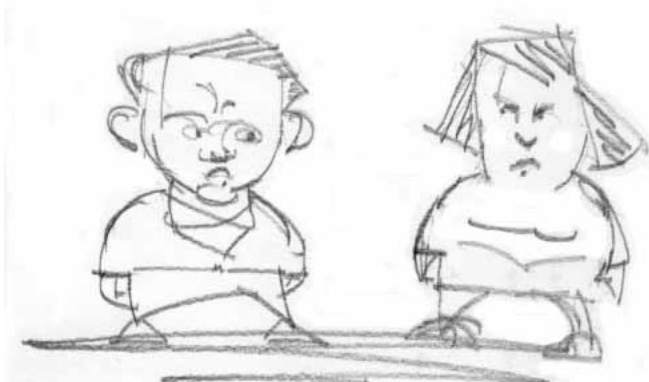
What begins to take shape in Nielsen’s research are the recurrent, pan-human patterns that naturally emerge in apex dreaming.

– ibid.

Therefore, all humans have the capacity to have apex dreams. Dreaming, especially vivid

dreams, is powerful because the image is never pinned down, never literalized into a fixed concept or meaning; it remains an animating and enlivening presence in the psychic life of the dreamer. Most people think of the patterns of dreaming as inherently bizarre, disordered, and meaningless, but what may be naturally emerging in apex dreaming is the dreaming psyche’s ability to generate images of astonishing beauty, complexity, and creativity, with meaning capable of memorable reflection on the emotional and spiritual content of a genuine internal world informing the actual experienced world.

There’s another peculiar aspect of dreams. You are by yourself going to sleep, dreaming, and then awakening. Nobody is with you. Your dream is your production and yours alone. You live in another space and time, and the time in that world rarely has a history, longevity, or continuity, and all dreams start in the middle or at the end. Time as lived is, in fact, not a factor. Only the story or part of the story is recalled. And its meaning can only be deciphered by you. You are the writer, producer, and director of that dream nightly. And, finally, you will be the interpreter.



*Unfollow you? Of course not!  
Why would I?*

KAREN BELANGER

But everybody you know and don't know is in you. You have a different cast of characters and a different play with a new plot every night. There is an audience of one and only one main character and narrator. And the only audience is You.

The Aboriginal Australians ... believe their ancestors dreamed the land into being. Dreaming in this context is equivalent to "creating," meaning a power to generate life, reality, and truth.

– *ibid.*

The idea that the world is a dream, or a divine illusion, can force us to rethink this world we consciously live in as the illusion, and consider that perhaps the dream, with its unsettling images and "truths," is truer and, in fact, our Source. What about Joseph, the husband of Mary, having his dream of the Angel coming to him and saying "for that which is conceived in her is the Holy Spirit"? Or Buddha, who was conceived in a dream experienced by his mother, Queen Maya, in which she was touched on her stomach by the trunk of a white elephant? What about Chuang Chou, who dreamed he was a butterfly, and suddenly awoke and there he was: the man Chuang Chou? And he wondered: Was he Chuang Chou who had dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly who thought he was Chuang Chou?

A strong case can be made that dreaming is a primal originating source for both religious experience and brain-mind growth; human dreaming has the effect of provoking greater consciousness of self, others, world and cosmos.

– *ibid.*

Finally, what about the cause and purpose of dreaming? Who orchestrated and decided the structure, the length of time, the meanings, and the chaotic self-organizing process, the mysterious origin of the whole process of dreaming in each of our minds nightly that propels consciousness in an otherwise undistinguished species of primates?

What about the projectionist? ■

– *Sarah A. Odishoo*

DAVID SAPP

## Acanthus

In ancient Corinth,  
it seemed, just yesterday,  
the girl walked near the long,  
columned shadows of the *stoa*,  
her black eyes, her black hair  
basking in a vivid Aegean sun,  
her temperament, her curvature,  
her bearing, her modest temple just  
turning to that of a woman.

In a basket,  
her nursemaid gathered her few,  
little things, trifles placed upon  
her tomb: her comb;  
her favourite, leafy earrings;  
a bronze coin she found  
on Apollo's temple steps;  
a curved, iridescent shell  
turned from the Ionian Sea;  
a small *kore* doll in brightly  
painted crimson *peplos*;  
a tiny amphora of scented oil,  
once tied to her wrist,  
her mother bought in the *agora*.

In the springtime,  
an acanthus root grew,  
turning through the basket weave,  
intertwining with her cherished  
trinkets, its tendrils bending  
into elaborately curving volutes,  
leafy columns bent to grief.

The architect,  
upon passing her grave turned,  
touched by the simple elegy,  
and, so inspired, adorned many  
temples and palaces with columns  
topped with leafy capitals,  
the peristyles, her necklaces of acanthus  
curving round the soft  
throats of mighty structures,  
this humble weed,  
this single, distant anguish,  
this unassuming girl,  
immortalized in stone.

BRUCE MCRAE

## Not another poem

Great stuttering oat-heels,  
another poem about meringue  
and mushroom spores.  
Another poem whipped off  
by a creaking cupboard door.  
Another oath challenging  
the New Illiterates to duel,  
dukes flailing in an alley,  
blood on our collective chins –  
hell, monkeys in our hair  
for that matter . . .

It's another poem foraging  
for dewberries and truffles,  
basking in its own limelight,  
like a little red wagon squeaking.  
Another poem buffing its fangs,  
glaring, highly defined,  
but its green lipstick smeared,  
its engines gunning,  
clothing strewn everywhere,  
apples in its eyes –  
or is that Moscow burning,  
a bellows in a moon-mask,  
the world's roundest square?

Another poem about trysts,  
tritium, truncheons,  
about so long by so wide,  
about fit to be tied,  
about Meng-Tse and Menalaus,  
about lintels rather than arches,  
about to conclude,  
its symbols crashing,  
even the Dianamaniacs in tears,  
tearing mindlessly at their flesh,  
consumed by their outrage,  
absolved by their fear.

BRUCE MCRAE

## All gas and gaiters

The forecast calls  
for heavy blackouts.

We take turns  
trading places.

We exchange  
good needles for bad,  
glances for gods,  
pennies for punches.

You're new  
around these parts.  
This is a knuckle.  
This is a toe.  
Whatever this was,  
it isn't.

Are you able  
to say *money*  
*for old rope*?  
To say *ants*  
*have no business*  
*dancing with souls*?

I'm beginning to think  
you don't know bells  
from a bull's foot  
or balls from bullets.  
You think as much  
as a dog does of Xmas,  
a fine servant  
to a deathly master,  
but one finger short  
of a glove.

They're calling for rain  
and an intense silence.

Blindfold a roach.  
Put a rag in your breath.  
A sock in your hole.

Continue winding.



## The Halls of Valhalla Death-Ride

KARL DIED ON THE LAST TUESDAY IN MARCH AT A LITTLE PAST THREE IN THE AFTERNOON. IT had been swift, something that had rested for years, coiled like a clock-spring in his DNA, awaiting the hour and the day. Genetic and multi-syllabled, containing too many letters for Jenny to hold in her head long enough to Google it, or even Google its approximation.

They'd met years before at the cycling club. Jenny'd been seeing Mark-from-Marketing at the time, and Karl had been with Alyce then, or maybe Carrie, one of many interchangeable blondes. She and Karl, as it turned out, had gone to the same law school, had endured the same professors in different years. He'd known her older sister's first ex-husband, and she'd known his old roommate's second wife. He was good with the repair kit, always had Band-Aids, and they'd liked the same beer and hated the same judges. They smiled and said "Hi" whenever their paths crossed. She'd thought once, for twenty minutes, about dating him but had sat in a nice, comfy chair until that notion passed.

So it hadn't been a friendship, not exactly.

Which was why she'd been surprised by his call. He'd been admitted. St. John's. Could she possibly stop by? And soon?

KARL WAS A PALE STREAK AGAINST PALE SHEETS in a room lit only by monitors and LEDs. Jenny'd seen him a month, six weeks before, and he'd been all Karl then, big and blond and tanned, not collapsed and withered and three-quarters of the way to dead. She'd stopped at the overpriced greengrocer on the corner and picked up a bag of fat, black grapes, but once she saw him, she knew immediately that he'd never eat them.

"It's just one of those things," he rasped, and then shrugged as well as he was able. "But I need a favour."

She was a lawyer, yes, but he knew she didn't do wills, and if he had a cat, a dog, even a houseplant, she didn't want it. "Of course," she said. "Anything."

He smiled, nodded to the bedside table. "Contact info?"

She pulled a note pad and pen from the drawer and wrote it all down. "For?"

"Later," he said. "And thanks for the grapes."

LATER CAME IN TEN DAYS, WHEN KARL'S LAWYER called. "You've been named in Mr. Eggertson's will," he said. "You'll have to come in."

"His ashes?" she asked, when presented with what looked like a shoebox done up in a plain brown wrapper. "Why me?"

"And an envelope." Karl's lawyer shrugged. "And why not you?"

Sole occupant of the gold-glass elevator, she still looked up, watching the storeys fall away, and avoided making eye contact with her reflection or the package tucked

under her arm. The box was heavier than she thought but lighter, maybe, than she'd expected, and for a moment, just a moment, she wished she had known to bring a bag, something with handles, something sturdy and opaque.

The edge of the box dug into her ribs; she shifted the package from under her right arm to under her left, and thought about Karl. In life, he had been well over six feet tall, sleek as a greyhound, all sinew and ease. In death, he had become just this: portable. Hard-edged. Rectangular.

How did this make sense? How did any of it?

Perhaps none of it was supposed to.

She closed her eyes, waiting for her descent to end.

HER CAR PRESENTED ITS OWN SET OF ISSUES. The trunk was obvious, but seemed disrespectful, while the passenger seat would be just too strange. The back was full of file boxes and case notes, dry-cleaning bags, an extra pair of heels, emergency gym clothes, some yellowing newspapers she'd tossed back there, unread. Fast-food bags, napkins and wrappers, too, and more take-out coffee cups than she cared to acknowledge. Junk, most of it, and no, Karl wasn't going back there.

She shifted from one sore foot to the other, remembering. When she first met him, Karl had been driving a white sub-compact, something he insisted got good mileage and was easy to park downtown. Probably true, but it always seemed too small for him, or he too big for it, like some clown car he'd have to fold himself into and out of.

A glance down reminded her that that wouldn't be a problem now. Karl was all out of problems. She set him in the passenger side wheel-well and drove.

THE ENVELOPE CONTAINED NOTHING BUT A business card for an outfit called *An Awfully Big Adventure*.

"Karl Eggertson, yes," Denise How-May-I-Help-You said. "We have him down for the Full Sunset Saga."

"For the which?"

"The Full Sunset Saga. The total immersion Viking funeral experience," Denise said.

"The deluxe package, which includes bards, weeping shield-maidens, thralls –"

"Thralls?"

"– the dragon boat, the grave goods –"

"Excuse me?"

"– and flaming arrows, all carried out to the highest safety and environmental standards, of course."

"Of course," Jenny echoed flatly. "Wait. Did you say flaming arrows?"

"Prepaid and prearranged, as per our contract with Mr. Eggertson. You have nothing to do but pick up your tickets! Now, let me give you your flight details."

Dutifully, she wrote it all on the back of the envelope.

It seemed so surreal. She tried to reconcile this bizarre fantasy funeral, this Disneyland *Halls of Valhalla Death-Ride*, with the buttoned-up, button-down tax lawyer she thought she had known but couldn't have.

She'd have to take time off work. Find her passport. Figure out what the hell you wore to a Viking funeral in Iceland in May. Or say no? Bow out? Stick Karl on a shelf in the hall closet, and shut the door? But he had made only one request of her, would only ever make this one request. You could argue with the dead, but the dead didn't hear.

SHE HAD SEEN PICTURES OF THE REYKJAVIK AIRPORT online, the tiny blue and yellow terminal a giant's child had once built from Lego. The sky was always blue in those photos, dotted, now and then, with cotton-ball clouds, but sunny, all the same. There were no grey hazes in those pictures, no layer of plane-debilitating dust. An unpronounceable volcano on an inaccessible island had misbehaved; no flights from the north in, no flights to the north out. Workers in blaze orange coveralls and white masks pushed brooms first one way and then another, built tidy piles of ash, waited for more to fall.

She looked down at the box of Karl in her lap and allowed herself to think, for the first time since the afternoon she'd taken his call, how stupid this whole exercise was. The Internet had helpfully told her that even the most violent, emotionally unstable Vikings didn't meet their violent, emotionally unstable gods in quite this way, that a "Viking Funeral," like so many other things both coveted and cool, belonged strictly to Hollywood.

"Are you needing a hotel?" The airport clerk was young and lovely, the name on her badge began with an unknown letter and had an "ö" somewhere near the middle.

"I might," Jenny said, shifting in her seat as the backs of her knees sweated. She handed over her ticket. "I don't know."

"Ah, yes. There will be no flight today. I will call to the hotel for you, and they will send the bus. It is just there." She pointed across the runway. "This way, please, yes?"

Obediently, Jenny followed.

"You are with *The Awful Adventures*, yes?" the clerk asked.

Jenny did not correct her. Jenny did not look at Karl. "How can you tell?"

The clerk nodded at Jenny's luggage tag. "Your destination," she said. "Where you are going, no one goes. There, there is nothing."

THE ROOM WAS SMALL AND SQUARE, EFFICIENTLY European, insanely expensive. The WI-FI was reliable and overpriced, and a quick scan of the necessary websites told her the flight home tomorrow was on, but anything involving a small plane was off, indefinitely so, and no one at *An Awfully Big Adventure* was answering the phone. She propped her feet on the footstool and indulged in a sigh. Miles to the north, she imagined shield-maidens weeping and moaning while they filed their nails, drummers paradiddling until their arms went numb, raw-throated bards who had long since run out of stories to tell, and thralls no longer quite so enthralled.

What had Karl really wanted? How would she ever know?

She looked at the box. The box did not look at her.

The brown paper tore away easily; the lid opened with the aid of a sharp fingernail and a little more effort. There was only a sack of coarse grey grit, and no answers, where Karl should have been.

DIANE WEBSTER

## Friendship look-alike

I think my bosses think our friendship  
is an office affair to remember.

It's bad enough one's a lesbian,  
but for her to love another here in this office?  
No, no, not so overt for us to say something,  
but they have too much fun together.  
They work too well, too close.  
My God, they've even hugged each other.

I think our bosses think we love each other.  
Fine. Then I'll give them something to think about,  
something to whisper about behind closed doors,  
a sight to fill their small-town minds.  
Come on, hon. Let's give 'em a show!

I think my bosses think she's my lover.  
How can she choose to make them think  
she's someone she's not?  
It's not a choice.  
She enjoys the shock if she played the role,  
if she played.

I think my bosses think  
I'm a lesbian.

## Like the girl she imagines in Paris

THEY PLAY THEIR CARD GAMES IN THE COMMON ROOM. USUALLY, IT'S WHILE VALERIE TALKS to the nurses and tidies her father's room, watering the plants and arranging the fresh flowers she brings, but she couldn't make it tonight, so Tom's here all alone. That may be why he's more anxious than usual. Or it may be because he hasn't lost a game against his father-in-law in weeks. Normally, he would have relished winning. In the past, if he ever won a game against Richard, he'd talk trash (only in his head, of course, not out loud) and afterwards replay it with his wife, in bed. "Oh, Tom," she'd say. "Don't you know I love you because you're not like him? I love you because you ... lose." But he was winning now.

Tom walks slowly beside his father-in-law away from the latter's room (TV bolted to the ceiling, skim-milk white walls). Richard won't accept help, nor will he use a wheelchair, so the pace is agonizingly slow, he gripping the handrails and wheezing while Tom, his face turned inside-out with frustration, remembers this feeling from when his kids were little. "Noooo, Daddy," they would say, "I can do it myself! Stop it!" A parent's concern and impatience, but now with this old man.

"Hello, Dick," Charlotte, another resident, says as they take their usual seats at the card table near the window. He replies with something under his breath that Tom can't understand and chooses to ignore. She witnesses all of their games. Here she is again tonight, doing a new puzzle. Her hair is freshly dyed, a Betty Boop black, with eyebrows painted to match. Her red lipstick is bleeding into her upper lip. On her cheeks are matching spots of colour.

"Hello, Charlotte," says Tom. "How's the puzzle coming?"

"A beauty. Notre Dame Cathedral. *Je me souviens de Paris au printemps. Quelle beauté.*" She shakes her head. She has been to the location depicted in every puzzle she does.

"Yes, very beautiful," he says.

When he hears the old man start to cough, he hopes the episode will be bad enough to put him back in his room. But Richard pulls a stained hankie out of his pocket, coughs one last time, and wipes his mouth.

Tom sets up the cribbage board.

"How's your buddy, McLean, McLeod, I can't –"

"McDead is how he is."

He pauses from shuffling the deck. "I am so sorry to hear that."

"If you haven't heard, Tommy boy, people come here to die."

He concentrates on dealing the cards, catches a draft of lavender from Charlotte's direction. "I thought you liked playing cards with him." He knocks twice on the top of the deck. A few cards flip as that skeletal hand shakes through a sloppy cut. "That's okay, Dad. Let me."

“Goddamn hands. Beat him all the time if that’s what you mean.”

“I liked the old guy. Funny. Do you remember? Every time I saw him he’d say, ‘Hide your wallet. Bank man’s here.’”

“Funny,” Richard says, arranging and rearranging the cards in his hand, slowly picking up the ones he drops (refusing to use the plastic holders provided). He glares at them and, finally, slaps one onto the table. “Ten.”

Tom wins the first hand by a wide margin. He doesn’t count many points throughout – successfully avoiding pegging on pairs, fifteens, and thirty-ones – but it adds up to a decent eight despite his efforts to break it up, and it’s his crib. “Fifteen two, four, two runs for ten, and a pair for twelve,” he says. “Wow, lucky crib.”

His opponent grunts and starts shuffling. Cards slide across and under the table, but when Tom sees a five leak from those fingers and slip under the easy chair, he doesn’t retrieve it. One less winning card to find in his hand.

“He was losing it upstairs.” Richard points with the card and then smacks it down. “Eight.”

“Who? Um, sixteen for two.”

“McLean. Twenty-one.”

“Dad? Are you sure you want to play that one? Okay, okay. Thirty-one for two. Maybe that’s why he wasn’t playing so –”

“That’s a load of shit. Once a card-player, always a card-player.”

“Well, that’s true. Do you remember when I was first dating Valerie? All those games at your dining room table? I embarrassed her. She brings home this guy who doesn’t even know tricks and trump. What kind of a boyfriend is that? Your turn.”

“The wife thought you were quite something. Ten.”

“Marie was very kind. Twenty.”

“With your university degree. Thirty.”

“Thirty-one for two. Yes, a university degree and I don’t even know tricks and trump.” Tom knows he could deliberately play even worse, but he *is* a numbers man after all; it would be noticed. This hand, he counts more points despite Richard’s having the crib and deals again. They play in silence for a while, apart from counting points aloud.

“She was a terrible cook, that woman.”

“What?”

“I get better food here.”

“Do you mean Marie?”

“Who else? Our private chef? Yes, Marie.”

When Tom thinks of Marie, he thinks of her in the kitchen or the garden. These were her spaces. Whenever she wasn’t in one of them, she seemed detached, anonymous. While having coffee in the living room, for instance, she might pick up a figurine and say, “Is this ours? Where did we get this?” Valerie would reply, “Mom, that’s been on the piano since I painted it in grade two. You dust it every week.” This was well before the dementia set in. “Oh, what a lovely job you did, dear. Always so precise, you were. Let me get us some more cookies.” Then she’d escape to her kitchen.



"Where's Valerie?"

"I told you, Dad. She has parent-teacher interviews tonight."

In the next hand, he donates a pair of sixes to the other's crib, but pegs six points and counts nine in his hand. Richard counts a lousy three in his hand and looks at his crib. "A pair for two. Jesus. You still don't know what you're doing. You gave me a pair." He coughs and fumbles his peg, losing it somewhere in his pajamas.

"Let's just use one of the green ones, Dad." He takes the opportunity to give Richard a few extra points.

"Are you feeling sorry for me? Goddamnit!"

The game continues for another few hands until his little blue pegs are well ahead of Richard's red and green. He's going to skunk the old man if he's not careful. As he shuffles the deck for a seventh hand, Richard says:

"She could have done better."

"Who? Who are you talking about, Dad?"

"Valerie."

He stops shuffling and examines his father-in-law: yellowish, rheumy eyes; crumpled, grey face; crooked hands; oversized, stained pajamas and housecoat on his wire clothes-hanger of a body. Pathetic. Still had that thick head of white hair, though.

In the silence, Charlotte asks, "*Qu'est ce qui se passe, mes gars?* Who's winning? Dick, judging by all that grumbling, I'm guessing that you've had some *malchance*."

"None of your goddamned business."

"Dad! I'm sorry, Charlotte. He didn't mean that."

"*Je comprends*. I've had some bad luck in my life."

"That's not bad luck."

"Dick, if you lose, this will be the, what," – Charlotte counts on her fingers and looks up at the ceiling – "tenth game in a row?"

"He'll come back this time. Right, Dad? Back to your old self, eh?"

"So, this *malchance* is new, Dick? You've been a lucky man? Not like my *pauvres* husbands. Died before their time, every one."

"Whore."

"Dad! Oh my God, I am so sorry, Charlotte. Game's over, all right?"

"*Mais non, continuez!*" Charlotte pushes her chair away from the puzzle, and Tom, rushing over, holds her elbow as she stands. "*Merci*. I'm off. A girl needs her beauty sleep."

As he helps her to the hallway, he hears Richard grumble something. He turns and, noticing her silk scarf dragging on the floor, picks it up and lays it over her arm.

"Are you okay?" he asks when out of earshot. "I can't apologize enough. I don't know what's got into him."

"*Mon chéri*, if I let that bother me? No. I'm an expert at outlasting men. You go back to your game."

"I think we're done with cards for tonight."

"Please finish. I insist."

"I can't seem to lose. Only now, when he's dying. It's terrible."

She looks at him with her huge, black-ringed eyes and says, “Dick is right, you know. People come here to die. – You, too?”

He laughs, the sound a bark echoing along the hard polished surfaces of the corridor. Taking a step back, he bows, weirdly gallant, and, recalling his high-school French, says, “*Pas encore, mademoiselle.*” Then he offers her his arm again.

“Do you need help to your room?”

“*Non, merci.*” She tosses the long end of her scarf over her shoulder, beautiful and confident like the girl she imagines in Paris.

He walks back to the common room, where he will sit and deal another hand.

HUGH BEHM-STEINBERG

## Fingernails

I don't write enough about my fingernails they tell me. They say if I don't write more about them, and good things too, they'll yellow or chip or hang out with exotic fungi, they'll turn into claws, I'll have to wear gloves, I won't be able to fit gloves over my mangled, quarrelsome tips. So I praise my fingernails. Gentle fingernails, may you never have to be the last thing I hold on with.

JOHN GREY

## Hermitage

I live in a shack in the wilderness.  
Without ink, I write poems in my own blood.  
I pick wild roses just so the thorns  
will pierce my skin.  
It hurts but I need the metaphors.

A mouse scurries out of his hole in my wall.  
We share the crumbs.  
We share the religion of the giant cat  
that pounces on rodents and breaks their back.  
To be honest, we don't mind the snap of bone,  
the gnawing at our insides.  
We all must have our gods.

I slurp water from the puddles after rain.  
Make believe it's wine.  
Sometimes I eat the grass  
just like the deer do.  
I no longer read "Walden,"  
not now I'm living it.  
Instead, I peruse my own stuff  
in the scars down my arm.

Soon it will be winter.  
That's the season where  
I finally get what's coming to me.  
I'll freeze up like a piece of meat.  
I'll ache all over  
but isn't that words for you.

## Midsummer night sorcery

ON A MIDSUMMER EVENING, WHEN MAGIC IS IN THE AIR AND MISCHIEVOUS SPRITES ARE OUT TO discomfort humans, two couples sat around a table playing bridge.

At the end of their first hand, Derek stabbed his finger at Jake, on his right, and said, "You could've made that. The eight of clubs was good – you didn't have to trump it." Jake responded with an unfriendly look, but Derek wasn't finished. "And another thing –, " he continued, but stopped suddenly and winced, looking with a hurt expression at his wife Emily, seated to his left.

Rosalinda, wife of Jake, was seated opposite Derek. "Are you," she asked Emily, her sister, with a faint smile as she gathered cards together, "going to kick Jake if he doesn't behave?"

"No, that's your job. I take care of Derek."

Jake dealt and they sorted their cards. Emily inspected her hand and groaned.

Derek, annoyed by Emily's earlier action and subsequent comments, remarked, "I should now do some kicking."

Emily regarded him with wide-eyed enquiry.

"You're not supposed to give messages to your partner," Derek told her, and Jake nodded in agreement.

"You men!" Rosalinda retorted before bidding one spade. She studied Derek's handsome physique. His neatly brushed hair and carefully laundered clothing matched a normally grave demeanour. She knew, however, that his retiring and unemotional exterior concealed an internal fire that could be released from time to time. Her pulse quickened at the thought.

Derek regarded her covertly, reflecting that her capricious nature, which had aggravated him in the past, actually increased her charm. He decided that she looked even more attractive, in her early forties, than she had in her late twenties. A ringlet of auburn hair curled seductively against her neck and her low-cut dress teasingly advertised the shapely breasts below. She looked up, and Derek felt quite dizzy as he met the latent passion behind her glance. He then became aware that Emily and Jake were waiting for him to say something. In his preoccupation, he had not realized that Jake had jumped to four hearts. Embarrassed, he hastily passed, as did Emily and Rosalinda.

Emily regarded Jake as he played the hand, and decided that the beginning of grey hair around his temples made him look even more handsome than when they had first met fifteen years ago. His casual attitude towards his clothing and grooming had in the past irritated her, but now she reflected that this really was an endearing characteristic. He had not lost that primal magnetism that she had found, and realized she still did find, enticing.

For a while Jake was absorbed in playing the hand. This completed, Rosalinda collected one pack of cards for shuffling, and Derek dealt the other.

Meanwhile, Emily got up to fetch a bowl of nuts from a side table. Either by accident or design, her skirt was briefly caught up, revealing an expanse of attractive leg. She glanced provocatively over her shoulder at Jake, and the resulting adrenaline rush made him feel light-headed. As she sorted her cards, Jake took the opportunity to examine her and reflected that her impeccable dress and manicuring enhanced her almost ethereal beauty. As he well knew, this serene and elegant image concealed a sensuality that few would have perceived. He returned part of his attention to evaluating his hand. All passed and threw their hands in.

Emily, who was aware of a magnetic surge between Rosalinda and Derek, concentrated on dealing the next hand. Her task completed, she looked up and intercepted a searing look from Jake. Her heart raced, and she was surprised to find herself blushing. In her confusion, she passed too quickly and then discovered an ace hidden behind another card. Her subsequent aggressive bidding after the initial pass confused everyone else.

A number of other hands were completed with little comment as all focused on their cards and, more particularly, each other. Jake looked at Emily and slightly raised his eyebrows. In response to this old signal between them, Emily pushed a leg out to meet Jake's. The trouble was that there was already a pair of legs in contact under the table. There was ensuing confusion and apologies all round as if the various impacts had been accidental. None of them believed this, however.

In the next hand, Jake bid out of turn, and Rosalinda dropped a card on the table face up.

"Oh hell!" Emily said, throwing down her cards. "Time out. Who's for tea and who for coffee?"

As she headed for the kitchen, Rosalinda said, "I'll come and help."

While filling the kettle, Emily looked over her shoulder and said, "Okay, little sister, what's going on?"

"Don't just blame me, you're as much involved as I am."

"Hey, hold your horses, I'm not blaming you. I just want to talk about where this is going."

Rosalinda, who knew her way around Emily's kitchen, opened a cupboard, located a bag of cookies, and said, "Right now, I just don't know."

Meanwhile, back at the bridge table, an atmosphere of mild tension was eased by Derek passing the bowl of nuts to Jake. They each took a handful and munched in silence.

ALL FOUR CAST THEIR THOUGHTS BACK to a vacation they had spent together, eight years ago, in the Greek Islands. At that time Emily had been married to Jake and Rosalinda to Derek, and although none of them could have realized it at the time, the trip had been the catalyst for the swap in marriage partners.

The sisters had instigated the trip, in the hope that it might revitalize their marriages. One Sunday morning, Rosalinda had asked Emily, "How're you and Jake making out?"



“What’s on your mind – why the question?” Emily wondered, as she added cream to her coffee.

“Derek and I had another row and haven’t spoken to each other for two days.” Rosalinda looked unseeingly through the window. Emily waited for her to continue. “He’s so goddamned sure he’s always right. He makes these decisions without consulting me and then gets mad when I question what he’s done.”

“And so?”

“And so, I threw my hot coffee over him and he had it dripping down his face and over the front of his shirt.”

Emily could never have brought herself to do anything “so juvenile,” she thought to herself, but at times she would have liked to. She recalled just such an occasion only a few days ago, when she told Jake that she had accepted an invitation to dinner with her friends, the Filimons.

Jake had narrowed his eyes and said, “Just like that – I don’t get consulted?”

“They’re refined and cultured people – just the sort you should meet more of.”

“They’re insipid, emotionless creeps. I doubt whether he’s able to get it up, and if he could, I doubt that she’d be capable of accepting it.”

“There’s no need to be crude. You always want us to do what you want to do, but never what I want to do. You’re entirely selfish, inconsiderate, and self-centred.”

“I cater to your wants *ad nauseam*. If you don’t know that, then I’ve wasted my time even trying.”

He had then stormed off, saying over his shoulder as he left, “Count me out – I’m not going.”

It was Emily who had suggested that a foreign excursion might stimulate more convivial interpersonal relationships. It did, but not in the way they were expecting.

ON THE ISLAND OF RHODES THEY HAD checked into the Hotel Cava D’Oro in Rhodes Town. Over the first two days, following enthusiastic research by Emily, they explored the Old Town, with its massive walls and labyrinthine alleyways. Tramping through the Knights Quarter, the Hora, and the Jewish Quarter, they examined the mesh of Byzantine, Turkish, and Latin architecture, visiting upwards of twenty mediaeval structures.

During breakfast on the third day on Rhodes, Emily presented a plan for using their rental car to visit the Doric city of Ialysos.

Jake was markedly unenthusiastic. “And what,” he asked, “will we find there?”

Emily opened her guidebook and, after locating a paragraph with her finger, said, “Foundations of a third-century BC temple, Monastery of Our Lady, Chapel of Agios Georgios, and a ruined fortress used by Suleyman the Magnificent for the siege of Rhodes Town.”

Rosalinda, scowling as she attacked an egg, said, “We’ve spent three days on Mykonos and Delos, two on Santorini, and now two here. I’ve seen more piles of rubble and churches than I can count. I’ve had it up to here,” – she motioned at her throat – “with religious edifices and archeological sites. I came here for some beach

time, and in spite of the sun and sparkling Mediterranean, we've had none of that, and it sounds like we don't have plans for any."

Jake, vigorously spreading jam on a piece of toast, nodded. "Yes, I go along with that. What's so special about all these old buildings and this mediaeval religious stuff anyway?"

"We have an opportunity to see history and another culture, and all you two want is to sit on a beach," Emily said.

Derek, midway in the process of buttering a muffin, was eager to present his view. "I quite agree with Emily," he said. "We may never have another chance to do this."

Rosalinda's eyes flashed as she rounded on Derek. "Just the sort of nerdy thing I might have expected from you."

Derek's face became taut with anger, and Emily bristled. Jake could see that they were headed for a general blowup. He tapped the butt of his knife on the table and said, "Okay, everybody – hold it. Let's all just sit quietly for two minutes and eat our breakfasts, and then I'll make a suggestion."

Derek seemed about to say something, but then he shrugged and went on with his muffin. The others looked at Jake expectantly. Just then a waiter came by with coffee, and Jake serenely added sugar and stirred his cup before speaking.

"I believe," he said, "that the solution is obvious. Emily and Derek will do the old building thing, and Rosalinda and I will do the beach thing."

"And how are you going to get to the beach if we have the car?" Emily asked coldly.

"Well, there are buses, and I suppose we are as entitled to the car as you two, but let me suggest that you drop us off at the beach and come back at an agreed time."

Emily couldn't resist a parting shot:

"Well I've done my best, and if you fail to take advantage of opportunities to broaden your cultural knowledge, there's nothing I can do."

"Indeed, you *have* done your best and are absolved without a stain on your character."

Rosalinda observed the exchange with a faint smile. Although Derek said nothing, he obviously disapproved of the arrangement.

ON THE FOURTH DAY, THEY RELOCATED SOUTH to the Pension Electra in the town of Lindos.

After settling in, they climbed up to the Acropolis perched high above the town. Even Rosalinda was impressed by the ruins and enjoyed imagining what the complex must have looked like in 200 BC. The view – of the town below and the beach – was spectacular. As far as Jake was concerned, the only blemish was the Byzantine Church of Agios Joannes, which he claimed polluted the atmosphere of the ancient site.

On the following morning, the four breakfasted early on a patio next to the Mediterranean. The sun, not long risen, cast a golden pathway over the gentle swell rolling in. Fishing boats, with their early morning catch, were chugging into a harbour just down the coast. When they had finished eating, Emily and Derek took the car and headed across the island to Ancient Kamiros, and Rosalinda and Jake opted again for sun and sand. Over dinner that evening, Rosalinda announced, "We spent the afternoon on a nude beach."

Emily, shocked, started to ask a question but then tailed off: "You didn't ...?"

"Of course we did. When in Rome ... ." There was a moment's silence before she continued. "We plan to go again tomorrow. Why don't you two come with us?"

Neither Emily nor Derek was keen on this, but both felt their relationship with their spouse to be threatened by "them cavorting around together naked," as the former put it to herself. Once again, she started a question she couldn't quite finish. "Would we have to ...?"

"No, you don't have to get undressed," Rosalinda said, "but, as I understand it, the ancient Greeks were not prudish about nudity, and I thought you came to absorb local culture."

"This is a tourist thing, not local culture."

Nevertheless, all four did go to the nude beach the next day and did get undressed. After about ten minutes, however, Emily donned her clothes again, claiming that she didn't want to get sunburned.

AFTER THEIR RETURN TO TORONTO, Rosalinda and Jake, who both worked downtown, agreed to meet occasionally, first for coffee, later for drinks. Because the initial meetings were quite innocent, they mentioned them to their spouses. However, after subsequent, less innocent liaisons, they became secretive.

Of the other two, it was Emily who first sensed what was happening. She called Derek and suggested that they get together to discuss her suspicions. Initially the meeting was awkward, but they soon warmed up to each other. Ostensibly to discuss the matter further, but actually because they enjoyed each other's company, they decided to meet again – and yet again.

Then came the day when Emily returned home unexpectedly and, hearing a sound in her bedroom, entered to find Rosalinda and Jake naked in her bed. – Rosalinda had called in with a recipe that she had promised to give to Emily and things had got out of hand when she found only Jake at home. – Emily did some screaming, which she hadn't thought she was capable of doing, and Rosalinda, struggling into her clothes, fled. Jake packed a suitcase and moved into a hotel.

Emily called Derek and told him. He then confronted Rosalinda, who, thinking that offence was the best defence, accused him of having a relationship with her sister. He moved out, and for several days they all lived apart. Then Jake moved in with Rosalinda. After voicing some acid recriminations about this, Derek and Emily decided that they might as well move in together, too. Finally, all four met and agreed that there was no point in acrimony between them, in that they were now all happy with the current arrangements.

Two divorces and two weddings followed. The fact that they chose to have a double wedding startled both family and friends. Reactions ranged from mild amusement on the part of some of their friends to shock on the part of some of their elderly relatives. Emily and Rosalinda's Aunt Millie was bewildered. "I just can't come to grips with the modern generation," she told her husband. "They not only get divorced, they get remarried alongside the people they were divorced from – it's just too much."

Uncle Harold lowered his newspaper and peered at her over his bifocals. “Well,” he said, “I suppose it’s good that they’re all still friends.”

Aunt Millie gave a snort very similar to that of a wildebeest on the plains of the Serengeti.

AFTER THE WOMEN HAD BEEN ABSENT from the bridge table for an extended period, Derek called out, “Hey, what’s going on there? Are you two ever coming back?”

They appeared shortly thereafter, Emily carrying a tray with cups of tea and coffee, Rosalinda a plate of cookies. After all had added milk and sugar as desired and taken a bite or two of a cookie, Rosalinda said, “Well in spite of the currents flowing around this evening, I don’t think we should go back to our previous marriage partnerships. Perhaps we should try something different. Now that same-sex marriage is becoming acceptable, why don’t I marry Emily, and Derek can marry Jake.”

Jake was amused, but Derek was irritated. Not only had Rosalinda barged in where “angels fear to tread,” highlighting a situation that would likely have unobtrusively disappeared, but she’d also felt compelled to make a joke in very poor taste. One of the things that had so bothered him about Rosalinda was just this type of ill-advised comment. Both women observed his expression of distaste. Emily felt a glow of warmth for him as she perceived the mirroring of her own thoughts. Rosalinda was reminded of her disgust with what she considered to be his archaic prudishness.

After downing his coffee, Jake shuffled cards while he waited for the others to clear their cups and plates. Emily, not sure that she wanted to play any more, reflected that Jake hadn’t changed – always this restlessness, this unseemly rush to get on with what he wanted to do. Rosalinda, however, was eager to proceed and spread the cards so that each could take one and thereby determine who the dealer would be.

Emily, resigning herself to playing, said, “Well, I’m really tired, but perhaps another game or two.”

Why, Jake wondered, couldn’t she just come right out and say whether she wanted to play or not. This was typical – making the people around her uncertain as to what she really felt. He glanced tenderly at Rosalinda. How open and forthright *she* was.

They dealt and played a few hands. It was soon clear, however, that enthusiasm had died for the evening – Jake and Rosalinda said they ought to be going. Derek and Emily stood arm in arm, watching them walk down the pathway hand in hand. When they reached their SUV, they turned towards each other and looked back over their shoulders. Rosalinda waved with her free hand, and Jake smiled.

Emily and Derek inhaled the fragrance of the night air as the vehicle turned the corner and disappeared. Then, putting her arm around him, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek.

## Efficiency

Things are never done  
enough or the right way  
can't drop the history  
project or evenly bake  
the cookies when burnt is,

for our purpose, the perfectly done  
way; no messy gradations  
for black and white when you want  
to be sure; when you need to be certain:  
repeat, repeat again.

There's the nervous energy, under  
the skin, an allergic reaction  
veins, writhing. Stay still and count:  
one CV done, another  
started before noon; "*I am nothing*

*if not efficient*"; tidy and imagine  
the house, no half-baked  
measures, no time wasted:  
lustrous and complete, but my God  
and H. the number of times

I melted in your office, crumbled over  
your turquoise/orange countertops  
and the charts, files, inside of so many  
blustery afternoons in late November  
when it's certain that nothing can be fixed

they know my name: "sickness"  
and still, after all life, this life  
sometimes too hard, trying, knowing  
that it ends, contains a stopping point  
it can be unexpected

makes it that much worse  
since there's more to finish  
(a horrible irony) the saddest of  
competence. It is not about control  
organic; it stems from intentions:

savour, build, hope for  
the architecture of life, a tome  
ends up the opposite: damage,  
weaken, make vulnerable. You are  
racing through life when you can't

(won't) let yourself sleep, even –  
the indulgence, too shameful.  
Sinner: I can only begin to see how  
your compulsion is so wholly misdirected  
like driving, correctly, the wrong way

wrong street, wrong city – stop, you  
silly girl, listen to yourself, or how you  
ruin everything. Your obsessions  
conversations with God, and the idea  
of Karma coming back, swinging back

like a rainbow-coloured boomerang to save you,  
restore your courage. These are utterly  
wasted. Why can't you just be normal? I am,  
I am, "*I am nothing if not efficient*"; I am  
begging you.

GILLIAN WALLACE

## That winter Sunday

Quiet afternoon, Dad, you and me reading  
in the living room with its shabby furniture  
pale light streaming through the old bay window.  
The others out or upstairs doing homework.  
Mom in the kitchen working on dinner  
good smells rising from the Sunday roast.  
The little scritch sound intruding, not quite  
taken for granted like the furnace coming on.  
Your hand down inside your pants, up and down.  
Outside, a snow plow rumbling by.

## Wrong diagnosis

You say I'm depressed  
prescribe a pretty pill in a  
glycerin capsule. It will heal me  
make you feel better. So much easier  
than listening to what I'm trying to say.

But you are wise, stuffed into your white  
pin-striped shirt, stomach bulging in that  
self-important way. I know if you were reading  
this, you'd be assessing me for excessive anger  
perhaps even paranoia (the pin-stripes are out to pin me  
down), but really, how can anyone wearing hot pink boots  
be depressed?



## The Mortal Coil

"WELCOME TO THE MORTAL COIL, OUR FAIR CITY'S NEWEST BOOKSHOP. I AM FELICIA PERKINS, the owner, and it is my unqualified pleasure to assist you as you transport yourself along your lifelong highway toward self-realization and personal fulfillment through the acquisition of the perfect book, that singular volume which you now seek. And on this day, I entreat the gods of literature to allow my shop to reward you with that book."

*Oh my God. I've stumbled into it. Hell does have a bookstore.*

Harry wanted to turn and dash through the glass door, open or not, but he stole a glance at his companion, who seemed to be hanging onto every syllable that oozed from Felicia Perkins's lips. *Well, grin and bear it, Harry. You, my friend, are stuck here for eternity, so heed all instructions and keep an eye out for lava flows. Oh yes, and pray that somewhere in this candle-scented, greeting-carded emporium lies concealed some dusty jewel of sufficient recompense to assuage your ravaged ears.*

By this time, Felicia Perkins had laid a bookseller's death-grip on Tabatha's left elbow and was steering her toward station one of the grand tour. Harry chose not to follow. As she was spirited away, a virgin to the sacrificial altar, Tabatha looked back at him, her face aglow with her special thank-you-for-bringing-me-here face, the one she awarded him when they dined out well, or they shopped Sears for sheets. *Poor innocent lamb.* He accepted her smile and replied with one of his own. A guy must always honour the primary male code: never overlook the opportunity to accumulate points, even if they are unearned. On some cold winter night, today's visit to this twin of perdition could very well be the difference between watching the hockey game and sitting through Masterpiece Theatre. The female mind lay far beyond male understanding, and no guy could foresee when a past good deed might come back into play. Harry glanced at his watch.

"Now, my dear, on this mauve bookshelf standing before you, stretches the most inclusive and up-to-date collection of local women's poetry that any bookshop offers, east of Fredericton. We begin with A on the top shelf left, and run all the way down to Z, bottom right. Of course there is only one Z, you understand. Daphne Coolidge Zutlovski. Lovely girl, truly. She has promised to conduct a signing here when her new chapbook is published in the fall. She attended Parnassus College, you know, and ..."

*Ignore, ignore, ignore. Dig in, Harry. You can handle it. Even Tabatha won't be able to hold out for more than a half-hour. She's a listener through and through, but this merciless monologue was composed by demons to break the spirit of the hardiest. Lucifer, you sly devil.*

As Felicia Perkins and Tabatha redeployed to bookshelf two, heralded by the trilling Perkins soprano as "sunflower yellow," Harry lifted from the polished hardwood floor

the carry-bag of books he had garnered from their earlier browse of two non-Coilish bookstores, *The Dog's Ear* and *Thom's Tomes*. Ah, he thought, those were the days.

He lowered the bag gently into an armchair upholstered in a material that must be, he concluded, an exemplar of puce. This chair and its more conservative pastel siblings sprouted from tiny islands of throw-rugs, in support of castaways who felt it necessary to sit and consume a chapter before purchasing. Harry shrugged his coat and laid it over the chair-back. Sensing movement, Felicia Perkins paused in her dissertation to peer at him, favouring him with an expression that he read as: *We could do very well without you, but we presume you are the one with the undisciplined bank card.*

With a thumb and an index finger, he tugged on his shirt collar to intimate that he found her establishment a tad warm for the season. His attempt at appeasement wilted unacknowledged and, without neglecting a syllable, Felicia Perkins resumed her prattle, now in reference to female short-story phenoms still absent the age of majority.

As the ladies slipped farther away from him, Harry discovered that it became possible, for the most part, to disregard the syrup and treacle that was Felicia Perkins's voice. He now caught only swatches of words that rose in volume during her paroxysms of excitement.

"Only seventeen ... master of her craft ... here, in *our city* ... shoe-in for the GG."

He trusted that his opportunity to meet the prodigy would continue to elude him.

Since standing and waiting was not his style, he considered his options, as Felicia Perkins would gracefully phrase it, to enhance and wholly realize his bookshop experience. He stepped toward a bookcase dressed in a quiet medium-blue. There, he instituted a search for a shelf that might involuntarily underwrite a title of interest.

A handwritten tag at the top proclaimed *Ladies of Literary Fame*. He moved closer and began to scan the spines. Although he embraced no memory of either Adrienne Appleman or Gloria Arnth, nor would he be quoted as to where they enjoyed their fame, he did sense a spike in his attention level when he spotted the name Atwood.

*Ah, perhaps we have unearthed the golden nugget.* He stretched up and teased the book from the high shelf. Tabatha collected Ms Atwood, and he did not recognize the title. If this volume was either new or old and absent from her collection, he had a hit. Her birthday was the following week. An Atwood and roses would score more points than a supermarket special on Air Miles.

*Aardvarks of Spring*. He had not heard of it. He flipped it open, seeking date of publication. 2011. *Hmm, it's new, and I'm certain it's not sitting on The Shelf.* The Shelf was the plank across the red plastic crates that supported Tabatha's special volumes. Harry was certain that no copy of *Aardvarks of Spring* had ever rested there. He smiled and was about to sing *Every cloud has a silver lining*, when he turned to the back to read the critical commentary on the dust jacket:

Once again, Ms Atwood has struck pay dirt. Her brilliant concept of conscripting the lowly aardvark as a metaphor for spring is breathtakingly realized. Kudos, MA!

The second appraisal languished in a miasma of reduced circumstances, an

anthology of pilfered superlatives, lifted from more substantial statements of praise, and punctuated by ellipses:

“Bravura performance ... marvellous ... exhilarating ... intoxicating ...”

*Now there’s a word that rings true. If ever I needed a cold beer.*

Through force of habit, he flipped open the rear cover, where the author’s photograph perched above her thumbnail biography. *Let’s see how the old gal is ageing. Wow, Peg! Not bad at all. They must have found that snap in a very old file cabinet.*

But when he began to read the biographical blurb, he burst into laughter. Automatically, he glanced toward the ladies. Felicia Perkins was staring at him, as if he had just broken his monk’s vow of silence. Tabatha held a forefinger to her lips in a gesture designed to shush him. *What the devil? Can’t a guy laugh when he finds something funny? This is a bookstore, not the public library or a morgue.* And after all, he was laughing at himself, at his own inattention and gullibility.

But to placate the ladies, he mimed a zipper action across his mouth and turned from them to the shelf. He couldn’t slide the book back in its place fast enough. *Margarita Atwood.* Who the hell had ever heard of a *Margarita* among the Atwood clan? Some long-lost Mexican cousin? No wonder the subject was aardvarks. He began to compose Margarita’s true biography.

Born parentless on the streets of Guadalajara in 2001, she was educated through texting with her inner self. In 2004, she emigrated to a lean-to on the Serengeti, where she defies the sweltering intensity of each African day, typing words of great consequence with one hand, while, with the other, she pitches suicidal termites into the cracked wooden bowls of indigent aardvarks.

*Margarita Atwood.* Perhaps he should buy the book to remind himself never again, under any circumstances, Tabatha points or no, to enter an unknown bookstore. Again he chuckled aloud, but checked himself before his transgression had alerted the Inquisition.

Having heroically emulated Magellan, the ladies were lowering sail as they approached the entrance to their home harbour. Felicia Perkins’s mainspring had not run down, but Harry was pleased that Tabatha’s arms were unencumbered by books. Though an incorrigible people-person, Tabatha was passionate about the authors she cared for and the books she read. She might listen to Felicia Perkins’s inane approach to sales, but he doubted that the bookseller’s oration would greatly impact her underpinnings.

“So there you have it. The whole shooting match, as the old folks say.”

Though not prepared to swear to it, Harry was almost certain that the shadow of a Perkins titter had passed over him.

“You now know what *The Mortal Coil* embraces for the well-read seeker of books. And if you cannot discover your heart’s desire upon our shelves, we shall, if necessary, climb Everest and beyond to acquire it for you. In this bookshop, our motto means

much more than mere words; it is our guiding principle. *'Enquire at Coil, let ours be the toil.'* I hope, Tabatha dear, that you will become a frequent guest."

"Thank you so much, Felicia, for taking so much of your time to show me around."

Harry winced. *Oh my god, they're on a first-name basis.* Guest? *Invite her to the apartment and I'll freak, regardless of the points I lose.*

"And now that you know where everything is, please feel free to enjoy a look-see on your own. If I can be of the littlest assistance, just give me a toot. I shall be over by the register carrel sorting new arrivals. Happy hunting."

What a directive to receive, Harry thought, when one had left one's weapon at home. He looked at Tabatha. She seemed a little frazzled, rather worn about the edges. He smiled at her, admiring her stamina. She had accomplished what no man could have done. He glanced up at a wall clock. Twenty-seven minutes of Felicia Perkins. This girl deserved a prize.

"Did you find anything that you liked?" he asked her. "If you did, regardless of cost, it's yours. You've earned it."

"Well," she replied, assuming her serious tone, the one that always sprang to the fore when money was an element of their conversation, "there was a beautiful boxed set. The complete stories of Alice Munro, and a bargain at \$235."

Harry felt his throat constricting, but he managed to squeak out, "Only \$235, eh? Seems more than reasonable. What the heck. If you really want it, let's buy it."

"Harry, do you actually think I'd let you spend \$235 on books? If I thought you had that kind of disposable cash, we wouldn't be here. We'd be in a shoe boutique. Though you'd be just as bored there watching me try on shoes as you have been here, while I loaned Ms Perkins my attention. And if I ever do allow you to purchase a box-set of Alice Munro, I shall first advise you not to return here, where Alisa Munro is the featured author."

She grinned and winked at him, and popped up on her toes to plant a quick kiss on his cheek. Harry looked toward the cash register where Felicia Perkins was smiling contentedly as she entered new titles into her computer. She softly jabbered to the device with the same enthusiasm she had shown with Tabatha. He wanted to shout, "Don't forget the Gwendoline MacEwen." But he didn't.

"If you're finished here, Harry, just two blocks down there's a shop that stocks Hemingway. Ernesto Hemingway. Remember him? He wrote that classic, *The Son Also Rises*. The poignant tale of a boy who gets up early each morning to help his dear sainted mother milk the goats. It was reviewed in all our fair city's newspapers."

Harry studied the mocking laughter in her eyes as she played the game. He loved her when she loosed her wit on him. *Who am I kidding? I just plain love her.*

"Hmm, as I recall, my Hemingway shelf is full to overflowing. What do you say to some lunch instead?"

"Absolutely. But only if you take me to that sports bar you like so much. If ever I needed a cold beer ..."

Harry opened the door and followed an impish Tabatha through it. The female mind lay far beyond male understanding.

ROBERT PIOTROWSKI

## Visitation

I got invited to Dave's dad's  
funeral last night.  
So we went  
and sat in the second row, naturally.

Dave's thick-legged brothers came in carrying  
the box,  
their father still coughing  
in the coffin,  
not yet ready.  
But it was inevitable and the family wanted  
to keep on schedule.

The audience didn't.  
They sat,  
offended and surprised at all the coolness.

To make matters right I brought out  
a heavy blade.  
Clicked and locked it into place.  
And cut vertical pale lines  
across his collar bones.  
It didn't help. He only screamed.

We left.  
Angry and sad for Dave  
and everything  
but also somehow relieved that  
we hadn't seen a corpse  
or anything  
too morbid.

ROBERT PIOTROWSKI

## Paper garage

A poem is a small (or large) machine made out of words.

– William Carlos Williams

I build and repair them here, these  
small machines.

A pity,  
you will never see them work,  
nor watch their gears fit and move as one,  
or hear their engines ping along,  
alone.

All of them  
you will never know.

Even though  
they always  
only  
run  
on  
you.

## Across the Nile

COLIN DIED LAST WEDNESDAY. I KEEP WAITING TO CRY, TO FEEL SOMETHING LIKE GRIEF, BUT SO far I don't feel any different. I have to keep reminding myself that he is really dead, that I will never see him again. Ten years have passed since I moved away, and in that decade I saw him only a few times. We hardly spoke at all. What has changed now that he's really gone?

He might as well be living in Egypt, a place I know he wanted to see. Perhaps he is studying the tomb of Tutankhamen, counting the steps of the pyramids, climbing up the side of the Great Sphinx. He might be bathing in the Nile – I know Colin wouldn't mind the brown waters. He never cared about things like that.

Colin would have loved Egypt. He always paid close attention to Mr McGraw during History class. I remember he once gave a presentation about the people in Mesopotamia. He was the only student in the class who had prepared visual materials. He had charts about the Nile and graphs on agriculture. He had even created a topographical map. He ignored the snickers and whispers of "browner" from the other students.

We often studied together – he, with passion, and I, with complete indifference. "Julie," he said one time, "let's make a model of a pyramid."

I squinted at him. "What? Why?" Making models was not required homework. But he had already left for the garage to retrieve some blocks of wood. He returned beaming. I admired his enthusiasm, though he made me feel sad to be so blasé about Ancient History.

I wanted to write a letter to his mother, to tell her about King Tut and the pyramids. I wanted her to know that I imagined Colin working there, as an archaeologist, digging up the lives of people who died long ago, just as one day people will dig up Colin's bones, and mine, and hers. I didn't know how to write it in a way that would comfort her, so I gave up and signed my name to the carnations and gladiolas my family sent.

I am sorry now that my family moved away from Clinton, though I was certainly pleased about it at the time. What fifteen-year-old wouldn't have been? I had never lived in a city before. City people seemed different – bigger, smarter, faster, more exciting. I love the city, but I would have liked to spend more time with Colin, before he went away to Egypt.

All day, friends and family have been asking me how I'm doing, as though he were my brother, my lover, or my friend. People thought I had been his girlfriend, but I was so young when we moved away. I didn't know what it meant to have a boyfriend, and I didn't know what attraction was. Not really.

We kissed once. We were walking home together, not talking, and he just asked if he

thought we should do it.

"Do what?" I asked.

"You know," he replied without looking up.

"No, I don't. What are you talking about?" I think I knew, but I was playing dumb.

"You know. It."

"*It* it?" I was staring at his running shoes. The laces were undone and I expected him to trip any second.

He shrugged.

"Why?" I asked.

"You know. People talk."

"What people?"

"Just people. Guys." He quickened his pace.

I matched his stride for a few seconds, but then stopped. I didn't understand what he was saying underneath his words. I didn't want him to be my boyfriend. He was just Colin. That's all he was. That was all I wanted from him.

He turned around when he realized I wasn't following him. He looked at me and then glanced down. As we walked toward each other, I knew we were going to kiss. His lips were dry and coarse, and after, when he stepped back, I licked my finger and gently touched it to his mouth. I ran my finger over his lips, making them glisten with my saliva. That was the first moment I felt something for him. It was a pang that shot up out of my abdomen, lingered for a few moments, and then went away. I still feel it sometimes now, when I think about him.

"It's okay, Julie," he whispered.

"What's okay?"

He paused. "Nothing." Then he walked me home and we never mentioned it again.

After moving to the city, when the time came to do it, I regretted that it wasn't Colin. I even thought about calling him and asking him to come and visit, but I knew I wouldn't. Darcy Johnson smelled like sweaty armpits. He had pasty skin. His lips were mushy. He had wax in his ears. It only lasted about fifteen seconds, but it felt like an eternity. And all I could think about was Colin's shoelaces.

"HOW ARE YOU?" DR GREGGS SAYS IN GREETING. He looks Colin straight in the eye, working hard to keep his voice steady. Colin knows exactly what Dr Greggs is going to say. He can feel the doctor's sadness, his disappointment, in the air between them.

"A few months. Six at most." That's all.

As soon as he hears the doctor's words, he thinks of Julie. It's ridiculous. Here he is, sitting in a cold, sterile doctor's office, surrounded by metal instruments and one pathetic-looking fern, being told he's going to die, and all he can think about is her. He hardly knows her really. Hasn't seen her in ages.

The last time was at Christmas a couple of years ago. For some reason his mother decided they should all go to the candlelight service at the church. They hardly ever went to church, but his mother was getting kind of weird on them. She wasn't born-again weird yet, not then, but she had already started acting all God this and Jesus that.



It was just as they were sitting down that he noticed her, or rather, he noticed the back of her neck. Her family was sitting three pews up from his. He was surprised because they usually spent Christmas in the city. He felt a pang inside him, like something was telling him it was fate and they were supposed to be together, but then he remembered they'd never had that relationship.

Still, she had her hair all cut short, and her neck looked so creamy he wanted to reach out and touch it. When they all stood to sing *Silent Night*, he stared so hard at her smooth neck he started feeling short of breath. It was like a heat rising up in him, trying to choke him.

She looked different from the last time he'd seen her, when they'd played pool together. That was when he'd first noticed how sexy she was, how she wasn't a little girl any more, how she was more than just his old friend Julie. Her hair was longer then, but he liked it this short way better. It was more womanly.

After the service, when they were all making their way down the aisle, he felt her at his side. When he looked at her, she smiled and said hi. He had never seen her look so beautiful. He was so struck by it that he forgot to say hi back.

That night he thought about her a lot, enough to need the hand towel by his bed. It may not have been a very spiritual thing to do on Christmas Eve, but she had just looked so good. He couldn't help himself. He kept thinking about that kiss, way back in Grade Ten. It was just a kiss, but in his mind that Christmas Eve it was a lot more.

"Colin? Are you all right? Colin?" Dr Greggs is staring at him.

Colin shrugs, letting the memory of Julie's neck dissipate for the moment. "Well, there's nothing we can do, right?"

"We could try another bout of chemo, but I don't think it would help at this point."

Colin stares at the dying fern. It looks thirsty. Like him. He suddenly feels a craving for a slushy. He presses his lips together. They feel dry. He wonders why Dr Greggs doesn't water the fern. Some things are easy to forget, and some things, like the creamy neck of a girl you once sort of knew or the feel of her wet finger on your coarse lips, stay with you forever.

IT IS AN OPEN CASKET. I HAVE NEVER GOTTEN USED to open caskets. I don't understand why people find them comforting. When we get to the funeral parlour some man directs me to it. I think he is one of Colin's uncles. "Say your final good-byes," he says. I don't want to look, but the uncle says it in such a way that I feel I have to.

At first I am relieved because I'm certain it's not him, but then I realize it *is* him. He looks so empty. I can see that he lost a lot of weight before he died, and I wish I could have been there to help feed him, to share my food with him. I think about all those hours spent together in the cafeteria. I always shared my chocolate-chip granola bar with him. His mom always packed the healthiest lunches. I used to feel sorry for him.

It upsets me to see him lying there so stiff. In my head he is at a dig, discovering artefacts that will change the way historians look at the past, not ramrod-straight with his eyes sealed shut in a satin-lined box. It doesn't make any sense.

MIKE AND COLIN ARE WORKING FOR MR DESJARDINES out at the mill. The work is hard and dirty, but the pay is twenty-five dollars an hour. They have just gotten off a long shift, and Mike thinks they should go into the Blue Fountain for a pint.

As soon as they walk in the door they see Julie in the back, playing pool with some people they don't recognize. Colin is surprised but figures she's here visiting her grandparents or something. She waves at them immediately, like she's been expecting them.

Mike speaks first. "So, you're here for the summer?"

She smiles as she comes towards them, and Colin notices that she's filled out since she moved away. Her blouse is kind of tight and really shows off her curves. She was kind of skinny before. Pretty, but skinny. But four years is enough time to change a person. He wonders if he's changed much. Is he taller? Are his shoulders more broad? Has she noticed?

"I'm staying with my grandparents for a month," she says, looking more at Colin than Mike. Colin is flattered by the attention. "Gran isn't doing so well these days so I'm here to help out," she says. "These are some friends of mine from the city. They're just here for the weekend." She introduces everyone, and Colin feels a stab of jealousy when one guy shakes his hand and tells him he's her boyfriend. Colin reminds himself that it's stupid, since he doesn't even know her any more.

"Do you guys want to play the next game?" the boyfriend asks.

"Sure," Mike says.

Colin watches Julie go over to the bar and order two pints. The curve of her hips looks inviting. She brings the beers back and hands one to Colin and one to Mike. Mike smiles and says thanks, but Colin just nods at her.

"How've you been?" she asks him.

Colin nods again. "Good."

"I'm working at the Foodland while I'm here." She says it like it's an invitation, or else he just thinks she says it that way. He regrets that his family usually shops at the Valu-Mart.

Colin breaks and sinks two solids.

"Geez – you guys are too good," her boyfriend says.

"Home advantage," Mike says, chalking his cue.

"I'll be Colin's partner," Julie says with a laugh.

Her boyfriend comes over to her and pinches her side gently. "You're abandoning me?" He laughs at her, and she smiles so wide Colin feels as if he's breaking in two.

"Hey. Mike is even better than Colin," she says, which Colin finds insulting because it's true, but he imagines she says it to justify her being his partner.

Her boyfriend takes the next shot. It's a tough one and he misses off the bank.

"My turn," she says. When she bends over to take the shot, Colin can see her cleavage, and it gives him a hard-on right there. He's pretty sure she catches his gaze, but she doesn't look annoyed. He has a feeling she might even be kind of flattered. She misses the shot.

Colin and Julie eventually win the game, and she gives him a high-five, but she looks at her watch right then and says she was supposed to be at her Gran's five minutes ago. They all hurry out, and Mike and Colin play one more game before they head home.

I AM SITTING IN A BAR WITH THE GIRLS AT WORK. We are having a round of martinis and talking about men. Selina tells us about how her high-school boyfriend used to give her horrible hickies that would take a week to go away. Tanya says her high-school boyfriend was romantic but refused to have sex with her. Monica says she never had a boyfriend in high school. When they ask me about my high-school boyfriend, I am about to tell them about Colin and how he was fascinated with Ancient Egypt, but I stop myself when I remember he was never my boyfriend.

I wonder if I should look him up on Facebook, but I catch myself the next instant. How could I forget, even for a moment, that he died two months ago? How could I forget seeing his emaciated figure lying in that coffin? How could I forget watching his mother weep and pray? How could I forget that he's now in Egypt, that he has to be in Egypt, that it's the only place that makes sense?

As we are having our second round of martinis, I think about the times over the years that I saw Colin. Every single image appears clear in my mind. It's strange, because I can't even remember this girl, Alison, whose name appears all over my Grade Nine yearbook and who, apparently, was my "friend forever." But Colin? I can see his face now as clearly as if I were looking right at him.

The last time I saw him was at church a few years ago. I was with my parents and we were visiting Gran and Grandpa for Christmas. I didn't even see him until right before we left. I remember he was looking at me with so much intensity, like he was going to tell me something really important, but he didn't say anything. I remember I said hello, but he never answered. I thought it was a bit strange, but I shrugged it off. Colin could be moody like that once in a while.

Actually, it was the same that time after first-year university when I was at the Blue Fountain, and we played pool together. It was like pulling teeth to get him to talk to me. One-word answers was all he seemed capable of. But still, there was something about him, or something trying to get out of him. I half-wondered if he was attracted to me, but he'd known me for so long, I must have been like a sister to him. I wanted him to talk to me, as more than a sister. I guess I was going out with that guy at the time, so maybe Colin didn't feel like he could really talk to me. I don't know. I guess we were always so undefined, it was hard to know how to be together. The only time we were ever totally comfortable together was when we were studying. Ancient Egypt. The Nile. I'd like to be there with Colin. We'd have fun together.

The first time he actually spoke to me after we moved away was when I was sixteen. I had been living in the city for less than a year, and I had gone back home to Clinton to take my driver's test there. I bumped into him at the park outside the Ministry of Transportation office.

It was awkward, and I guess we weren't really sure what we were supposed to do. I wanted to give him a big hug, but he just stood there with his hands in his pockets, so I just waved and said hi.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Taking my driver's test. Too busy in the city."

He nodded. "Me too."

"I'm supposed to wait for, like, thirty minutes," I said, and I sat down in the grass.

He looked indecisive for a moment but then said, "Do you mind if I wait with you?"

I shrugged. We sat in silence for a few moments.

"So, how's the city?" he finally asked.

"It's cool. There's a lot of stuff to do, and there's so many people in the school there. And they actually have a real football team and a wrestling team and a gymnastics team."

He raised his eyebrows to show interest, but I don't think he really cared. I looked down into the grass.

"We have a rugby team now," he said. "Of course, none of the other high schools around have one, so we just play against ourselves, but it's pretty cool."

He smiled at me, and I met his gaze for a moment, but then I looked away. I wish I hadn't.

"I guess I'd better go in and see how long I have to wait," he said.

I nodded. "See you."

I watched him go and then started picking at the grass. I regret now not stopping him from leaving. I should have asked him if he wanted to go get a slushy at Becker's, the way we used to do when we'd skip art class. We used to suck out all the juice and then go back into the store and ask for more syrup.

The thought of slushies makes me thirsty for one, and I suggest to the girls at work that we should give up the martinis and start a round of daiquiris. The girls love the idea. We all get completely wasted.

EVEN WITHOUT THE CHEMO, COLIN HAS BEEN HURTING all over this past month. He feels short of breath a lot of the time, and he can't believe how thirsty he has become. He keeps thinking of how he used to hang out at Becker's with Julie, sucking back slushy after slushy.

He thinks about the time he walked her home from school, when they kissed. He thinks of her finger, wet with saliva, moistening his dry lips. Still so dry. Always so dry.

He can't understand why he keeps thinking about her. He hardly knows her. Even when he did see her, he barely ever spoke to her. Like the time after they played pool together, when he went into the Foodland just to see if she was working. She was, but she was talking and laughing with Robbie Simons, one of the baggers. Robbie had always been sort of a jerk, so Colin decided to leave.

Then there was the time she came back to Clinton from university for Reading Week, and he saw her out shovelling her Gran's walkway. He wanted to go over and

help her and then ask her to invite him in for a hot chocolate, but he figured she still had that boyfriend, and he wasn't sure how it would be between them, if it would be weird or awkward, so he just walked on.

And there was that time not long after she moved away when he saw her at the Ministry of Transportation. He wanted to give her a hug, but he wasn't sure he should. He wasn't sure she'd want that. They talked about school, but all the time he wanted to invite her to go for a slushy.

God, he'd love one of those slushies now.

LAST NIGHT I DREAMT OF EGYPT. IT WAS HOT and sunny, and I was standing along the banks of the Nile. Colin was with me, but he was standing on the opposite shore. And there were all these people bathing and washing their clothes between us, and there were market vendors behind me selling colourful fabrics and aromatic spices. There was so much noise and commotion, and I was sweltering in the heat. Every once in a while I would meet Colin's gaze, and we'd smile at each other, these weird smiles, like there was some understanding between us. But there were so many people around us, so many smells, so much to see, that I kept forgetting about him.

And the next time I looked across the river Colin was gone.

SUSAN BUIS

## **Desire is a squirrel**

This isn't her usual butch-  
bitch voice.

The dog's yelp is a line  
pitched high and flung  
again and again  
at the treed squirrel.

As if sound could snap  
the animal from the branch  
to her lips – black commas  
piped with foam.

Her vibrating focus aligns  
like iron shavings, magnetized.  
Not muscle, fur or bone, but venous  
elastic, welt-raising want. She squirms  
to squeeze out treble cries.  
The space between them rings.

## Waste not, want not

RALPH DIDN'T HEAR TOMMY PULL IN, BUT THERE HE WAS, HANGING OUT THE WINDOW OF HIS black Lexus.

"Hey, Walph, what's new at the dump today?"

"Same garbage, different day," said Ralph. No matter how carefully he said it, it came out: same gawbage, diffwent day.

His mother had given up on his speech classes. "You speak fine," she always said, "If someone doesn't understand you, they're not worth worrying about."

Ralph peered in the back of Tommy's SUV, but the windows were so dark that all he saw was his own shaggy reflection.

"Recyclables go in the second bin, garbage around the bend and up the ramp." He'd told Tommy the same thing over and over, but Tommy never got it right.

"Seen Becky lately?" Tommy smiled, his white teeth all lined up.

Ralph shook his head. He hoped Tommy would be gone before Becky came in; he hated the way Tommy talked her up.

Tommy pulled away, and Ralph realized he'd forgotten to ask to see his card. It was on his list, but it was hard to remember all the things on that list. He'd be sure to remember next time.

After Tommy drove away from the recycling bins and up the ramp, Ralph checked the bins. Tommy had dumped his wine bottles in with his Jack Daniel's bottles again, even though there were official-looking signs everywhere that said coloured glass and clear glass were supposed to be separated, plus the instructions Ralph had scrawled across the bins with black magic marker.

Ralph hoisted himself up and leaned into the container, his belly resting on the opening. He could just reach the bottle – *Yellow Tail* – that was one of Tommy's.

"Hey, Walph, nice ass."

Ralph jerked his head up and smacked it against the lid of the bin as Tommy peeled out of the compound, muck flying. He grasped the neck of the bottle and threw it in the proper bin. Pieces splintered and bounced, echoing inside the steel walls. No matter how hard he wished it, Tommy wouldn't go away.

Ralph trudged back to his shed and bent down to look at a muddy brown spider that had spun a web in a stack of sheet metal beside his hut.

"How's the hunting today, Elsa?" he said.

He eyed the rain clouds that had collected on the horizon, then he propped a two-by-four between the building and the stack of sheet metal so that it sheltered her web. "There you go, that should keep the rain off."

It wasn't long before Ralph heard the splutter of Becky's pick-up truck. He jumped up to greet her.

"What have you got today, Becky?"

“Nothing special, Ralph.” She laughed, her crazy red hair flying.

Sometimes Becky gave him things. At Christmas time she’d brought him a picture of a clear blue lake and snow-covered mountains on a black background. “It’s not my kind of painting, but I thought you might like it,” she’d said. He did. It hung over his desk in the hut, and sometimes he ran his fingers across that velvety surface and thought about Becky.

He waved her through; he never had to ask for her card, it was sitting on the dash, every time. She tossed a few empty water bottles, some yogurt tubs, and other jars into the proper compartments. Then she unloaded her newspapers, bags and bags of them. How anyone could read that much was a mystery to Ralph. She took off up the ramp, her tiny bag of garbage bouncing on the open tailgate. He had a pretty good idea what was in that bag – he knew what people threw away – but he’d never gone through Becky’s garbage. It didn’t seem right. She waved on her way out, and he stood up as she passed.

“There’s a nice lady. A real nice lady,” he mumbled.

At closing time Ralph let the lids of the recycling bins ease silently onto their frames, then he secured them with bungee cords. He’d forgotten last night, and the raccoons had dragged cans and tubs and plastic bags all over the compound. It was noon before he had it all cleaned up. He picked up a few stray pieces of cardboard and slid them through the slit in the bin before heading off to the garbage drop-off.

The trees hadn’t leafed out completely, but there were buds on the dogwoods and willows that lined the ramp. The creek rushed behind the landfill, swollen from the spring’s melt. It wound through the swamp until it came to the river. Ralph used to fish back there when the water was high, until last spring when he’d come upon a new log home at the edge of the river, with Tommy’s black Lexus in the drive. He hadn’t fished there since.

Ralph surveyed the mounds of bags. The ones at the back were dusty and shrunken like old potatoes, the ones at the front were glossy black, stretched to bursting. He was about to turn around when he noticed a bag at the edge of the pile that was ripped, a jagged shard of a Jack Daniel’s bottle sticking out.

He lowered himself onto the uneven bed of garbage, breathing through his mouth to avoid the smell of rotten meat, diapers, and sour milk. His Kodiaks sank in, and armies of flies rose around him and settled a few seconds later. He gave the bag a gentle tug, remembering what the County rep had told him about garbage – that it could be dangerous; they had even sent him to the clinic for shots for Hepatitis A, or was it B? He couldn’t remember.

He hoisted the bag onto the rim and pulled himself up after it. Mother used to tease him about his strength. “You’re too strong for your own good.” She would laugh when he picked her up, still sitting in her old green chair, and carried both her and the chair outside so she could watch the birds. The last few times that chair had seemed to weigh nothing at all, there was so little left of her.

Ralph opened the bag and let out a low whistle. Not only recyclables but chemicals too: turpentine, motor oil, pesticide, an almost full jug of wood preservative. Some of



the bottles were so old he couldn't identify them, but they were hazardous, he could tell by the skull and crossbones on the labels. Tommy knew this stuff didn't belong in a landfill. He was just too lazy to take it to the proper place. Or maybe he wanted to get Ralph in trouble?

Ralph hurried to where his truck was parked and backed it up the ramp, skidding through puddles along the way. He made sure the containers weren't leaking and set them upright in a cardboard box. If the County found out there were hazardous materials in the landfill, he'd get a warning, or he might even get fired, even though it was Tommy's doing. On his way out he tucked the box into a corner of his hut. He'd take it to the hazardous waste depot himself on his next day off.

RALPH KEPT HIS HEAD DOWN AS HE UNLOCKED the door of his house and went inside. He knew the dolls were there, high above him on their narrow shelf. When she was still able, his mother had climbed up on a rickety stool with a feather duster in one hand and a damp cloth in the other. She'd talk to the dolls as she wiped their faces, about where they'd come from, the things they'd seen. The dolls were dusty and pockmarked now, but Ralph could still feel them looking down at him.

He could hardly stand to be in the house any more; the quiet made him uneasy. He laced up his boots and stepped outside. He had walked every night since they took his mother away, or at least since the well-wishers stopped coming, the few who had come.

A coyote slunk into the woods as Ralph climbed the stone fence and dropped into the field. The field smelled damp and earthy. The ground was spongy underfoot. There were black clouds all around and thunder in the distance.

It had been late in the winter when he'd first come across Becky's house. The snow had sunk, and the landscape was dirty. The house she lived in was a plain brick bungalow, a house he hadn't even known was there. He was startled to see her in the kitchen window, and he had hidden behind a clump of cedars. He couldn't see her face, but he knew it was her by the way the light lit up her hair.

The next time she came to the landfill, he'd wanted to tell her they were neighbours, that the backs of their properties abutted one another, even though their driveways were on different concessions, but something stopped him. "Don't be bothering girls, Ralph," his mother had often said. "They don't appreciate you like I do." So he'd kept quiet.

Tonight he slowed as he got closer to Becky's house, staying in the shadow of the fencerows. At the edge of her backyard, he got down on all fours where the thorny shrubs hid him from view. Over the past couple of weeks he'd noticed splashes of colour in her yard. Daffodils and crocuses and tulips. Now the lilacs were in bloom, and shrubs with arching branches and tiny white flowers, and others with larger bright yellow flowers, shrubs he couldn't remember the names of, even though his mother had tried to teach him. "Remember the plants and animals, Ralph – the natural world isn't nearly as cruel as the human one."

Becky appeared at the side of the house, and Ralph ducked. She held a pair of pruning shears that looked too big for her and set to work on a vine that had climbed up

the back wall and was half covering one of the windows. Virginia Creeper – that was the name of it – but it wouldn't give. Ralph wanted to step into the yard and wrench the vine down and hand it to her. Instead, he watched her brace one foot against the brick until the vine let go. She tumbled backwards and laughed out loud, even though she was all alone. Without realizing it, Ralph had risen to get a better look, and when Becky picked herself up she spotted him. Her smile froze. She shook her head, slowly at first, then more violently, so that her curls swished back and forth across her face.

Ralph shook his head too. He wanted to tell her it was all right, that he meant no harm. He only wanted to make sure she was safe. But he'd seen that look before – on the faces of girls at school, cashiers in the grocery store, young women on the street. He backed away, then turned and ran. His work boots thudded across the fields. It was raining hard by the time he reached home. He threw the door open and kicked the empty green chair. A wad of mud clung to the side for a moment, then dropped to the carpet. He sank down and put his head in his hands.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON A POLICE CRUISER TURNED into Ralph's driveway.

"We've had a complaint about you, Ralph," said Officer Hogan, when Ralph opened the door. Ralph nodded. "Doesn't look good, you spying on the neighbours." He stepped inside and took off his hat and ran his fingers through what was left of his hair. "I know you don't mean anything by it, but not everyone knows you like I do." He lowered himself into the green chair, then jumped up. "Sorry, Ralph, I wasn't thinking."

Ralph shrugged as if it made no difference that Officer Hogan had sat in his mother's chair, but he felt better with him standing.

Officer Hogan rubbed the back of the chair. "It wasn't your fault, Ralph, you know that." He patted the chair. "Poor Elsa, she was old and infirm when she died."

*Infirm* wasn't a word Ralph was familiar with, but he remembered the coroner had said that his mother died of natural causes.

Officer Hogan leaned against the door frame on his way out and turned his hat around in his hands. "You must get lonely out here now that she's gone. I understand that." He sighed. "But make things easy for me, Ralph, and stay away from Becky."

He got into his cruiser and drove away. The gravel spewed when he turned at the end of the lane, as if he were in a hurry. When he was out of sight Ralph took hold of the high shelf and gave it a pull. One end of the shelf gave way, and the dolls slid down. They flew through the air and crashed onto the floor at his feet. For a moment the air was full of breaking china and clouds of ages-old dust; then it was quiet again.

TOMMY PULLED IN REAL SLOW THE NEXT SUNDAY and Ralph guessed, even before the window lowered, that the back of the truck was full of empty bottles.

"Hey, Walph, what's cooking?" said Tommy, as if it hurt him to speak.

"Let's see your card."

"Come on, Walph, you know me, we're buddies." Tommy raised his sunglasses to reveal bloodshot eyes.

"Card." Ralph folded his arms across his chest.

Tommy sighed and scrounged in the glove compartment.

It shouldn't be hard to find a neon orange card in amongst all that slippery black leather, thought Ralph.

Tommy ranted as he searched. "Freaking Jody, always wants things cleaned up right away, can't let a guy sleep in on a Sunday morning."

Ralph waited, picturing Tommy's skinny blonde wife following him around their fine house, maybe with their little baby bawling over her shoulder.

"Here it is, big guy." Tommy stretched a neon green card towards Ralph.

"That's last year's. This year's is orange."

"For Christ's sake, Ralph, give me a break."

"Can't. County wants me to check everyone's card, every time, they don't want anyone doing anything illegal." Ralph sucked in his breath and thrust his shoulders back. "Like dumping chemicals in the landfill."

"What are you talking about?"

"Chemicals are dangerous, they can leak into the water, get into wells, make people sick, even kill people sometimes."

"So?"

"Thought you might want to know. It's a violation. A person could get fined."

"Like I care." Tommy hit the gas and spun a U-turn around Ralph's shed and disappeared out onto the road.

Ralph waited for Becky until long past closing time. Finally, he pulled out of the compound and locked the gate. A few miles up the road he slammed on the brakes and stared through the windshield at the garbage that littered the road: Coke cans, newspapers, dirty diapers. Tommy's garbage was everywhere. Neighbours would complain. Ralph would get in trouble. Maybe that's what Tommy wanted? It was his job to keep the landfill and everything around it tidy.

He got out and picked up every last piece of garbage and tossed it into the back of the truck. Tommy had been careful; there wasn't a single magazine or envelope or prescription with his name on it.

"HEY, WALPH, DID YOU MISS ME?" SAID TOMMY. He stretched his arm out the window, a neon orange card clenched between his fingers.

Ralph hadn't seen Tommy for almost a month. One of the locals said Tommy had gone to Europe to visit Jody's family.

Ralph took the card, then handed it back.

"Did you hear I'm single again?" said Tommy.

Ralph nodded. He'd heard that Jody and the baby hadn't come home with Tommy and that he was all alone in his log house.

"Maybe we should go out on the town, you and me?"

Ralph was used to Tommy taunting him, but he wasn't sure how to respond to an invitation.

"We're both single, and you must be bored with your mama gone. I guess I can't call you 'Mama's Boy' any more, can I?" Tommy snorted and rubbed the side of his head.

Ralph clenched his fists in his pockets so Tommy wouldn't see. Mother had taught him to ignore people like Tommy, and most times he did. He eyed the scar on Tommy's temple. If you didn't know it was there, you'd hardly be able to see it.

"How'd she die anyway?"

"Natural causes." Ralph was relieved that the term came to him so easily.

"You sure you didn't lose your temper? It happens, you know? I've seen it." Tommy leaned further out the window and tapped his finger against his scar.

Ralph kicked at the gravel with the toe of his work boot. Inside his pockets his palms were clammy.

Tommy sat back in his vehicle and put it in gear. "Becky been in today?"

Ralph hadn't seen Becky since the night he ran away from her house. He'd done what Officer Hogan asked, he'd stayed away. So had Becky. He had no idea where she'd been taking her garbage.

"Maybe I'll pay her a visit," said Tommy. "Unless you two got something going?" He didn't give Ralph a chance to answer; he hit the gas, and gravel sprayed behind him. Ralph could hear him laughing all the way up the ramp.

As soon as Tommy left the site, Ralph forced the lids of the recycling bins down hard, the noise echoing through the deserted compound. Then he crushed the stray cardboard under his feet and stomped on the misshapen boxes until long after they were flattened. Before he went to the garbage drop-off, he dragged the box of chemicals out from the corner of his hut. He'd forgotten to take them to the depot.

He pulled out the jug of wood preservative and rubbed the dirt off the label with his thumb. Copper Chrome Arsenate. Arsenate, *arsenic*. He wasn't one for learning, but some things stuck with him. He jammed the jug into the oversized pocket of his coveralls where it strained against the coarse fabric.

He marched around the perimeter of the landfill to where the creek started. It wasn't rushing any more, and spiky leaves had grown up along the edges. He trudged through the underbrush alongside the creek, punching aside the willows and dogwoods as he went. The wind had picked up, and the high branches of the trees made a rushing sound, like the river made in the spring, only not as steady.

Sweat dribbled down his forehead and spread out along his eyebrows. He was almost there; he could see the peak of Tommy's roof over the trees. He came to a shallow pool, not more than four feet across, all that was left of the creek this time of year. It was close to the well; Ralph could see the casing from where he stood.

He pulled the jug out of his pocket and struggled with the cap. It had been on there so long that, by the time he pried it off, his hands were raw, and sweat dripped off the end of his nose. The green liquid swirled with the clear water in the pool, sparkling in the late afternoon light. It looked pretty, not dangerous. He shook the last drop from the lip of the jug and sat back on his heels to catch his breath.

He was hidden behind a stand of cattails, but he could see Tommy's house well enough. Two storeys high, with dormers facing the river. Made out of logs that glowed in the sun. Ralph's own house was no bigger than the garage. Big enough for him, though; too big, with Mother gone.

A door opened, and Tommy came out onto the deck. Ralph crouched low. He was surprised to see that Tommy's legs were skinny and white below his boxers, not tanned like his arms and face. Tommy wasn't wearing sunglasses, and he squinted into the sun as he took a long swallow of his drink.

Behind him, Tommy's house was dark. It must be quiet in there, thought Ralph, maybe as quiet as his own house had been these last months. He tried to imagine what it looked like inside. Paintings on the walls, a big fireplace, a big TV, too. Maybe some baby toys still lying around. An empty crib upstairs, waiting for a baby that might never come home.

Ralph slumped forward and stared into the pool. No sign of the green liquid remained. He leaned forward so that his nose almost touched the water, but it was gone. He thrust his hands in and scooped water out, throwing it on the bank across from him and on either side. No matter how fast he scooped, the water level didn't drop. He kept going. His arms got wet and tired, and his back ached from bending over the pool. He was soaked, and still the water level remained the same. He scooped until he was exhausted and collapsed on the bank. The chill seeped through his coveralls and made him shiver.

The wind died and the sky cleared as he lay there. The first star appeared. Mother had said the stars were always there, but you couldn't see them until it was dark.

SHE HAD BEEN LOOKING AT THE STARS THAT NIGHT. The night she insisted he take her outside, even though the weather people had promised it would be one of the coldest nights of the winter. He'd lifted her in her chair and listened to her watery laughter as he carried her outside. He set her down on the driveway where his truck tires had flattened the snow, then hurried inside for a blanket.

"I don't need that, Ralph, I don't feel the cold like I used to," she said, as he spread the afghan across her lap. She tilted her head and rested it on the back of the chair. "Look at that, there's Orion, and over there, that's Cassiopeia." She pointed a thin finger at the sky.

He left her there, a holey afghan wrapped around her legs, thin wafts of breath rising into the cold night air. He went inside to rest on the couch for a few minutes before he brought her back in.

He woke up when the dim light of morning edged into the living room. He was uncomfortable and cold; the screen door was all that separated him from outside. Then he remembered. He jumped to his feet and raced into the snow, still in his socks. His mother was sitting in her chair, just like he'd left her, her face lifted to the stars. His breath was ragged as he dragged her and the chair back inside; for once, he wasn't strong enough to lift her.

ROBERT BOATES

## First Wednesday in March

A sharp-shinned hawk flew  
through the sun over  
Christie and Dupont.  
It was headed toward Sobeys,  
me to a postal outlet. The sun  
burned my eyes and I lost  
sight of the bird; the crossing  
lights Yellow, Yellow, Yellow.

## Swartz Bay

An eagle carries a cormorant  
across the bay. The black bird startled  
at its reflection, disbelieving.





MARY ANNE CREE

## Catching up with *Running the Goat*

IN A COZY COVE ABOUT 40 KM SOUTH OF ST. JOHN'S JUST OFF THE IRISH LOOP HIGHWAY, AN OUTPORT NESTLES into the curve of the bay. Tors Cove, current population 449, is known for the little red house that turns up on all the Newfoundland tourism brochures and calendars (January this year). Originally called Toads Cove, it was an early fishing community, first settled in the 1600s. I had the great good fortune to spend a week there last summer, staying at the home of a dear friend who has recently opened her own print shop and gallery. Named after an old Newfoundland set dance for four couples, *Running the Goat Books & Broadsides* creates handmade, letterpress-printed books by Newfoundland authors and publishes a line of offset-printed fine trade books, including an award-winning series of folktales by Andy Jones. The proprietor is Marnie Parsons, book-lover, former English professor, and passionate craftsperson, formerly of Ontario, now a committed Newfoundlander.

Last year, Marnie decided to move out to Tors Cove from St. John's. She built the print shop and painted it green to match her house next door. I fell in love with the house and the shop – vast views of the ever-changing sea and two islands through a wall of windows across the back of both house and shop. What a glorious place to live and work! In the shop, heavy, antique printing presses crowd drawers of metal type. There's a little foyer with books and art on display. (While puttering around in St. John's one day, we found a vintage desk, perfect for holding the guest book.) The shop, open several days a week, sees a steady stream of tourists and locals dropping in to look at the machinery and buy a little handmade treasure. Along with the *Five Island Art Gallery* and *BallyCatter Crafts*



textile studio (where I learned traditional rug hooking from Catherine McCausland), *Running the Goat* helps make Tors Cove a destination for art and culture lovers.

Since it was my first visit to the Rock, I spent some time enjoying the sights and sounds of St. John's: the pretty painted houses winding up and down the hilly streets; the funky cafes and shops; the Duke of Duckworth pub (made famous by *Republic of Doyle*); the lovely Anglican cathedral in the Gothic style; the imposing Roman Catholic cathedral overlooking the town; and *The Rooms*, a large



modern structure housing an art gallery, an archive, and a museum and rivalling the RC cathedral for prime position on top of the hill (or, as the locals say, there's the cathedral and there's the box it came in). It's an old city, now a bit drunk on oil money, full of authentic charm but poised to lose some in its rush to embrace the modern world.

The towns and villages outside of St. John's are also affected by the relentless march of progress, with suburbs springing up all along Route 10. Tors Cove has been spared from too much development



so far and retains the feel of a fishing village, now, however, without the fish plant, which was still operational after the cod moratorium in 1992 but closed a few years ago. Locals are allowed to fish for food only a few weeks each year. I was very lucky, then, to be there during this time. On the day I arrived, we went down to the pier next to the boarded-up fish plant and scored a great big fish freshly caught by Michael. Cod, of course. Anything else is called what it is – cod is always just “fish.” It was a grand fry-up that night.



TORS COVE IS ONE OF THE STOPS on the East Coast Trail, which spans 540 kilometres of coastline. Not as well known as its western counterpart, the trail is popular, all the same, with day trippers and serious hikers. I walked a bit of it and met an adventurous young Swiss couple camping on the gravelly beach below the headland. A neighbour, who also met them later on, invited them up, as one does. That evening, they knocked on our door, and we shared our fish and beer and talked of life in Switzerland and Canada.

Socializing isn't like anything in Ontario, whether small town or big city. Doors are open, and just about every evening, at least in the summer months, is passed sharing a drink and a story or two. A neighbour was happy to show me around her small “farm” when I wandered over to see the chickens. The six warm eggs I came back with made a delicious breakfast the next morning. Neighbours helped with digging out the snow the previous winter, Marnie told me, and also brought food to the print shop's grand opening earlier in the summer. There is an honest friendliness here that I've never encountered anywhere else. Community takes on real meaning in a Newfoundland outpost.



Our regular walk was up to the headland, just past the famous little red house. One morning I went alone with a blanket and sat there, gazing out over the endless ocean. I was rewarded with the sight of a whale sweeping up into the sunlight, then disappearing into the ocean depths. I laughed out loud and waited for it to reappear, which it did, several times, before finally turning around the little island, going south.



AUGUST 2 WAS A BIG DAY FOR THE PRESS and the other artists in the Cove, the first (annual, maybe) celebration of Halley Day. As Marnie writes on her website:

This August 2nd is the 314th anniversary of the arrival of Sir Edmond Halley (the astronomer and geophysicist for whom Halley's comet was named) [...]. At the end of a prolonged scientific voyage, Halley came to Tors Cove looking for fresh water and wood, and was greeted with gunfire. Apparently, local fishermen mistook his vessel for a pirate ship. A rude welcome, whatever way it was. Fortunately for the scientific world, Halley hoisted the British flag and the locals eventually welcomed him in.



And a fine celebration it was. Marnie had designed and printed the beautiful broadside, featuring a new poem by Newfoundland poet Des Walsh, that was for sale on the day. Two days before the event, she decided it wasn't quite finished. She pulled two small stars out of her box of "fun" type, inked up the rollers with gold ink, and, after a few tries, was happy with the result. I volunteered to help. So, after a quick lesson, I began to churn out broadsides with gold stars on the big proof press. In no time, it seemed, I had finished all one-hundred of them. We ended the day down at the crumbling pier, smelling the salty air, toasting Halley with fresh

water (and a little rum), reading poetry and lighting sparklers, while the great, grey waves rolled off into the night.

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PHOTOS: [TOP] MARNIE PARSONS; [BOTTOM] MARY ANNE CREE



## The moral component

### *The Betrayers*

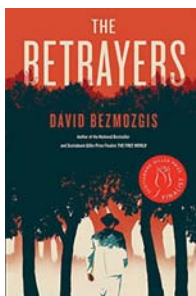
David Bezmozgis

HarperCollins

230 pp

DAVID BEZMOZGIS' FIRST NOVEL, *THE FREE WORLD*, was as ambitious as could be. Set in Rome (and environs) during the summer of 1978, it followed the attempts of the Krasnansky family, recently arrived Soviet refugees from Latvia, to pass through the bureaucracy of immigration and resettlement. The patriarch, one of his two sons, and a daughter-in-law were the figures of chief interest, and Bezmozgis took his time developing them. Too much time, I thought initially, although by the end they, or those who survived, were so clearly distinguishable (so strongly inflected) that each could have been said to contain the germ of his or her own future. I was curious, in other words, to know what would happen to them, as separate characters, and hopeful that the saga would continue.

And perhaps it will. But Bezmozgis' second novel is not that continuation. It is a shorter, tighter book that, however much it, too, may draw on the past for its subject, does so from a more current perspective and with a more pointedly dramatic structure. Chekhov, not Tolstoy, would seem to be the model here, given the setting, Yalta (just before Russia's annexation of Crimea), and the set-up, an avowedly implausible coincidence that serves to reunite betrayer and betrayed. The conventions submitted to are, indeed, less novelistic than theatric, as to the unities, or cinematic (Bezmozgis is also a filmmaker), as to the story's overall "arc."



Baruch Kotler is an aging Israeli politician, a man of principle, whom we first meet doing a rather unprincipled thing: sneaking away with his young mistress for a visit to the holiday resort where he fondly recalls spending a month with his parents when he was ten. A resort and now, as it happens, a refuge, the extra-marital affair being no longer a secret but a public scandal, its details exposed in all the media back home, even unto a photo of the guilty couple taken this very morning while they were booking their flight from Tel Aviv airport. The merciless exposure, however, owes nothing to outraged morality, everything to political manoeuvring, is, in fact, brute retaliation for Kotler's (no doubt, as always, principled) stand against withdrawal

of settlers from the West Bank. He had been warned by an operative of the prime minister, had been offered the option of quietly abstaining during the vote. But he would not yield, likening such tactics to those employed, years ago, by the KGB, which had imprisoned him for, in essence, merely wanting to emigrate, the charge of espionage being a common enough pretext. (Kotler bears a strong resemblance, in this and many other respects, to the most famous of *refuseniks*, Natan Sharansky, whose show trial was occasionally mentioned in *The Free World*.)

That his imprisonment became a cause célèbre, his release after thirteen years a triumph, these are the crucial facts of his biography and have certainly formed the basis for his impressive career. Truly, Baruch Kotel would not be the man he is now had it not been for the treachery of the erstwhile friend who informed on him. Or so, at least, will argue the informant, Tankilevich, when they finally do decide to speak of it, in the latter's home, to which Kotel has been led by chance, a tourist in search of lodgings.

"The odds of this," says Leora, the mistress, "of ending up a boarder in his house, are almost nil."

## reviews

She regrets having entered into the arrangement with Svetlana, Tankilevich's wife, and wants to leave. More receptive to fate and feeling unexpectedly serene, Kotler insists that they stay, not to fulfill some fantasy of revenge but to see what the situation will bring forth. He is curious, he says. As curious as he has ever been. He hungers for an explanation.

Their quarrel, of course, anticipates the reader's with the author about those explicitly long "odds" and what *his* intentions might be. Why have we been brought here, we ask, if not for revenge? (In the manner, say, of Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*.) And yet if only for revenge, then how disappointing.

The rest of the novel – which is to say the remaining two acts – proves to be anything but. Bezmozgis has a light touch. He understands our scepticism, allows Leora, and to some extent Kotler, to embody it. He knows, even so, that we, too, hunger for an explanation. And who else but Chaim Tankilevich could provide one?

FOR TANKILEVICH HAD HIS REASONS. His brother, his father, both needed protecting from the KGB, which had him by the neck, he says. He was forced to sign the denunciation that appeared in *Izvestia*, and his life has been tainted by it ever since. Here, in Yalta, where the number of Jews is dwindling, he, "this notorious traitor to the Jewish people," has had to beg relief from the director of the local HESD, who granted it to him reluctantly and in secret, on condition that he travel once a week by bus from Yalta to Simferopol and attend the synagogue there, to ensure a minyan. Which condition, he now complains, he has been fulfilling for ten years, imperilling his health (he is 70, an old man) with an arduous trip that can no longer be justified, given how few other old men (less than a minyan) are left. She, the director, has fears that, should she relent, the fraud will be discovered and, not without righteousness,

condemns him to go on suffering. Clearly, absolution must be sought elsewhere.

Were Kotler to absolve him, in public "before the Jewish people," he might leave Yalta, find himself, as himself, welcomed in Israel. And harsh though their confrontation may have become, and however convoluted their reasoning, the two men agree, it would seem, on nearly every point. That Tankilevich has been sufficiently punished. That he was "ensnared in a villainous system." *Et cetera*.

Every point but one, that is, the subtlest and most inflexible. Each is a man of principle, evidently, and, on principle, neither will budge. Tankilevich will not repent, because he believes he had then no choice but to cooperate, would, for the same reasons, betray Kotler again if he had to. He saved his brother's life, perhaps his father's also, and the victim of his treachery, well, ultimately he prospered, didn't he? And what's more, he, the betrayer, had tried, unsuccessfully, to recant after the first trial, had, years later, sent a letter of confession to one of the accusers, during a second trial, in Israel, for libel, when Kotler, irony of ironies, was being accused of having faked his celebrated captivity, of having worked with the KGB to expose other human-rights activists.

Kotler's reply is simple: he would not have done what his betrayer did. He would have let those people die. And yet he accepts that Tankilevich himself could not have acted otherwise:

"The moral component is no different from the physical component – a man's soul, a man's conscience, is like his height or the shape of his nose. We are all born with inherent propensities and limits. You can no more be reviled for your character than for your height. No more reviled than revered. [...] You asked my opinion, and I said that I believed we walk hand in hand with fate. We choose to follow it or pull against it, depending on our characters. But it is character

that decides, and the trouble is, we don't decide our characters. We are born as we are. [...] Just as there are people in this world who are imparted with physical or intellectual gifts, there are those who are imparted with moral gifts. People who are inherently moral. People who have a clear sense of justice and cannot, under any circumstances, subvert it."

Blame or praise, he says, there may not be, but, even so, we are each held accountable for our actions. To absolve Tankilevich now, in public, would only cause general misunderstanding. Would set, as it were, a bad (moral) example.

The subtle shift in the debate – from wheedling to scorn on one side and from magnanimity to implacability on the other – is instructive, inasmuch as it affords a view of two versions of the same destiny. Tankilevich is a man (he himself says a worm), but Kotler (he says) is a saint. And a saint, as the disabused Leora will later reflect, "love[s] the world more than any single person." – That, to be sure, is not the end of the subtleties to be reckoned with. Bezmozgis will nudge the mechanism one further turn, to produce a satisfying (satisfyingly Chekhovian) catharsis.

*The Betrayers* is a more assured novel than *The Free World*, perhaps because it is more rigorously geometric, more frankly discursive. They both show nonetheless a similar concern for the moral life, the inner reaches of what some would call a group mentality, a conscience. Their characters are ruled by a dialectic in which faith and doubt, idealism and cynicism, etc. (the entire binary brigade) are equally faulty, equally powerless to render a life more livable than it was ever likely to be. You can betray your wife or your mistress, your cause or your country, but between betrayer and betrayed there is little separation, the thickness, at most, of the mirror you're holding with that dual pair of (soiled, unsoiled) hands. ■

– Brenda Keble

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WORLD

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## Noir enough

### *Her*

Harriet Lane  
Little, Brown and Company  
e-book version

### *The Girl on the Train*

Paula Hawkins  
Doubleday  
e-book version

### *The Silent Wife*

A.S.A. Harrison  
Penguin  
e-book version

### *You Should Have Known*

Jean Hanff Korelitz  
Grand Central Publishing  
e-book version

### *Before We Met*

Lucie Whitehouse  
Bloomsbury  
e-book version

### *Hausfrau*

Jill Alexander Essbaum  
Random House  
e-book version

### *Before I Go to Sleep*

S.J. Watson  
HarperCollins  
e-book version

IT WON'T DO NOWADAYS SIMPLY TO WRITE A "psychological thriller." Ever since the accession of the doubly crowned *Gone Girl*, some authors (or their agents/editors/publishers) have felt the need to label one type a little more succinctly, to dangle before a ravenous public the bait of its combined intimacy and terror.

But "domestic noir"\* is as pejorative a term, really, as its alternative, "chick noir." *Domestic*, you may remember, was the word once used to deride and segregate the fiction of Drabble, Pym, Taylor, *et al.*, an entire generation of women, mid-century, pre- or post-war, who dared maintain that literature could be created from the very substance of what passed inside, no less than outside, the home, which, after all, these same condescending, mostly male critics shared and benefited from. That women, even this century, should find it necessary or perhaps expedient to shelter under an easier to market category, a *sub-sub-genre*, leads one to suspect that – financially, at least, and to begin with – they are no further advanced than the Brontë sisters were, among whom Charlotte, with the thriller-like *Jane Eyre*, now appears to stand out as a reassuringly literary precursor. – But, one may ask, why not just write literary fiction, then, since this is where the most honour lies, if not the most money? (Unless that was the answer all along.) Are the women who rally round domestic noir only being, as they generally have to be, pragmatic? – Many a writer, of either sex, has written well, they might reply, *and* (not *or*) become well-off. – Do these women see the difference between the categories as negligible, in

\*The term was coined by the novelist Julia Crouch to describe her own work:

*In a nutshell, Domestic Noir takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants.*

a certain sense merely (like the critical esteem granted one, denied the other) man-made? Or do they, in fact, accept the necessity of compromise, of a levelling off, not to say a lowering, of ambition?

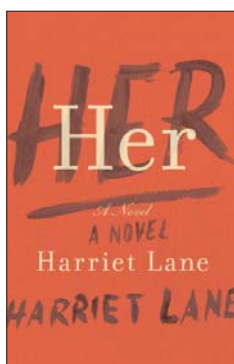
For all the human interest, for all the careful, clever writing, the author of any novel marked by genre must ultimately agree to satisfy the singular appetites of her chosen readers. Nothing, to these last, quite matters so much as the promised outcome, however reluctant to supply it may be their gaily prevaricating *cicerone*. She cannot set the terms herself – the genre does that – but she will eventually be rewarded (she having her own appetites) for their fulfillment.

And perhaps, in the end, the odds of achieving any kind of (*Gone Girl*-ish) success are better here overall.

Away, you're thinking, with such overt status anxiety. The fact is, marital relationships have – now more than ever – taken on the cast of a scrupulous itemization of our doubts, suspicions, disenthralments, and fears. And the thriller might be a form eminently suited to portray them, since women – now as much as ever – have reason to feel themselves endangered. By men.

I can't help asking, though: What, materially, is there to distinguish between a fine example of, if we must, *domestic noir* – Harriet Lane's new novel *Her* – and, say, Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs*? Or Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*? Or Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be*? Or Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal*? Or Mary Gaitskill's *Veronica*? Or Beryl Bainbridge's *Harriet Said*? Or Barbara Pym's *Jane and Prudence*? ... All novels of female friendship, its treacheries, its seductions. Is the usual answer – the overriding element of suspense – still adequate? Still accurate?

*HER* FOLLOWS THE METHOD OF LANE'S MORE AMUSING first novel, *Alys, Always*, in setting one character to stalk another. That story was told from but a single perspective, the stalker's. This story, by contrast, is told from the perspectives of both stalker and stalked. In alternating chapters, Nina, pursuing, and Emma, pursued, relate the events in which their lives, whenever the former so disposes, coincide or overlap. One might question Lane's decision (at first) to have the same event related from each perspective in somewhat similar ways, without contradiction or anything more than a barely noticeable variation in style. The redundancy is puzzling. Indeed, it's difficult (at first) to tell the two characters apart.



However, we soon learn that Nina is shorter, darker, more self-composed, more truly “arrived,” with her distinguished (older) husband (an architect), her beautiful teenage daughter, her celebrity father (a composer), her career as a painter of moody landscapes. She possesses that most fearsome of qualities, good taste, and behaves towards those who don't with unnerving, unblinking

restraint. For a (very) long time, we are not permitted to know what grievance she has with Emma nor given any indication as to how she means to broach it. Her antipathy, nonetheless, is unmistakable.

Poor Emma, her beauty has faded. She is the fairer, taller one and, during the preliminary chapters, awkwardly pregnant. Once this baby is born (a daughter), she has to struggle even harder, what with her other child, a demanding four-year-old boy, and her all too feckless, sometimes thoughtless husband (a freelance teevee producer, enviably free every day to betake himself elsewhere). She yearns to escape the confinement of their home, its glaring, obsessively recounted imperfections (the loose garden-shed door, the brown spot on the boy's bedroom ceiling). Nina,

## reviews

who has, we understand, gone through all this ennui and angst years ago, with her own (now sulky, spoiled) daughter, emanates a sympathy tinged with contempt that Emma, so abject is she, cannot help drawing on, even as her husband, Ben, speculates what the unexpectedly assiduous “friend” is up to.

I can’t explain to [him] how this feels: to be seen, again, for who I really am. Not to be a person always in the context of other people. However much I love them.

The resounding irony is that, from the very start, she will have been seen, recognized, without aid of “context,” for who she “really” is, but in a manner that, if she knew the truth of it, would horrify her. When Nina has occasion, the one time, to pay full attention to Emma’s wearily miscellaneous household furnishings, she does so with precisely the disdain feared :

It’s strange to be here, alone, surrounded by the sense of her: all the little things she collects, the context she has carefully assembled for herself.

It’s not so strange that they should use the same word; but each woman uses it differently. For Emma, context is the stifling weight of her marriage and motherhood. For Nina, it is the grownup disguise that Emma has willingly adopted to evade detection and escape punishment. (Again, what she might deserve to be punished for is consistently, teasingly withheld.) Which is only to say, finally, that Nina has returned her to a previous context, one that Emma will have no cause (until it’s too late?) to remember.

This is what it comes down to: the flat-out invisible drudgery of family maintenance, the vanishing of personality as everyone else’s accrues. You never asked for this, did you, Emma? You didn’t know it would be quite like this? [...] All

those busy, healthy, confident years, the Brownie badges and tennis coaching and swimming galas, the house captaincy, the university theatre productions and the column in the student rag, the work placements and rapid promotions. The boys and men, the dates and declarations. The sense that it all must be leading, inexorably, to something. And now this. Was it always leading here, I wonder: to teetering piles of laundry, to teaching yourself to joint a chicken, to never running out of milk? Was it?

Step into genre and you won’t – you can’t – step out of it. When a reviewer, in a mixture of enthusiasm and condescension, claims that a writer has “raised the bar” or “exceeded the limits” of the genre, he is mistaking brush for canvas, surely. Genre fiction always has had, in and of itself, the capacity to expand, to accommodate any measure of inventiveness. Any height or depth. That supposedly untrammelled writer is still heeding, rather than exceeding, the basic rules that constitute the form and (if the reviewer was correct) mining their hitherto unassayed potential. The average thriller depends for its momentum, and hence popularity, on the assumption that the reader won’t be tempted to linger, shouldn’t, that is, be presented with something to linger upon, not the anfractuosités of its characters’ thinking, not their brightly topical asides, not even the language or its arrangement. The above-average thriller, by contrast, assumes that such pleasures as these are perfectly in keeping, that the tension the reader then feels (between slowing down and rushing on) is a good part of the “thrill” intended.

He [Ben] picks up his book, reads a page or two, then lets it drop onto his chest: picks it up again, turns back to check something in an earlier chapter.

I [Nina] say, “How are you getting on with that?”



He feels it's not quite as good as the first one, and I say, *Oh, that's a pity*.

I don't say that I've read it and enjoyed it, though I found the final plot twist unsatisfying, as plot twists often are: nothing like life, which – it seems to me – turns less on shocks or theatrics than on the small quiet moments, misunderstandings or disappointments, the things that it's easy to overlook.

"I don't think I like these characters," he's saying: an annoying remark, one with which I can't be bothered to engage.

And maybe, with respect to Lane, it's the best part. For the plot, though suspenseful enough once Nina's mischief becomes more pointed, doesn't at all interfere (or compete) with our leisurely appreciation of the tartness, the acuity of her observations, the restrained prose in which she self-depicts, self-analyses, self-communes. She is cool, Nina, but not *that* cool. She has recurring dreams she can't interpret. In one, she needs to speak but is prevented, such sound as she makes being inaudible. In the other, she is fearfully unsure whether she is chasing or being chased. (A prefigurement of the concluding scene.)

The asymmetry between the characters is sustained throughout. As a child, Nina was the envying one, Emma scarcely conscious of being envied. Now their fortunes are reversed, and Emma's neediness is the fatal flaw, at least in Nina's steadily evolving scheme of revenge. Both of them are nevertheless, as it happens, equally adept at *noticing*. Lane, a seasoned journalist, has never been loath to write or speak about the neurological condition affecting her eyesight. Which (condition, candour) may explain the remarkable definiteness of her characters' impressions, how well they describe to us what they see and hear. Nina's paintings, we learn, are of particular landscapes (including one that moves Emma to tears, she can't say why), but they evoke a vaguely emotional atmosphere

rather than give shape to any particular details.

Lane's landscapes, on the other hand, are *brimming* with them. She has mastered the art of writing in what one might call the not-so-close (fish-eyed) first person. Each woman (each half-woman or incomplete psyche) thinks and feels and reacts in direct address, the usual whispery, confiding tone (as if communicating with us by letter or diary or confessional grille)<sup>†</sup>, and yet is incapable of leaving out (of not noticing) details that might seem (to the efficiency-minded) extraneous. Or is capable, shall we say, of rendering more details than are strictly necessary, in order to create a more vibrant picture of the world that surrounds her. A world that cannot go unnoticed, whatever the mystery at its heart.

So it's not Nina alone who is being greedily observant. Emma, too, captures her surroundings with a lens as expansive, as unblinking, designed to gather in all the untidy peripheral information that might well, we think, have impinged upon our own lives, our own sensoria. Furthermore, they do this, the two of them, in alternation, without lag, with the immediacy of "real time." This isn't the historic present they're invoking, the tense anyone might employ, for example, to dramatize the retelling of a dream (the sacking of a village). No, it's the present (present) itself, that translucent medium akin to a fog, through which they transport themselves by the power, uniquely, of their gaze. In the not-so-close first-person, thought and action are joined, not as cause to effect but in a single process, the lexical equivalent of (kinetic) force.

PAULA HAWKINS' *THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN*, LACKING any such claims to sophistication of technique (or higher metaphorical physics), leans a good deal more on menace and imperilment, the typical stuff of a crime (for crime's sake) thriller. We are apportioned our dose of the psychological

<sup>†</sup> But not, I think, by full-frontal webcam.

## reviews

from three unequal, roughly complementary viewpoints: those of Rachel, the witness, Megan, the victim, and Anna, the accessory. Their monologues, in the dolefully close (stiffly blinkered) first person, have the more familiar task of accumulating facts unlovely and impressions dire: these characters are exactly what they say they are, while the others, possibly (tantalizingly), are not.

The dominant narrative belongs to Rachel, the girl-woman of the title, who, every weekday morning, takes the 8:04 from Ashbury to Euston and, every evening, returns on the 17:56 – has continued to do this even after being fired months ago for drinking on the job, ostensibly to avoid forfeiting the goodwill of her flatmate, without whose charity she would be homeless, but more urgently to maintain her momentary vigil on Blenheim Road, the street where she used to live. Which, handily, backs up to the tracks where the morning train always has to stop briefly, at a signal, before proceeding into Witney station. Which is where she herself would once have embarked and disembarked, living as she did, for five years, at number 23. Which is now inhabited by her ex-husband Tom and his second wife Anna. Which she prefers (for that very reason) not to look at, concentrating instead on number 15, whose occupants are strangers to her and hence more amenable to fantasy. The couple, or so Rachel thinks, have ideal looks and ideal lives. (“They’re what I lost, they’re everything I want to be.”) She has been observing them, in these daily snatches, for months and is thus all the more appalled one day to see the woman embracing not her husband but another man. We know by then, having read the intervening chapter, in which her own monologue (dated the previous year, 2012) has commenced, that the woman’s name is Megan, her husband’s Scott, and that their lives, never mind their looks,

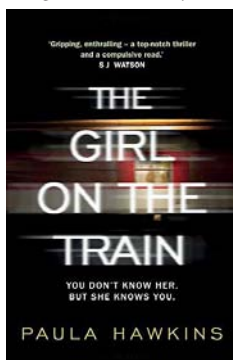
are far from ideal. Megan, who once owned a gallery, is now also jobless, also restive, also anxious, enough so, at last, to cause her to seek the help of a therapist, a Dr Kamal Abdic . . .

This deliberate temporal misalignment – two present-tense accounts, off by nearly a year but gradually converging – is reminiscent of the structure Gillian Flynn gave the first third of *Gone Girl*, in which Amy’s earlier diary entries were a counterpoint to Nick’s painfully current report on the day of her disappearance. Both characters, being writers of a sort, showed a writerly awareness throughout of their potential reader-allies (to such a degree that this reader, well before the finish, felt unwarrantably detained). Here, though, the three characters privileged with a point of view are all, as it were, writing at random, in their heads, unavailingly. Megan’s chapters, as they develop, serve as much to undermine as to corroborate Rachel’s, especially after the former has gone missing and the

latter has decided she knows how and why. Their similarities, even so, grow more and more evident, as if to justify Rachel’s alcohol-assisted self-projections, which the police, naturally, take to be lies and out of which Hawkins concocts a few, pretty effective red herrings. The projections themselves go unchallenged, as the two women never do meet, except figuratively, in the person of Anna,

who deceived one and was deceived by the other.

The two husbands in *Her* had some qualities useful to their wives, but as protectors they were of no consequence whatsoever. Nor were they, for that matter, the abiding threat. Here, we have a trio of sometimes inaccessible men (mobile phones figure heavily as means of, or impediments to, access), each to be suspected, at the very least, of abusing the trust the women have put in them. They’re all handsome, all cheats, according to Rachel, whose susceptibility to their



attractions follows a dotted, often wavering line, far more wayward than her favourite train track but no less providential. That she is an alcoholic suffering from blackouts (one of which occurs at the most decisive moment) simply endows her with the authority (in fiction) of the unreliable witness: what she doesn't know is destined to become the only thing worth knowing.

We encounter more rivalry among the women than friendship (Rachel feels robbed of her future by Megan as well as Anna; Megan and Anna are, secretly, fatally entwined), but what they do have in common is a preoccupation with the maternal: one believes her marriage foundered because she couldn't get pregnant; one is haunted by a child's death she blames herself for; one, having a child, is terrified she'll lose her. These are recurring motifs in *domestic noir*, consistent with the women's overall precarity (stated or implied).

No thriller is free of manipulation, but Hawkins' nudges, via Rachel, are, shall we say, strenuous, as to *mise en scène*. She's a little too indebted to Hitchcock perhaps, the final movements being, as his tended to be, too crudely blocked out, the resolution too clumsy, melodramatic. Sensational rather than subtle. As if subtlety were ever in question.

A.S.A. HARRISON'S *THE SILENT WIFE* DOES exhibit some subtlety – in the writing if not the plotting – but remains just as steadfastly concerned with the economic and social imparity endured by women who have come to depend on men. For Jodi, the “wife” of the title, is not legally married to Todd and, were they to break up, would have no legal claim, not even to the condo that they cohabit, her “aerie on the twenty-seventh floor,” which she loves for its “sense of containment.” At the beginning of the novel this risk has yet to make itself known, and it is left to the hovering author to suggest

how deluded Jodi must be about her life's apparent stability, “given that a few short months are all it will take to make a killer out of her.”

Todd, a developer, and Jodi, a therapist, met (cutely) some twenty years ago during a minor traffic accident; they have been together more or less ever since. It was she who, all this time, rejected the idea of a more formal union and the children that, in Todd's mind, would come afterwards.

Sometimes it's hard to remember why she objected to marriage so emphatically. A reaction more than a decision. Aversion, distaste, something on a visceral level.

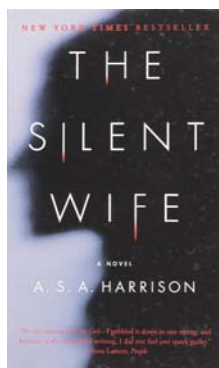
Faithful herself, she has grown resigned to his occasional infidelity. The latest, however, with a much younger woman, irremediably pregnant, will prove seriously threatening and set in motion the events that lead to the death foretold.

Harrison uses free indirect style, or close (over

the shoulder) third person. Her characters don't give an account of themselves; they are accounted for. We hear them thinking, but at some remove. One reviewer considered this a serious flaw, in that it discouraged the reader's involvement and made the novel sound more like an “insightful, well-written, carefully annotated case file.”§ I would argue that Harrison may have felt she need-

ed this distance if she were to be as even-handed as she wished in recounting the couple's downfall. And she is remarkably fair, giving both characters equal billing, in chapters headed *Her* or *Him*, and equal opportunity for self-exculpation.

Jodi might be thought to have the advantage here, as to the inner life, because of her training and profession, but Todd, although unschooled, is no less introspective.



§ Robert J. Wiersema, *National Post*, July 5, 2013

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It's come to a point where he savours the constant apprehension, the risk he takes with each small decision, the strain of being overextended, the pressure of betting everything on the current venture. The anxiety he feels is stabilizing in a way, letting him know that he's alive and on track. It's anxiety cut with anticipation, an interest in what comes next, a stake in things.

Todd's school, of course, has been the school of life, and he seems likely (at first) to be nothing more than an agglomeration of blue-collar clichés, his masculinity a target for revulsion. And yet Harrison works hard to particularize him, filling the "case file" with details about his early life, his upbringing, that can only soften (or even "round") his character. It is true, too, that Jodi and Todd inevitably reveal something about themselves whenever they think, appreciatively or otherwise, about each other.

Jodi's great gift is her silence, and he has always loved this about her, that she knows how to mind her own business, keep her own counsel, but silence is also her weapon. The woman who refuses to object, who doesn't yell and scream – there's strength in that, and power.

Todd was a child in so many ways, in Freudian terms a case of arrested psychosexual development, a phallus-fixated five-year-old preoccupied with sexual ascendancy, still in love with his mother, displacing the desire onto all women, the embodiment of the Oedipus complex.

Complacency for complacency, they are well matched. It's only Jodi's reluctance to act and Todd's fitful temporizing that cause them to collide again, as it were, this time conclusively. She believes, despite her humiliation, that she can hold onto him. He believes, rather fatuously, that she will agree to a lesser rôle, become, in effect, his silent (unprotesting) mistress.

There are lots of reasons why a woman stays with a man, even when she's given up on changing him and can predict with certainty the shape that the rest of her life with him is going to take. Her mother had a reason. Every woman has a reason.

It's possible that he took Jodi's tolerance and forbearance too much for granted, didn't credit her enough for putting up with him. An easy mistake to make. Jodi has a knack for acceptance. She isn't easily threatened or thrown off-balance. She moves along in a measured way and with a sense of scale, doesn't get alarmed or take things to extremes.

Harrison seems to be placing two distinct systems of thought in opposition. For Todd, the loosely conforming Catholic, "[w]e are all mediums for our own basic truths. All we really have in life is the primal force that moves us through our days – our unvarnished, untutored, ever-present, inborn agency." Redemption, accordingly, is always mercifully at hand. For Jodi, the lapsed Adlerian, "[w]hoever you are and wherever you come from, you grew into your present shape and form in the garden of your early childhood. In other words, your orientation to life and the world around you – your psychogenic framework – was already in place before you were old enough to leave the house without parental supervision." Character is destiny, in other (other) words, to quote, as she cannot refrain from doing, Heraclitus.

How else to reconcile (the two systems) but in dramatic, cathartic irony? Before we end, Todd will have been the one tripped up by fate and Jodi the one saved (in the nick of) by chance.

Harrison doesn't neglect the more thrillerish aspects. Nor are they superfluous; there would be little tension otherwise. Todd and Jodi, for all their heavily shaded backgrounds, have no *raison d'être* beyond their (sorely belaboured)

situation. They're too plausible, perhaps. Too, I daresay, banal. Or too pawn-like. I should add, however, that Harrison's prose, at its worst ploddingly serviceable, at its best crisp and dry, becomes truly inspired once we arrive at the *dénouement*. These few pages transcend the cautiousness of the case worker and strike (at long last) a sympathetic chord.

GRACE, THE SOON TO BE BETRAYED WIFE IN JEAN Hanff Korelitz's *You Should Have Known* is a therapist, too, and of a similarly eclectic kind. Her specialty being marital counselling, she has written and is preparing to publish a book with this very title, the subtitle to which promises to reveal : *Why Women Fail to Hear What the Men in Their Lives Are Telling Them*. It is as good, she would have us believe, as a key to all the mythologies. She who was "born with a predisposition for social observation and insight [...] could [now] sit down with people and see [...] what snares they were setting for themselves and how not to fall into them [...] [o]r, if they were [...] ensnared [...] how to free themselves." She is modest enough to wonder whether her remarks on what is nothing more than the "readily observable" merit quite so much attention: "[...] she felt almost ashamed of herself, as if she were about to market some miracle cure that had long been available on the drugstore shelf." But they are the result, the remarks are or, better yet, this particular insight is, of years of watching her clients, the women especially, struggle to repair the irreparable, to save a clearly doomed relationship. "Don't pick the wrong person," she tells the affected young interviewer from *Vogue*. Otherwise, the marriage won't prosper. It's that simple. And the thing is, women do know the truth about the other person from the start, but they strive unconsciously to ignore it. To *unknow* it.

Grace's own relationship is prospering, thank you. She is married to an extraordinarily compassionate pediatrician. They have a gifted teenage son, who attends the private school she herself, as a child, attended, which is not far from their apartment, the one she herself grew up in and now owns. On 81st Street, in Manhattan. A New Yorker with roots, a woman whose life is as secure as it could be. Not that it's all perfect. She and her best friend from college no longer talk. Haven't since Grace got engaged. And, indeed, apart from the parents at her son's school, what friends, she's beginning to ask herself, does she have? There was the wife of one of her husband's colleagues, but something happened to make her less friendly, which nobody will explain. And Jonathan, her husband, he's such a *mensh*, of course, but couldn't he spend a little more time with his family? And her father's second wife, Eva, why is she always so difficult, so hostile? And her fellow therapists, what will they think when they read her fundamentally unsettling book?



Then the mother of a scholarship boy at the school is murdered, and everything, as we knew it would, unravels, Grace's composure first of all. Hubris and nemesis and the NYC police department (two slightly overdetermined detectives, straight from the nth season of *L&O*). The murder, bloody and barbaric, is, as in Greek theatre, discreetly confined

to the wings. The victim herself has, beforehand, only a bit part; the pursuit of her murderer, also offstage, can only be intermittently suspenseful. Clearly, Korelitz is more taken up with what Grace will do once she, the self-styled relationships expert, admits that her bourgeois comforts, her perfect marriage, her confidence in the future were resting, essentially, on a lie.

The subdued tone, the gentle humour, the gradual enlargement of our view (in the single-perspective third person) of Grace's family

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circle and territory are reminiscent of (literary) strategies favoured by such novelists as Cathleen Schine (*The Evolution of Jane, The New Yorkers, Fin & Lady*) and Ann Tyler (*passim*). Which is to say that the lesson, for us as well as for Grace, though severe enough, will be accompanied by a suitable dose of mild analgesic and the dreamily convenient prospect of a second chance at relationship happiness. Furnishing, all in all, a (literary, emotional) pleasure not to be scorned.

WITH LUCIE WHITEHOUSE'S *BEFORE WE MET*, THE pleasure available is of the more utilitarian, problem-solving kind: there's a lying husband (again) but it's the wife (now) who's in danger and who must figure out, while she still can, what she has gotten herself into. Because one evening when Hannah goes to pick up Mark from Heathrow, he isn't there, and she learns (in the days following) not only that he may have missed his plane but also that he may not have been in New York to begin with. Which is where they met, or, to be more precise, in Montauk, Long Island, at some friends' summer rental. Which (New York) is where Hanna had a relatively good job in advertising and an apartment she loved and where, the plan was, Mark would stay, to run the American office of his software company. Which went awry, the plan did, forcing her to come back to England (she's from Worcestershire originally) and take up residence in Mark's (eerily large) London house and search (it's been five disappointing months) for work. – Grace, if we were to consult her, might posit the signs that Hannah, with her sensitive stomach, could not or should not have failed to recognize: Mark's evasiveness as to family background, his intense desire to know everything about hers, his stony expression when she mentions children, his even stonier expression when

she asks about a hitherto concealed (lookalike) brother. (Her own brother, Tom, teaches English "at a school in Highbury" and favours Pynchon and Foster Wallace and "slim volumes written by anxious young men." Mark prefers nonfiction, "biographies of presidents and business leaders, history and economics – or Penguin Classics." Uh-oh.)

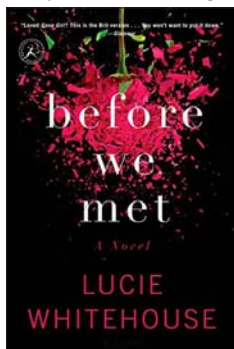
In fact, she did hesitate, after that first (cute) meeting, and (her anxiety-induced stomach ache worsening by the day) cancelled, with a lie, their dinner engagement a week later, only to run into him that same evening at the McNally Jackson bookstore in SoHo, where, ever since arriving in New York, she had fallen into the habit of going, to alleviate her loneliness and/or homesickness. Here, she tells us, she would buy a new book and sit in the café, eavesdropping on conversations and observing the life around her. And here she was discovered, with "the new Alan Hollinghurst," by a not at all chagrined Mark,

who understood a thing or two, you might say, about lying. Meet-cute *redux* (minus the beach and the bonfire):

[T]hey'd talked like people who'd known each other for twenty years without ever having heard the other's best stories. The tension came back into her stomach but it wasn't anxiety or embarrassment now but a reaction

to being near him, [...] . She'd watched his hands [...] and she'd yearned – it was an actual, physical sensation – to reach out and touch him.

The delinquent, present-day Mark does turn up, a few pages on, to offer various (New York) mishaps as explanation for his not landing, if you remember, when expected. But for Hannah, in the meantime, too many doubts have arisen, too many discrepancies come naggingly forward. She is awash in "actual, physical sensation"





again, occasioned this time firstly by jealousy and secondly (and lastly) by fear. To placate or misdirect her, Mark regularly concedes a little bit of the truth while suppressing, we suspect, a good deal more. Hannah is being hoodwinked, evidently, perhaps even, we think, *gaslighted*, and her predicament will sustain our curiosity for a good two-thirds of the book, there being several possible (dramatic, cathartic) solutions to the problem of Mark's identity and purpose.

But then, unfortunately, Whitehouse goes and selects the least interesting, most predictable solution, diverting us onto the overly familiar terrain of (syndicated, MOTW) teevee: a white van, an isolated country house, a rather chatty (fully audited) bout of mortal combat. Hannah, it's true, does get to exact her revenge, much as Rachel did in *The Girl on the Train*. But by that point she is nothing more than the sum of her frailties and apprehensions (a Woman in Peril, fuelled by adrenaline, grasping for the nearest weapon), and her originality (or our curiosity) has all but disappeared.

WITH ANNA (FOR ANHEDONIC, FOR analysand), the self-tormented mother, wife, and lover (and, she confesses, former student of home economics) in Jill Alexander Essbaum's *Hausfrau*, we return to the *grisaille* of soul-destroying domesticity. The principal crime here is the breaking of the marriage vows, as exemplified by the great adultery novels of the 19th century, which the author seems to have chosen for a template. Anna and Bruno and their three children live in "the town of Dietlikon, in the district of Bülach, in the canton of Zürich," a short train ride from the city itself. Which is where, at the Migros Klubschule, she, an American, has decided (has been urged by her analyst) to take German lessons. During which she meets Archie, a Scot, with whom, for the length of the book, i.e., from September to

November, she will have an affair, and Mary, a Canadian, with whom she will form a singular, sisterly bond, which, though innocent itself of guile (or perhaps not), will serve to precipitate the final much-foreshadowed crisis. Nine years a resident, Anna has neither driver's license nor bank account and, with little comprehension of *Schwiizerdütsch*, must speak to her own (Swiss) family mostly in English. No wonder she is feeling isolated and depressed. Hence the recurring need for the ministrations of Frau Doktor Messerli, a Jungian analyst unusually fond of gnomic utterances ("The Swiss are neutral, not passive. We do not choose a side. We are scales in perfect balance") and oracular pronouncements intended, presumably, to stir the patient into action ("Shame is psychic extortion [...] Psyche will be heard. She demands it"). Anna is by nature so passive she likens herself to a swinging door: "I have no knack for volition. My backbone's in a brace. It's the story of my life."

And her life, though outwardly fulfilling, has brought her nothing but despair. In front of her house on Rosenweg, there is "a spate of rosebushes, blooms of every shade." The street so aptly named, however, is a "dead end." The two boys, Victor (eight years old) and Charles (six), "ash blond and hazel eyed," are "without a doubt the sons of the man Anna had married." (Charles, the more

"deferential," is her favourite.) The ten-month-old Polly Jean, "black-haired, bisque-skinned," is not, to Mary's (guileless?) amusement, so easily placed.

Cue the entrance, via Anna's recollections, of her secret sharer, Stephen, a fellow American expat with whom, two years ago, she started a passionate affair, which he, unaware of her pregnancy, insensitive to the strength of her feelings, too soon ended, and for whom (despite Archie or Bruno or Karl, another ill-advisedly impulsive



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attachment) she still pines. Stephen was a *pyrologist*; he knew everything there is to know (or pretentiously allude to) about fire, flames, combustion, and the like. And, although he now lives in Boston, she continually revisits the sites where they were happy together.

Mind you, she does sometimes acknowledge (charily) having also known happiness within her marriage:

The house, when Anna was alone inside it, often assumed a pall of unbearable, catatonic stillness. *Has it always been like this?* Anna would be lying if she'd said it had. They'd shared good times, Bruno and she. It would be unfair to deny it. And even if he barely tolerated what he called her "melancholic huffs" or her "sullen temperaments," Bruno too, if pressed, would have admitted a love and fondness for Anna that, while often displaced by frustration, held an irrefutable honor in his heart.

Bruno, we're assured, is not a violent person, but he can be cruel in speech and has his own daily quotient of sullenness. The tension inexorably mounts: What will he do when he discovers, as Anna seems almost to want him to, one of her several infidelities?

Essbaum is a poet. Anna is not, or not intentionally. She keeps a therapeutic journal, the writing in it, by her own account, "hurried and overblown." And yet she is poeticized, her thoughts and feelings mediated in a language (a diction) that seeks to heighten their colour, give them (tragic) weight. The close third person here has the hectoring voice of a hall monitor, shrilly insisting on her main character's first name. The word "Anna" occurs, indeed, as many times per page as it would in a (nervously disambiguating) legal contract. Even Anna thinks of herself as "Anna," addresses herself as such.

More alienating still (for the reader) are those instances in which author or character slips into

a form of non-idiomatic English that might (generously) be supposed an attempt at poetic compression: "Anna took absent notes"; "brake-screech thirty seconds"; "[y]our perception blinks"; "iridescent scheming"; "hysteria's rancid theatrics"; "[c]aught in the red-handed act"; "the cogs of an apprehension"; "the deadbolt room of her pelvis"; "metastasized wistfulness"; "she was fast to add." Nor can one be sure which of the two, Essbaum or Anna, is to be held responsible for the transparently sophomoric reflections on grammatical terms (moods and declensions, etc.) or the self-satisfied groaners arising from therapeutic/poetic wordplay, e.g., "*I've traded sewing hems for sowing him*s. Anna grinned on the inside." (As the author patently did, too, alas.)

Grinning or groaning, readers will ultimately have to answer Doktor Messerli's typically accusatory question for themselves:

Did not Anna worry that she perpetuated the stereotype of the fragile, subjugated woman? That excepting her manner of dress and the language she used [...] there was little to distinguish her from a woman who lived seventy, one hundred years earlier?

IF DOMESTIC NOIR WERE A CLINICAL TRIAL, THEN perhaps the men participating in it (e.g., Mark Edwards, Peter Swanson, Tom Vowler, S.J. Watson) would constitute a control group: going through the motions but not really ingesting the drug, as they don't really (forgive them, Hannah) have the *stomach* for it. – Empathize all you want, gentlemen. You'll never taste a woman's fear other than vicariously. And in a category of fiction where that, the genuine feeling, would seem (so far) to have been the prime requirement, how else could you make a place for yourselves but by sheer (ventriloquial) opportunism? – There ought to be a place, of course, for a distinctly male point of view on domestic relationships. (Something more enlightened, let's say,



than James M. Cain's.) That may not, however, be what these (male) authors are proposing.

Take S.J. Watson for example. In his (higher than high) high-concept *Before I Go to Sleep*, the first-person narrator is a woman suffering from *anterograde amnesia*: she wakes up every morning not knowing who or where she is nor who the man beside her might turn out to be. There are reminders and photos on the bathroom wall; there is the man himself, once awake, gently telling her of their marriage of 22 years. What memory she has is no more than a glimmer, its failure the result of a "bad accident," a hit and run, that occurred when she was 29. (She is now 47.) They live in a house in North London. Crouch End. He, Ben, is a high-school teacher, he says. She, Christine, used to do "odd things [...] [s]ecretarial work [...] sales." Now, every day, she is at pains to absorb the same information piece by piece, knowing that she will be unable to remember it the next morning. Is this day to be any different? It is. Ben goes off to work. She hears a phone ring, answers it, and finds herself talking to Dr Nash, a neuropsychologist, who says they have been working together for some time (unbeknownst to Ben) to improve, as much as one could ever hope to, her memory. (Which functions normally to some extent, "transfer[ring] things from short-term to long-term storage perfectly well," but not, here's the rub, retaining them.) And at their meeting that afternoon he hands her a journal she has been keeping (he says; she doesn't recall), to help her "maintain a thread [...] from one day to the next." A journal that she hides from Ben in her closet every night and which, on the morrow, the good doctor calls to remind her of.

The premise is stark: we cannot know more than Christine does, since we, too, are totally reliant on her journal; and we cannot safely

believe everything she writes down, since her memory and perhaps her mind itself, as well as the two men she converses with, are or may be unreliable. As for the literary value, let alone the readability, of this leather-bound, handwritten archaism, we will discover, as she does, that she had, in fact, in her former life, published a novel entitled (not so felicitously) *For the Morning Birds* and was at work (was blocked) on a second when the "accident" occurred. Here, as elsewhere, Ben is found to have lied. To protect her, he says, as ever, but ... ?

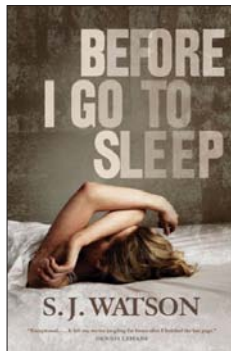
The awkwardness of the recording device (in the movie adaptation, not surprisingly, it was changed into a video-equipped Lumix camera) becomes ridiculous whenever Christine is away from home and must secure herself some privacy to write in it. But that risibly potentiated journal is not only a memory-substitute; it is also a manuscript, this very novel's manuscript, the unique, undigitized copy thereof, and

Christine reacts as any unblocked writer/recovering amnesiac would at seeing it threatened with destruction: "I am nothing without that journal," she thinks. "Nothing." Her instinctive leap to save it will, in effect, bring down the curtain. With a thud. On the head of her tormentor. (So that, like Rachel and Hannah but unlike Jodi, she can't be said to have had more than a fleeting

choice in the matter.)

Men always say I love you as a question.

The reader caring for naught but escapism may stumble nonetheless upon the greater inconvenience that Christine, as written, turns out to be largely a phantasm, a plaster figurine in the voyeuristic diorama. Dr Nash is studying her (her atypical symptoms, i.e. her traumatic stupidity) for a career-enhancing paper. Ben is



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filling her empty (forcibly emptied) head with a version of the past in which he will preserve his rôle as the stalwart, long-suffering husband. And Watson himself is galvanizing her much leered-upon limbs with a predictable number of reactive, questioning gestures, in the hope that off this exactly copied assembly line will stride, at last, something resembling a real woman. Or a real woman character, if you like.

But, in my thriller-sated opinion, it doesn't happen. Christine is as groggy and bewildered as any brain-injury victim (in fiction) could be. And yet there is nothing particularly female about her plight, despite the profusion of signifiers (for sexuality, motherhood, dependence, etc.). I was going to say, she might as well be a man, but Jodi (of *The Silent Wife*) would probably object that the (psychogenic) evidence is paltry there, too. And Grace (of *You Should Have Known*) would probably remark that Christine's unconscious complicity – not in the abuse but in the forgetting – has no basis in gender, however convincing or unconvincing we may think the pseudo-medical presentation.

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THRILLERS LEAVE US HUNGERING FOR MORE AND BETTER. More thrillers, that is to say, and better solutions to the riddles posed. (Q: Why is the first third of *Gone Girl* so much more satisfying than the rest? A: It doesn't seem to know the solution, either. It hasn't been boxed in by mere plausibility.) The ideal thriller would return us at once to the opening page, so that we could feel again exactly the same amount of anticipation we did when we began reading. How? Well, as in the case of *Her*, by opting for ambiguity, by ending (just) before the (unimaginable) end. Lane's novel assumes that readers *can* imagine it, that they will, in fact, have room in their imaginations for two (the worst and the best) possible outcomes. – Or, as in the case of *You Should Have Known*, by conducting us beyond the usual (procedural)

tidying up into an area that has been of more interest (and not only to Korelitz) all along: Grace's faltering steps towards social and professional rehabilitation. That, after all, is how many workaday novels work – and how many thrillers, to judge from this small sample, don't. (Only the most ingenious solutions invite a rereading. Dead villains are dead forever.)

Here is what I've learned about *domestic noir*. It adheres to an epistemological model in which *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge are held to be mutually deterrent. – *You should have known? Come on. Even when you knew, you couldn't have known. And if you knew, what did you know? Nothing. Because there was nothing to know.* – Instinct and experience (theory and practice), which in real life go hand in hand, are here seldom close enough to touch for more than a second, and even then one will make as if to trounce the other, shedding not (figurative) blood but insidious, all-enveloping doubt. (Doubt is, of course, the *lifeblood* of the psychological thriller.)

Not knowing – the buzzy state thereof – manifests itself variously as suspicion, mistrust, ennui, forgetfulness, even indifference. Nina (in *Her*) worries excessively about something long past that Emma has never since given a moment's thought to. Rachel (in *The Girl on the Train*) achieves a pure state of not knowing in the aftermath of her alcoholic blackouts: memory itself has been disabled, is void of content. Christine's state (in *Before I Go to Sleep*) was for years purer still, what little knowledge she repossessed during the day vanishing from her injured brain overnight. Jodi (in *The Silent Wife*) and Grace (in *You Should Have Known*) have accommodated their own (connubial) ignorance by counter-transferring it into the treatment of clients whose narratives are not nearly so fixed; the two therapists seem to have calculated to a hair's breadth what they themselves can tolerate not knowing. Hanna (in *Before We Met*) was on the emotional rebound when she met the bounder Mark; not

knowing simply accelerated her infatuation, helped her to disregard the Cassandra-like complaints of her stomach, the voiced concern of her brother. Anna (in *Hausfrau*) is so mentally altered she doesn't know what ails her nor yet what can harm her and thus exposes herself irrationally to risk.

The corollary, as one might have guessed, is that men are unknowable. Not always evil, no, but, in essence, opaque. That which they are known to be (as lovers or husbands) will, more often than not, change dramatically, for the worse. (Or, as in *Her*, remain so constantly the same that any reader, male or female, would be moved to condemn them for their criminal stolidity. Not to be a villain is not necessarily to be a hero.) The unknowability contributes to their power; they withhold things (their feelings, the truth about their identity) so as to regulate the behaviour of the women who live with them. Such control is made easier by the fact that these men own or determine the place of cohabitation. Rachel has been – and (in Zürich) Anna will end up being – cast out; Jodi's thoughts turn to murder when she is faced with eviction; Grace is shamed into leaving her childhood home; Hanna regrets having been persuaded to give up her TriBeCa apartment; Christine wakes every morning in a house with which she can form no lasting attachment; besides, it's a jail.

The knowledge is always unequally shared: he knows more than she does (and so, frequently, do we). The object of the woman's fears may for a while be unknown, but its realization, this much she knows, is likely to be imminent. How, then, should she, in time, solve the enigma? By intuition, usually (recognizing that some detail in the pattern has been knocked awry); by intrusion (searching, comparing, enquiring, etc.); by purposely or fortuitously provoking the man to reveal himself, all, to be sure, with less than what we would think a normal regard for her own safety.

The woman's desire to know may be frustrated by the personality of her opponent. The personality *disorder*, I should say, since, in most cases, the only explanation for nefariousness is the non-explanation (the tautology) of anti-social tendencies. Nina, the one female villain of the group (homicidal Jodi being more resourceful than malicious), fits the profile of a sociopath. As do the husbands of Rachel, Grace, Hanna, and Christine.

Therapy is no protection, evidently, neither for the therapists nor for the patients. Despite their professional training and experience, Jodi and Grace have no ascendancy over their situations, no extra awareness. They don't cope any better or make wiser choices. As for Frau Doktor Messerli and Herr Dr Nash, they are both (effective) catalysts and (ineffective) choruses. If the Jungian hadn't recommended German lessons, Anna wouldn't have met Archie, etc. If the neuropsychologist hadn't prevailed upon Christine to keep a journal, she wouldn't have begun to inch her way toward daylight, etc. But Anna, *in extremis*, is refused an unscheduled appointment, and Christine, shocked into remembering, is left to fight, unassisted, for her own survival.

Children, as noted, have a crucial bearing on the actions of the characters, even those who are childless. Todd's latest betrayal of Jodi requires chastising mainly because he has fathered a child with his mistress. Mark's reluctance to discuss when they should start a family is an early sign for Hanna that something may be gravely amiss. She wants children, troubled though relations with her own mother still are. So does Rachel, who couldn't have them for trying; her husband took up with a woman who could. Anna has three children and suffers on their account but isn't sure she ever really wanted them. Poor unsuspecting Emma feels a little ambivalent herself but loves her two children well enough that Nina can see this as *the* vulnerability to exploit. Grace shelters her teenage son from the

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misdeeds of his father and deplores the fate of the murdered woman's newborn, to whom (not to give anything away) she is somewhat related. Christine is told that she had a son and then that he died, but later she is inspired to heroic efforts by the thought that he might yet be alive. The theme of motherhood operates with the severity of a railway switch: children are wanted or unwanted, abandoned or coddled, mourned for or rejoiced in. Fertility is never a given. Miscarriages are never forgotten.

The city is the setting – London (four times), New York (twice), Chicago, Zürich – but not always the *locus in quo*. Some of the women make excursions elsewhere: Hannah and Grace, coincidentally, to meet their lying husbands' living and/or blameless parents; Jodi to establish an alibi. Some are conveyed elsewhere by force or cunning: Hannah (again) to that isolated country house; Emma to Nina's father's villa in the south of France; Christine to a particularly significant hotel room in Brighton. And the realism is of the wayfaring kind. *Hausfrau* quite purposely, I think, ranges over Zürich like a guidebook. (Or an expat: Anna's Stephen is first encountered misfolding a map.) *You Should Have Known* walks us as energetically through the canyons of Manhattan. *The Silent Wife* focuses (on Chicago) a little more gauzily but is just as prone to (street) name-dropping. The neighbourhoods in the London novels are at least contiguous if not identical (Christine and Hannah both dwell, separately, on the view of fireworks from Parliament Hill); the topography itself has, of course, been thoroughly charted by novelists ever since Defoe.

*DOMESTIC NOIR*, IF IT'S TO BE MORE THAN A CATCH-ALL for *Gone Girl* epigones, will have to sustain itself on something like the wider literary ambitions of Essbaum, Korelitz, and Lane. Their novels emphasize inner, not outer, conflict; they pick at the lock of the enigma, they don't pry it open. Single-minded (crowbar-wielding) thrillers too often give the impression of having been written back to front, of having had their course (cf. Amy's paper chase) inflexibly set by the (fore-*Gone*) conclusion. The minds of their characters are preprogrammed to grow dim at moments when, in real life, they would be ablaze. Men are too crudely objectified, women too easily girified. Vindication may come, but only through the modality of a masculine world. The more conventionally aggressive the thriller, the less extensive the ambit of the domestic. (The less meaningful the separation of categories.)

Lane, to answer my own earlier, tentative question, could well have written a literary novel comparable to those I listed. – She has the talent. – She simply elected not to. So her *Her* is a thriller, certainly, but of a superior kind, one in which psychology has not been subjugated to plot nor style bleached to the pallor of a screenplay. Korelitz and Essbaum (though she over-eggs, I would say lethally, her pudding) have the talent, too. And that, ultimately, is the only factor to make the distinction worth acknowledging. ■

– Ida Kohl

## Straining to amuse

### *The Zone of Interest*

Martin Amis

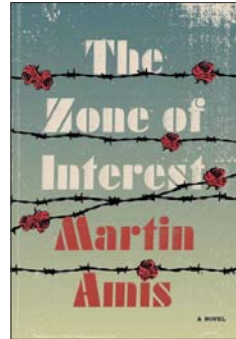
Knopf

306 pp

IMMEDIATELY UPON FINISHING THIS, AMIS'S MOST recent, novel, I turned to one of the *loci classici* he acknowledges in his afterword: Hugh Trevor-Roper's *The Last Days of Hitler*, not because I wanted to spend more time with "Uncle Martin" and the rest but rather, perhaps, because the implausibilities of fiction cried out at that moment for the drear corroboration of fact.

Trevor-Roper, writing specifically to scotch the rumours, Russian in origin, that Hitler, not dead, had been captured by the Allies, reconstructs, from testimony provided by those who managed to escape the bunker, the fate of Mr and Mrs H and their assorted friends, including (while escaping) the aforementioned, appallingly gullible Martin Bormann.

Trevor-Roper's style is that of a latter-day Gibbon, his tone that of a sarcastic schoolmaster. Enough of the horrors had been documented by then (1947) for a thorough condemnation, but it would be years before the numbers (of victims, of camps) were accurately reckoned. The Nazi system of murder had incorporated, from the start, its own means of concealment and denial. And the liberators themselves, however outraged, were not entirely free of a cast of mind we would now consider anti-semitic. His emphasis fell, therefore, not on the genocidal ethos that had prevailed but on how very oddly (serially) Germany had lost the war – and on how little, finally, Hitler had cared whether the country would survive him.



Indeed, from that close a perspective, the lip-foaming leader could be seen to have turned on his compatriots, whether civilian or soldier, and pretty much consigned them to defeat, reasoning (unreasonably) that if they hadn't won under his guidance and command, it was because they were, in spite of their Aryan embellishments, simply unworthy. The funeral pyre would be big enough for everyone, the earth scorched as far as the (barbarian victor's) eye could see.

What we see, of course, from our larger perspective, is the all-consuming fire cloud of the Holocaust, the Fact itself, beside which the death of its instigator appears as but a tawdry, shameful pantomime: if there were any (earthly) justice, he and his crew would have died six million deaths each, their names been erased beyond recall. Historians, to be sure, disagree on the latter point. Ignominy will have to do, they maintain, since these men and women whose acts we deplore must be remembered clearly, ever

more distinctly, lest they become, for deluded cultists, the stuff of myth. Lest they return, in that form, to life.

And there have been many histories, biographies, and memoirs published since to increase our understanding of the Fact, to approach it directly, with respect, without fear, to bring to light even the least of the innumerable facts composing it. Such documents, the memoirs

especially, mean to bear everlasting witness; the strangely weighted pleasure they give comes from the satisfaction we take in now knowing more, conjecturing less. When we are moved to tears by a camp survivor's tale, we are relieved to find ourselves sharing in her humanity and not (by default) in that of her tormentors. We briefly join with her suffering as if it were our own. Which, we may later have to be reminded, it was not. Nor, for that matter, did she, in any sense, suffer for our sakes. Still, above this existential

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barrier something does pass that resembles enlightenment: we realize that we will never know enough.

And there are the fictions, which cannot approach the Fact but circumspectly; which aspire, as it were, to harmonize imaginary with real suffering; which, at their best, increase, if not our understanding, then our fellow-feeling; which, at their worst, exploit the Fact for our entertainment, from which, alas, we get, never mind our supposedly civilized selves, more (horror-engorging) delight than (conscience-pricked) instruction.

In his prodigious career, Amis may be said to have touched both extremes: the best, with *Time's Arrow*, a retro-chronicle so single-mindedly sly of approach that the Fact, while remaining factual, becomes unreal, its horror mitigated by the narrative's wizardry; the worst, with the novel under review, whose burden of lower-case fact is made to support the totteriest of tales, the most lugubrious of *dramas sentimentaux*.

The short afterword of the first novel finds itself reflected, anxiously magnified, in the much longer afterword of the second. More than twenty years have elapsed, during which, we are told, Amis has read "scores" of books, studied and restudied the question of *why*, pondered and repondered the objection as to *what*. Why the perpetrators committed their unspeakable crimes, and what, if anything, can be written about them. Has the Fact an explanation? Have we yet found one? Or should we refrain from looking, on the principle (put forward by Primo Levi, repeated here) that to understand is almost to justify.

The anxiety I detect beneath this busily embroidered *apologia* is somewhat at odds with the belief he asserts, to end, that authorial freedom can be derived from the notion of the inexplicable. The *whylessness*, he says, is a "spur." By what *right*, though, we may still wish to enquire, does Amis persuade himself he has entry, other than that of the unbridled imagination? By right, it would

seem, of acculturation through marriage. Hence the dedication to his wife, children, and mother-in-law, placed, oddly, as if conclusively, on the final page. Or, to cite an interview in which, while comparing the two novels, he said:

... it was qualitatively different writing about it when your flesh and blood is involved. [...] So I took it more personally. When I wrote the first book, I knew I couldn't do anything about the experience of the victims, and in this one I felt I could a bit. That I somehow had the right of entry into that experience that I didn't have before. [...] I do think there are responsibilities involved in taking this subject on. And as with all writing you have to earn it. But I felt I'd done the emotional suffering spread out over 20 years and I felt that I'd sort of earned the right to address it, just by preoccupation and reading. \*

A "sort of" suffering, we might agree, but not, surely, an equivalent sort. More the reflexive sympathy common to all of those (of us) who were spared any direct encounter with it. Who have only to imagine (or reimagine) it. And upon whom no right whatsoever is bestowed. Not even so tenuous a one as Amis claims for himself.

"Responsibilities"? – Historical novels are generally measured by the "responsibility" their authors show to "the factual record," which they so often shuffle around to fit (later, perhaps, afterwordily noting what's at odds). Measured, which is to say lightly judged. We expect them to be based on fact, but we don't usually object if other facts have been made up or modified. The novel, after all, is the half of the equation we're engaged by. Even when that novel belongs to the category of Holocaust fiction, we're willing, more or less, to suspend judgment for the sake of something cathartic, something that refreshes, as it were, our empathy with the victims. (See,

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\**The Globe and Mail*, 13 October 2014



for example, Yann Martel's *Beatrice & Virgil*.) When, however, the novel borrows the point of view of their murderers, we ask, or should ask, for considerably more rigour. Documentation alone won't suffice. (See, for example, Jonathan Littell's *Les bienveillantes*.) Nor will good intentions. (See, for example, Laurent Binet's *HHhH*.) Nor will seriousness of purpose. (See, for example, Yves Gosselin's *Le jardin du commandant*.) Nor will irony or satire or parody. (See, for example, Gosselin's *Discours de réception*.)<sup>†</sup>

Amis might say that *The Zone of Interest* more than qualifies in every respect: well researched, well intentioned, highly serious, and "militantly" satirical. In writing it, he might, once again, point out, he was clearly guided by a scrupulous regard for the ethics of representation. And, to defend it, he might, once again, adduce his overall sincerity.

What (before or after reading the afterword) we readers discover, a few pages in, is that he has attempted to graft onto the "unicum" of the Holocaust, its exceptionality, a variant of the typical Amis novel. An inferior variant, at that.

THE TYPICAL AMIS NOVEL TENDS TO SURCHARGE ITS material, to rejoice in comical excess, to play skilfully and vigorously with types. It makes abundant use of class markers, emphasizing accent, elocution, and idiom. The puppetry isn't perfect, according to some (e.g., the critics of *Lionel Asbo*), but every marionette has a distinctive voice, a freely working wooden jaw. Nor, for that matter, is verisimilitude anything but a minor objective: none of the strings, after all, or the fingers writhing above them, are hidden. In truth, the more obviously factitious the language, the more Amisian, one might think, the novel. In *Money*, for example, the mixture of English and American demotic uttered (or, rather, *bellowed*) by its protagonist John Self has the density of something foreign, though we manage, almost

unwillingly, to understand it. Echoes there are here of, yes, Bellow and perhaps Burgess (in *Clockwork* mode) but certainly Nabokov (in Umbertian expiation), the richness of whose style was paid for, so to speak, on studiously accumulated credit. Amis is, at such times, writing as if from the perspective (and with the inspiringly limited capabilities) of someone whose mother tongue this has never been. It would be beside the point, in other words, to criticize him for straining. He strains, shall we say, to amuse – and, in amusing (himself first, the reader afterwards), strains yet more urgently still.

A supposition that, if true, may account for a singular oddity exhibited by all the German characters in *The Zone of Interest*: they are English to the core. And not, I might add, secretly. Not by dint of the homeostatic tendency many translators were once conspicuously prone to (the *Penguin Classics Equivalent*, to give it a name) and have since been ridiculed or condemned for. No, these are newly adumbrated entities who have determined, *ab ovo*, not so much to "live" as to author themselves (by themselves) if they can – to flesh themselves out – from the cellular material provided, its *unheimlich* semantic scurf.

How do you construct a plausible Nazi? You don't. You just let him ramble on.

This, at least, is my explanation for the eternally failing to be droll Paul Doll, *Kommandant* of the *Konzentrationslager* and (short, impotent) husband to (big, placid-seeming) Hannah, with whom the young (though white-haired) male lead Golo Thomsen has, from the very first line, become infatuated, as only a favoured nephew of Martin Bormann could. Paul and Golo are given points of view, Hannah not – unless we count her (dyslexic) letters and (dually) reported speech. No, the third point of view is given to the *Sonderkommandoführer* Szmul Zachariasz, whose plight, far more desperate, as a half-consenting

<sup>†</sup>A somewhat more lenient view of some of these authors may be found here:

<http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20100705.BIB5425/generation-littell.html>

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abettor – an intermediary who, spared for but a few months himself, is required to beguile the disembarking deportees and lead those not selected for slavery directly into the gas chambers (soon thereafter carrying their lifelessly indignant bodies out) – he records, with circumspection, in a document to be buried where he hopes it will be found by the (otherwise unbelieving) Allies. More than an instrumental intermediary, Szmul becomes Paul's intended weapon against the (he has cause to suppose) adulterously trysting couple.

But Hannah and Golo aren't that, exactly. In truth, their "love story" is of no interest whatsoever; it's the merest lure for our sense of scandal (*love? here? now?*) and for Paul's (syntactically grasping) jealousy, his (to ape him a little) husbandly hysteria. He is a performer, his text the most performative of the three. We don't believe, any more than Amis does, that this is how the historical figures upon whom Doll was modelled would have communed with themselves. In manifest disregard, it would seem, for the sobering effect of all that research, he, the cuckold in waiting, assumes the voice and (as we imagine it) the bearing of a stage German, his staginess, we begin to think, standing in for the inexplicability of his crimes.

His words, so many words, ring false; they are falsified as we read them. He translates his own (arbitrarily placed) German or leaves it (shyly) untranslated. He glosses over the daily atrocities with managerial jargon. (He is, on his own terms, a 9 to 5 monster.) He commits solecisms that Amis, who now resides there, is most likely to have heard in 21st century Brooklyn. He *snaps* (anachronistically), he *crackles* (dithyrambically), he *pops* (oh, most uxoriously).

As he can and should and will, because he, not Golo, is the character of greatest import, the only one, for all his clownish excess, to have the capacity to persuade us we're directly experiencing the villainy of the times. A harmless duffer to his entourage, a pratfalling bully to his children and wife, he is nonetheless, to the *Haftlinge* passing,

in their thousands, before him, nothing less than an annihilating god, the very embodiment of the policy known, by the bureaucrats who approved it, as *Kreativ Vernichtung* (the Nazis were remarkable perverters of language). It isn't that we expect to salvage from this foundering psyche a full account of whatever originally motivated such people; it may (more than) suffice that we be confronted with the baseness of our common humanity when unattended by the usual prohibitory respect for human life.

How much bolder a novel this would have been, then, if Doll's were the only point of view, if his blatant hypocrisy were all we had to struggle with. How much more sinisterly comical, briskly Nabokovian, and perhaps artistically satisfying.

Amis has spoken disparagingly of plays and playwriting (in a CBC radio interview with Eleanor Wachtel); he has even suggested that "every writer knows" that dialogue is the easy part, that the real task of writing awaits elsewhere. And yet, of course, *The Zone of Interest*, like his previous novels, is eminently dialogic, the friction or flow between its characters unmistakably theatrical. The *Grand Guignol* of Brecht and Weill would have been appropriate to the setting here, but what we are given instead (after Szmul's tragic highlights and Doll's benighted burlesque) is something of a Terence Rattigan two-hander, with a bit of Auden abusively added to the mix. (One would have thought that Ian McEwan held the patent on such poignancy manufacturing.)

I can't imagine a worse ending. The appearance on the following page of a photo of Hitler accompanied by Bormann only served to prove to me that Amis had long since stumbled off the path he'd chosen, drawing much too heavily upon his research (others' moral indignation) and not nearly enough upon his – as we reviewers affect to grant, to alleviate this the final verdict – very considerable skills.

(The verdict being: failure.) ■

– Karl Buchner



## La plaie du présent

### *Soumission*

Michel Houellebecq

Flammarion

299 pages

### *Les Événements*

Jean Rolin

P.O.L.

197 pages

GRAND ÉCRIVAIN, HOUELLEBECQ ? J'AI MES DOUTES là-dessus. Je me demande même pourquoi la question se serait si souvent posée, tout au moins dans la presse anglo-saxonne. Il a bon *bec*, évidemment, ce « becq », il aime bavarder, sait bien « riposter et injurier », comme nous dit le dictionnaire. Mais pour ce qui est de l'écriture, au sens propre, je ne le mettrais qu'au deuxième rang. Et pour ce qui est du roman, au troisième. Parmi les cancres, qu'ils s'appellent Barrès, Bourget ou Gobineau.

Cela ne veut pas dire que ses romans sont sans intérêt, en ce qu'ils aient de vérités à proposer sur la société (française) d'aujourd'hui. C'est justement là où il est le plus fort, Houellebecq, il peut toucher au vif notre contemporanéité, faire remuer son doigt dans la plaie pas encore cicatrisée du présent. Même lorsqu'il lui est question de conjecturer sur l'avenir (un avenir tout proche, dans ce cas), l'auteur donne l'impression plutôt de porter un jugement sur ce qui se produit à l'heure actuelle.

Bien avant le début de cette année, lorsque la parution de son roman a été assombrie par l'attentat contre *Charlie Hebdo*, se faisait-il remarquer pour des commentaires quelquefois désobligeants au sujet de la crainte qu'inspirent,

selon lui, le sexe, la politique et la religion. C'est comme si, pour racoler des lecteurs, il croyait bon d'abord de les fustiger eu égard à ce genre de complexe, et cela, bien sûr, sans leur fournir de quoi que ce soit de remèdes à y apporter. Il n'a rien d'un réformateur, Houellebecq. Il s'indigne, oui, mais d'une façon platement satirique. C'est aux autres qu'il incombe de calculer comment s'en sortir. En ceci il se ressemble à feu ses confrères, qui, eux, ont dessiné leurs croquis en n'ayant cure de la réaction des gens ciblés. Triste ironie du sort, il s'est vu caricaturé, lui aussi, en première page du numéro publié le jour même de l'attentat : un portrait disgracieux se moquant de sa faiblesse pour la vaticination.

Vaticinateur, Houellebecq ? Là, il n'y a aucun doute.

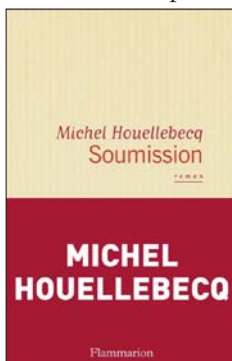
Ce n'est pas, bien entendu, en plaquant l'actualité sur l'avenir qu'on réussira à vider ce dernier de tout ce qu'il a de sinistre. En plus d'extrapoler, faut-il inventer, ce que notre romancier

ne saurait faire que médiocrement. Qu'à cela ne tienne, il s'en a fait une idée, de cet avenir, et il cherche à nous l'expliquer.

Nous sommes à Paris pendant les élections présidentielles de 2022. Le narrateur, du nom François, est un prof universitaire chargé de l'enseignement de la littérature du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle et spécialiste de l'écrivain belge Huysmans, à propos de qui il aurait

soutenu, il y a 15 ans, une thèse de doctorat. Comme tous les protagonistes de Houellebecq, ce célibataire dans la quarantaine manifeste une attitude teintée d'une torpeur spirituelle et sexuelle, voire de l'acédie elle-même, tout autant laïque que monastique. Ou politique, mettons : « je me sentais aussi politisé qu'une serviette de toilette ... ». Il a l'air de vraiment s'étioler, François.

C'est un type qui s'est habitué à coucher avec des étudiantes, ces coucheries se conformant plus ou moins à l'année scolaire, en début de



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laquelle, en principe et par suite de lassitude, il laisse tomber la fille – rien que pour reprendre la comédie avec une autre, dès lors qu'il se soit remonté le moral. Mais plus maintenant, nous dit-il. Son ancienne copine, celle-ci de fraîche date, Myriam, dont les fellations auraient « suffi à justifier la vie d'un homme », n'a toujours pas été remplacée. Il commence même à la regretter, la mignonne, maintenant qu'elle s'est décidée à émigrer avec ses parents en Israël. Et pour cause. N'est-ce pas qu'elle serait, elle aussi, un personnage houellebecquien récurrent, reconnaissable à son instrumentalisation ? Encore une dame qui, tout en comblant les désirs d'un narrateur invariablement déprimé, s'acharne à faire reluire son amour-propre, grâce à des compliments des plus absurdes. – Il exhibe, d'après elle, non seulement « des goûts littéraires raffinés » mais « une sensibilité féminine anormale, pour les tissus d'ameublement » ...

Le filon Huysmans s'exploite, ce me semble, avec plus de succès. À part Myriam, on a droit à un trio de ces beaux parleurs dont Houellebecq aime corser les intrigues, sinon minables, de ses romans. Le premier de nos interlocuteurs loquaces, un collègue de François et spécialiste, lui, de Bloy, s'appelle Godefroy Lempereur. C'est un élégant. De prime abord, François est sincèrement impressionné ; il lui trouve « un cachet intellectuel de droite assez séduisant » et d'autant plus sympa que ce « jeune type au visage anguleux, à la peau très blanche » aurait tout de go professé une admiration pour son travail. Bloy et Huysmans, voyons, à la fin ils se détestaient, mais, comme dit Lempereur :

C'est curieux [...] comme on reste proches des auteurs auxquels on s'est consacrés au début de sa vie. On pourrait croire, après un siècle ou deux, que les passions s'éteignent, qu'on accède en tant qu'universitaires à une sorte d'objectivité littéraire, etc. Eh bien pas du tout. Huysmans, Zola, Barbey, Bloy, tous ces gens se sont connus,

ont eu des relations d'amitié ou de haine, se sont alliés, fâchés, l'histoire de leurs relations est celle de la littérature française ; et nous, à plus d'un siècle de distance, nous reproduisons ces mêmes relations, nous restons toujours fidèles au champion qui a été le nôtre, nous demeurons prêts pour lui à nous aimer, nous fâcher, nous battre par articles interposés.

Et François de répondre : « Vous avez raison, mais c'est bien. Ça prouve au moins que la littérature est une affaire sérieuse. » Lempereur : « Vous avez toujours été quelqu'un de sérieux. » Cela résonne *sérieusement*, non ? De toute façon, un lecteur mal averti pourrait s'attendre à ce qu'il se développe ensuite une comédie de mœurs où justement cette déformation professionnelle serait le point de mire. Malheureusement, Lempereur avoue s'être désenchanté de son auteur fétiche, dont depuis quelque temps la « dimension spirituelle et sacrée » ne lui évoque « à peu près plus rien ». Il n'est pas là simplement pour nous amuser, donc ; il prend à tâche, lui aussi, de nous instruire de la situation politique.

Il a quand même son côté *Des Esseintes*, Godefroy ; il habite un petit hôtel particulier, « typiquement Second empire ». Et dans son salon, pareillement meublé, « un très grand tableau de style pompier, qui était probablement un Bougereau authentique, trônait au-dessus d'une cheminée très ouvragée. » Devant celui-ci, François fait des réflexions sur la difficulté qu'il y a de se mettre « dans la peau d'un de ces bourgeois [...] pour lesquels [il] avait été peint. » Par contre, les auteurs tels que Maupassant, Zola, même Huysmans sont « d'un accès beaucoup plus immédiat. »

J'aurais probablement dû parler de cela, de cet étrange pouvoir de la littérature, je décidai pourtant de continuer à parler politique ...

À notre perte, Maître. À notre perte.

Huysmans, c'était un fameux converti, et son disciple s'est montré tout prêt à lui emboîter le pas, jusqu'à faire, pour la deuxième fois depuis vingt ans, une retraite en monastère à l'abbaye de Ligugé. Mais, comme l'était Huysmans, il est fumeur, notre pèlerin, et le fait de ne pas pouvoir griller un clope dans sa cellule le soir lui pèse tellement qu'il doit y écourter son séjour, sans pour autant, dit-il, ressentir de la « satisfaction à [se] retrouver au milieu de [ses] semblables ».

Parlons politique enfin. Toujours selon Godefroy, cela représente une forte menace, cette faction identitaire (les soi-disant « Indigènes européens ») qui refuse « la colonisation musulmane » et qui veut « déclencher la guerre civile ... le plus tôt possible ». Voilà l'extrême droite profitant de ce qu'il y ait eu des « violences urbaines » et essayant de « faire monter la pression ». Ce que le jeunot fébrile prédisait quant aux suites des provocations anti-islam a pu nous sembler alarmiste ; les résultats du premier tour y correspondent pas mal toutefois. C'est le Front national qui arrive en tête. Mais, voyez-vous, en deuxième position, c'est la Fédération musulmane. Dès lors les responsables des autres partis se trouveront coincés entre le marteau et l'enclume : quelles consignes de vote donner pour le second tour ?

S'Y INSÈRE PROCHAINEMENT le mari d'une collègue de François, afin, paraît-il, de relayer Godefroy et de nous prendre en main. Lui aussi, il aime s'épancher sur la situation politique, et il s'y connaît comme personne, vu qu'il travaille (pour le moment ; voir ci-dessous) à la DGSI, c'est-à-dire au renseignement intérieur. Du nom, plus viril, d'Alain Tanneur, et sorti, dirait-on, d'un roman de Gérard de Villiers, il s'évertue à nous faire comprendre qu'est-ce qui sera, lors des négociations (irrécusables) entre le PS et la FM, le seul point d'achoppement : l'éducation. Pronostiqueur intarissable, il croit qu'il y aura tout d'abord un dédoublement systématique des

enseignements scolaires. Et ce qui plus est, que l'enseignement musulman parviendra éventuellement jusqu'à l'université même ...

Sur ces entrefaites, François n'a de cesse qu'il parte, en se dirigeant vers le Sud-Ouest où il escompte se mettre à l'abri de la guerre civile qui, au dire de tout le monde, ne manquera pas d'éclater. En route, c'est plutôt tranquille, si l'on ne tient pas compte de la découverte des corps de deux jeunes Maghébriens abattus près d'un parking poids lourds. (Heureusement que Houellebecq se restreint à suggérer la violence ambiante.) À Martel, dans cette région légendaire où les Francs ont repoussé les Sarrasins, le fugitif rencontre de nouveau Alain Tanneur, celui-ci venant tout juste d'être mis à pied pour avoir, dit-il, subodoré le souhait du gouvernement que le processus électoral soit interrompu ... et tant mieux si quelques bureaux de vote, comme cela s'est produit, allaient être pris d'assaut par des bandes armées.

De tels incidents sont à attribuer aussi bien aux identitaires qu'aux djihadistes (salafistes dévoyés). Pour ces derniers, dit-il (je cite grossièrement), la France est terre d'impiété, *dar al koufr*. Pour la FM, au contraire, la France fait déjà potentiellement partie du *dar al islam*. Et son candidat, Ben Abbes, même les extrémistes musulmans ne veulent pas en empêcher la victoire. Au fond, le véritable ennemi de l'islam, c'est « le sécularisme, la laïcité, le matérialisme athée ». Les identitaires, eux, n'ont qu'un choix : le FN, avec sa plateforme anti-immigrante, anti-européenne. Tout bien considéré, l'UMP, plutôt pro-Europe, va se rallier à la candidature dudit M. Abbes, modéré ...

C'est un peu sommaire, ça, mais Alain parle sans arrêt (comme si l'on était là pour prendre la dictée) et François, bouche béante, ne l'interrompt presque jamais. En tout cas, les différends se règlent et Abbes, élu président de la république, met en place un gouvernement d'union nationale. Tout le monde s'en félicite ... excepté

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les petits profs comme François : à moins de se convertir, il sera interdit d'enseigner à l'université par les nouveaux statuts islamiques. Il préfère, lui, recevoir sa pension de retraite.

QUELQUES MOIS S'ÉCOULENT avant qu'il ne se trouve en tête-à-tête avec le nouveau président de l'université, Robert Rediger, le troisième de nos discoureurs et peut-être le plus fin, le plus séduisant. Celui-ci, à l'encontre de Godefroy et Alain, s'excuse d'être « trop prolixe », de parler « vraiment beaucoup trop » (tout en continuant de le faire). De nous avoir infligé ces « trois heures de prosélytisme religieux ». C'est qu'il veut persuader notre bonhomme de reprendre son poste ... en tant que converti.

Sa conversion à lui, Robert, s'est effectuée suite à la fermeture, dit-il, du bar de l'hôtel Métropole de Bruxelles : « Oui, c'est à ce moment-là que j'ai compris : l'Europe avait déjà accompli son suicide. » Spécialiste de René Guénon, pour qui, rappelons, le monde occidental était depuis bien longtemps en dégénérescence, il s'avoue content de vivre dans cette maison où Dominique Aury a peut-être rédigé son *Histoire d'O*. Et pourquoi ? À cause du rapport qu'il prétend y déceler « entre l'absolue soumission de la femme à l'homme [...] et la soumission de l'homme à Dieu, telle que l'envisage l'islam ».

Tout cela n'est pas pour déplaire à François. Que fera-t-il à la fin ? Encore que le dernier chapitre soit écrit au conditionnel, c'est assez clair : il va se soumettre, il est trop flemmard d'agir autrement. Houellebecq, en bonne logique, ne lui aurait pas laissé une seule issue de sortie.

*La Soumission*, est-ce un argument en règle qu'il faut traiter avec sérieux ? Ou est-ce bien le roman de plage qu'il semble singer ? Mieux vaut, pour réponse, le comparer à celui, assurément littéraire, publié en même temps par Jean Rolin.

AUSSITÔT QUE COMMENCE *LES ÉVÉNEMENTS* NOUS NOUS trouvons en pleine guerre civile. Pareillement à François, le narrateur innommé sort de Paris pour s'en éloigner vers le sud. On lui a confié un paquet de médicaments à l'intention d'un ancien ami, autrefois camarade de pêche, maintenant chef de milice unitaire. Le territoire se partage entre l'armée régulière et les milices diverses, de gauche ou de droite, chrétiennes ou musulmanes. S'il y a un cessez-le-feu, seulement les Nations unies et leurs casques bleus font semblant d'y croire. C'est une traversée périlleuse, donc, qui va nous mener de Paris à Port-de-Bouc, en passant par la Beauce, la Sologne et l'Auvergne.

À vrai dire, ce paysage prospectif n'est là que pour rappeler certains champs de bataille, tels que ceux du Liban et de l'ex-Yougoslavie, où Rolin a fait le grand reportage et où, s'est-il dit alors, il aurait pu être né, tant les rues se ressemblaient à celles de la France. Il insiste d'ailleurs que son texte ne soit pas entendu comme un roman d'anticipation politique ; tout à l'opposé de Houellebecq, il ne cherche pas à nous persuader du bien-fondé de ce qu'il raconte. Que l'on accepte ou non le postulat de départ, il ne va pas stagner dans des explications ennuyeuses.

L'intérêt se porte évidemment ailleurs. Sur la faune et la flore en premier, sur ce qui perdure parmi ces ravages guerriers. La survivance de poissons et d'oiseaux. La continuation du cycle végétatif. L'indifférence affichée par les cours d'eau à ce qu'on les traitent de voies de transport ou de lignes de démarcation. Pas erroné ce sentiment que peut avoir quelquefois le lecteur d'être tenu à distance d'un narratif dont les péripéties ne semblent advenir qu'à l'improvisé. C'est à peine si le récit obtempère aux procédés stylistiques du roman traditionnel.



Par effet de cette distanciation, Rolin rend encore plus transparente sa méthode en nous permettant de le suivre dans ses recherches topographiques. Passionné pour les cartes (de son aveu même, il en a des centaines), il ne dissimule aucunement ce côté *carnet de route* – au point, faut-il dire, que ça finit par être un peu fastidieux, avec tous ces noms de lieux sans attaches. Et pourtant ... faire le tracé du voyage de l'écrivain, cela s'avère une belle façon également de s'imaginer le parcours de son protagoniste. La lecture, aussi discontinue qu'elle soit, tient bon, se poursuit dans l'acceptation de cette espèce de calquage.

Une autre cassure du rythme, celle-ci plus prononcée : au fil des chapitres, la première personne s'alterne avec la troisième, comme si les faits et gestes du narrateur se prenant pour un « je » étaient à commenter (ou corriger), de manière goguenarde, par un exégète quelque peu altier. Dans le but, disons, de leur faire réintégrer la fiction.

Que toute la trame du tapis soit visible : en voilà la devise d'un roman qui abjure la certitude, voire, qui se termine – et sobrement – avec « l'incertitude du sort ». Bref, cela n'a rien d'un roman à thèse, *Les Événements*. On est libre d'en conclure tout ce qu'on veut. Pas besoin de boniment, de bagou religio-politique.

Les deux romanciers font sa part à la réalité ; ils lui reconnaissent une force d'inertie incontestable. Peu surprenant que dans chaque roman il s'élabore une petite histoire égoïste basée sur la grande histoire, pour l'un celle des années 90, pour l'autre celle de l'ère infâme de Vichy. (François, n'est-il pas un collabo-né ?) Rolin, en contraste avec Houellebecq, ne montre aucun signe de se sentir concerné immodérément par le futur ; ce que vivent les personnages, c'est un présent interminé, limnique ; ce qui nous émeut, même à distance, c'est la vue des âmes errantes en proie à l'arbitraire du pouvoir, quelque soit le parti ou la secte. L'intrigue (où se mêlent deux trois dames, un fils peut-être illusoire) ne va pas perdre de notre intérêt au cours du récit, cependant qu'elle n'en gagnera pas non plus, tant elle est minée par l'irrésolution du narrateur-botaniste, la tendance qu'il a de s'en absenter.

Résumons : *Soumission* sent la fabrication, *Les Événements* l'inspiration – en est saisi, chacun, jusqu'à s'y dissoudre. ■

– B.-X. Mathieu

## Contributors [cont'd]

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