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FEATURE ARTIST: JULIE FLETT

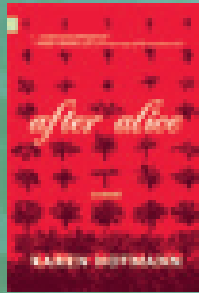
Julie Flett is a Vancouver artist, children's book author, and illustrator.

The cover image for this issue was inspired by a series of coincidences that I experienced over the past month: both my son and a friend shared stories with me about the red flowering currant; I stumbled upon an article about dolphin calls being turned into kaleidoscopic flower patterns using sound wavelets shortly after having a dream about dolphin 'petals' while working on a book about dolphins. My sister had also called earlier in the month to tell me about a dream she'd had about our mother; we realized we had both dreamt the same dream.



PHOTO: TAYLOR FERGUSON

Apology: Issue #66 featured an error in Sandra Alland's story, "Chance". The line, *They pushed their glasses up onto their not-so-pale Canadian nose, and exhaled.* was incorrectly published as "...their not-so-pale Canadian noses..." Our apologies to Ms. Alland. A corrected version of her story can be found at our website, subterrain.ca



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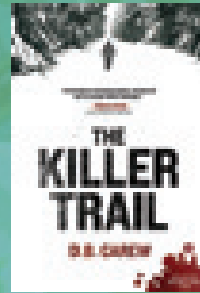
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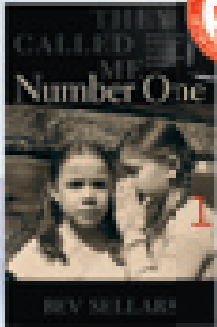
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DEEPER THAN MERE COINCIDENCE

S ometime in March of 2013 I was at the main post office mailing several parcels, review copies of books destined for US magazines and journals . . . or maybe it was contributor copies of the magazine, five apiece sailing off, at alarming prices, to destinations across the country and into the US. I was bantering with the postal clerk, as I often do, paying by cheque for services rendered, noting my BC driver's license number on the back, lest Canada Post Corp needed to track me down in the event that the cheque bounced, which wouldn't be a huge stretch of the imagination, issuing, as it was, from a small literary magazine. He took the cheque, inspected it for date, signature, amount and then slipped it into the drawer beneath his station. The receipt was zzzzt-zzzzt printing out and he soon tore it off and circled the tracking numbers for the various packages that had just been processed. I then realized I had forgotten to note the cheque number, which I needed to write on the receipt so that our bookkeeper wouldn't get on my case about a receipt without a paper trail. I apologized for not noting the number of the cheque and the clerk obligingly pulled it from the drawer and informed me that it was cheque 1996. I thanked him and said, *It was a good year*. He chuckled and said, *Yes, we'll party like it's 1996!* We both laughed, being about the same age, and realizing (however poignantly) that our heavy partying days were long behind us. *We wish!* he said and we both laughed again. I thanked him, wished him a good day, and headed off to check our postal box that is located in the main lobby just through the doors from the service counter area. I was still smirking, but wondering, wasn't the line—*we're gonna party like it's 1999?* But maybe that was his joke?

Even in the age of email our post office box is regularly stuffed with mail—manuscripts, query letters, bills, cheques, subscriptions, review copies, and assorted junk mail. And still, after twenty-five years, I feel a sense of excitement when I pull the mail from the box, load it onto my arm, and carry it to one of the granite slab sorting counters to sift through and examine the names and addresses on the top left-hand corner of the envelopes. One of the most enjoyable aspects of running a literary magazine that publishes book reviews is receiving the new releases from our publishing colleagues across the country.

And on that particular day in March of last year there was a package from Anansi and I tore it open immediately, freed its contents, and stuffed the padded, recyclable envelope through the slot in the blue recycling bin. And there on the table, in the midst of the other assorted mail items, wrapped in its 8.5 x 14 press release was the poetry book 1996 by Sara Peters. The coincidence was not lost on me, and as I held the book I wondered if maybe there was some greater significance to this book landing in my hands *today* as opposed to next week or the week after. And then I noticed the endorsement from Robert Pinsky on the cover—“Deeper than mere darkness.” I was now even more intrigued. If there is a thing that we call “light reading” then I am naturally drawn to the opposite end of the spectrum of literature, and that would be “dark reading.” I made a note to read 1996 with close attention, to see if there wasn't perhaps a deeper meaning, a special message for me, just me . . .

—Brian Kaufman, Editor

BIANCA AND THE BLACKBIRDS:

How Vladimir Nabokov Saved Me from Referential Mania

by Peter Babiak

There's a scene in Vladimir Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* where Axel, the rakish middle-aged artist, turns to his way-too-young lover, Margot, and delivers an impeccable aphorism: "A certain man once lost a diamond cuff-link in the wide blue sea, and twenty years later, on the exact day, a Friday apparently, he was eating a large fish—but there was no diamond inside. That's what I like about coincidence." These little word-jewels are what I like about Nabokov. Life is capricious and open to chance, not held together by some cosmic duct tape that harmonises random events in a state of metaphysical awesomeness. And yet, even though reason and Nabokov tell us that coincidences don't just happen, we know that it's only in detecting and recognizing flukes and fortuities that the deliberate familiarity of an ordinary life can be refashioned as extraordinary, enchanting, and at times even thrilling.

My job—teaching English literature to college students—isn't exactly exhilarating. Like being the night watchman at a museum or a volunteer shelver at a public library, it's rewarding in an intangible way but it's more pedestrian than provocative. When something memorable happens it happens to fictional characters; I'm supposed to remain abstract and nonplussed by the scandalous shenanigans that happen on paper. But there was this one time, one afternoon years ago, when something happened in my office that was so unnervingly wanton and such a bamboozling conundrum that it left me metaphysically bamboozled.

"Bianca" was a student in my English class. Older, around twenty-five or so, and south-eastern European by birth, she struck me as well versed in the ways of the world, certainly compared to the more morally-chaste younger students, though academically she was extraordinarily average. A classic femme fatale who adapted to the brazen aesthetic of sex-positive feminism, Bianca announced her presence the first day of class almost a decade ago by declaring that feminists "need a good fuck." Always one for theatrics, she's what you get when you slip a coquette like Lauren Bacall or Lana Turner into the cast of Lena Dunham's *Girls*. She was, in short, a woman with gifted cleavage and a mediocre mind who knew she could often use the first in the service of the second.

I hadn't heard from Bianca in a few years when she emails and asks if I remember her and can she come by my office? She was writing a paper for a grad seminar on postmodern language games and wanted to talk literary shop. I obliged with a time—2:30 on a Tuesday—and mentioned that I happened to be teaching Nabokov's short story "Symbols and Signs" that very week and goading my first-year students, in the same course she'd taken with me a few years before, in slow textual analyses of the narrative.

She was on time but I was with another student. This one was crying, like the sensitive ones sometimes do when they realize that theirs isn't the A-level work the high school teachers said



SAYS

RISQUÉ LIKE

MAYBE NOTHING

it was. I don't remember most of the criers but I remember this one—Harry Potter glasses and an unironic Hello Kitty knapsack—because during the fifteen minutes she was in my office I had four or five phone calls. The first was a guy who wanted to speak to Charlie somebody, and the rest were hang-ups. All that ringing alleviated the task of trying to make my criticism of the girl's banal analysis of a sentence in "Symbols and Signs" sound more like a consolation to her wounded self-esteem, but persistent phone calls can make you go fucking ape-shit with paranoia. Even Nabokov knew this because at the end of his story someone calls for a "Charlie" two times.

This was when I first considered that this parcel of time on a dreary Tuesday afternoon in November just might be, contrary to the routines that structured my typical afternoons, textured with a metaphysical thread of tattered references and allusions that were just a little too strange, though at the time I didn't think the phone calls could have possibly foreshadowed that something wildly inappropriate was about to happen to me. And I still can't. But then coincidence is a seductive spark ignited by memory, and what's so fascinating about memory, like Nabokov says in his autobiography, "is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past." It was months, probably closer to a year and maybe even longer, before I remembered in my own "suspended and wandering tonalities" that Bianca, who was pacing outside my office while I was with the crier, had a phone in her hand. Which isn't strange in itself, not really. But was she trying to tumble my dominoes of fortuity. Aristotle points out in *The Poetics* that coincidences are "most striking when they have an air of design" and if Bianca did disguise her voice and place those calls then it was a striking design for sure.

The crier exited and Bianca entered. She didn't mention the ringing, but sitting down in the chair the crier had just vacated, she leaned forward. Wasn't it bizarre, she asked in what I think was a mock conspiratorial voice, that one of the important signs in Nabokov's story is a crying girl and that a real one was just sitting in this chair? I agreed. It was weird, and so were the phone calls. Life imitated art in the weather pattern, too, I told her, and then in our ensuing conversation when I learned that it was Bianca's birthday the next day I pointed out that it's also a raining birthday in "Symbols and Signs."

If there were a fate story that overlapped with my life I wouldn't want it to be this one. It's a dreary narrative about an elderly Russian couple who go visit their deranged son at an asylum for his birthday but are turned away because he has tried to commit suicide again. I like it because it's short and because Nabokov—a literary genius but a pretentious dick—puts you on a wild goose chase looking for "signs" or "symbols" in the story that are supposed to make reading the story hook up with the son's delusional condition. Believing that "everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence," he considers every detail in his environment—the clouds, mannequins, his exhalations—as somehow being about him.

The thing is, when you read the story you fall into the same system of paranoid delusions because each detail in the narrative is designed to charm you into your own "referential mania": even if you want to read right past them, you can't. On the contrary, like the compulsive paranoid in the story you find something relevant in each reference and suture them all to a bigger pattern of meaning. The postmodern joke is that the parents experience things—the rain, a girl crying, a late bus, the phone, a fledgling blackbird, and so on—that are so obviously random and unrelated to their son's fate but we can't help but think they're all references that tell us, conclusively, that something bad happens to the boy. Even though it's really only about an old couple in New York City who want to visit their fucked-up son on his birthday but end up going home—where someone calls asking for Charlie. You can't help over-reading the story, forcing connections between the parts and making it into something it's not. It's like Thomas Pynchon says: "there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia" partly because we can't stand when "nothing is connected to anything." Whatever the case, Nabokov's story is a great introduction to the "arbitrary" relationship between a signifier and signified—a word and its idea—which is a core part of literary theory-speak and is pretty useful in understanding why any semiotically-charged cultural practice—from horoscopes to modernist poetry, road signs to online dating profiles—are so evocative to us even if we know they're arbitrary.

Though Bianca and I did talk about Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist who came up with this concept of arbitrariness, we didn't dwell on

A DISCUSSION OF METAPHOR AND SYNTAX IN SUGGESTIVE NOVELS

the kinks in the envelope of analogical weirdness that meshed this parcel of real time things—a ringing phone, the crier, the weather and birthday—with their anchors in the Nabokov story. Instead, she told me about life in Toronto, that she'd been there a year, loved postmodernism and wanted to teach Comp Lit one day, and—finally—that she needed help with her essay on the erotics of language in *Lolita* and *Laughter in the Dark*. She was working with a “theory” of reading she pulled from *The Pleasure of the Text*, a book by Roland Barthes, a French literary celebrity who was struck and killed by a laundry truck back when students were all down with the zany language of postmodernism.

This business about the “erotics of language” in Bianca’s essay, coupled with the title of that one Nabokov novel—both, actually, though the second, an earlier attempt at the same kind of story, doesn’t have the twisted reputation—probably suggests that my trivial narrative about the collusion of fiction with reality is going to a perverted end. Though Bianca had graduated years before that November visit, it’s pretty much always scary—and destabilizing in an existential way that can dislodge you from the walls of your ethical self faster than you can say *Oleanna*—when a female student is in your office talking about taboo books and overheated themes. Bianca’s Frenchman wrote “the pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas as I do,” and anybody who’s had a bodily reaction when reading bad porn knows he’s right. But people who read and talk about what they’re reading can’t go around living by this truth. It’s bad optics. Maybe nothing says risqué like a discussion of metaphor and syntax in suggestive novels that most normal people won’t ever read, but the overdetermined setting of an academic office triggers, in the compulsory pornography of our time, a series of tawdry conclusions, which I suppose is its own kind of referential mania. And which is why my door is always open, especially when I’m with a female student and doubly especially when she’s a morally-emancipated one who wants to talk about mature subject matter like a fleshy ee cummings poem or an Angela Carter story. Or Nabokov, though this guy’s sentences are so compounded and his allusions so convoluted that indecencies remain hidden to most people or only alluded to through tedious indirection that most won’t bother to follow.

My door was open the day Bianca came to visit, and it stayed that way until something happened that was stranger still than the trifling conspiracy of fiction with reality I was just going on about. I was rambling on about Nabokov’s sentences. I think it was how his suspended sentences say indirectly what his characters are doing when we think they might be fucking but don’t know for sure because his language is so murky. She said she was writing about the “erotics” of his writing and wanted to argue that the intermittent suggestiveness in his sentences, the fact that he goes on and on and teases readers with quick flits and flashes of sexuality, is like a striptease. It was around here that Bianca reached across my desk with her left hand to the jar of jelly beans I keep beside my phone. Maybe it was her fingers or maybe the sleeve of her black raincoat, but on the way she dislodged the handset from the phone and it dropped between the desk and her chair.

She got up and I probably did, too, or half-stood and leaned, nudged her chair back and reached down to pull up the handset by its cord because when I looked up again I saw that Bianca was at the door, which was now more closed than it was when she came in. And apparently in those four or five steps it took her to get from the chair to the door she significantly altered the structure of her apparel because what I saw was a vertical column of bare skin framed by a mostly opened black raincoat—unbuttoned or unzipped, I don’t know which—and punctuated only twice with minimalist underthings. She leaned back into the jackets and sweaters I keep hanging on the back of the door and it clicked shut. If any of this happened in a novel or a film I’d say it was an important dialectical image or core mise-en-scene and talk theoretically about composition and proxemics and psychological setting, but here, at 2:30 in the afternoon in my second-floor college office, I just stared.

There’s nothing so wanton or wantonly incoherent in Nabokov. I know what Bianca was disclosing with that subtle reorganization of her clothing but in-the-flesh embodiments of literary principles like the “erotics of language” aren’t supposed to really happen, and never to me. I was, and still am, looking for references, for something I may have missed in “Symbols and Signs” or in those novels Bianca wanted to talk to me about, that explains or legitimates the malapropism of a partially-clothed woman leaning back against the inside of my office door. Margot in *Laughter in the Dark* was

THAT
MOST
NORMAL
PEOPLE
WON'T
EVER
READ...



...what I saw was a vertical column of bare skin framed by an mostly opened black raincoat—unbuttoned or unzipped, I don't know which...

a conniving temptress, and Lolita, well, I'm never sure what to say about her. But neither did this.

I stood there, uncomfortably, in the Tuesday afternoon low-key light of my office while this woman who said she wanted to talk about words leaned against my door in a scandalous but exquisitely fetching state of dishabille, and signified herself silently. I wasn't even sure if I was the intended referent or part of the sign or even if the scene was her attempt at illustrating the arbitrary relationship between a signifier and signified for some secret grad school project. So I just stood staring at that vertical strip of white barely punctuated with two horizontal references to clothing and was spellbound by the uncanny pornography of it all. Barthes, Bianca's French theorist who went on about the "pleasures of the text," once asked "is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes?" Theoretically speaking, the answer has to be yes. I know Freud was right to say that repression of sexual instinct is needed in a civilized society for it to work but, let's face it, when a woman strikes this semiotic pose in your office you can't help but wonder if Herbert Marcuse, the guy who reread Freud from a permissive point of view and said that eros is the truly constructive impulse of civilisation, might have been even more right?

This event became more coherent to me when, improbably, Nabokov's story pushed itself back into the narrative. Bianca stood there, armed in that long, opened raincoat and waiting for me to say or, maybe, to do something, but fortuitously—or maybe not?—two more quirks intervened to nudge this suspended arousal away from sheer caprice back to the world of incomprehensibly meaningful signs and symbols. The phone, still in my hand, started making that irritating sound a phone makes when it's off the hook too long, and this, I think, effectively compromised the intended tone of the scene. And then, as if on cue, just as we both became aware of that sound, a bird flew to my window. I heard but didn't notice it until Bianca, with a look that signified comical vexation, said something like "A bird. Unfuckingreal. The phone. And I have red toes." She was looking behind me, and when I turned to look I saw black wings scrum along the window and fly off.

I didn't ask about the red toes. There's a reference to red toes and a bird in "Symbols and Signs" and red is obviously a sign—or symbol?—of passion and sexuality. But the sheer congestion of fictional coincidences in the temporal continuum

that afternoon weirded me out way more than its impropriety. The "girl with dark hair . . . was weeping," "the telephone rang again," "a tiny unfledged bird was helplessly twitching." The details edged their way from Nabokov's story into my office, some by design but mostly as a function of a remarkable shift in the narrative of an afternoon that was punctuated with an enticing personification of the "erotics of language" that, unclothed, leaned back against my door until it shut. And there are more stories about the memorable Bianca. She flirted obsessively, shifting attention from comma splices and mishandling of semi-colons with compulsive leg crossings and inordinately low leans across the desk, sustained stares, and the time she asked a borderline unsavory question about the pair of costume handcuffs I have hanging on my wall. A couple of years after she leaned back against my door in that unclothed offering she sent me a copy of the paper she wrote on Nabokov. It was okay, but all I really remember of it is the epigram, which came from her French theorist: "Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes?"

In the subdued rush of references—her visit to my office during my Nabokov week, the phone calls, Charlie, the rain, the crying girl, the bird, the birthday—I convinced myself that this sliver of time on a Tuesday afternoon in November was so patterned and symbolically-charged with significant details that it coalesced in some grand master plan or flash of wisdom. But who knows? The impulse to find a pattern in one's life, to find causes and reasons for the events we experience that push thinking away from the banal towards the extraordinary, and maybe even to the spiritual—yes, even in tawdry narratives involving lascivious characters named "Bianca"—is greater than our seemingly absolute knowledge that no such patterns can possibly exist. Nabokov says in his novel *Ada* that "Some law of logic should fix the number of coincidences, in a given domain, after which they cease to be coincidences, and form, instead, the living organism of a new truth." I have no idea what kind of "new truth" the coincidences on that Tuesday afternoon pointed towards. It wasn't fate that connected her to me as much as it was a voluptuous appetite for Nabokov and literary theory, though it was a thrill I'm bound—referential maniac that I am—to vaunt to the level of enchanting, beautiful things. »

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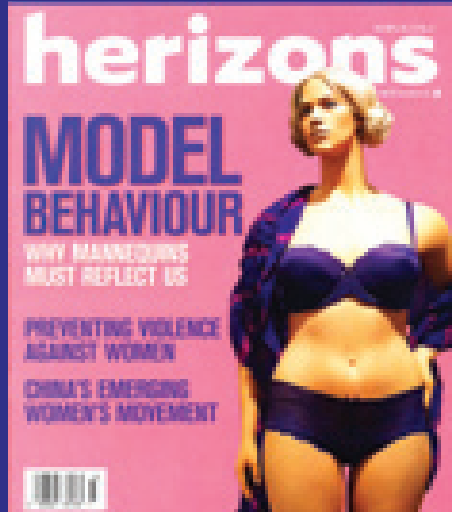
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LOOKS JUST LIKE THE SUN

by Robert Nathan

I KNEW
SOMETHING
TECTONIC
WAS
HAPPENING,
I JUST
DIDN'T
KNOW HOW
IT WOULD
AFFECT ME.

He danced with his jacket inside out. He wore long hair with deep waves that shone in the moonlight and bounced like a thing alive. His blue eyes sparkled high in his tall frame. When he opened his mouth men laughed and women pretended not to stare at his pearly teeth. He was like a comet in this world, burning bright, speeding by. Disappearing.

I met Simon at the red pandas. Staring at his beautiful cheekbones, his innocent untarnished skin, I had the answer to my question. Because I never liked zoos. Much less driving to Granby.

Yet there I was. A sunlit afternoon in May, an hour east of home, an enclosure of ochre beasts. And a man, one I knew I'd make my own and make love to in whatever order seemed convenient.

It wasn't the kind of thing I did, setting aims like that. Not because of some principle that forbade it. The idea of choosing a man off the street and seeing things through 'til he was mine and naked always struck me as a thrill. A venture to be tried if not made a habit of, like paragliding. Meeting small goals, pushing the bounds of one's power—what greater bliss? No, it wasn't ideals that held me back. It was the sweating.

Funny for a girl like me, being awkward with men. I was once, three years ago, in an underwear advertisement. Me in my tangas and a lacy push-up. That pretty much guarantees men have sated themselves to my photograph, if growing up with two brothers is anything to go by. I am an official Object of Want, sanctified by the laws of marketing. And yet I can't have what I want, because it makes me perspire.

Two red pandas lay curled on their treetop platforms, sleeping silently. On the other side of the fence two animals stood, equally silent, one subtly spying on the other while feigning interest in small red bears.

I sidled up to him, skin noticeably moist, heart pummeling my ribcage. But I didn't look. After that first glimpse I couldn't bear it. Simon was a man I had to keep on the periphery lest my eyes ache from the inside out.

"They're amazing, aren't they?" God. His voice. Better than I'd imagined. No, I hadn't imagined it at all. He was, 'til then, the man I would possess and ravish all in silence.

"Yeah, you're so beautiful." I felt it in my armpits then, sliding, slipping, rushing away from me. Perspiration's rain of terror. "I mean, yeah, you're right, *they're* so beautiful." I smiled pathetically and scuffed the hard sole of my shoe on the concrete.

He laughed, looked at me. My eyes pushed right, strained toward him while my head stayed still. If I didn't move I couldn't lose anything, surely. I could hang on and everything was liable to be fine so long as I remained in one spot. Somehow this line of reasoning made faultless sense at the time. "What's your name?" he asked.

I turned to face him, relenting. It was like wrenching up a tree that'd been rooted to the same land for a thousand years. "Cora," I said, clearing my throat and batting my lashes like a fool.

The European Institute in Florence had accepted Simon as a post-doctoral fellow on a twelve-month contract. He asked me to go with him. "I don't think I can stay in Europe for a year," I said, curling my long brown hair around a finger to stave off apprehension. I knew something tectonic was happening, I just didn't know how it would affect me. My body lay naked on the bed, and Simon leaned back with both hands on the dresser across the room, watching. Normally I didn't mind exposure to him, because I didn't think of it like that. But in that moment I did, and my sense that it was all so wide open threw me into a panic I tried my best to hide. "I'm not a citizen."

"Well." He flopped onto the bed, staring at the ceiling's tiny stuccoed stalactites as I sat up to button my blouse. "We could get married." With those words it was back: the sweating I'd forgotten after long months with Simon.

A year and a half had passed since we met at the red pandas in the Granby zoo. It's not that life had been bad before, but I was happy now in a way I hadn't known. Not in adulthood anyway. These past eighteen months I'd lived in a state of wonder, like a child swept up in the majesty of a

circus or the favour of a wild friend who worked on barges and swam with sharks.

It's not that I needed Simon to make me happy. I'd always been fine by myself, indeed better than when I wasn't (mostly because of the men I'd known). But the best thing about Simon was he didn't make me *unhappy*—a miracle in the world of dating. I was me and he was him and together we were beautiful. And so we never went on manic roller coaster rides, raging brutally down and then flying up the honeyed hills of reconciliation, like most couples. We preferred the zoo.

And I could hold my own. Sure, he was a bright light, but I had my own life.

It'd been five years since graduation, and for the last two I'd been turning down contracts several times a month. Fresh out of school I designed the logo of a start-up that turned huge, this computer accessories thing called Mousepocalypse. People knew my work. On days I didn't feel like designing I walked the banks of the St. Lawrence with my camera, then blogged about my photos over a glass of wine.

All the same, it was now impossible to imagine life without Simon. Or at least a comparable one. This is where people start to get weird and politely suggest you're clingy. But what's wrong with someone making you happy?

The basics of life have become sinful in our age; we're full of excuses. I for one have had enough. So let me just tell you: I believe in love and, though I didn't before, higher powers. And though I still don't know what pushed me to Granby that day, I believe it was something like a god. That or the sheer magnetism of beauty, pure and concentrated.

I looked at the button in my hands, at my sloping breasts and the darkness of my belly button beneath my shirt. Then I turned to him. "Ok," I said, solemn as a tomb, like I'd just resolved to undertake what no normal person could pull off. He stood.

"Really?" he said. "You want to?"

"Yes," I told him, biting my bottom lip as my head shook fast up and down. "I do. I, Cora, will marry you, Mr. Simon of Florence." I always tried to make light when I was wracked with nerves.

He took my hands, looked into the skin on my knuckles, kissed them. Then he began to jump on the bed, shouting "Viva Italia! Viva Firenze! Viva l'amore!" I giggled, only to see him run from the room as quickly as he'd bounced on the blankets. Then in a moment he was back and the music

WHEN
A PLANE
EXPLODES
AT 35,000
FEET THEY
SAY IT
LOOKS
LIKE THE
SUN.
A FLASH
OF WHITE
WAY UP
HIGH.



was blaring and he was putting his jacket on inside out and pulling me to my feet. “Come on, pumpkin,” he said. “Dance with me.”

And so we danced together and I watched the moonlight stream in the window and splash across his wavy locks as we mangled the springs of a mattress we’d no longer need. In a few weeks it would be on the curb with the rest of it, relics of a life left back by Italian lovebirds. But the truth was it grew futile sooner than I’d imagined.

Having only ten guests made it cozy, so for once, and even though it was my wedding, I didn’t have to sweat. We were saving our money for Europe (the excuse we gave), and would leave at the end of the month once Simon was back. He’d submitted a paper to a UN governance conference that, unlike most academic meetings, subsidized travel costs.

We couldn’t spare the time, considering all we had to do before dissolving our lives in Montreal and building them anew in Florence. But it was a free trip to Beijing, and I encouraged him to go. I could see how much it meant to him. “Are you kidding? Are you mad? Have you lost your bloody mind, man?” I said, hamming it up. “Seriously though, you should go, babe, it’s a great opportunity.” And it was. Another glowing line on the CV of a glowing man.

He was living a dream and I was happy dreaming with him. And we both knew I would do most of the packing anyway. It was something I was especially good at.

I drove him to the airport and kissed his eyes. “Write me when you land.”

He hugged me tight. “I will,” he said, flashing that mollifying smile he carried like a weapon. “I’ll miss you.”

I pouted, only half pretending. “I’ll miss you too. So much.”

His fingers stroked my hair, landed softly on my cheek. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back soon. Then we’ll drink espresso and propitiate cupid on the banks of the Arno!” He made a splashy gesture with his hands, throwing them up as to the gods, so gifting me a final moment’s laugh. And like that he was gone.

When a plane explodes at 35,000 feet they say it looks like the sun. A flash of white way up high. Ultimately this gives way to streaks of red and black that arc to the sea and are snuffed by waves. A star falling to pieces.

First I worried and then I was angry. There are always hiccups when you fly, but surely by now he could’ve found a way to send me a quick email or a text message. My thoughts ran and circled back on themselves in the morning as I fried eggs in the cast iron pan Simon brought home from the thrift shop on Maisonneuve one day, happy as a kid.

Out of habit I cracked them close to the edge. I stared at his half of the pan, black and empty, and then into the thickening yolks of my eggs huddled to the side as they cooked. *They look just like little suns*, I thought. *Two stars cooking along together.*

Then, snaps and sizzles in my ear, I did it without thinking. And as I opened my laptop to pull up the news—a morning reflex hard to break—a raging dizziness yanked at my feet, and I saw both yolks had run across the pan. “No,” I said, the sound creaking out as though someone were there, as though a word could alter life when you were alone like it could when you weren’t.

I dropped the flipper from my trembling hand and its hot metal seared my toe, though I felt nothing. In a moment I too fell, the headline I’d seen in a flash knocking me like a blow. One that shatters, stabs—an act of pure negation. A robbery, a despoliation that crushes all in three words. China Flight Missing.

I lay on the floor until the eggs burned black. Though frozen in anguish, I didn’t sweat. I knew, moreover, I never would again. And I also knew, in those lonely kitchen shadows, that the sun was never coming back. »



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RECONCILIATION THROUGH POETRY

September 22 was one of the wettest days on record last year, notably wet even for rainy Vancouver. Despite the monsoon-like downpour, some 70,000 people converged at the intersection of Homer and Georgia to walk in support of a hopeful yet formidable concept: reconciliation among Canada's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

The walk was the vision of Robert Joseph, Hereditary Chief of the Gwawaenuk First Nation and Ambassador for Reconciliation Canada. As a child, Chief Joseph suffered the brutish treatment of St. Michael's Indian Residential School in Alert Bay, British Columbia, and dedicated much of his life subsequently to supporting other residential school survivors. Over time, his focus on healing has expanded to include a wider examination of the relationships between Aboriginal peoples and all Canadians.

This work has taken Chief Joseph from Ottawa, where he advises Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to as far away as the Vatican City, as part of the delegation that received Pope Benedict XVI's statement of regret for the Catholic Church's role in Canada's residential schools. What unifies these activities is a belief that a lack of mutual understanding is undermining attempts to seek justice for Canada's Aboriginal peoples, and that the first step in this process is exploring shared values that can inspire Canadians to do better for each other.

The four poems that follow were commissioned by Simon Fraser University's Centre for Dialogue to honour Chief Joseph's approach, and to mark his receiving SFU's 2014 Jack P. Blaney Award for Dialogue. The diverse cast of poets—Jordan Abel, Joanne Arnett, Juliane Okot Bitek and Daniel Zomparelli—drew from their own backgrounds and perspectives to create a tableau on the concept of reconciliation. Advisors for the event included Wayde Compton, Barbara Kelly, Megan Langley and Renée Sarojini Saklikar. The debut reading took place on February 27, hosted by Vancouver Public Library as part of the City of Vancouver's Year of Reconciliation activities, across the street from where the 70,000-person Walk for Reconciliation had assembled just months before, a fitting indicator that the legacy of the Walk continues.

—Robin Prest, Program Analyst
Simon Fraser University's Centre for Dialogue



Please Check Against Delivery

former students have spoken but as you became parents, cultural practices were prohibited federal partly in order we are now joining you on this journey. Most schools families, strong communities remove and isolate children a renewed implementation of the Indian never having received a full Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian new relationship between and a desire to move forward

First Nations, we apologize for failing to now recognize that in separating sad legacy of the Government of Canada system in which very young children and an opportunity to

recognizes that it was wrong Years of work In the 1870's, the cultures and spiritual beliefs were and their separation and cultures, and to children from their families, inadequately fed, clothed understanding that strong to adequately own children from suffering powerless to protect Residential Schools system Canadians built an educational said, "to kill the Indian in the child". Government

sincerely apologizes sowed the seeds for all Canadians on the Indian apology caused great harm, and are sorry federally-supported schools Stephen Harper, inadequately controlled, and the abuse It is to healing and reconciliation asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal Inuit and Métis and You have been working on recovering while attending residential schools Residential Schools no place in our country. housed. students are and communities, and we far too often,

Many were a lasting and damaging impact institutions gave rise to abuse having done this. is a sad chapter in our history. Residential Schools forward to speak publicly about the same experience, and for assimilation

by Jordan Abel

A Love Letter or Considering Reconciliation in Canada

for Chief Robert Joseph

by Juliane Okot Bitek



Dear Kas, today Vancouver is as beautiful as ever. It rains sometimes; sometimes it doesn't rain.

Dear Kas, talks about reconciliation are happening in the context of young people walking to Ottawa, walking for miles and miles and miles.

Dear Kas, people haven't remained idle—they never were; just simmering, like porridge simmering, like thick, thick soup.

Dear Kas, reconciliation walks, protests, drums, tattoos, and this year, marks the coldest winter in memory. A bus ride to Kamloops reveals a landscape in which people were loved.

Dear Kas, spring isn't a promise, it just is. Otherwise you would be here.

Dear Kas, exactly a month after the funeral there's a brilliant blue in the sky. A woman in a yellow kimono, at Oppenheimer Park, remembers the murdered and missing women. She releases red balloons into the sky.

Dear Kas, I can no longer depend on dates and times. I don't know where you are.

Dear Kas, there are at least 20 women missing from the Highway of Tears. I still don't know all their names.

Dear Kas, here are some echoes. There was a Trail of Tears and the Long Walk of the Navajo in the United States and I only knew of them after you were gone. Dear Kas, there were children walking in our homeland during the wholesale murder—sometimes they call it slaughter. Hundreds of huts spontaneously burst into flames. I think of it as a culling.

Dear Kas, here are some echoes. We remember and we forget. We remember Gassy Jack and Captain Vancouver and we forget the dispossession and displacement. We remember the murdered and missing women and forget the dispossession and displacement. We remember Hogan's Alley and Vie's Chicken but forget the dispossession and displacement.

Dear Kas, we often forget that we're guests on this land. How can we reconcile this with the insistence on nightmares and tears?

Dear Kas, we remember tight jeans, cowboy boots, Elvis wannabees and we forget why these are markers for our youth.

Dear Kas, I miss you.

Dear Kas, this crisis has been going on too long. Young people are walking to Ottawa and I'm remembering how your eyes sparkled the last time you said goodbye.

Dear Kas, we may cover the landscape with our bodies and memories but we cannot; we cannot forget.

Truth & Wreck,

excerpt

by Joanne Arnott

I have a multiplicity of stories
within me
some are the bones of me
some are the blood
some are the meat of me
some are the stagnant pools of qi
some are the resuscitation of being

rising up

I feel a cool wind blowing through
when I hear the truth
the truth about who is dying from neglect
who is lied about, who is suppressed
who is showcased and honoured and no, wait, listen—
who is allowed a natural life
who is interfered with, who is taken

rising up

a cool wave of truth flowing through
aligning the bones and the meat of my stories
cousins disappearing from the left hand
new cousins arriving on the right hand
who is interfered with
who is paid to raise whose children, how
indigenous families became outlawed
how settler economies feed upon me

the cool truth has a hot heart
the cool truth has a sober word for you
the cool truth is a mind-blowing instrument

blowing through the dead leaves of the fallen

blowing away the grit of snow under which
the stories were buried, frozen

taking up a shovel
for redemption

To Fill the Sky

A poem in honour of Chief Joseph

by Daniel Zomparelli

I stand before you today in order to meet its obligation.
White linen folded over wood, folded
over dirt, over earth. Dry grass press
skin leave marks on body.
The sun, not yet visible, lights the clouds
that surface the earth, that dips around
the spaces between us and them. In the distance,
there is a building, heavy with stone bricks
that weighs the earth, press against
the same dirt that pushes against your skin,
that presses grass, or
how do we reconcile with the land?

Before today, I order you to stand in its obligation, meet.
Start from the land, press against the sky
and make
shapes.
You fill the sky with words
to constellate each night
asking where to start again
or how do we reconcile with memory?

Stand in order today, to meet in its obligation, you before I.
A poet goes inward, asking what it is to reconcile
and all he can think of is him,
or more dangerously, her.
We meet again,
and you say goodbye, and goodbye.
He thinks of her now and the way
the body is pressed between earth
she takes a space within the question mark
*do you remember, mother, that we
never finished that conversation, or*
how do we reconcile with the dead?

I stand before obligation, in order to meet in its, you today.
The comments are closed, and I watch as you
make shapes with words, build homes
with a story.
I would be
nothing without you. Rewritten,
poetry would be nothing without you. Descending
from mountains, the sky
doesn't ask the question, it does
fill in the blanks, you and I.
or how do we reconcile the space between?

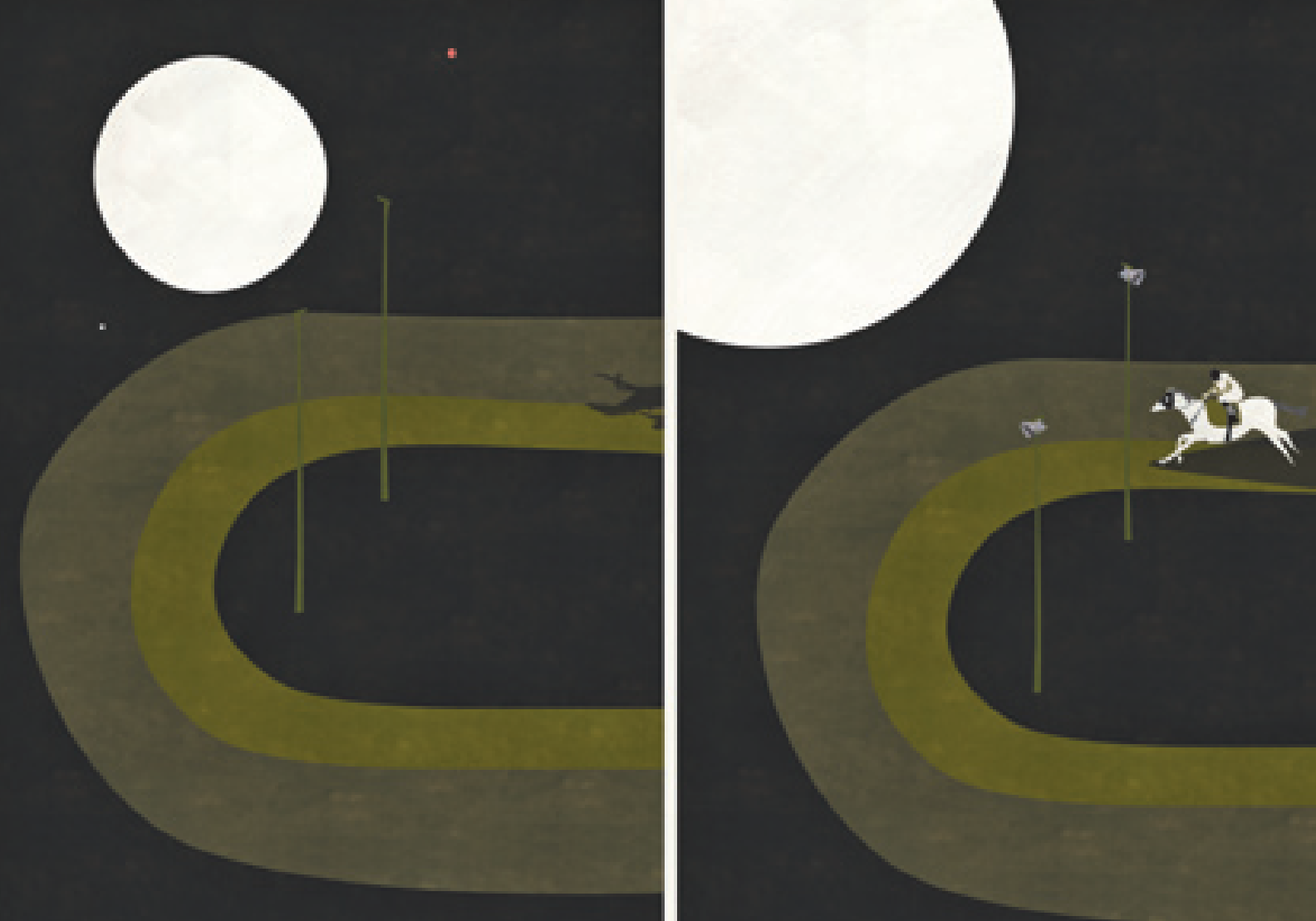
COINCIDENCE PROBLEM

by Stephen Osborne

I was walking down the street thinking about a friend I hadn't seen for some time, and when I looked up, there was my friend standing at the corner with his wife and he was looking at me in some surprise, for as it turned out they had been speaking of me in the same moment that I had been thinking of him, and so we congratulated ourselves on having arrived there at the corner at just the right moment for these facts to be revealed to us. We talked for a while, as there were many things that we had been meaning to discuss were we ever to run into each other precisely as we had just done, and when we parted I had the happy sense that the substance of my day had been revealed. Only later did I recall that none of us had referred to our fortunate meeting as a coincidence, which is what it was, of course. But coincidence is a word that we have learned to distrust, a term of mild derogation employed by parents, teachers and other grown-ups to dismiss the marvellous: "only a coincidence" was the way they usually put it, and in that word only we understood meaning and significance to lie not in the world of the coincidental, but elsewhere, in a more real world of non-coincidence, in which

events could be held accountable according to an iron law of cause and effect. What was never pointed out to us was that coincidence required perception in order to exist: it was a function of our looking at the world. If my friend and I had not seen each other there would have been no event: this is perhaps what troubled the rational minds of grown-ups, who believed an event had to be an event whether or not it was perceived to be one in the first place.

On another day I had been trying to write a story about the British Israelites, a Protestant sect whose followers were convinced that Anglo-Saxons were the lost tribes of Israel, and I had developed the uneasy feeling that there was much about British Israelites that I would never understand. I left my desk and went for a walk along an unfamiliar stretch of Kingsway Avenue occupied by Asian grocery stores and restaurants and electronics shops, and became lost in thought; when I looked up I was standing outside an aging storefront in the window of which lay a map of Europe and North Africa on which curved arrows had been printed to indicate, as I soon saw, the movements of the same lost tribes of Israel that I had



been reading about. They surged up across Europe and the English Channel and then across the Atlantic Ocean: I had stumbled onto the British-Israelite World Federation Bookstore, the proprietor of which was a red-haired man with a beard who was pleased to fill me in on the present state of the Israelite movement, which he said was still alive in certain circles. Among other documents, he showed me a pamphlet containing a speech given by a local scholar and businessman in which the Jewish origins of the Japanese people and the Shinto religion had been explained to the public on March 28, 1932, in the Oak Room of the Hotel Vancouver. I bought the pamphlet for two dollars, and as I walked home with my souvenir I felt as if I were returning from a dream. Coincidence is the glue of dreams, and that dreamlike quality may be what makes a coincidence so difficult for rational minds to account for: a coincidence is always somewhat ludicrous; it makes us feel laughable. In a moment of coincidence the world seems, however gently, to be mocking us.

And so we speak with caution about coincidence (Wittgenstein avoided the word entirely by speak-

ing of “concomitance” instead). How many times have events like the ones I speak of been demoted from the real world by being dismissed as mere coincidence? Not long ago on the radio I heard a man brush off a rather wonderful coincidence in his own life as being but the product of “random chance,” as he put it. What, we want to ask him, constitutes the non-random chance? Is there a world of intended occurrence? Three of the four dictionaries within my reach define coincidence as events “apparently accidental” happening “without apparent causal connection,” “apparently by mere chance”; the fourth is even more skittish: “an event that might have been arranged although it was really accidental.” None of this helps us understand what the non-coincidental might be, or might, as the lexicographers put it, apparently be.

Coincidence invokes the spectre of cause and effect, a set of rules poorly understood by modern, non-Newtonian physics, and it reminds us of the photon that exists as a wave or a particle depending on how you look at it. Perhaps behind a fear of coincidence is a fear of magic passed down to us

I LOOKED
OUT TO THE
EAST WHERE
THE MOON,
NEARLY
FULL,
COULD
BE SEEN
HANGING IN
A BLUE SKY.
I SAID TO
MYSELF:
WHITE
HORSE,
WHITE
MOON,
FOUR
IN THE
FOURTH
RACE,
AND THEN
I SAID:
IT'S ONLY
COINCIDENCE

by the age of Newton, but magic is unnecessary to understand a world that proceeds by the rules of cause and effect: evolution and entropy follow these rules, and so does coincidence, which is made marvellous precisely because those same rules are the mode of its coming into being. Here perhaps we approach the heart of the matter: the rules merely define a system; of themselves they cause nothing. Coincidence is a flaw in the tangled blur of cause and effect that we see when we look out at the world: suddenly the world looks back at us in a moment that has no explanation, that is defined only by our perception of it. In such a moment everything is changed but nothing is different. Perhaps this is why there are no monuments to coincidence, although coincidence informs the life of each of us.

Last week I met friends from out of town in a downtown bar and told them stories of an old mentor of mine who twenty-five years ago had been an important force in my life. The music in the bar had become funereal, and when we asked the bartender about it he shrugged and made a joke about a funeral parlour. When I got home I picked up a magazine from the stack in the bathroom and it fell open at an elegy written in memory of the man I had been telling stories about, my old mentor, and I understood at that moment that he was no longer alive. The magazine was six months old; the poem, written by his daughter, would be how much older than that?

I lit a candle to honour the man whom I had loved but had not seen since 1986. His name was Richard Simmins and he had been a curator and an art critic before moving to the Ottawa Valley to become an antiquarian book dealer, and he was a writer of some power. ("We all laughed at the photograph of the surrealist insulting a priest," he wrote in a poem in 1974, and I copied the line into my journal.) He once gave me a 1958 Pontiac in return for some small favour; I drove it for six months and sold it for a dollar in the Cecil beer parlour when I didn't need it any more.

That was the summer I used to go to the race-track with my brother to place bets, on the advice of an astrologer who had worked out a way of predicting winners based on the positions of the planets and the timing of the starting gun. It took a few weeks to adapt to the system, and when we were ready and had chosen our day, the astrologer calculated that the first race, if it started on time, would bring in horses six and three, which, as I recall, were

controlled by Mars and Mercury, and after that the following races would come in like clockwork.

My brother and I set out in the Pontiac with our charts and my girlfriend, who became unpleasantly negative as we drove across the city and eventually I had to pull over and ask her to get out of the car. She had no money so I gave her cab fare. The Pontiac ran out of gas a few blocks from the track and we had to push it into a gas station and pour a few gallons into the tank; the parking lot at the track was full so we drove onto the street to park, and then ran back to the gate to pay the entrance fee. We were within a few feet of the betting window when the bell rang and the race went off before we could place our bets. Mars and Mercury came in just as they were supposed to do. We could see then that the system worked, but we couldn't see that it didn't work for us: we followed up the consequences of the first win as our advisor had directed us, and broke even in the second and third races.

The fourth race was a big one, we had been warned, and Mars and Mercury would play a part in it. My brother took our money to the wicket to bet on six and three both ways. I looked out at the track as the horses came up to the post; among them was a white stallion, a rare sight at the races, and it carried the number four on its back: four was the number of the moon, which according to our advisor always played a role in the fourth race. It was also an extreme long shot. I looked out to the east where the moon, nearly full, could be seen hanging in a blue sky. I said to myself: white horse, white moon, four in the fourth race, and then I said: it's only coincidence, and manfully, rationally, resisted the impulse to call my brother back (I was the eldest, and perhaps the more addicted to the unbending lever of logic). The white stallion won the race handily, separated from the pack by six and three, who seemed to be running interference for it, and my brother and I failed to win many hundreds of dollars.

Thirty years later, I read in a layman's book on quantum mechanics that what we experience of the world is not external reality at all, but our interaction with reality. »

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—Annabel Lyon
author of *The Sweet Girl*

"...characters are strong and weak at once, certain and confused at once, and always compelling."

—Steven Galloway
author of *The Confabulist*

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<< POETRY >>



hope quest

by Beth Goobie

one petal in a flower.
a single sun-fired snowflake node.
longing etched out stark as a november tree branch.
days when the part suddenly manifests the whole,
some unseen resonance surfacing to tune the choices of a life
the way a violin's peak note vibrates crystal.
where does the quicksilver thought come from,
whose hands embroider confluence onto awareness?
is it that bus stop smile,
this library book's hope quest,
an afternoon sky's anthology of blue
that awakens the brain's synapses,
bringing them out of their slow-blink trance state?
and, once awakened, are their rapid-pulse declarations
merely the erratic chatter of backyard chickadees
or the incandescence of a million monarchs
determinedly flickerflying, inch by inch, here to mexico

that magnetic grid summoning us to a cognizance
of global vistas sketched through flesh
and beyond, synapses of a cosmos
dreaming itself into being.

THE CANVAS

by Laura Hartenberger

I FOUND HER
SITTING IN
THE DOORWAY,
ACROSS FROM A
GIRL WHO WAS
MAYBE MY AGE,
HER FACE PINK
AND HAIR DAMP
WITH SWEAT.

The job was simple: knock on the doors of people who hadn't yet returned their census forms and remind them to do it.

The reality was more complicated. People submitted forms with errors, or they were moving in a week and hadn't figured out where. They omitted household members after arguments, or included the names of foreign relatives, hoping it would somehow imbue them with citizenship. They were illegal and skeptical of my claim that the census wouldn't be forwarded to immigration. They hated the government and everything it asked of them. They wrote indecipherably, or with non-English characters. I tried to explain the purpose of the poll and its accuracy: *it's really important because of voting and that kind of thing. I feel terrible, but would you mind? It's because they really need to have the numbers right so they can create the right number of jobs, and open the appropriate number of schools, that sort of thing.*

I was subletting a cheap room in a two-bedroom above back-to-back pizza-by-the-slice shops. I'd moved in the same day I saw the handwritten poster in the window: *Apartment for rent.*

The sign now read: *Fortunes, \$20.* Trudy, my roommate, was a psychic. She could've been thirty or fifty or anywhere in between. We didn't talk much, but she liked that I let her keep her sign in the window facing the street, even though it blocked out most of the light. "For you, no charge," she told me. I wasn't interested in having my fortune told: I doubted there was much to look forward to.

The living room was sparse. Its tattered rug was the colour of mud and cracks in the walls webbed together densely. Trudy had a small wooden table and two chairs, and I'd brought a mattress and an alarm clock. In the mornings, soft flute music played in Trudy's room as I drank water at the sink. At night, she soaked her feet in a red mixing bowl while I sat at the table and cut coupons or cut up my T-shirts.

Each day, I picked up a new copy of my route, the grayscale ink wearing off on my hands throughout my canvas. If I missed a household, I took note of the address and returned the next day, doubling back over my routes again and again. My stack of maps thickened, adding weight to my pocket and hours to my day. I left cards with a printed reminder:

“Return your census form—*It’s The Law!*” and a handwritten note indicating that residents should call me if they had questions. I carried a government-issued phone with me and did not receive a single call. Canvassing had sounded easy enough to fill a summer, but now I felt lucky if I finished half of my list each day. At 4 PM, I reported to my district supervisor, a pimply teenage boy who was probably a decade younger than me.

“I need you to pick up the pace,” he told me a week into the job, snapping his gum, nearly gagging. “Got it?” I wondered how much more per hour he was earning than me. If it was a lot, I’d be irritated. If it wasn’t much, I’d be even more irritated.

I tried to pick up the pace. I took elevators instead of stairs. “But it’s the law,” I parroted when people refused to submit their forms. I omitted *please*, *thank you* and *excuse me* from my spiel to save time. None of this improved my rate of progress.

At the shift’s end, I tossed my pile of forms onto the district supervisor’s desk. He leaned back, kicking up his feet. His oversized boots were missing laces, their tongues hanging loose, wagging at me.

“We’ve gotta hire,” he said. “Speed things up.”

“Are you firing me?” I asked.

“Do you listen? I said I need hires. That’s it.” He spun around in his chair, trying to keep his eyes on me as his body rotated.

Trudy hadn’t told me she was seeing clients at home. I found her sitting in the doorway, across from a girl who was maybe my age, her face pink and hair damp with sweat. A gauzy scarf covered Trudy’s hair and a matching blanket lay across her lap. She didn’t seem to mind the heat.

Trudy held the girl’s hands, examining them by feel, eyes shut. Shimmering paste glimmered on her eyelids. “Yes,” she said. “I see good news coming very soon. Somewhere unexpected, an offer of work will come your way.”

“Oh,” I said suddenly, and Trudy’s eyes opened. “Hi, excuse me.”

I squeezed into the apartment between the women, forcing them to break hands. “Sorry to interrupt. We’re hiring over at the census. No pressure, of course. It’s temporary, and the pay isn’t great, but it’s work. If you want.”

Silence.

The woman began crying. Trudy grabbed her hands again. “Okay,” she said. “See? There you go.”

The girl turned to me. “Thank you.” Her voice sounded like it came from the bottom of her soul.

“It’s okay,” I said, uncomfortable. I waited while Trudy took her payment—four crumpled five-dollar bills—and showed her out.

“This is not for you.” Trudy waved the cash at me.

“Of course not.” I couldn’t tell if she was angry.

Trudy folded her blanket and unravelled her headscarf. I could hear the crunching of TVs in the apartments above and beside ours.

“Do you have more jobs?”

“At the census? I mean, they’re hiring, yeah, but—”

“Come back again tomorrow.”

It was another hot day. My stomach twisted progressively throughout my day of canvassing. I visited the same family twice without realizing it, and they patiently filled out duplicate censuses.

The carpet in the hallway of my apartment building glistened like it was perspiring. Trudy sat in our doorway with her client, a middle-aged man with a bad haircut and long-sleeved shirt.

“Excuse me,” I said, slipping past into the apartment, “just passing through.”

The man kept his gaze on Trudy’s face, which was expressionless.

I washed my hands at the sink, waiting to hear Trudy’s prediction.

“Sooner than you think, an offer of work may arrive.” I smiled, impressed at how mystical she sounded. I’d believe her if she’d predicted my future in that tone.

“Oh, that reminds me,” I turned around casually, waving my dripping hands in the air to dry them. “We’re actually looking for people at my office. In fact, we need people exactly like you. Enthusiastic, hard workers.” I pointed a finger at the man, who stared at me as if trying to focus.

“See?” said Trudy, shaking the man’s hands. “See? You are very, very fortunate.”

“Amazing,” the man whispered. He left a generous tip and I peeled back a corner of the sign in the kitchen window to watch him walk down the street with his head up, smiling.

Trudy asked me not to turn on the sink while she was with a client. “Bad for energy channels. They prefer silence.”

“No problem.” My hands were shaking. My feet, which had ached all day, felt light. The two wooden chairs waited by the doorway for the next client, the hallway light shining on them like spotlights.

“Also,” Trudy said, “you could wait outside. Say you live upstairs.”

“Whatever you think works best.”

The next day, the building was quiet, making the coincidence of me passing by at just the right moment seem even more remarkable. Trudy’s client was so grateful that she hugged me, leaching tears into the collar of my shirt.

By the end of the week, I’d gotten the timing down just right. I waited until I heard Trudy say “good news” and started walking towards the staircase, passing by the open apartment door right at “unexpected.” I halted with exaggerated force, pivoting to face the client. “Say, you aren’t looking for something starting *immediately*, are you?” Signing my name in thick ink over blank census forms, I distributed them like business cards. I was becoming quite the actor. Nobody seemed to think it wasn’t authentic surprise on my face as I found someone looking for a job at just the moment I needed to hire someone. Many of Trudy’s clients wouldn’t have taken the job under other circumstances. Minimum wage, door-to-door work in the burning heat—it was worse than telemarketing. But to get the offer right there—it would be a slap in the face of fate to turn it down.

Trudy didn’t split the cash with me, and I didn’t ask her to. I wasn’t in it for the money. The feeling afterwards was like none other. After the clients left, the two of us sat in the dark kitchen with the overhead fan humming and Trudy closed her eyes, maybe napping or maybe just resting. My head buzzed and my ears were hot to the touch for hours. It felt good just to sit and cool down like that.

My canvassing numbers began to improve as I covered a bigger area each day. It was getting easier to knock on strangers’ doors. I no longer tapped quietly, hoping for no answer. Now, I gave a confident pound and invited myself inside.

“Why hello, I’m here with the census! I’d love to help you complete your form. We can get it over with and then you won’t have to think about it. Easy. Why don’t we sit over here.”

Just like that, I was inside. I looked around, making eye contact, taking in the surroundings. I cycled through apartment after apartment with the exact same room layout—couch by the window, bed in the corner farthest from the bathroom. I started counting how many had the same cream-colored kettle, how many the starched bed sheets that sold at the weekend street fairs. The houses had the same wilting impatiens in hanging baskets, grains in bulk jars on the counter, half-opened mail on radiator tops. I could predict

which houses had dogs and what breed: the ones with young kids had the biggest dogs—retrievers or German shepherds—and the childless couples had beagles or basset hounds. Single women had chihuahuas or terriers, and single men had cats.

For all the predictability of their living spaces, the people inside were various to an improbable degree. Each person had a distinct voice, a unique alignment of wrinkles and moles, a singular eyebrow arc, a recognizable tic, a specific degree of cleanliness. I lingered, accepting offers of iced tea and granola bars, chatting about families, jobs, dreams.

“You’re easy to talk to,” said a burly accountant who drew his own comic books.

“Oh, no,” I shooed away his smile but was privately thrilled.

A middle-aged woman said, “We should meet for coffee,” after telling me about her divorce and subsequent dating attempts.

“I’ll give you my phone number,” I said.

On my way home, energized, I talked quietly to myself, replaying the encounters.

At the apartment, Trudy and I had a run of successes: I recruited census workers and she made generous tips.

It was only the exchange of information. Trudy’s clients could just as easily have found the job from flyers or subway ads. But something about it felt deeply satisfying. Trudy had the best job in the world. How lucky I’d been to walk past her sublet sign in the window that first day.

“I just can’t wait to meet someone and get married,” a young lady, a medical receptionist, confided in me. She lived alone. We sat together on a floral-patterned loveseat, chatting, with the sun streaming in through the window, her census half-completed on the coffee table.

“You will,” I said. I took her hands in mine, the way I’d seen Trudy do. “Very soon. I feel certain this will happen for you.”

The woman looked at me with big, teary eyes. “I know exactly the person I’m looking for. I just haven’t met him yet.”

I nodded sympathetically.

“Hispanic, five years older than me, a doctor,” she said, laughing. “That’s my checklist.”

“That doesn’t sound so unreasonable.”

“Thank you. It’s just so hard to wait, not knowing when he’ll show up. What if I don’t get what I want?”

Each person had a distinct voice, a unique alignment of wrinkles and moles, a singular eyebrow arc, a recognizable tic, a specific degree of cleanliness.

“I promise you will. It’s going to happen.” I pulled a blank census form from my bag. “Let me prove it to you.” Taking a pen, I copied down her identification and demographic information. Then, under “additional household members,” I wrote “one.”

“What are you doing?” she said. “Oh!”

I filled out her future husband’s age, ethnicity, and occupation, then folded the form and sealed it into the envelope.

“There,” I said. “Now, it’s definitely going to happen!”

She smiled gratefully. “Thank you.”

“I worry I’m too old for children,” said a police-woman, home with the flu, her gun sitting out on the kitchen counter. “Maybe it wasn’t meant to be. I’m not superstitious. But I’m thirty-nine and I work long, hard days—I don’t think it’s in the cards.”

“Do you want it to be?” I asked.

The woman put a hand over her heart. “More than anything.”

“Well,” I said. “I will do everything in my power to make it happen.”

She laughed. “How—prayer?”

“I can do better than prayer.” I didn’t show her my additions to her census—she was a police-woman, after all. But after our talk, I knew, overwhelmingly, that she’d want me to do it. I gave her twins: one boy, one girl.

A sixty-year-old man had been living with his elderly mother through her battle with cancer. She’d passed away two weeks earlier and the apartment was filled with flowers wilting in their vases, the aftermath of the funeral and reception. The water in the vases was murky and beginning to smell. As I helped the man spill out the water and compost the old flowers, he told me, “I know it’s been coming for a while, but I’m not ready for her to be gone. I want another month with her—just a month.”

“It’s okay,” I told him. “These things take time.” I included his mother on the census, and gave him a hug before leaving.

Next door lived a couple with three beagles and an elaborate fish tank that completely encircled the living room. We sat on upholstered stools in the centre while the dogs snarled at the fish. “We only let them into the fish room for special occasions,” said the man.

I was reluctant at first to add their pets onto the form: I didn’t want this to get out of hand. But, as they pointed out, the creatures were essentially family, not to mention true household members. Indeed, the form did not specify that only human household members should be listed. The couple, pleased, sent me off with a baggie of Oreos.

One young woman about my age in a pink tracksuit closed the door in my face. “No thanks,” she called flatly.

“It’s the law,” I shouted through the door. “I’m only here to help.”

“I said no, thanks.”

“You need my help.” I knocked again. I pounded, hurting my wrist. “You’ll wish you’d asked me to come in.”

I filled out her census right there in the hall. She was no older than twenty-three, but I wrote down forty. Gender? Other. Children: four, named after fascist dictators. I licked and sealed the envelope.

The heat intensified and the smell of August—garbage about to rot, leaves about to turn, things on the verge—hung in every hallway. One day, instead of my canvas route in my mailbox, I found a memo requesting that I proceed to the central office.

A promotion, maybe? I imagined the district supervisor saying, with a serious look, “She deserves this job more than I do. That’s all there is to it.”

He was there, with his baggy T-shirt and greasy yellow hair. He sat next to the central manager.



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His chair had no wheels but he rocked in it anyway, clunking its legs heavily on the floor each way he leaned. The office had no windows. Papering the walls were district maps, highlighted and drawn over so many times the street names were illegible.

The central manager wore a full suit. He greeted me with a handshake.

"We have had some reports," he said, "of discrepancies."

I wasn't worried. "Isn't that natural for this sort of thing, to have a certain number of—"

"Discrepancies. Yes. But there have been a surprising number. You do know," he leaned forward, revealing smudges on the panes of his glasses, "that we cross-check everything with voting records, social security, the works."

I frowned. "Information changes. People don't stay the same forever. They change things about themselves."

The man coughed. "Well, yes. But the numbers are, as I said, surprising."

In the next room, the photocopier whirred and crunched, and somebody cursed.

I reached across the desk to hold the man's hands. The man yanked his hands away.

Beside him, the district supervisor laughed into his hand. "Told you she's a nut," he said, leaning back so far his chair tipped over and he jumped up while it toppled behind him.

"I'm sorry," the central manager said. "We have so many folks lined up to work for us. I'm going to have to let you go."

"Go?"

"This isn't the place for you."

"No—I belong here. On the route."

"We'll mail you the cheque for this week."

I couldn't speak. All those people I'd helped. Everything I'd created.

Walking home, I tossed handfuls of my business cards in the trashcans at each corner. Trudy sat alone in the doorway as if she knew I was coming.

"It's over," I said.

She sighed. "This came in today's mail." She handed me a postage-paid envelope and a form.

I stared at it.

"Fill it out for me," I told her. »

THE ROAD TO COINCIDENCE ROAD

by April Salzano

must be interstate 79, southbound, somewhere between Erie and home, not off the Kearsarge exit, but close. Two text messages with nearly identical content, methodically spaced exactly one year apart. *Hello?* the second prefaced, as if my ex-husband was announcing his second intrusion on my family's second trip to the water park to enjoy my second son's birthday. *Huh?* my response resounded, refraining from expressing the whatthefuckness of the whole situation. Just like the first year, he said he had been calling all day. No missed calls. He asked a question of a practical matter, insurance or well-being of the children, maybe to deadbeat his way out of timely child support money again this month. The best time to fuck me over is before Christmas and at the end of summer, when the kids need school clothes, supplies, shoes, though June works too, to set the tone for a summer without extras such as ice cream afternoons and anything else that isn't expense-free. I bit my tongue until it bled and answered his question before returning to my hatred, rekindled as always, at the worst time.



AS IF

by Alban Goulden

*"The body is as complex as any thought process we can have."
—Édouard Lock*

As if it were that easy. A blind roll of the universe dice. Trashed Adidas (supposed to wear safety boots), bare hands (supposed to wear work gloves), air of salt-fresh Fraser River lifting hair (supposed to wear hard hat). And a leap without looking onto raft of logs, grafter pole nonchalant above the head. Done a thousand times. Today a bonus of taffy sun oozing across skyblue; new towers and old slag buildings of New Westminster gleaming like they belong together.

He never looks down because it's always as easy as taking a breath.

Except this once. Neimi calls out as Rye is mid-air between the tug and the raft. He hears every predictable thing Neimi says: "Hey, ballerina! Yer wife let you out tonight?" Half-turns, sees Neimi's scraggly head against the tug and the sunshine on New West, the background hill with its top evergreen chunk of Queen's Park dark spires. And he knows something. It bursts up from a place he had not before realized, a revelation, as his head turns slowly back across the bright river to the raft—a leisurely pan of sky/sun/blue/cedar—then down to the logs beneath his feet and the gap between: water, dark and open between the logs. *There. That's where it is.*

The decision made, he alters everything, drops the grafter, lets go, disappears from the world of light.

As if she should know.

Why. That's what they all ask her—cops, media, relatives, the some-time-friends, people at work.

At night Maureen sits in a chair in a corner of Krystal's darkened room, listening to her child sleep. Sometimes she creeps close to check on the breathing. They are supposed to keep breathing.

What she wants to explain to everyone is her confusion: how can there be death without a body so you can check on their breathing?

She touches her daughter's cheek, warm, imagines blood flooding through legs, arms, head, up and down, it's like a water pump or computer that you depend on every day, every moment, but have no idea how it works in spite of diagrams or explanations from doctors. Or some of her relatives, the religious nuts sounding like drug pushers who keep babbling to her of "The Forgiving Holy Spirit" at the party after the funeral, especially when she sees the look on their faces. Why haven't these people disappeared from the world?

The behaviour of most of the rest is more conventional: Johnny Walker, Molsons, and that cloying cloak of weed enfolding the young.

At this party she sits in a chair in the corner. They think it is the grief about Rye. But she has to concentrate all her energy on breathing: imagining him lurching, jerking, gulping water for air, his body so angered at the change. His terror. She experiences it over and over. But she can't drink a bottle of vodka or inhale a joint like the rest of them; that would make tomorrow morning impossible. She might as well go jump into the river with him.

Which she has considered.

But her anger at Rye saves her; her body's anger will not allow the booze or the water in. And of course there's Krystal. *Do I love her enough?* She huddles in the corner where the two walls can protect. *Do I love anyone?* She remembers the quote someone sent to her Facebook page: "A hug from the right person can make just about anything better."

And then there was the grasping feel of Ella her sister, a few hours ago, before Ella flew back to Ottawa. They'd both cried, Ella gulping like a plump seal, her warm tears running down Maureen's cheek into her dress. Maureen had stiffened, fight-

ing an impulse to laugh. Ella had interpreted more convulsive grief and so grabbed harder. But an indifference opened within Maureen. As if she were watching a rehearsal for a drama in which she might be asked to act as if she could provide proof. *Proof of what? My acting ability?*

She remembers Ella nine and herself five when her sister and mother had buried the rabbit. After Maureen's racking sobs ceased, she'd looked out the window into the sky where her mother said Flopsy had gone—maniacal, seeking the cloud she now was. And Ella coming quietly behind her, whispering, "She was still alive, you know. When we buried her. *Still... a... live.*"

It crosses Maureen's mind that she can get up, go to her daughter, and easily stop the life they told her in the hospital she'd given (when the drugs began to fade they put the small bundle with the screwed up face in her arms). It's easy to stop anybody's life. The blood, the skin, the silly brain, everything so fragile. Her leg moves forward to get up; she grabs it. *To do what? Am I mad?*

Shivers. Rye would laugh. He has no time for imagination. He's all about action.

As if it were possible.

Not to let go. Ice fear as he drops from certainty into panicked *didn't mean to!* Horror love for the world above—Maureen, Krystal, anyone. Instead now this despairing sink into the vicious dark.

Lungs almost empty, head jerks up to receding square of light. The river carries him beneath, away. Flailing legs, arms, spits out remaining air and becomes insane desire to live, upthrusting until open water between the rafts lets him through.

Somehow into air. Sunlight.

The very next thought he claws up a rocky bank in the painful light. Sees his hands shake as they slick over wet dirt and rocks, but he can't feel the shivers. There is a racking cough in his lungs. Mind sinks away . . .

And wakes. "Neimi?"

There's a scrabbling. He is aware of himself pulled roughly along in the slanting sunlight, hears the laboured breathing of someone whose hard work this is.

His possessor stops. He knows it's a woman even before she gasps: "You're harder to haul than a deadhead."

The world seems broken into crystal facets: hard-edged clarities. There's a single shard of grass just inches from one eye. He notices a tiny blotch curling the end of it. The blotch moves,

some kind of bug waving its feelers towards him. Then his vision lurches forward. "Fuck!" he swears. She laughs. The hard light fades.

Some moments later Rye has a dream. He's seated at a table playing cards. Maureen is dealing, but there's a guy beside her who points his fingers at a card she takes off the top of the deck to give to Rye. The man—his name is The Colonel—raises one eyebrow, and she quickly puts the card on the bottom of the deck and takes another off the top. A haze of other players sit at the rest of the table, but Rye knows they're not important.

The guy next to Maureen keeps changing. One moment he's young, dark-haired, a trimmed black beard; then he's elegant, grey-haired with one wandering eye. Then he looks like the Canadian Forces Colonel who turned out to be a rapist and murderer.

Rye turns up his cards. They're blank. He puts all his chips in anyway—\$4 mil. The Colonel grins at him. "Can't get hurt if you're shot with blanks," he says, his eyebrow raised.

As if he were there.

The next image is river morning. Mist drifts, curls over the water; a rising sun burns it away. He's sitting on a rickety porch, blanket wrapped around him. Distant groan of waking container cargo machines; a spiritual exhaustion inside. Cup of steaming tea in front of him: wisps of fragrant heat. Like a plant seeking light, he brings it to his lips, feels the hot tang roll into his mouth and down, spreading warmth.

Rye looks up. A woman somehow very familiar, grey streaks in her hair, drops into the chair opposite, takes a deep breath, and gazes at him. Her eyes are full of experience, not hard but absorbing.

Rye becomes nervous, gulps tea, and chokes. She waits him out. When he can breathe normally she says, "It's not easy coming back to life, being born again. Time can slide. I know."

"What?" he croaks.

"I saw you out there," she says, flicking her head towards the river. "You didn't slip. It wasn't an accident. You just let go, dropped into it all on your own."

He puts the tea down on the porch. "I don't know what I did. Or why. I don't feel like I decided anything. It just came to me... happened. Something my body did."

"Huh. Well that's a big thing to do on the spur of the moment." She sighs and reaches over, sticks out her hand. "My name's Maureen."



Talonbooks Spring 2014

The Talonbooks spring list features new poetry from Catriona Strang, Nikki Reimer, Cecily Nicholson, and Natalie Simpson. We also have M.A.C. Farrant's existential elixir, **The World Afloat**, and new books in translation including the psycho-sexual thriller **The Obese Christ**, and Héléne Vachon's death defying **A Matter of Gravity**. Plays by dramatic masters David Fennario, Joan MacLeod and Drew Hayden Taylor round out the list.

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Rye's head comes up; he jerks back into the chair, holds the blanket tight around him. "Oh, God," he says.

"I admit it's not the greatest name," she half laughs. "And I'm not even Irish. My Ukrainian parents thought Maureen was English. Desperate to blend in, eh."

Rye looks up at the sky to turn his attention another way. "Why am I here?"

This time Maureen laughs. "Hah! You'll have to figure that out for yourself, boyo. I've got work to do. No time for epistemology."

"Huh?" Rye says.

As if he *never* existed.

The thought is surprising to Maureen. She tastes its strangeness. Grief at Rye's death has become a black gulf between now and her past. A gulf that's growing. She can see this receding landscape break into coruscating light that fades into rerun convention: the night after their wedding when he had tears in his eyes; the Thanksgiving Day Maureen's father got drunk and cracked one of Rye's ribs and how Rye manoeuvred his way through the cops just for her; the way he sat with Krystal on his lap as they both stared at the hockey game on tv. (Krystal checking on Rye's open face that is like the face of a child too . . . Krystal making sure she was doing the right thing, copying her dad's cheering, swearing.)

And other memories: the way he would become a wild mad man during sex exactly when Maureen wanted him to; the way she caught Rye and her sister, a then still thin Ella, looking at each other when they didn't know her understanding had knifed through—of course, they didn't know she'd seen the email, airhead Ella babbling: "My feelings—temporarily crushed because I am not seen as realistic but a fantasist. Rye, you and I have greater communication of mind and soul than I ever experienced with anyone before, male or female . . . magnetism that creates stronger energies to deal with people. Maybe, Rye, that is not allowing you a true sense of what you feel . . . but I want to make me a stronger person, self-reliant and God-loving in the energies that soar from our creativity of spirit . . ."

Now all of it—especially Ella's babbling—belongs to someone else in some other place. There is a clean, clear emotional space around her, a kind of open field. It's as if her body knows she can turn in any direction, go any way. It's not that the other person—that other Maureen who used to be her—doesn't still want him, miss him, not

that the memories don't make love and sentiment wash around her, but he is not at the centre of the new Maureen.

She's not sure what should be there.

As if he dreams he died in the river.

Fierce currents pushing him down into darkness, bubbles trailing, the complete dread of knowing his body will make him die. But first fighting it. Alone. Grey dark. Abandoned. Everything out of his control. "Mommy, help me!" he opens his mouth. Sharp pain like a blow to his chest. Then a cold warmth of pleasure, terrifying because he knows it is the beginning of death. A cool light at the bottom of the river moving towards him, implacable.

"Hey!" a voice says, "McKinn. You'll burn out your eyes facing the sun like that."

He shudders awake. Sergeant Cameron is a haloed shadow above him.

"Sorry, Sarge." He sits up, spitting dust. The squad is at the side of the road, Highway 1, right in the middle of "Ambush Alley." To the south he can see the distant yellow-brown gleam of Rigistan. *Country of sand, all right*, he thinks, remembering the dust billowing convoys. North, Kandahar is about an hour away.

Sergeant Cameron ambles back to the armoured carrier.

Bastion says in his ear, "That prick gonna hit a Terminator some time now."

"Cameron's okay," he says. "Only reason you don't like him is because you're such an asshole."

"Me! 'E 'ave it for me, you can be sure 'bout dat, Pete."

He looks away into the dry, yellow-grey distance of the land rising towards the north and east. Somewhere beyond Afghanistan are the Himalayas. Cool snow. Lakes. Water rippling over rivers of stone. Fantasies of the Rockies.

"Bastion, I don't like you calling them Terminators. They're just fucking roadside bombs, eh."

"Hah, Pete. I ask you again when you step on 'im."

"Ya, ya." He pushes himself up through the hot air, bends to pick up his rifle, then twists swiftly towards Bastion. "What did you call me?"

Bastion laughs. "I call you lot of tings, eh."

"No, not that. You called me 'Pete.'"

Bastion gives him a strange look. "Oui, I call you Pete. *C'est vrai.*"

"Why? That's my brother, he's in—" *My brother Pete is in Afghanistan.*

Flailing legs, arms, spits out remaining air and becomes insane desire to live, upthrusting until open water between the rafts lets him through.

Just before they get underway, Sergeant Cameron passes on an order from Lieutenant Goodrow to send them ahead on point to check for the tell-tale signs of roadside mines: odd looking rises or depressions, especially for anything hastily covered with dirt, grass, or brush.

Walking at the highway's edge, he remembers the rattlesnake at his uncle's place on the prairie. It's a hot day like this, but in the late afternoon the young snake is out sunning on the gravel road, blended. Rye jogs in a far zone, fantasizing. Just before he puts his foot down, he sees the snake in his peripheral vision and hastily angles his foot aside on the way down, watches his foot, an action beyond conscious decision, watches it come down on the slight depression in the road. Of course, then it is too late for Pete.

As if Maureen recognizes the wolf at her door.

She bites her lip nervously, watching him sit in the sun and stare at the river. He looks innocuous, vulnerable. *But that's always the case, isn't it? The vulnerable ones are the most dangerous. Like a snake invisible in the road. The world lulls you into thinking it's a safe place until your lover, your child, your corporate government, the voice in the whirlwind suddenly demands: 'What do you know? What can you do if we take it all away?'*

Thankfully, he's a stranger now. Yet there's something deathly familiar about him, as if her body remembers why. Something that locks into a place inside, a heartbreaking place where she is young and susceptible, long before the stone in the graveyard—whose is it, really? A time, like now, when Rye suddenly appears and seems to be the answer to every question about her future, but God help her not her past.

She shakes her grey-streaked hair; glad the child is at her mother's and not here. What will she do with this bizarre coincidence that can't possibly be, this new yet strangely familiar man? A man who would throw his life away to get it back. As she did. »

IT SEEMS LIKE **SEX** IS A **WEIRD** THING THAT USED TO HAPPEN TO **ME** SOMETIMES

by Jon Paul Fiorentino

The truth is I was a very disturbed individual. I still am. But I am at peace with it now. Not too long after I began to experience all of the panic attacks and all of the sadness attacks, I signed up for a screening interview to ascertain whether or not I was a suitable candidate for cognitive therapy.

My sadness was profound and it struck me at particular times. It had little to do with the weather or whether I was alone, which of course, I was. In fact, the sadness was acutely linked to the observation of other people's happiness. For instance, if I were on the bus and I were to see two people laughing or enjoying each other's company in any way, it would strike—as if all of the heartbreak and depression and anxiety that ever existed was heaped upon my shoulders and, more accurately, my brain. I would imagine enjoying such moments with someone who surely does not exist and never will. The thing about the sadness was that it was too unpredictable, and yet way too predictably abject to bear. The task at hand was to distract myself, to immerse myself in new life experiences. I had to move away from a life of introspection and self-torture and move toward a life of many interests, of even more experiences. But I would need help. I was only one man. Still am.

The flyer on the bulletin board said: "Are you depressed? Are you tired of taking antidepressants? Do you want to take your own life? Are you ready

to take your own life back in your hands instead of just taking it? If you've answered yes to at least two of these four questions, then you may be a suitable candidate for cognitive therapy!" I thought about it and my answers were yes, no, no and yes. Since I had answered yes to two or more of these questions, I decided I should really call the number of the Twin Spirits Homeopathic Cognitive Therapy Centre for Wellness. The receptionist said I was lucky—it turned out they had an open appointment the very next day!

As I strolled home that night, I looked up at the stars; the sky seemed to have been covered with some sort of epiphanic spackling. The cool Montreal air was soothing and the evening sky reminded me of my bedroom when I was a child. I'd had glow-in-the-dark star stickers all over my bedroom ceiling and when my mother would turn out the light, I would stare at the astronomically correct star field until all of the worries, embarrassments, and bruises of the day seemed inconsequential. Or less consequential. I guess I'm trying to say that the night sky was soothing that night. I got home, slid into my Buck Rogers pajamas and tucked myself in after a brief Google interlude in which I discovered some of the tenets of cognitive therapy. My eyes closed as I dopily began to formulate my responses to the questions I was anticipating.

It turned out that the Twin Spirits Homeopathic Cognitive Therapy Centre for Wellness was located

I think to myself: well done, Steven. I am thirty-six years old. I'm diabetic, asthmatic, photosensitive, and wickedly depressed, but I have most of my hair and I have avoided hard drugs for the most part.

in the Royal Victoria Hospital's psych ward. It was a pristine and promising environment. I headed toward the nurses' station and announced my arrival. A perky bee-hived nurse in a teal uniform greeted me with what seemed like a forced smile and gestured for me to sit down and so I did. A striking teenage girl with glassy eyes shuffled by in a hospital gown and smiled at me. I couldn't help but feel a sense of peculiar sadness. I wondered what mental affliction she had. I wanted to ask but that seemed inelegant. Another patient, an older gentleman with long, wispy grey hair, shuffled by. He sipped on a Diet Orange Crush through eight straws that had been crammed into the opening of his can. He offered me a sip and I declined.

After about half an hour, two thirty-something bearded men, one with a blue argyle sweater vest, and the other with a light brown tweed blazer, approached me.

"Mr. Marr?" The man with the sweater vest asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Dr. Galloway and this is my associate, Dr. Scholl."

"Hello!" I said, in a tone entirely too enthusiastic. I guess I was nervous.

"Please. Come with us."

The room was completely unfurnished and completely white. There were three chairs. Two were quite nice: expensive rolling and swiveling office chairs that looked like they provided more than adequate lumbar support. The third was a simple old wooden chair. I was ushered to the wooden chair, facing my two inquisitors. I thought it would have been a nice gesture, as I was technically the guest, for them to offer me one of the comfier chairs. But alas.

The questions began:

"Please answer with a 'true' or 'false' to the following statements, Mr. Marr," Sweater Vest said. "Number one. Others make me angry."

"They most certainly do! But only grown-ups and cruel people. I have nothing against the kind-hearted, children or the child-like. They are the inheritors of the Earth! I think that's in the Book of Mormon."

"Number two. At times I worry about . . ."

"This is not a true or false question is it? If it is, I suppose I would have to say true. I worry about sharks. I know it's irrational, being so far away from sharks, as I am in the middle of the city. But definitely sharks. Real sharks and also animatronic talking sharks. Also, I don't want to be seen as needy. In fact I would say I need to appear that I'm not needy."

"Mr. Marr, You didn't let me finish the question."

"Oh, I am sorry. I do tend to ramble when I get nervous or aroused."

"OK. Number two, again. At times I worry about my mortality."

"False. Because there is no God. And if there were a God, he would be mortal too, like that guy in the Bible, Moses?"

"Right. OK. Number three. I tend to ruminate about the past."

"False. Although I must add that I regret never having lived with anyone other than myself. But, recently, it occurred to me that I prefer to live alone. I'm not saying that because I'm alone. I have just acquired a particular contentment with the company of my own thoughts, as demented and disturbing as they may be. Also, I'm not sure if what I just said about my preference and contentment is true."

"Number four. Nasty names naturally hurt people."

"False. Except for words like fucking asshole and fucking fuckface and fucking cunt and so forth. Those words can sting."

"Number five. Most impulses should be squelched."

"True. However, I just had the strangest desire to get my hair cut in a Wal-Mart and so you know what I did? I went and got a haircut in a Wal-Mart. No joke. Can you imagine? I wish my mom were alive to see that shit go down! But I guess, in the end, I don't know what the real point of giving into one's impulses is. It turns out that life is a swirling vortex of despair. But the new IKEA catalogue looks promising!"

"Number six. I have some flaws right now that I could stand to fix."

"True. But you know what? When I look in the

WHEN I
DON'T GET
SEX
I GET VERY
UNHAPPY.
AND I HAVE
TO ADMIT
I AM IN A
BIT OF A
DRY SPELL.

14
YEARS

mirror, that is to say, when I look at myself in the mirror, I think to myself: well done, Steven. I am thirty-six years old. I'm diabetic, asthmatic, photosensitive, and wickedly depressed, but I have most of my hair and I have avoided hard drugs for the most part. Oh and by the way, diabetes is just one of an astonishing number of things I have in common with Howard Hughes!"

"Number seven. It is healthy to revisit your youth on a frequent basis."

"False. Although I was watching the movie *Teen Wolf* recently and it occurred to me, and stay with me here: *Teen Wolf* is actually a metaphor for puberty." I paused to gauge their response to this epiphany but they remained stone-faced. They were either true professionals or truly clueless. "Do you guys know what a metaphor is?"

"Yes, Mr. Marr. Let's move on, shall we? Number eight. When I don't get what I want, I often get unhappy."

"True. Especially sex. When I don't get sex I get very unhappy. And I have to admit I am in a bit of a dry spell. Fourteen years. So I guess you could say that I have been often unhappy in the last fourteen years. It seems like sex is a weird thing that used to happen to me sometimes."

"Number nine. I would like to fall in love and share my life with someone."

"True. Oh, very true. Falling in love can make you do strange things like brushing your teeth or showering. And I would love an excuse to manscape. Like, to truly manscape. As it stands right now, I have no real reason to trim my pubic hair into fun and amusing shapes. Also, I feel like my sense of humour could really wake a slumbering lady from her slumber!"

"And finally, number ten. My symptoms are the result of how I have conducted my life."

"False. I drink a litre of gin a day. And, at first, I thought the gin was sort of making me crazy. But I truly believe that what is making me crazy is my psychosis. My craziness, if you will."

At 3:17 PM the next afternoon, my olive green rotary dial vintage telephone rang. I skipped into the kitchen and answered somewhat cheerfully, expectantly.

"Hello?"

"Yes? Mr. Marr?" The voice said.

"Yes. Speaking. Thank you. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. This is Dr. Galloway from the Department of Psychiatry at the Royal Vic."

"Yes! Dr. Galloway! I really enjoyed the con-

versation between myself and you and your colleague! I hope to have many more of these conversations in the very near future! And I meant to say, by the way, that you looked very fetching in that sweater!"

"Yes, well. Thanks for that. However, based on our screening interview, it has been determined that you are not a suitable candidate for our cognitive therapy program."

"But," I said, "but . . . I'm sad."

"I am sorry, Mr. Marr."

Since I was deemed to be an unsuitable candidate for cognitive therapy (which, by the way, is total fucking bullshit), I went to the Metro Montreal Medical Walk-in Clinic of Medicine in order to speak to a doctor about my lingering depression. It was only a walk-in clinic, but these practitioners had surely taken the same oath of Hippocrates as all doctors must!

Dr. Marwhani was a frail man with kind eyes. He asked me to pop off my shirt and take a seat on the examination table.

"You are a very fat man," Dr. Marwhani said.

"Yes sir, I'm a little overweight. Mildly overweight."

Dr. Marwhani cackled. "Oh! Please! My father is called sir! But my father is dead, so yes, indeed, call me sir. Or doctor. In any event, show me some respect!"

"Yes, Doctor."

"You need to eat much, much less."

"Yes, Doctor. But you see, my problem, I feel, is not primarily my weight."

"Hmm. Well it is no asset!"

"Right. Well I came here to see if you could do something for my sadness."

"Your sadness?"

"You see . . . I have not been with a sexual partner of any sort for fourteen years and . . ."

"Well, I can understand that. It seems dubious for a girl or sexual partner of any sort (as you put it) to fall for such an unattractive emotional eater. Perhaps you should stop thinking about it."

Finally, I snapped. Just a little. "Doctor. Could you please lay off the weight comments? They are hurting my feelings and making me angry. I'm here for antidepressants. I want strong antidepressants. The strongest you have."

"Fine. Here's what I will do. What's your name?"

Dr. Marwhani looked down at his patient file. "Steven Marr. OK, Steven, I will take you on as my personal project. Do you have a family doctor?"

"No."

"You do now. It is me. Dr. Marwhani. I am your family doctor now." He began to scrawl on a prescription pad. "Here is a prescription for six months of Citalopram. And another for six months of Clonazepam. Come see me in six months on the nose. You will be a healthier person if you use these drugs to cure your sadness instead of always using pizza." Dr. Marwhani handed the prescription to me and then quickly snatched it back. "Also, let me add a six-month supply of Finasteride. It's for prostate health, but if you section the pill into quarters, you can use it to regrow hair! On your head! Isn't it delightful that the future is now? With luck, in six months, you will no longer be balding or obese! Then we will possibly see about getting you some sex with a brand new lady where you wouldn't even have to pay!"

I smiled a thankful smile and left the office and headed straight to the pharmacy.

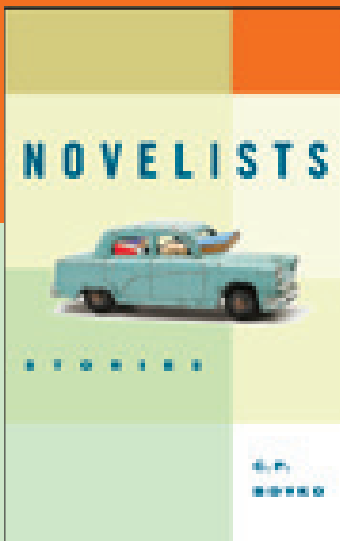
The first week of reuptaking was an adventure in the surreal. I trudged through my routines, soy coffee stops, bookstore perusals. There was

a different pitch to reality now. It was as though there was a vise tightening on my skull. It was as though God himself had taken two of his godly fingers and pinched my temples and just held on, guiding me through this oddly patterned existence. I felt like God's action figure. It felt urgent yet pleasant and very real. More real than any dream of realness I have ever known! I felt that I was amused and touched more than I ever had been and often by very simple things which were becoming stunningly beautiful, like chipmunks eating out of Doritos bags, or homeless men masturbating daintily behind very large, regal trees with weeping branches. I was growing accustomed to this new pressure that was being applied to my head and the small joys that accompanied it. It all felt right. Something very new and exciting was happening to me. I discovered that I had a desire to try new things; I discovered that I had the ability to follow through. And that's when I took up competitive eating. »



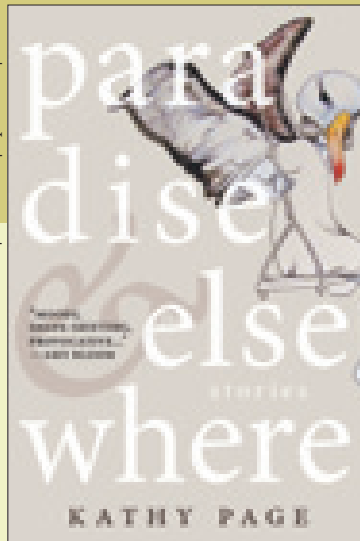
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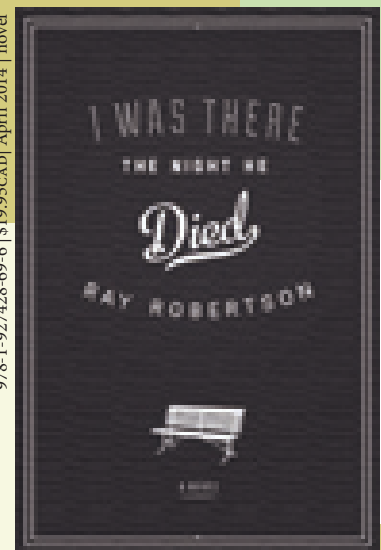
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"...with brass balls, and a heart of gold."
— JONATHAN EVISON

SLEEP ON

by Caroline Szpak

Two weeks later, Bridget still sleeps on a tattered line of blood. The brown scarps of it spattered on the bedsheets in the shape of a steep hill, sloping towards the wall. Blunt glass had damaged a nerve in her middle finger—she can't feel anything there at all, except when she reaches for something, hand flexing, and the wound on the joint snaps open like the jaw of some scabby dog about to bite down. Then the pain shoots through everything at once, and she can do nothing but bend in half and clench to become numb again, the bandage fraying like an old pulse from the curve of her hand.

Hours ago, the heat creaked back in through the pipes after weeks of broken chill. Things have started to slip from her grip because of the sweat. Kitchen utensils thud against the carpet, a few soft bumps at her bare feet until the motion stops under her gaze.

She draws an angular face on the steam clinging to the bathroom mirror. It remains nameless—pain jolts through her hand before she's able to recognize its features. Bridget decides to leave her bathrobe on for the evening.

The bottom lids of her eyes are lifting, thinning the room as the freckled girl next door lets out the final squeaks of an hour-long cry. The yelps are muffled but amplified, as if her mouth was flattened right up against the other side of the wall. She can chew her way through.

The only time she and Bridget spoke was in the laundry room. The girl flipped through her wallet as she waited for her cycle to end. Before she said anything, she pulled all her bills out—fanning them at her chest as if synchronizing a fleet of swimmers in her hands, and started going on about paper money being all different colours, how she recognized a bill by its colour alone and never by the face printed on it.

Bridget asked if she was from here, and the girl said, "No. I came on an overnight bus. I've been following the new math." Bridget didn't know what that meant but started to think of equations and limbs poking out from water at right angles—let cause equal x.

The timer blasted like a foghorn and the girl bent at the waist to yank out her soggy load, the bundle dripping against her stomach. Her clothes were the colour of wet sand, thick sodden materials like waterlogged bodies washed up on a beach—she could have been cradling a soldier, facedown in Normandy, Operation Overload. After this run-in, Bridget heard her singing about chain gangs through the wall. She was sure the girl made the words up as she went along. She was sure she sang them to herself.

Bras are draped all over Bridget's room—on the backs and arms of wing-backed chairs, the worn corner of *Saka Chandni Chowk*—a Punjabi opera record she couldn't have listened to more



A TAP, TAP-TAP ON THE DOOR.

than twice. Side one is drum-heavy, each song starting with strings on the verge of screeching, then a man says something measured before the woman comes in with her high octaves. Though sometimes the men strive to join her up there in the height of her cries. The front of the album has a bare-chested man with murky brows lifting a wide sword above his head. He's about to swing down, and people are carrying the heads of other people. This makes Bridget think they're singing about battle.

The kettle, yellowed from heat or exposure, is quiet on the counter. Its low, round form saturated like the molting fur of prey in spring. It's plugged in for tea but isn't getting anywhere. Bridget pinches the fingers of her good hand against the cord at the kettle's base. Its sides are cold as when the water first entered it. She pinches hard to wake it up, and an electric surge shoots through her index finger, coursing up her arm and over the top of her brain. She rips her hand away and the backs of her eyes are still.

A tap, tap-tap on the door. Sounds like the stiff tip of a fingernail. She turns to answer it, head frozen like a buried seed on her neck and there's another tap-tap and a sudden itch from somewhere on her throat. It's impossible to tell where the itch is coming from—on or under her skin—so she doesn't scratch as she shuffles towards the pause in sound.

She hadn't locked the door. Bridget squints at the red-lettered In Case of Fire sticker and turns the knob, pulls the door into her shoulder so only part of her shows. The freckled girl from next door stands there with her hands clasped at her groin, out-turned arms draped flawlessly over her breasts. She looks at Bridget through a red-tart glaze. A bulky black purse juts out behind her shoulder like a wing missing its partner. Bridget squints again to thin her out. The top of her head is the first thing to go missing.

"So," the girl says. Her black-collared shirt is rumpled—it looks slept in; a thick line of dust covers her arm. "So. Haven't seen you in the laundry room lately." There's something shut and soapy about her face when it moves. It looks washed out, diligent as steel wool.

"No. I haven't really been sleeping enough these days to get any washing done."

"Oh. So, what's happening in here?"

Bridget steps back, holds the door open with

one arm and swings the other around the room behind her. "Nothing." The arm swoops back down to her thigh where it flaps like a dead end. She's still stiff from the electric shock though there's no coursing anywhere in her body.

"Oh," the girl says. "Oh. So." Copper earrings swing from her lobes. Peeling traces of silver curl out like stunted ribbons. Traces that probably used to cover the whole thing—plated.

"So," Bridget tries.

"You've been listening to me cry. I can tell. There's a very practical look to your face."

"It's difficult not to hear everything you do when the walls are so thin."

The elevator dings open at the end of the hall. It makes a deep rumble when the door slides closed. Bridget cinches her robe until the sash digs into her stomach, so tight she'd be able to make out each organ if she gave herself the chance.

"I'm headed to a funeral," the girl says.

Bridget's hidden leg shifts behind the door. "Oh," she says, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"He's in another place." Something clinks. Bridget looks down to the girl's fingertips. A metal chain trails down from them, brushing the floor. It's slipping slightly, like an escape knot lowered from a window.

The girl's hands spread beyond the outline of her body to display the metal—a necklace. Extended, the chain forms a V and the girl's lips stretch out for victory.

"It's a Persian one-and-a-half," she says. "These things are named after the way the rings link up."

The way the rings link up looks entirely illogical. Bridget can't make sense of the pattern. The whole mess has the effect of a gnarled beard. She has an urge to pet the thing, or unravel it. "It's very—textured," she says. Soft, pliable metal coiled in on itself.

The girl brings the two ends of the necklace up until they meet. Surprisingly, nothing tangles. Though it may be impossible for the thing to tangle more than it already seems to be. "The latch is a bit of a hack job, but I'm still burying him with it. I can't not." Her arms fall below her chest, elbows bent like the caving roof of some rundown tourist stop. She drops the chain into the bottomless purse, each link clinking upon another on its way down.

"Why not?"

"I can't not. It took him five months to make.

SOUNDS LIKE THE STIFF TIP OF A FINGERNAIL.

All this care. Each coil clamped and cut individually. Can I come in?”

There’s dust around the girl’s breath that stops short when she speaks so it doesn’t really cloud anything but her face. It may just be the stuffy hallway, but her mouth is attracting some kind of particle. She’s looking at the top of Bridget’s ear, and when she steps forward, she’s still looking at it.

Bridget feels the weight in her legs when she steps back—a horse with a full carriage at its haunches. She doesn’t know what her backing up means—a cue for the girl to step inside, or if she was just going to give herself enough room to close the door—but the girl steps in.

As she walks past Bridget, the girl starts to sway like a tissue held to a trumpeting nose. Her motions get thin and subtle. She stops at the hall closet, turns to the light coming through its wooden slats. Bridget stares along with the girl. You can’t really make out what, exactly, is behind that door, but can tell much of it’s piled in disordered clumps below.

“The closet in my place is painted. White metal—no light comes through. I know this kind, though,” the girl says. “I used to live here, before I moved into my suite. It’s much bigger.”

“It gives a good, warm glow to the room,” Bridget says.

“Just like those red bills, remember?”

“You didn’t just mention red ones.”

“It’s that red of the fifty. Stumps the sun.”

Bridget wants to tell the girl she’s said all this before, instead she lays two fingers on her arm, latches her thumb to its underside and pinches as if she were testing a new formation on a beach—a shell, a rock, a shell-covered rock. The girl’s arm is a knot, but Bridget can tell it was that way long before she touched it. Below the dust, the weave on her shirt seems brittle, tight, pursed hard as a whistling lip. It feels so good to grip, put calculated pressure on the wound in her hand, like tying a string to the base of a tooth about to be torn out by the slam of a door.

Bridget lifts her fingers, leans in to look for the pattern of her prints. There’s nothing but a cavity of space—disturbed dust enclosing the finger-sized emptiness.

Somehow, the girl understands the quick touch and looks straight ahead. Then her steps follow her eyes and she walks past the hall and turns

into the main room of the bachelor. The light here is dimmer. The girl’s shoulder buckles and her purse slides down her arm. Her wrist flips up, the purse bumping against the barrier, its sway jagged at her hip.

When Bridget asks for the girl’s name, her voice is peeling tape. The girl tells Bridget her name is Deirdre and Bridget gives her own. That’s when they discover they were both raised Catholic, and Irish, and that Bridget must have the Moors in her because her hair is so dark, while Deirdre’s burns so classically red. Bridget lets out that her own name always makes her think of brides, which is strange, as she’s been celibate for almost two years and Deirdre says she understands the association, but Bridget’s name means strength. She tells Bridget she used to read a lot of name books, back when she ironed her hair and thought she might want to have something small as a child as soon as possible.

“I’m like a retaining wall for names,” she says as she drops into the pink chair with a bra slung over its wing. She doesn’t look at the cups, though they hang right over her head. The black purse is in her lap, and she opens it. Her whole arm disappears into its mouth and shuffles around until it stiffens and pulls out a green bottle containing a magnum of wine. She can hardly wrap her hand around it, but sets the bottle on the coffee table in front of her and the same arm reaches into the purse again, this time pulling out a metal corkscrew that she stabs hard into the cork.

“I need a glass,” she says, when the thing pops out.

Bridget steps into the kitchen, bare feet sticky against the linoleum, and Deirdre calls out that she better fetch two. When she returns, a glass in either hand, Deirdre is tilting the whole bottle into her mouth, looking at Bridget from the corners of her straining eyes. The liquid slides down her throat, bulging up the front of her neck like the back of a cautious dog. She sets the glasses down in front of them and Deirdre pours wine into both with the finesse of an expert diver—not a drop of backslash. The amounts are perfectly equal. She pinches the stem, handing the goblet over. Peering down, Bridget sees a glassy outline of her own face in the red murk and asks who died.

It’s difficult to tell what Deirdre’s looking at but it’s not at Bridget. Maybe she’s trying to see herself, in the mirror with the yellow jalopy painted on it. Her head titled high as a reflection would

**SHE
TURNS TO
ANSWER IT,
HEAD
FROZEN
LIKE A
BURIED
SEED
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AND
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TAP-TAP
AND A
SUDDEN
ITCH FROM
SOMEWHERE
ON HER
THROAT.**

EXPOSED
KNEES
QUIVERING
IN THE
BREEZE LIKE
EGGSHELLS
POISED
ABOVE THE
EDGE OF
A BOWL

take. Deirdre plants both elbows on either armrest at the same time. Her hair spurts past the sides of the chair like a lawn infestation. Bridget sits on the settee kitty-corner to Deirdre and tells her she's sorry, she shouldn't have asked.

"No," she says, "you think I would've come here if I didn't want you asking?"

Bridget takes a mouthful of drink that stops her breath for long enough to catch up. "I don't know why you came here in the first place."

"It's my lover."

"You came here because of your lover?"

"Yes," Deirdre says, "because he's dead."

"You came here because he's dead?"

Deirdre makes the sign of the cross and it dawns like bricks that Deirdre must remember a lot more of her childhood than she does. One hard surface after another: kneeling, standing, sitting. The cross paraded in, the cross paraded out. Avoiding the priest's dry, extended hand when she passed him to the light on the other side of the door's sullen, engraved weight. Exposed knees quivering in the breeze like eggshells poised above the edge of a bowl. But that's about it. She can't even remember the smell of that many candles together in their many rows, but can see them all there—each white pillar melting with a different prayer.

Everything on Deirdre becomes muted fly wings except her mouth—she takes another two sips of wine before she sets the glass down and unzips her purse. The same arm as before reaches in.

"Looks like you're digging in the mouth of Gommorrah." Bridget approximates a couple of matching swigs.

"I came here because my lover's dead and I needed you to ask about it." Her arm stiffens and pulls out a metal box with a protruding gold anchor on one of its sides—some kind of nautical relief.

Bridget asks her what it is.

"He died at sea."

"What's that box?"

"He washed up where the mud was soft. He was sinking into it by the time they found him. No one knows exactly how this happened. The waters were so calm that day. His wife told me he usually wore a lifejacket, so the drowning was strange. But I already knew that. He always wore a life jacket and his wearing the thing was strange for a man with his kind of boat—not many do. Not if there's a motor. I knew all that stuff. That wasn't why I was fucking him."

There's a chain wrapped around the anchor on the box. It weaves behind, then finds its way back

to the front. Bridget looks for rust but all she finds is more and more brilliant shine.

"Actually, that's about all she said to me. Other than that she knew who I was and never wanted to see me again. Imagine when the will was read out. We're both going to have to imagine it together, as I wasn't there. I got him."

"What's that box for?"

"He's in here."

Deirdre swirls her wine and her hair undulates like seething marination, simmering from the bottom up. She swirls the glass in the other direction and the hair settles back onto her shoulders. The stillness releases the reek of soft, oiled carrots.

"In there?"

"He's in this box. This is his urn."

The box has the shine of a bleached knife. The kind of shine Bridget would try to catch glimpses of her reflection in throughout the day, just to make sure there was enough gleam to throw her back to herself. The dust from Deirdre's mouth starts to settle around it and the lustre fades. She exhales again and the urn's square shape perches as if it's about to lift off in a cloud, hover above the table, the tops of their heads, their very different hair.

Bridget yanks the side of her bathrobe to cover her crossed thighs.

"Why would you want me to ask about it? Why would you bring that thing in here?"

"I got him. It was in his will."

A seagull glides past the window. Its outstretched wings and belly lit underneath by the white glow of the insurance sign on the next block. Bridget watches it soar and waits for it to make a sound until it's out of sight. They rarely cry at night, not in this neighbourhood.

"Deirdre?"

"He asked me what I thought of the clasp on the Persian and I told him it works. I said, it works." She eyes the box. "Should've told him it was hack, because he died later that day. The same day he gave it to me."

"Why is that thing sitting on my table, Deirdre?"

Deirdre tops her own glass. Wine spatters the sides of the goblet on its way down. Bridget wants to plunge inside, see if she could get red enough to capsize.

"What's that thing doing here?"

Deirdre swings her arms to top the other glass. Bridget lifts it to her face before she gets the chance. The bottle circles sharp until it plunks back on the table.

"You know, when he said he wanted to move in

with me all I could think of was how many coat hangers he'd bring into the place? What about room? It's a type of music. The hangers make a clink whenever you reach for something." Deirdre tilts her glass at Bridget, the liquid slopes towards her like a tongue. "My clothes starting to smell like his, his clothes starting to smell like mine. Always wondered how long something like that would take. How long it'd take to become a kind of appendage. Then breathing would be a trick." She sets her glass down. "You know, facedown in the mud with a life jacket that's no help at all."

Jesus Camp in a Cold War summer. The bunk rooms had those hangers that are closed off with an infinite loop—you can't take them off the rod unless you tear the whole thing down. That would take a lot of force. New math, it's applicable. You could really use a good diagram of an infinite loop in times of war.

The metal box stands its ground. It seems bolted to the table.

Deirdre asks what happened to her hand. Bridget tells her the heat in the apartment was broken and she was sitting on the floor at the coffee table, holding an empty mug, rent money stacked in front of her, hair pulled back like a babysitter's. The cold fusing the cup to her hand in a slow enough way that she thought the glass would imprint and never leave her. So she smashed the thing on the edge of the table, and it shattered. One of the larger shards sliced through the underside of her finger. She tells Deirdre she's never bled like that before. She bled right through the white shirt she wrapped her hand in.

"When I lifted my hand to see, the blood ran down and coated my arm as if I'd dunked the thing in a bucket of paint."

"Or glued a stack of fifties on it."

The stained shirt is bunched like the fallen, desiccated remains of a tightrope walker under the table they sit around. Let red equal red.

Bridget swigs her dregs and sets the goblet down to wait for the swing of Deirdre's arm. She presses her hand against the glass, and there's nothing. "I can't feel my finger."

Deirdre places a flat palm on either side of the box, as if the metal was between a prayer—intercepting, or conducting it. She lifts it as she stands. "To Deirdre Avery, my last love, I will my urn, and the cremated remains therein." She looks down at the box in her hands. "It's like he knew he was going to die." Her head turns to scan the room. Her body doesn't move. "I'll be leaving this here."

"Leaving it? What? I never knew him. I don't even know who he is. Why would I want him?"

"He was a local man. They showed his body on tv. No one mentioned me. Fucking me in that corner there was fine." Holding the box to her chest prevents her from pointing in any specific direction.

Bridget looks at the unmade bed, the exposed blood, the spattered covers trailing down to the floor. She pictures the box left behind in the middle of the room, its metal shining harder than a stove, reflecting all sides of the room and every little thing in it. A point when the box itself becomes all the broken heat and stains that the room can ever give back.

"This is where I lived when he first met me. I was terribly isolated then. This is where we first slept together. This is what he wanted—to stay here, sleep on. Keep him here. I'm leaving the chain with it. You decide how to arrange the two together." »

<< POETRY >>

Persimmon

by Emily Davidson

in No Frills, a little girl
has learned the word *persimmon*
and practices near the potatoes

persimmon, persimmon, persimmon

her mother buys the fruit
to try at home

at home, a sparrow
has come in through the open window
and beats its wings against the glass

chirping rapid-fire
sweet, sweet, sweet

the persimmon is split into quarters
the sparrow escapes under the sash

I read the news

by Philip Quinn



About a lucky man who thirty-two years ago
Waited outside the Dakota, pumped four hollow-point bullets
Into the victim's strange boyfriend, charged with first-degree celebrity

The who neuter rising, sorry so sorry
Suri cruise missile homing in
 holmes kills in Colorado
 theatre bill at midnight
grisly slaying a domestic crime.
Is the Canadian economy in trouble?
Former neuroscience student put under microscope in courtroom

The killer of ex-Beatle John Lennon says he used hollow point bullets to shoot the singer "because he was very famous something that would keep me alive and boost me," Mark David Chapman told the parole board in his most recent bid to be released.
"society just geared toward celebrity like crazy."
The reason for the crime, according to Chapman: "Attention, bottom line."
"Fame is ridiculous. It holds no value."
California moves closer to banning 'gay cure' therapy
Baby bobcat injured by fire recuperating at wildlife shelter
Two men reunite with wayward boat Queen Bee that washed up in Spain
Veterans rely on patchwork safety net during hard financial times
Armed customer shoots dollar store robber, killing him
Preserved body of dmitri
Isaac's storm surge
250 million of tom's money, no prenup, no entitlement to
Slithered body parts, the Qi and hua
 still missing, an elaborate hoax The pieces of a machine to dupe humans (on the other side of the screen realking Siri)

today oh boy

news of the arrest spread Monday, more details of Liu's mysterious life revealed in interviews
"It was a very selfish act and I deeply regret it," Chapman told the parole board. "I'm sure suri (will understand) [for] my crime."

police,

poultice

george-zimmerman,

bobby-zimmerman,

politics,

los-angeles,

close to true AI, et all, than we possibly programmed to think

The innocent always in opposition

Latent holmeys, it's not impossible to think a major actor so thoroughly gay

He said he also considered targeting television host Johnny Carson and movie star George C. Scott.

But Lennon more famous,

computers missing something says roger penrose, can't exactly say what they're missing

Waited outside the Dakota, travelled all the way from Hawaii

Carried *Catcher in the Rye*

Record-breaking Giant Burmese Python Caught In The Florida Everglades
the celebrity of

of Forget Me Not holistic spa

4,000 killed in monthly installments in Syria

The neuroscience of murder, the rampage of chess, and
remains found in the Credit River

Kasparov found not guilty

Conversations to kill people The celebrity tom kat

conscious robots

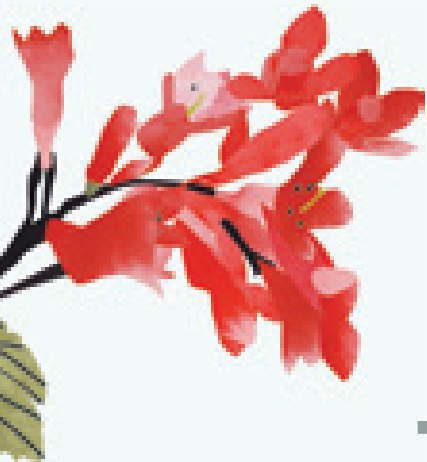
Drifter who skinned cat, wore its tail sentenced to two years in prison



CHANCE

or "You probably won't believe this, but . . ."

by Jim Christy



"I'VE
TAKEN
OFF, TOO,"
I SAID,
"BUT NEVER
LANDED.
WHICH,
COME TO
THINK OF IT,
MAY BE THE
STORY OF
MY LIFE."

I was at the Y working out and got talking to a woman from Riga, Latvia. I told her I had a friend from Riga and that her mother was a popular writer named Aina Zemdega. She had read some of Zemdega's poetry. When I got home, I had an email from Michael Mirolla. We'd been trying to set up a meeting for the following week. I told him Monday morning was good for me. He had replied, saying he would be jet-lagged Monday morning because he was flying in from Riga, Latvia. The very next email was from Brian Kaufman at *subTerrain* magazine, who wrote, "A guy who travels around like you do, you must have encountered a coincidence or two along the line. Our spring issue . . ."

Well, of course. And, of course, everyone's life has been enlivened, or titillated, by chance and coincidence. The telephone rings just as you were going to call the one on the other end. An event like that, common to all, is a little bit of the marvelous dropped into the everyday. I even collect clippings about other people's coincidences. Here's one, dated Saturday, 11 August, 2007: a man had been hit by lightning three days before, on Wednesday, the eighth; it was the second time it had happened to him; the other time he was hit by lightning was thirty-seven years ago *to the day*.

While staying at a lodge in the Alps, Arthur Conan Doyle began to write a story about several people being trapped in a similar hostelry in the mountains, how they grew to detest each other but couldn't escape because of heavy snowfall. Later, he discovered that Guy du Maupassant had not only written a story exactly like that but had done so in the same hotel and in the very same room.

My friend, the late Paul Murphy, told a story about finding his class ring from a high school in Montreal in a glass bowl on the bedside table of a Japanese woman he had met the night before in Tokyo while on leave during the Korean War.

It is my own good fortune to have had a close relationship with chance and coincidence my entire life. In the early summer of 1968, I was staying in Carbondale, Illinois under an assumed name. I had failed to report for induction into the armed forces but had not yet left for Canada; I couldn't take off because I was needed as a character witness at the murder trial of my best friend. While waiting to appear in court, I took a job, under one of my aliases, driving a delivery truck for the New Era Dairy in the town of Edwardsville.

Twenty-five years later while working in Peachland, B.C. for Eddie Haymour, the only person to ever take a Canadian Embassy hostage, I met a filmmaker named Kevin Brown. He and his partner had come to the Castle Haymour, a Middle Eastern themed hotel, with the intention of obtaining the rights to Haymour's story. They gave up after Haymour made outrageous demands and insisted on a ridiculous sum of money up front. Anyway, we had talked at length about films and travel, and several weeks later, after I moved out of the Castle, Kevin, who is eight years younger than me, drove out from Vancouver to visit and we spent a weekend hanging out and becoming friends.

Kevin was born in England and raised in the States. Before emigrating to Canada, his father taught at Southern Illinois at Carbondale in the late 1960s.

"Was he there in 1968?"

"Yes."

"And where did you live?"

I somehow knew the answer.

"Edwardsville."

He told me what part.

"And did you get your milk delivered by a driver for New Era Dairy?"

"Yeah, but that's a weird thing to ask. Why do you want to know that and how the hell do you know the name of the dairy?"

"Because I was your milk man."

In 1990 during a long trip through New Zealand, I landed in the town of Nelson, at the top of the south island. Nelson had only recently been discovered by the trendy crowd; it was sophisticated yet relatively inexpensive. At the local cinema, I was able to watch an Italian movie and drink a glass of Italian wine. The Wearable Art Festival had only just made it to television.

There were still old-fashioned pubs, however, where everything had a glow of old wood to it—the mahogany of the bar reflected in the glasses hanging above—and to one of these I repaired on my second night in town.

I sat at the bar and met this guy and after a few drinks began talking with a woman whom I guessed to be at least ten years older than me, who looked like she sat in the sun a lot, smoking all the while. She asked me what I did and I asked her what she did. She was a pilot, self-employed; the owner of two planes. She never lacked for work; with the exception of a few weekly or monthly contracts, she was able to fly whenever she wished, taking

fishermen or geologists into remote areas or not taking them, depending on how she felt that day. Her name was Louise.

I told Louise about the bush pilots in Canada; I'd spent a lot of hours in the air in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. Although I didn't have a license, I'd flown planes, including a couple of times during medical evacuation flights where the pilot had been needed in the back. "I've taken off, too," I said, "but never landed. Which, come to think of it, may be the story of my life."

Louise told me I was a real joker.

She was interested in conditions in the northwest of Canada, and we compared the terrain to the rugged south island. I told her I'd been along the Mackenzie River and up to the Arctic Ocean and flown through canyons made by sheer granite cliffs only a few metres, or so it seemed, from the tips of the wings. We talked about pontoons and seat-of-the-pants flying and the drinks went down and time passed. At midnight, she informed me that she had to be out of the house at six and in the air by seven to make a delivery at a lodge in the Abel Tasman National Forest. "There's really no point now in trying to sleep so I might as well stay up. You want to come back to my place and keep me company?"

She was a smart and interesting woman, a good talker, and if she was twelve years older, as it turned out, what did that matter?

"Just think," she said. "If I hadn't gone into the pub tonight, and if you hadn't. Chance brought us together. You know, a woman of a certain age, around here, anyway, and I suspect most everywhere else, has a hard time of it finding male companionship. At least, of an appealing sort. You have your rich older ones, of course. With their bank accounts and their bellies and nothing on their minds. They only want to leave the house to go to the golf course. And when they find out what I do, they're usually intimidated. Younger ones don't want anything to do with a desiccated old broad like me, even if I do have a penchant for drinking and fucking."

She asked me if I wanted to fly into the park with her in the morning and I said that I did.

She was all business going over the plane making her checks, didn't say a word as she tested the controls, all business as she took off and leveled out. When she was done all that she looked at me and smiled, big white teeth and pale blue eyes framed by headphones. It was too loud to talk. Louise put a hand on my leg and squeezed, then

returned her hand, dark with prominent veins, to the stick.

We came down low over a bush of tea trees and giant ferns that gave way to a golden beach. She made a sweep over the water and turned back to bring the plane down on a grass strip cut out of the bush. There were some people from the lodge to meet the plane. On the ground, I helped the men, two Maori and a *pakeha*, unload boxes from the hold.

“Got an all right fellow here, wants to stay in one of your rooms,” she told the white man who was the manager of the lodge. “I tried to warn him but he insists.”

They had a laugh about that and then she shook my hand and climbed back into the plane. I sat in the back of a Toyota pickup with the packages and watched the plane take off as we drove away.

The lodge manager—a compact man in his thirties with short blond hair and a ridge of bone across the base of his brow—and I got along well and when I mentioned writing for magazines, he let me stay in a little cottage without paying. One afternoon I went with him to his own place that was away from the lodge property, a bigger cottage hanging over a bluff looking down on the sea. A spectacular spot. We sat in hammocks and drank tequila, talked about Canada and New Zealand, about travel. He never felt the need to do any traveling, and when I asked why, he stretched out an arm and gestured towards the cove below and the sea beyond, as if introducing his beloved host.

On the second day I went to fetch supplies with the manager and three other men, the two Maoris that had met the plane and another fellow, a *pakeha* without a New Zealand accent, a tall lanky guy with a handlebar moustache. I took him for a Canadian.

“No, I’m from California originally. But I’ve been in Canada. In British Columbia, working in logging camps north of a place called Powell River.”

“I live just south of there on the Sunshine Coast, in Gibsons.”

“No kidding. I’ve been to Gibsons plenty of times. Been drinking at the pub there. Forget what it’s called.”

“Gramma’s.”

“That’s it.”

His name was Frank Chance. When he first told me his name, I asked after Tinker and Ever, but he just looked for a moment before saying, “Huh?”

We all climbed onto a flat-bottom boat, like a small barge, powered by a small inboard motor

and for an hour crept along the surface of a lake until we came to shore where a pickup truck was waiting at the end of a dirt road. The lake lived only when the tide was in. You could get across it in a flat-bottom boat, as we had done, or in a canoe but when the tide was out, it was all just an expanse of impassable mud. We unloaded the truck and loaded the barge and made our way back.

The night before I left the lodge, Frank and I stayed up ‘til the wee hours, sitting at a table snug among the fern trees, drinking beer. Toward the end of the night, he told me about his two tours working construction in Antarctica. “This last contract ended with me getting fired. About five months ago. I was working in the American quarter and the Americans have a no-drinking policy. Well this one night I went and had dinner with some Italian friends over in their area. Naturally, being Italians, they served wine with dinner. I didn’t think anything of it but when I got back to base camp one of the bosses smelled the wine on my breath and sent me packing. Literally. I was on the plane to Christchurch the next day.”

I commiserated with him. It was pretty small-minded of the Americans and he was losing all that good pay over a couple of glasses of wine.

“Yeah, but that’s not the bad part. What really hurts is that I had fallen for this woman. Fallen hard. I mean, I loved her, man. She was the one. She’s a Kiwi but I never asked her where her hometown was or anything like that. We just met two days before I was shipped out. I don’t even know her last name. It broke my damned heart, I can tell you that.”

The next day after breakfast, I said my good-byes, thanked the manager, shook hands with the Maoris and wished Frank the best of luck, told him that something might happen and he might meet the woman again. Hollow words, just trying to be polite, sympathetic.

I had a great hour-walk out of the bush, along a trail through the tea trees. The first part was spent climbing a rise at the top of which I saw the golden beaches and the blue green sea. For the next half hour, I had that vista before me. Finally I emerged on the beach. My instructions were to head right and to keep walking until I came to the third bay. It’s there I could catch a small passenger boat that would take me to a village and the bus to Nelson.

It took nearly half an hour to cross the first beach, and I saw no one. It was all very beautiful and perfect. Reaching the second cove, I was able

to make out a figure coming my way. After several minutes, I saw that it was a woman. Five more minutes and I saw that she was wearing a bikini and had long brown hair. By the time we met up, we were both smiling like old friends. She hadn't seen another person all morning, she said.

The woman was a New Zealander and on R-n-R after a four-month stint working in a lab in Antarctica.

"Are you having a good time?"

"Well, yes and no. Awhile ago down there I met this guy and fell for him. Fell really hard but he disappeared. He was with the American camp but when I went there no one could tell me anything about him. Just that he was gone. It felt very strange, him just disappearing like that. He left a vacuum. When I was there it was bad enough but I was stuck in Antarctica and I accepted that. But now being away from there, being outside, well, I know it's a big world but, still, he's in it somewhere."

People use that expression about a chill running through them, and whenever I've heard it or read it I think of it as just a lazy cliché, but that's what I felt. A chill running through me. I *knew*.

"Maybe it's not such a big world after all."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"What was his name?"

"Frank. Why?"

There we were standing on the edge of the sea in a swooping curve of a cove on golden sands. I pictured us from above, as we'd look from the cockpit of Louise's bush plane.

"Is his last name Chance?"

"Oh, my god. Oh, my god!"

She shook her head, shook it back and forth, as if there were bees in her long brown hair.

"How do you . . . how can it be? You know him?"

"He doesn't know your last name. You never told him."

"Oh, my god. That's right. How do you know that? Were you down there?"

"No."

"What? Are you a psychic? Who the hell *are* you?"

"I'm just a guy who happened to be in the right place at the right time."

She couldn't speak. Her mouth just hung open as she stared at me.

"Frank is only about an hour and a half from here."

"Don't do this to me. I don't know how you know his name but don't fucking do this to me."

"Go across this beach and across the next one. When you come to the end of that beach you'll see a trail leading back into the bush. Follow that

trail; it leads to a lodge. It'll take you an hour or so. There you'll see Frank. He works there. Frank Chance."

She stood perfectly still. I was a little worried. "Give him a note for me."

I tore a page out of my pocket notebook, and scrawled, *Frank: told you something might happen.*
Jim

She took the note and remained looking at me for another long moment before turning her back to me. She put the note inside her bikini bottom and began running down the beach toward the trail and the lodge and her Frank Chance.

I continued on my way and caught my boat and went back to Nelson.

I wish I could have been there when she and Frank saw each other. Often I try to picture the woman wandering onto the grounds of the lodge in her bikini and Frank looking up from where he was sawing boards.

I hope they're still together and that they tell the story often about how they were reunited. I hope they begin the story with "You probably won't believe this, but . . ." »




New books from
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How Does a Single Blade of Grass Thank the Sun?, by Journey-Prize shortlisted author **Doretta Lau**, is a collection of short stories that represent whimsical new perspectives from young Asian-Canadian characters. **Rob Winger**, a Governor General's and Trillium Award nominee, shows off his linguistic dexterity in **Old Hat**, his third collection of poetry. The poems in **Pluck**, by bestselling novelist and award-winning poet **Laisha Rosnau**, tackle issues of sexuality, female vulnerability and parenthood. **Adrienne Weiss**, a member of Toronto's first all-female sketch comedy troupe, explores the nature of performance, identity, self-mythology and the desire to find a happy ending in **There are No Solid Gold Dancers Anymore**. Meanwhile **andrea bennett's** debut collection, **Canoodlers**, offers a hilarious, yet harrowing, study of contemporary consumerism and how relationships with families, friends and lovers function within it.


www.nightwoodeditions.com

GENE, GENIE

by Gerilee McBride



For weeks I've been catching glimpses of him everywhere. The grey of his hair on a crowded bus. His skinny legs walking down the street in front of me. His jean-jacketed torso with old-man neck poking out the top. There was a moment when I thought he must have died and I was seeing his revenant—like seeing a the afterimage of a recently deceased pet, the flash of familiarity until your brain catches up with reality. But I know my dad hasn't died. Yet. He just drunk-dialed me last week. Still. I can't shake off the feeling that he's somehow here and not fourteen hours away tucked in his own home as he should be.



I saw him again today. We were opposite in a crosswalk and I made the decision to turn around and follow because there was no mistaking him this time. And when he pulled open the door to a down-and-out bar in the middle of a dead-end street I wasn't even surprised. When I caught up with him he was already seated at the counter and had a cold pint of beer to his lips and was drinking thirstily. The inside of the bar had dark corners and a handful of what I would guess were the regular patrons of this not-so-fine establishment. It was only half past five but I couldn't imagine the place livening up much more. I sat down at an end corner of the bar, keeping a seat between us, waiting to see if dad recognized me. It had been a long time since we saw each other but there was still enough of the Norwegian in us both that couldn't be denied; same ski-slope nose, same pale skin, and the very same grey-blue eyes. I could see the resemblance in the mirror over the bar. It was him, wasn't it? Catching the attention of the bartender I ordered a beer in the noisiest way possible to see if dad would look up. Only when I fumbled my change on the counter did he sweep his eyes my way. There was no surprise of recognition but he didn't seem in a hurry to get back to pondering his now almost finished

beer either. He caught one of my rolling coins and slid it back to me.

"Better watch your loose change in here. These people have no manners. They're just as likely to grab it up and pretend they dropped it themselves."

"Now, Gene, you know you're just describing yourself. Let this young woman have her drink in peace." The bartender, who's name tag read Brett, gave me a wink, and went back to sorting out the dishwasher at the other end of the bar.

Gene? Not the right name and yet the voice was instantly familiar, the long drawling of the vowels that makes dad sound like he's a 45 on a 33 spin. Why didn't he know it was me? I was trying to gulp down the last of my pint and grab my bag to go, figuring it was just a bad coincidence, when Gene started talking to me.

"What's yurrr naaaame?"

I told him and he nodded long and slow, seemingly satisfied. I decided to stay a while. The eyes that I thought were like mine were just a little bit on the glacial blue side, more light than grey. His voice was so close as to be almost better than the real thing and it made me want to listen more closely. I leaned in and bought us another round since Gene started making a sour face with his lips which I could only guess was his way of indicating he was parched. Dad would have just asked or scrounged some change to buy some off-sales to drink at home. I didn't mind drinking with Gene. Gene was quite pleasant company. I would never have drunk with my real dad. He's a genuine drunk, the kind that has a pickled liver and the pigmentless hair to show for it. The kind that buys a six-pack of the cheapest beer and is slurring, falling-down drunk after two cans but always, always finishes off the six. Not a mean drunk but one that you don't really want to spend any time with as his conversation skills deteriorate like the dead-end pathways in his brain. The kind of drunk that drunk-dials his daughter twice

NOW ON MY THIRD BEER, I'VE HAD TOO MUCH TO DRINK AND MY VISION IS STARTING TO PAN LIKE A BAD STUDENT FILM.

a year to ask how she's doing and who won't remember he had the conversation the next day. I've learned not to answer the phone after 3 p.m.

This guy Gene, he seems different. Instead of starting to slur his speech upon the downing of his second beer, his underwater voice has actually cleared up a little and we're able to have a fairly viable conversation about the recent Ryan Gosling movie. I say 'fairly' since I'm now the one concentrating on not slurring and trying to keep up with Gene's drinking skills. I'm not a big drinker, though, like dad; it only takes me two beers to get loaded.

"Gene, want another one?" I can't resist, it's like watching my dad in reverse. He's even started to sway less.

"Well, aren't you generous. Why yes, I would like another drink."

I ignored the fact that he hadn't offered to stand us a round, that and his vision seemed sharper, more calculating as the night wore on wondering just how many drinks a girl like me will buy a skeleton like him. I like Gene, but his seeming sobriety was making me nervous. It wasn't just the kind of sobriety that drunks try to mimic—the careful drawing out of words, the slow consideration to a question asked—Gene has none of that pretense. He's even stopped sloshing his beer around when he makes a particularly impassioned argument about why Gosling is the new Pitt.

Now on my third beer, I've had too much to drink and my vision is starting to pan like a bad student film. I gather my scarf and coat and pat my pockets making sure my phone and keys are where they should be. I'm ready to say *Seeya Gene, nice chatting with ya Gene, gee you look an awful lot like my dad Gene but I guess I've drunk too much and should really get home now Gene* when he grabs my hand, squeezing my knuckles together until they're grinding within his grip.

"You'll come back again, won't you?"

"Um, sure Gene." I respond and try to pull my hand out of his grasp. We stand there for a full minute with my hand in his as he stares at me through his now cold eyes. Then, like nothing is amiss, he drops my hand, smiles with a vague grin on his face (just like dad would), and slaps me on the shoulder.

"Okay! Good. I'll see you tomorrow night then."

I can only grunt in reply, looking around to see if Brett noticed anything off but he's serving another customer so I turn away and walk quickly

through the bar until I'm outside taking huge gulps of the fresh and crisp winter air into my lungs and trying not to vomit.

I went back. Of course I did. It was like sniffing milk from an expired carton to see if it's still good. I got so used to the smell that it was a little over two weeks later and I still found myself walking into the now familiar doors to sit at my now usual seat at the bar. I was also now up to a five beer minimum and Gene's stories were getting funnier with each telling (he sometimes forgot he was telling the same ones but I didn't mind). Gene played dad so well that I would pretend for a beer or two that he *was* dad because that was a nice warm feeling that went well with the nice warm feeling of inebriation. Then he would tell a story that wasn't particularly nice and would sneer while telling it and I would be reminded of that knuckle-crunching grip and feel little shivers run up the back of my neck. That's about the point in each night where the drink would catch up with me and my memory would flood out and yet somehow I made my way home to sleep it off.

Tonight was the first time that I arrived at the bar and had to wait for Gene. I was already two pints in (and finishing a third, but who's counting) when he made an appearance.

"Hey, Gene-genie," I laughed a bit to myself as he climbed onto his stool, "Where've you been?"

"None of your fucking business," he said, baring his teeth. That aggressive response blanked my mind and I could only stare at his perfectly straight, bright white and solid teeth. They were miraculous really, how could they be so perfect with all the drinking he did? I imagined he could do all kinds of things with teeth like that. Visions of Goya's murderous father entered my head; chewing and spitting bloody bits of arm. So cavernous was Gene's great tooth-filled maw that even though that terrible mouth had closed in a frown I couldn't manage more than a gasp and a long draw from my now-warm beer in response. I also had a real need for the bathroom, since my traitorous body decided to put up a fight in response to Gene's aggressiveness even as my brain said flight.



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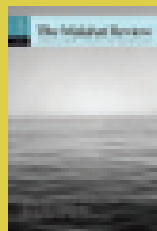
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Slipping from my seat, I wound my way to the poorly lit hallway leading to the washrooms, trying not to piss myself along the way. It was close but I made it, just. A hard prickle of sweat trickled under my arms and when I looked in the mirror my skin was tinged green and my eyes sallow. I felt my mouth water and spots were forming at the periphery of my vision. The drink was catching up with me. Crouching down to lay my head against the cool ceramic of the sink, I waited for the nausea to pass. I had to get out of there but I couldn't make my body cooperate. It wanted to throw up and I was fighting it. I focused on counting the small black squares of the black and white tiled floor and eventually my breathing became less erratic and my stomach settled enough for me to pull myself up, wash my face and get the hell out of the bathroom.

Before I could pull open the door I felt my leg vibrate. Reaching with a shaking hand into my pocket I grasped my phone, reading the display, and before I thought about it too much I answered the call from 'Dad.' My hello was greeted with silence, which while not unusual, as it sometimes takes dad a few seconds to kick in, my earlier unease was returning. Finally, I could hear breathing on the other end and a voice slowly asking if they had the right phone number. The voice was his and not his; it was playing at being dad. *That fucker.* Vibrating with an anger so furious my jaw ached from it I ended the call, locked my knees, and flung open the bathroom door ready to stomp back to confront Gene only to see that he had vanished from his perch. I whipped my head around, sure I would find him lurking in the corner waiting to see the result of his little gag. When it was apparent that Gene hadn't stuck around I went back to my seat to gather my coat, still grinding my teeth at having been played.

"I was just about to put that in back," Brett said, nodding to where I had gathered up my coat. I paused in my perusal of the bar, "Why would you do that?" I asked.

"You've been gone for almost an hour," he stated and then gave me a puzzled look.

"Yeah, sure." Was he in on it too? I gave him a look to accompany the sarcasm in my voice. "Tell Gene, good one, but I'm too tired to play whatever game this is." I turned around and slammed out of the bar. »

SPECTACLES

by Rachel Shabalin

The man with the spectacles will look at his pocket watch in three, two, one. The crest of his left index finger abrades the crown. The man with the spectacles, his watch.

Whenever the train passes a light in the tunnel, the man with the spectacles winds his pocket watch. His fingers revive internal aerial wheels. The click, clicks mutedly. Fresh waves shock the ceiling of faded rainbow plastic, politics, cooking advice, into a vivid spectrum. A hallow glow wends its way around statue feet, the edges of soles. All dissolves, returning to a sepia fluorescence. Another light will arrive in exactly twenty-seven minutes—the process will happen again.

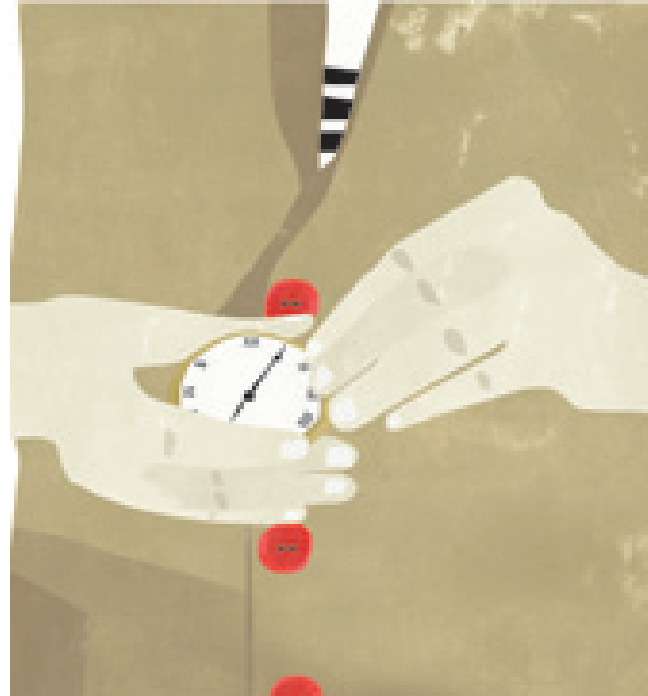
The lady in the velvet hat is aware that this tunnel does not end, that this train does not stop. She does not ask the other passengers how they feel. She sits across from the man with the spectacles. The man not looking at his pocket watch.

The lady in the velvet hat focuses, blinks, adjusts the ring of her hat. She watches the sepia tableau with roaming eyes. The girl with stiff platinum curls has an eyebrow marginally higher than the other. The gentleman's bottom lip sags to one side. Someone—no one—with eyes off-centre.

There is also a child.

A forty-five degree line connects his right elbow to an unblemished hand clutching a lollipop. The lady in the velvet hat no longer sees the particles of the child's lollipop. She knows the child holds a striped red, pink, blue lollipop, but it has neutralized to unify the sepia tableau.

The sepia tableau and the roaming marbles irretrievable in continuous ennui. The lady with the velvet hat does not know the word *ennui*, although she suspects she is experiencing it. The tableau's staggered two-dimensional faces make the lady in the velvet hat feel there is no lapse of time. Every twenty-seven minutes, the man with



the spectacles reawakens time. She remembers this tunnel does not end, this train does not stop.

And she also remembers there is a mucous covered box in her throat. It bothers her. The fact that no one speaks on the train, that she is shy. She wonders if the child is not shy. How she knows there is a mucous covered box in her throat she does not know, all the lips on the train are petrified supple lines. Is it possible that the girl, gentleman, and someone, have a box in their throat too? Probably not, probably because they are the sepia tableau. Yet isn't the lady in the velvet hat also the sepia tableau? No. The lady in the velvet hat is aware that this tunnel does not end. This train does not stop. What about the man with the spectacles? The man with the spectacles knows the word *ennui*. And the child?

The man with the spectacles will look at his pocket watch in three, two, one. The man with the spectacles. His watch. »



Richard

by Adam Elliot Segal

**RICHARD
INJURED
A MAN
ONCE,
VERY
BADLY,
WITH ONLY
HIS BARE
HANDS.
HE DIDN'T
MEAN TO,
HE SAYS,
AND HE
DOESN'T
LIKE TO TALK
ABOUT IT.
HE CALLS IT
"THE INCIDENT."**

“There are too many clocks,” Richard says. We are walking up the stairs from the subway platform, the smell of cinnamon buns and Jamaican patties slamming into the brisk winter air sifting from the station doors, this sharp breeze that’s traveled all the way from the Arctic Circle on an Alberta Clipper to sting our faces.

Richard looks at me. “And too many people, Matthew. There are too many people.” A whirl of puffy cheeks and laptop bags flash before our eyes, bodies squishing their way down the stairwell. Richard usually walks very quickly, except when he is scared, so he ascends the stairs of the subway station trepidatiously, hugging the handrail with one arm, clutching my bicep with the other.

“There are too many pigeons, Matthew,” he says, watching a series of rogue birds flutter below our legs, willful inmates in the nether regions of the city’s bustling underground. “Too many pigeons.” I can’t tell which he dislikes more, clocks or pigeons. It’s always something with Richard. His brown eyes have grown sallow with time, but that’s one thing he doesn’t seem to want to pay attention to, the passing of time.

I always want to know exactly how long it will take to get somewhere, the best route to follow, as if knowing arms me with the ammunition to turn the key in my front door every day. One morning on my way home from work, I listen to an off-duty streetcar driver, stealing a ride up to the station, tell stories to the operator about how best to take advantage of the inner-workings of cities while on vacation. When bus drivers take holidays, he says, all they think about is transportation. The driver laughs and nods his head. “Always going somewhere, right?” he says, and I wish he were referring to me. They discuss the intricacies of shuttle services, above ground travel, the proximity of major metro stations to airports, gabbing away like old ladies playing bridge. I miss my stop.

Staring out the window of the streetcar, my dark, heavy eyes squinting into the harsh winter light that’s surfing the horizon, I remember a story I heard years ago about a train conductor in Nova Scotia, who after retiring from 40 years of working the Halifax-Moncton corridor, spent the twilight of his years riding the rails between Halifax and Toronto, back and forth, back and forth on his lifetime free pass, always sitting in the same seat, sometimes never even getting off the train. Someone said he died looking out the window, location undetermined.

Richard's hair is greying now. He is built like a boxer but hunched at the shoulders, possessing the gait of someone who looks much older. I suspect he is in his 40s, but he's never mentioned his exact age, which I find odd, since Richard always asks strangers how old they are when we are grocery shopping.

"When's your birthday?" Richard says to a middle-aged lady examining cantaloupes in the grocery store, the winter fruit selection reduced to insipid-tasting melons and pesticide-laden strawberries.

"June 22nd, 1955," she politely replies.

"Wednesday. You were born on a Wednesday."

"Are you sure?" she asks, mildly astonished.

"He's never wrong," I say.

"Mangoes, Matthew. I like the mangoes."

Later that spring, the emergence of dandelions and red-breasted robins juxtaposes against a grey, lifeless landscape. Richard walks efficiently when he's thinking and it's hard to keep pace, the bulge over my beltline preventing an all-out jog. "There are too many buildings," Richard says, looking up. "Too many buildings, Matthew. There are 348,656 buildings in New York City, you know."

"This is Toronto, Richard. Don't you want to know how many buildings there are in this city?"

"Nobody cares about that, Matthew."

Richard hates the sound a shovel makes scraping against concrete after a snowfall; the suction sound a hand pump makes at the ballpark, mustard oozing onto a hotdog; the tick-tick-tick of my left-turn signal. "Go right, Matthew. Go right." Richard has no control of these dark places, the inter-cranial chasms he retreats to without me, the corners of thought he hides behind when the world outside becomes opaque. But he likes the way yellow spring flowers smear across the grass and the *pump-pump* motion a robin makes bobbing its head into the soil. He enjoys watching television, but has trouble focusing for long periods of time. "There are too many channels," Richard says. "Too many channels." He likes shows about the ocean, programs that deal with infinite spaces, and he seems especially delighted when a man catches a fish, no matter how small. "They gotta throw it back, Matthew," he says. "They gotta throw it back."

Richard injured a man once, very badly, with only his bare hands. He didn't mean to, he says, and he doesn't like to talk about it. He calls it "the

incident." That's how he arrived in my office one afternoon. After nearly a decade working as a behavioral therapist, I had never become close to any of my clients, but something about Richard was different. He was shy and withdrawn but warm when asked about the things he loved, like skyscrapers and the Latin names of things. Extremely intelligent, the paperwork explained, but hindered by layers of emotional resistance and occasional outbursts. Instead of talking, we would often play chess on a park bench for several hours, saying very little. Richard would rattle off the names of common flowers—"Taraxacum officinale are dandelions Matthew, clovers are trifolium"—before checkmating me. I only win if he becomes distracted, or if he remembers the incident, and then it's something else altogether, and it takes hours for Richard to become himself again.

When my wife finally left me, she said I loved Richard more than I loved her. "You don't understand," I said. She grabbed the antique lamp shaped like a swan that we bought together at a flea market in Tweed and stormed out the front door. I drank steadily for some time—a stark difference from heavily and much worse—but there were those nights, too. What I remember most from that period is a slow, steady descent, realizing the ritualistic motions of other lonely-hearted men occupying the barstools beside me. Drinking over the dinner hours. Slurring my words and stumbling home before darkness arrived. I haven't had a drink since.

During that time, I realized some people are like oil and water. Others, like the two of us, survived somewhere in the middle, negotiating a failing relationship over the course of many drawn-out years, begging silently for an end. She said she wanted a husband, a man, a father, as if I was none of these things any longer. I simply wanted someone who cared less about French manicures and throw pillows.

One night, two years after I'd met Richard, she walked into the bedroom and slowly slid her fake plastic nails beneath the elastic of her waistband, tugging the drawstring, her pants dropping to the ground.

"Matthew."

"Hmmm."

"Stop reading."

"Not now."

"When?"

"Not now."

"Just once I'd like you to at least pretend you're mildly interested."

"You want a deviant," I said.

"I want a man."

"You don't know what you want."

"Just once, just once I would like you to come up from behind me and hold me. Is that too much to ask?"

"I'm sorry."

"Do you know the first time we slept together you asked me 'Is this okay?' three times?"

"We never should have moved to the city."

"You've become obsessed with helping him. He has problems, Matthew."

"There is a difference between love and devotion. You'll never understand that."

When she slammed the door to our semi-detached home, the swan lamp and her other spoils of war sticking out from under her skinny, tanned arms, I could see through the tears in her eyes that she wished for a stronger man, a convicted man, one who built things made of metal in a garage and wore the same pair of faded jeans every Sunday. Years later, I can still remember the look on her face, a pair of defeated eyes pulsing with disappointment when I told her that it wasn't worth arguing about, that I'd rather be alone. That I'd rather be with Richard.

Richard wants to be good. He wants to be good more than anything in this world, but he doesn't know what that means, and doesn't know how to express it. He understands, despite the things he's done and the limitations of his ability to empathize, that the desire to be better is something worth fighting for. He fights every day for this feeling in his own way. And it makes me want to be good, too. In our world, this shared, noble act means something. And on the days when I'm not with him, I think about how the two of us have distilled the noise of the city and reduced our lives to the simplest of things: being good.

In a bookstore he says to me, "There are too many stories. We don't need that many stories, Matthew." Inside a coffee shop, he hears a song on the speakers. "There are too many musicians, Matthew." "Yes, there are a lot of musicians, Richard," I reply. "They sold their songs to car commercials, Matthew," he says thumbing a Norah Jones CD sitting on the front counter. "There are too many sequels and too many Panini sandwiches."

"You're right. They don't need to make another *Star Wars*. And I don't like Panini's very much."

"How old are you Matthew?"

"I'm forty-two. You know that."

"You're old."

"I know Richard."

"When's your birthday?"

"April 27, 1971."

"Tuesday. You were born on a Tuesday."

My ex-wife, on the day we first met, told me there is something dangerous about a man with just a coat and a book. She said a man like that has nothing to lose (except the book, I offered) and nothing to gain. What about knowledge, I replied, and she smiled, and we were together from that day forward. But now I imagine myself before all this ever happened, before I met her, before I started taking care of Richard, when I was a younger man without an ex-wife, armed only with a navy seaman's coat and a copy of *On The Road* sticking out from the front pocket, dreams like stars in the sky.

Richard has a difficult time ignoring things. This is especially true with the ubiquitous TV screens hanging above the subway platforms, a rolling 24-hour news channel complete with hockey scores, headlines and a clock. It's too much information for Richard to process, and he gets impatient en route to his doctor appointments.

"There are too many clocks," he says.

"I know, Richard."

"I know what time it is already, Matthew."

"I know you do."

"I know what day your birthday was."

"I know you do."

"April 27, 1971. Tuesday."

"Do you want to get on the next train, Richard?"

"Not yet, Matthew. Not yet."

Richard likes to look out windows, even on the subway. He doesn't like to thumb a cell phone, or scroll through a handheld music device like teenagers do instead of just sitting there, instead of just thinking. Richard doesn't like to read while traveling, either. He leans into the window, face pressed against the glass, processing a cacophony of sounds and myriad blurred images. Richard has never flown in a plane—he prefers viewing the countryside—so we take train trips together in the summer, north of the city, Richard in the window seat, myself in the aisle. He never understands where we are going until we get there, or how far we've traveled. He likes watching sunsets and dipping his feet off the dock into the lake.

Richard sits there, his lumbering frame wiggling its toes, singing songs under his breath, holding a fishing rod, never catching anything. He never speaks of the word happiness, but I often wonder if that's exactly what this moment is for him—late summer sun catching his neck, water stretching for miles, the thought of a small minnow on his line—happiness.

Richard is always looking back, remembering something, unable to envision the future. Most people can picture a spouse or children, but Richard retreats deep into a set of numbers and objects, dates and events when asked where he sees himself in five years. There are no other people in Richard's imagination. It's as if they don't exist at all.

A butterfly lands on a bicycle in the middle of the city on a bright spring morning and Richard gets excited, because he knows the average lifespan of a butterfly is twenty to forty days. This is how he classifies beauty. He doesn't grasp the ugliness of the world. He doesn't know about pancreatic cancer and car accidents, oil spills or sleazebag landlords on trial for raping female tenants. He doesn't grasp good and evil as moral questions to answer. He doesn't know the greed involved in building pipelines through endangered habitat, or broken love. He simply knows things and doesn't pass judgment, and sometimes that is what I wish for, too, for all the noise to dissipate, for all the regrets to disappear, so it's just Richard wondering aloud about things in the world, and me answering. And sometimes, just when I think he is wandering off into some unfamiliar place, he looks at me and grabs me by the arm.

"You can't drink oil, Matthew," Richard says.

"No, you can't," I say.

"We shouldn't harm anything, Matthew."

"We have a hard time forecasting the implications of our choices."

"There's too much noise, Matthew."

"The whales you mean. The whales we kill using sonar equipment. Do you think we need acoustic sanctuaries, Richard?"

"Do you think they know?"

"I think they do."

"We should love more things, Matthew."

"There's a difference between devotion and love, Richard."

"I know that. You do too, Matthew."

When I was seven years old, a blind man was killed crossing the street outside my parent's home. I heard the shrill shrieking of tires from

my bedroom, and I raced to the front door. I could see the man's lifeless body on the pavement. It was hot that summer, too hot to stay outside for an extended period of time, but the guide dog stayed there, in the searing heat of a country summer, refusing to leave his owner's side. Neighbours brought water, trying to coax the devoted animal away, but the dog stayed there, even when the body was removed, licking the ground.

When Richard died of a brain aneurism last fall, it felt like a black emptiness had ripped itself open in my chest cavity and everyone could see the details of my dark heart. The world feels bigger now, noisier, like a racetrack in the dead of July. But I carry him with me, like a book in my coat pocket. I sit on the aisle, even when the train is empty. And there are days when Richard's voice grows soft, barely a whisper, and his face blurs into the fading light of the day. Often I sit graveside with a chessboard, waiting for Richard to make a move. And I think about how there are too many clocks and not enough time. »

BRAVE NEW WORDS



GENDER FAILURE

Rae Spoon & Ivan E. Coyote

"Thoughtful, revelatory, brave, intermittently angry, and often quite touching, *Gender Failure* acts as a terrific primer about transgender politics."

—Vancouver Sun



ARTIFICIAL CHERRY

Billeh Nickerson

Sweetly flavored with a hint of cheeky, *Artificial Cherry* is the latest collection from one of Canada's showiest poets.

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SILENCE SPLASHING EVERYWHERE

by Raoul Fernandes

5 POEMS

Mixtape

He collects his friends' broken walkmans and builds a flying machine out of them. Straps in and launches from his rooftop in the fading light, just after the crows have passed. These are the controls: rewind, fast-forward, play, and stop. All other variables are left to the music on the cassettes, old mixes he has received from friends. One of the tapes ribbon is wrinkled in places from a recent unspooling. It murmurs and crackles, but it still works, still lifts the rickety machine. Another tape contains, in the last empty minutes, rainfall, a train in the distance. Someone says something he strains to hear. At this particular height, the landscape below seems toy-like, a miniature model, despite what all hell he has been through down there. The blue eyes of backyard swimming pools. A soccer field like a green diary, locked. What all hell. When you return, return with the strength gathered here, a charged battery, a wheel inside a wheel.

An Online Friend Dies Somewhere Outside The Internet

Freezes, goes blue screen, shuts down. Dead pixel, dark. Ghost echoes, lossy in the source code. Time-zones away people who have actually shaken hands with my online friend stand around a box of his remains. I'm left to click through data, two-dimensional and without decay, in multiple windows. Close all

until I'm left by the one that renders birds, sky, and keep-moving-nothing-to-see-here clouds. Nothing to see here. I go for a walk to the edge of town, daydream a closed-loop whirlwind in a field of tall grass. Cast a rock into the dark old sea.

White Noise Generator

for Amanda Todd

The autumn air feels guilt, the trees feel guilt, the cables and the pixels, the birds and the ditch. A tornado forms, tries to suck a ghost back down from its slow lift. Fails, then roars through the town then toward the next town over. Makes a point to hit every billboard on the way.

Horses run through sea-foam, white horses running through a calendar. The cold chemical smell of a permanent marker squeaking over rectangles of paper. A mood-ring on her hand rotating through the spectrum. All the strength needed in the narration, the thorn that digs deeper with the telling. What happened and is happening and the strength needed still.

Friend request like a conch shell left on your doorstep. Friend request like devil-horning every face in my old yearbook while on the phone into the wee hours. Friend request like would you like to see the portal I found in the school's darkroom? Friend request like lets cover ourselves in wet leaves and mud before math class. Friend request like I'll be your white noise generator.

An ocean is a good listener. An ocean works the teen suicide hotline 24-7 throughout the year. A conch shell (stay with me) is a telephone.

Friend request like a poem typed in an empty chat-room at the end of the night. Friend request like I got a rooftop, a joint, and a handful of stars with your name on it. Friend request like what is difficult is what is necessary is what is actually listening to another human speaking.

Picture a pear tree in the middle of a wasteland where the pear tree is you and the wasteland is the comment section.

Never interrupt a girl while she is trying to draw a horse. Never laugh when she whisper-sings under her breath walking across the soccer field. She may be summoning dragons, she may be summoning them against you.

Flashcards held in front of a window. Another then another. Trust and we shall be the receiver, love and we shall be the amplifier. Until the amplifier short circuits, the windows blow out, and silence splashes everywhere.

Driftwood

Let leaping embers burn through the open journal, the shoes, the army surplus jacket, the skin.

Let the driftwood fire converse with something in your chest as if you weren't there. Let it continue

until the police come down and instruct you to kick sand over the flames. And before that

someone always hefts a log, burning at one end, into the low tide. It hisses darkly. Nobody knows what it means, but it's not like we are in the business

of meaning things. You take off your grey-green jacket and offer it to a shivering girl but she shakes her head.

You set the jacket down and it crawls into the ocean, starts swimming out. Swims back an hour later, dripping and wiser.

What we feared: spiders, snakes, ourselves, drowning, embarrassment, girls, ourselves. A chord fumbled at a crucial moment, killing the song.

Later, outside a 7-Eleven, a man says *watch out for the bombs tonight* and I don't get it. Later, in a car window reflection,

I do. We pretend we are so gentle, so gentle we are not capable of a fist in a face, until we are, and then we are

frightened by our own wolf eyes in mirrors, shivering at a breakfast table in the early dawn after the long what-have-I-done-night. Or the

what-have-I-thought night.

Your jacket still smells of driftwood smoke after a few washes. Even after you get it together, move out, get a job

wearing a staticky headset, receiving calls from strangers miles away.

Let the ember burn through. Set your jacket down and it crawls into the ocean and doesn't come back. Let it stay there. In her way,

she's wearing it and while she's wearing it, thinking of you.



Attachments

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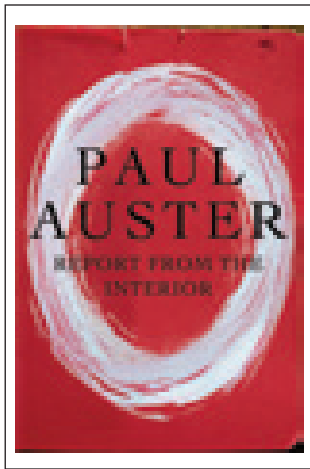
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He writes of reading, travel, sex. He pays tribute to the comic purity of a fart. He goes to Paris with little money and much misery, though it was “in almost every way, a perfect life.”

Initiated one year to the day after starting his exquisite *Winter Journal*, Paul Auster's *Report From the Interior*, like its predecessor, explores new strategies for customizing this amorphous genre we call “memoir.” Like *Winter Journal*, it's written in the second person, a logical form of address for a book that both mirrors the act of talking to oneself and uses the specifics of an individual life to speak about the mysteries of life in general.

Unlike *Winter Journal*, conceived of as a history of Auster's body and composed as a single sustained piece, this *Report*, which does something similar with the formation of Auster's consciousness from childhood to early adulthood, is divided into four sections. Inevitably, it lacks the same coherence. At times, it almost reads as nostalgia; at others, as a well-executed exercise only tenuously connected to the book's ostensible *raison d'être*. Call these flaws, failed experiments or idiosyncrasies, there is yet much that's fascinating, curious and moving.

The first, eponymous section, covering birth to age twelve, exudes Auster's control of reverie in prose both radiant and economical. He writes of his first sense of the world's injustice, first book purchase (Poe), first awareness of Judaism (and Jewish invisibility); of in-

venting an NFL quarterback to his birthday party; of his belief in the existence of secret letters in the alphabet; of how his father's isolation drove him inward, turning him “into a man who has spent the better part of his life sitting alone in

Report from the Interior by Paul Auster

McClelland & Stewart, 2013;
341 pp; \$30

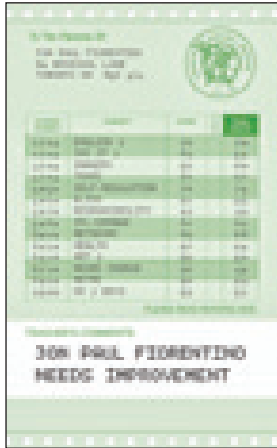
REVIEWED BY
Jose Teodoro

a room.” He describes sudden eerie interludes of disassociation (the second-person address works especially well here), recalling similar experiences recorded in Paul Bowles' memoir *Without Stopping*: “a feeling of anticipation and unease, as if you were both there and not there at the same time, no longer inside your own body, in the way one disappears into oneself in the grip of a dream.”

In *Two Blows to the Head*, Auster revisits a form he clearly enjoys: film narration, offering scene-by-scene descriptions of

The Incredible Shrinking Man and *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. Young Auster strongly identified with the shrinking man, who was, in a sense, turned into a writer by his freakish disease. But why devote so much of this *Report* to narrating films with little pertinent digression? The narration says more about sextegenarian Auster than pubescent Auster.

My favourite part of *Report* is composed of letters Auster wrote during college to the woman who would become his first wife, fellow author Lydia Davis. These letters brim with ambition and uncertainty, the feeling of being in love, and of longing. He writes of reading, travel, sex. He pays tribute to the comic purity of a fart. He goes to Paris with little money and much misery, though it was “in almost every way, a perfect life. Absolute freedom [...] dining out with your friends, watching movies at the Cinémathèque, taking long walks through the city [...] pining for your absent love...” At times the letters are clumsy and obviously under the sway of, say, Henry Miller, but in this lies their authenticity and verve. They are evocative, funny, inventive, a portrait of an artist's formation more deeply informative than any conventional autobiography. But convention is anathema to Auster's entire body of work. »



... what Fiorentino is doing with these report cards is much darker. In stark contrast we finally see the individual, a young boy from Transcona (Fiorentino's hometown) being abused by the education system, and also by those who hold the power within that system—and yet we feel compelled to laugh.

Last autumn saw the release of Jon Paul Fiorentino's book of experimental poetry *Needs Improvement*, published by Coach House Books. The title, *Needs Improvement*, taken from the egregious system for monitoring children's proficiency in assigned subjects, is a tongue-in-cheek play on institutionalized processes for valourizing or discrediting individuals based upon their ability to comply within certain normative modes of performativity.

One of the earlier poems in the collection, "Winnipeg Cold Storage Company," is appropriated from Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. However, in these little poems, Fiorentino replaces "gender" with "Winnipeg" or allusions to popular Winnipeg-based references. This re-negotiates the signifiers of Butler's work, taking it from the theoretical realm of systemic oppression and instead engaging with performativity as a sedimentation of identity with relation to place. Place, in and of itself, can imply certain other forms of compulsory performance with relation to class, cultural practices, specific dialectic identifiers, amongst others. Fiorentino, who is from Winnipeg, may have simply chosen the place as a site of his own nostalgic consciousness—however, one cannot help but ponder the relation between his past

role as a young student in Winnipeg and his current job as a University professor in Montreal. There is a clear relationship between being the subject of a grading system and being the benefactor of that same system; one must negotiate their identity in relation to their own power within that very system that once de-

Needs Improvement by Jon Paul Fiorentino

Coach House, 2013; 88 pp; \$17.95

REVIEWED BY
Julie Mannell

duced them to powerless.

Reading deeper into the book, one encounters mechanical drawings of machinery, a washing machine that details the parts and functions as they relate to "ideology," a showerhead representing "displacement." The reader begins to conflate theory with simple mechanics, models of production. Perhaps such impersonal modes of analyses problematize the role of the individual within that system. The individual disappears and all that is left is a model for how a thing might be used.

Abruptly Fiorentino inserts an experimental piece that is neither entirely poetry or prose. It is a series of report cards that reveal interactions between parents and teachers over the behaviour of the hopeless student "Leslie Mackie." Given a surface reading, the piece is sharp and funny. Leslie's parents confess to his second grade teacher: "Thanks for your patience. We love Leslie but sometimes we wish he didn't exist." However, what Fiorentino is doing with these report cards is much darker. In stark contrast we finally see the individual, a young boy from Transcona (Fiorentino's hometown) being abused by the education system, and also by those who hold the power within that system—and yet we feel compelled to laugh. Is the reader letting down Leslie Mackie too? Why should we care about him?

Fundamentally this book is a pointed critique of societal models of behaviour, models of which Fiorentino himself is a part. The way the cover is laid out is to imply that Fiorentino is grading himself, it is addressed to himself (if you look closely, the address cites experimental Canadian poet bpNichol) and reads "Jon Paul Fiorentino Needs Improvement." The author deprecates himself, sacrificing the authority of authorship to that invisible system the book continually harps back to. »



Reading these poems reminds me that literature and myth are inseparable, and that so many of our core narratives—fables, myths, religions—all come from a stone’s throw away from the same place. “So let’s cast our stories into the sea / and move on,” as the speaker says in “The Old Olive Tree.”

When reading poems I don’t immediately “get,” like these ones by acclaimed Iraqi-American Dunya Mikhail, I think of Heidegger’s dictum, “Tell me how you read and I’ll tell you who you are,” because it takes time to figure out how to read them. I took the “advance reader’s copy” mostly because the poet has a cool name, her book is short, and drawings accompany her series of twenty-four “Tablets.” But also because in the first piece, “The Iraqi Nights,” I saw a reference to Ishtar, the Sumerian goddess of love, war and sex whom I remember from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the world’s oldest work of literature, which in turn always makes me think of the “Darmok” episode of *Star Trek TNG* that was about metaphor and myths.

The first piece consists of seven poems that form a narrative about Ishtar and Tammuz, the god of food who was also the finicky Ishtar’s faithful lover, until they were separated by agents of the underworld. Mikhail’s speaker assumes the voice of Ishtar, who wrote on each of the seven gates to the underworld. “He would cross thousands of miles / for the sake of a single cup of tea / poured by my own hand,” says the speaker in the third, “I fear the tea is growing cold: / Cold tea is worse than death.” The seventh poem, which

begins “In Iraq, / after a thousand and one nights, / someone will talk to someone else,” steps out of mythological history into the ordinary present in the sense that these “nights” become metaphors for the recent war that her country has experienced.

The Iraqi Nights by Dunya Mikhail

translated from the Arabic
by Kareem James Abu-Zeid

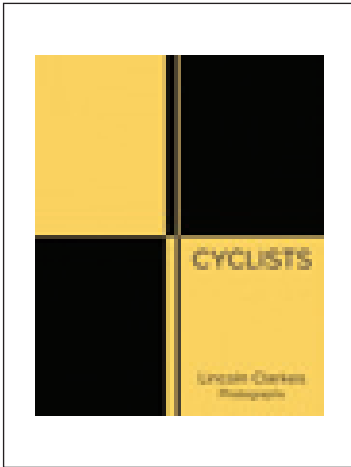
New Directions, 2014; 84 pp; \$15.95

REVIEWED BY
Peter Babiak

The intertext here, and elsewhere in Mikhail’s collection, is *The One Thousand and One Nights*, the well-known Middle Eastern narratives compiled in Arabic about a thousand years ago. In each, Scheherazade tells stories by night to escape death. It’s the archetypal narrative about the significance of narrative itself. Unlike her, Mikhail’s speakers aren’t always narrating from the same perspective, and aren’t faced with literal death, but there’s a sense of existential and romantic urgency

throughout. Tablet 12, for example, is a near-oriental love haiku: “Dates piled high / beside the road; / your way / of kissing me.” Tablet 21 is more political, resonating with the “Arab Spring”: “Instant messages / ignite revolutions / They spark new lives / waiting for a country to download.” Or 24, a loving but despairing diamante: “How thrilling to appear in his eyes. /...She looks at the mouth she’ll never kiss, / ...and at the ground where their shadows meet.”

Reading these poems reminds me that literature and myth are inseparable, and that so many of our core narratives—fables, myths, religions—all come from a stone’s throw away from the same place. “So let’s cast our stories into the sea / and move on,” as the speaker says in “The Old Olive Tree,” which is my favourite. I don’t know how else to read poetry like this except to scurry around looking for touchstones, and looking up historical references is the only way I know how to read poetry that is about the fictional narratives, the metaphors, that hold life together. »



With his extensive fashion and portrait work, Clarkes brings a street-style photography aesthetic to *Cyclists*. Just about everyone in this book looks like they are on their way to a modelling job. But despite the fact that they were captured in a public place, I do feel some discomfort with the camera's invasion into private moments of each apparently unaware subject.

What is your image of a cyclist? Sidewalk-riding scofflaw? Spandex-clad racer? Com-muter decked out in reflective stripes? Whatever their plumage, people on bikes stand out in a sea of cars, slipping gracefully or perilously (depending on your point of view) through choked city streets.

Lincoln Clarkes busts these stereotypes somewhat in his new collection of photographs simply titled *Cyclists*. Taking candid portraits of cyclists riding down the streets of Toronto between spring 2011 and fall 2012, he focuses on the most breathtaking and stylish members of the cycling species.

Clarkes is well known for *Heroines* (Anvil Press, 2002), his collection of portraits of women on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. With his extensive fashion and portrait work, Clarkes brings a street-style photography aesthetic to *Cyclists*. Just about everyone in this book looks like they are on their way to a modelling job. But despite the fact that they were captured in a public place, I do feel some discomfort with the camera's invasion into private moments of each apparently unaware subject.

Aside from the introduction by Judith Tansley, which invites readers to imagine themselves sitting at a sidewalk

cafe with Clarkes watching "the city's most elegant cyclists glide by," there is no text accompanying the photographs. With no names, stories, dates, times or locations attached, the viewer is free to focus purely on the physical details in the frame—the style of the bicycle, the expression on a face, the length of

Cyclists: Photographs by Lincoln Clarkes

Quattro Books, 2013; 150 pp; \$35

REVIEWED BY
Christine Rowlands

a skirt or shorts—as well as each subject's relationship to surrounding traffic and apparent accordance (or not) with rules of the road.

As a cyclist, I found myself looking through the pages for evidence of "bike-ness" among the photographs, admittedly to compare my own attempts at cycle chic (i.e., dressing for cycling without looking like a "cyclist") with the people on these pages. Accessories such as helmets and pannier bags are in scant evidence; reflectiveness is not a

visibility strategy in use at all; and even the bikes are minimalist, betraying few practical attachments such as brackets for water bottles and locks, baskets and racks. Many women wear flip-flops and very short-shorts with reckless abandon. Free of most encumbrances save a bag slung low around the body, these people do not even appear to sweat.

Of course, the images Clarkes selected for *Cyclists* are perhaps but a fraction of the hundreds of images he shot over two years. There are about twice as many "ladies" pictured as "gentlemen," though many studies of cycling show women have only just started to catch up to men in terms of owning and riding bikes. But hey, they don't look as pretty. (Some of the guys wear athletic gear, even.) And as alluded to in the introduction, the risk of retribution for an unwanted picture is greater.

One of the stated goals of this collection is to glamourize the act of cycling, not only to make it look cool but also to contrast it with the environmental danger and "false freedoms" of automobiles. He certainly succeeds in choosing beautiful subjects who embody youth and fashion and sustainable transportation choices to boot. Now if only there were a wider range of people who were considered beautiful enough to be *Cyclists*. »



Kay has artfully fashioned her multi-storied debut novel into a highly-readable organic unit, with all of its elements falling neatly into place. As the riveting narrative unfolds, the fleshed-out characters act as we expect, like them or not, given their circumstances and environment.

In *De Niro's Game* Rawi Hage mined the underworld of 1980s Beirut for its literary gold. Now, Ailsa Kay has done the same for 1950s Budapest, rooting around several storeys under the city's floor, searching for tunnels and cells rumoured to have housed numerous lost souls imprisoned during Hungary's Communist "Reign of terror." The search, of course, in Kay's engaging, gold-standard *Under Budapest* is for more than legendary tunnels and cells—it's for a missing sister, a long-lost lover, memories of "the girls they used to be," and a murderer.

The grit and crime of the city is introduced with two teenagers, Csaba Bekes, an angry, penniless Hungarian, and Janos Hago, a Canadian on a re-visit, flush with Canadian cash, chasing down and beating a homeless man while the *turistas* see "Just the usual *turista* shit. Vaci Utca, the market, Castle Hegy, whatever."

But we soon learn that this is not a novel for the *turistas* as the naive Janos becomes a stand-in for Csaba's brother Laci, a role that leads him to lose his head, literally, when it is lopped off and rolls past Tibor Roland, a York University academic. An unwitting witness to the killing, Tibor is convinced he knows the unseen killer's voice.

But Kay has more to serve up than mere mystery as she cleverly introduces

back and side stories of Tibor's affair with his best friend's wife and his mother Agnes' coincidental trip to Budapest to visit the *turista* hot-spots, lesser-known back alleys and an underground cellar to research the infamous tunnels. As well, there's the 1956 disappearance of her younger sister Zsofi. She's also tracking her own long-ago love affair

Under Budapest by Ailsa Kay

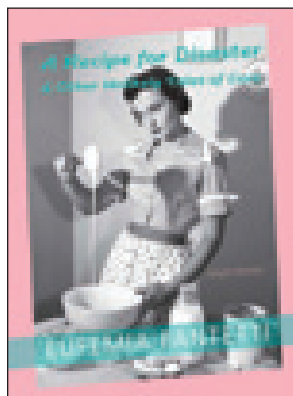
Goose Lane Editions, 2013;
256 pp; \$19.99

REVIEWED BY
Wayne Cunningham

with a former rebel leader, Gyula, now an established "businessman," but with previous ties to the sisters as well. As paths of various characters cross and re-cross during the scenes of the '50s conflict, a noose tightens around Tibor's neck as he slip-slides from witness to framed murder suspect when images on his camera are twisted into evidence of his wrongdoing. Whether he escapes the noose is best left for potential readers to discover.

But what should be revealed is that Kay has artfully fashioned her multi-storied debut novel into a highly-readable organic unit, with all of its elements falling neatly into place. As the riveting narrative unfolds, the fleshed-out characters act as we expect, like them or not, given their circumstances and environment. The tenuous mother-son relationship, for example, is illustrated when Agnes repays Tibor's slight by vowing "to order an overpriced lunch and charge it to her son." Stark images stand out like the one of a guard dumping a pail of feces over a prisoner's head. Dialogue quickens or slows the narrative while the use of Hungarian phrases and references to *turista* sites reinforce the authenticity of the setting. And the detailed accounts of the bloodied street fights in October 1956 with Hungarian pistols and rifles against Soviet machine guns and tanks are as evocative of pain and suffering as any of today's television images in Syria's continuing conflict.

In an end-page note, Kay refers to the Hungarians' many years of "national amnesia," about the Russian occupation of the '50s. Her masterful novel should do much to shake loose the recollections and bring the story forward with a new face for today's readers. »



When the title story which opens the book fulfilled the promise offered by the book's design, I was hooked. As it describes the rise and fall of a relationship, it employs the structure of a recipe, using such directives as *Sift through all your childhood memories together. Fold in your family histories at medium-high speed.*

There's something appealing about a retro photograph. You know the kind I mean—a black & white image of a housewife from the '50s, perfectly coiffed, engaged in some mindless household task. I can't help but think that much of the appeal may lie in reminding us of roles women no longer have to fill, tasks they no longer worry about.

The cover of *A Recipe for Disaster* depicts the perfect Mrs. Wifey, aproned and staring rather glumly at what I suspect may be batter for an item once known as popovers. This cover shot is accented with wedding-cake turquoise and pink. Heck, even the end pages make me blush for the design: pink. Drawings inside extend the metaphor; each story is introduced by a sketch of some kitchen tool—rolling pin, grater, the proverbial rubber lick. Design-wise, the book looks fresh out-of-the-oven irresistible.

When the title story which opens the book fulfilled the promise offered by the book's design, I was hooked. As it describes the rise and fall of a relationship, it employs the structure of a recipe, using such directives as *Sift through all your childhood memories together. Fold in your family histories at medium-high speed.* Although the characters' names, Adam and Eve, seem

overly cute, the author has taken this into account and offers a half-cup of apology with, "Eve has met someone. His name is Adam. Their friends find this funny, and fortuitous."

The other stories are less about romance than about not-always-easy relationships with aging parents, siblings, close friends—and, yes, even

thing that's nowhere near true, slams her against the wall: "I felt the snap in my arm all the way to my teeth. John kept me company while I whimpered on the floor until Gram came and took me to the hospital. John signed my cast with a bunch of different names: Ike Newton, Charlie Darwin and Al Einstein." This combination—where the horrific situation is faced with humour creates much of the charm in her stories.

Unfortunately, not all the stories live up to this standard. Too many characters come across as whiney and self-centered. Sure, they're *supposed* to be that way—that's why somebody's breaking up with them, leaving them for someone who might be more interesting. But darn, after encountering a few of them, I couldn't help but find them tiresome.

Fantetti has won a number of awards for her writing—and I'm sure she'll win more. As for this book, some of the batter seems a little bit thin. »

A Recipe for Disaster & Other Unlikely Tales of Love by Eufemia Fantetti

Mother Tongue Press, 2013;
100 pp; \$18.95

REVIEWED BY
Heidi Greco

partners. Considering there are only six stories in the entire book, they manage to cover a fair bit of territory, not all of it especially happy.

My favourite, a piece called "Sweets," conveys something of the reliance-on-each-other developed by siblings in desperate situations. Told in first person, much of it is nicely understated. Consider this brief scene where her brother John comes to her aid when their mother, accusing her of some-



Amber Dawn does not fit into the oppressive structures and boxes society has laid out for women. As a queer, femme, feminist, assault survivor, activist and artist who worked in the indoor and outdoor sex trade, her multi-layered identity and experiences transgress socio-cultural expectations of class, gender and sexuality. Likewise, her story cannot be told according to hierarchical structures and rigid categories of genre.

How *Poetry Saved My Life: A Hustler's Memoir* is a love letter to experimental writing. By combining poetry and prose in her memoirs, Amber Dawn demonstrates how genre-crossing can open the door to empowering possibilities less accessible in more traditionally structured formats.

The book is a series of poems and personal essays divided into three parts: "Outside," "Inside," and "Inward," which speak to the author's life in the outdoor sex trade, the indoor sex trade, and her reflections after exiting. The poems and essays are not discrete from each other; they flow well together, and many pieces carry elements of both genres, such as the ten-page prose poem, "Bikini Kill Lyrics," which is told in six parts as a succession of events that almost feels like a short story.

In "Self-Addressed Postcards," Dawn continues to play with form, while revisiting memories of sex outside a Parisian nightclub, visiting a Virginia sorority house after a neo-cabaret performance, and swimming in Horseshoe Bay during summer nights with her future wife. Each of these pieces is delivered as a textual snippet rather than as a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Dawn is self-reflective when playing with the structure, begin-

ning "Everyone Hearts a Virginia Girl" by describing an orgasm, before saying, "But you can't begin a story at the climax."

The second person voice used in many pieces in the book, works beautifully in these "postcards," which sit in the "Inward" section. By writing in the second person, Dawn invites the

ond person might not have worked well in a straight-prose memoir, the eclectic format of the book allows such transitions to work well, and bridges art with activism.

Amber Dawn does not fit into the oppressive structures and boxes society has laid out for women. As a queer, femme, feminist, assault survivor, activist and artist who worked in the indoor and outdoor sex trade, her multi-layered identity and experiences transgress socio-cultural expectations of class, gender and sexuality. Likewise, her story cannot be told according to hierarchical structures and rigid categories of genre. The brave combination of literary forms we see in *How Poetry Saved My Life* is the result of Dawn speaking her truth using mediums that can deliver it authentically.

Poetry, of course, is the ultimate star, the form Dawn finds most capable of articulating her holistic self and story. She writes that "poetry can make even the highest concepts concrete," echoing Audre Lorde's statement that "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought." Coming from a social location packed with stories but accosted with silence, Amber Dawn has transgressively named the unnamed. »

How Poetry Saved My Life: A Hustler's Memoir by Amber Dawn

Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013;
156 pp; \$15.95

REVIEWED BY
Natasha Sanders-Kay

reader to look inward, too. Although the "you" she writes to is clearly herself, the device opens the door to identify with the writer. Since her story is one laden with stigma from the public eye, this is a brilliant move to challenge readers to look deep inside our own prejudices and vulnerabilities.

In other pieces, Dawn addresses the reader directly, urging us to break our own silences and tell our own stories. While switching between first and sec-



While these stories return repeatedly to a fairly specific sort of character and narrative, they pose interesting questions about the nature of the self in the Internet Age, in prose that's easy to read and often funny.

How have sex and dating been affected by mobile and digital technologies? Elizabeth Cohen's debut short fiction collection *The Hypothetical Girl* offers answers to this question. While these stories return repeatedly to a fairly specific sort of character and narrative, they pose interesting questions about the nature of the self in the Internet Age, in prose that's easy to read and often funny.

Cohen's protagonists are generally white, heterosexual women she describes as "of a certain age," usually meaning they are at the cusp of forty, or just past fifty. Reaching these milestones today means re-negotiating romantic and sexual agency. In "Dog People," Clarissa meets Harry at a dog park, and this initial face-to-face encounter is an anomaly—which she recounts to her best friend via Facebook chat.

Though there are similarities between Cohen's characters, they aren't completely monochromatic. There are multiple references to Jewish identity, and more than one Jewish/Latino cross-cultural relationship. These women are for the most part middle class: they teach yoga, have memorized Shakespeare, cook with pine nuts. Cohen's gaze is knowing and occasionally satirical. In "Life Underground," the single Alana observes her local grocery: "Couples

with their babies strapped on in very cool Swedish baby carriers, consulting about avocado condition."

Many stories follow a standard trajectory: Woman meets man online, they (sometimes) meet in real life, and things (usually) don't work out for one reason or another. The occasions when Cohen steps out of these bounds are when things get more interesting.

The Hypothetical Girl by Elizabeth Cohen

Other Press, 2013; 256 pp; \$16.95

REVIEWED BY
Shawn Syms

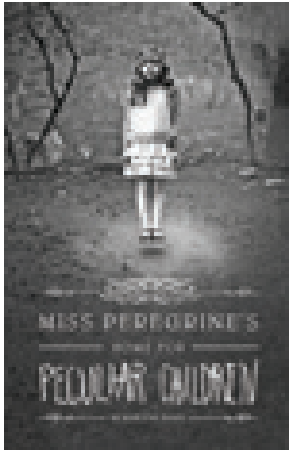
In "The Hardness Factor," Estelle, a secretary at the God Bless America meatpacking plant, prepares for a first meeting with self-described "ugly man" Charlie while fending off non-stop messages from her septuagenarian texting-addict mother. Throughout the day, Estelle views herself in mirrors and sees someone different looking back at her, a reflection upon the constructed nature of the online self. Cohen reveals how beauty and ugliness are as much about social and economic class as looks,

and that our identities are composed of everything we've ever done, good or shameful.

The role of disabilities and illness in social perceptions of attractiveness and worth is a recurring theme. In "The Opposite of Love," Rita learns about her great new teaching job, and her stage-two breast cancer diagnosis, on the same day. Rita wrestles with the question of disclosure, not wanting anyone to know about her illness or treatment—until she can no longer disguise that clumps of hair are falling from her head. Meanwhile she finds solace on an anonymous Internet message board where she can be completely truthful.

"People Who Live Far, Far Away" turns a commonplace idea—that people are dishonest online—into a short but complex and satisfying story. Miko is not an Icelandic yak farmer and Misty is not a twenty-three-year-old model—and when each reveals their "true" self, they're still lying. In actuality he is a paraplegic war veteran, she a caretaker for a severely disabled twin sister—the irony being that each may have understood one another if they had taken the risk to be honest.

Despite frequent tonal similarities, the stories in *The Hypothetical Girl* offer smooth prose and thematic complexity. »



“Peculiarness is determined by genes, not geography. But large portions of the peculiar world have simply not been explored.”

So says a character in Ransom Riggs’ *Hollow City*, Riggs’ second unique novel about the riveting adventures of the peculiars first introduced in *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children*. Picking up where book one left off, *Hollow City* recounts with an admirably imaginative mix of dated black and white photographs and sparkling prose just how peculiar the genes and talents of its characters are, and just how widespread the world of peculiardom is. It’s a fascinating read for young and old, peculiar or not themselves.

The several characters are led by sixteen-year-old Jacob Portman and Emma Bloom, “an old crone hiding in the body of a girl,” because of the time loop in which she, Jacob and their friends find themselves. They’re on a three-day mission to deliver their ymbryne, Miss Alma LeFay Peregrine, now trapped in a large bird’s broken-winged body. They must get from Wales to London during the Nazi blitz of the early 1940s to have her returned to her former self. Pursued by wights and hollows, they need to use their peculiarities to save themselves from various dangers: Jacob suffers pain that makes him puke as he

Filled with drama, thrilling action, and surprising wrenches of plot, the narrative is enhanced with more than fifty pages of “authentic, vintage, found photographs” that Riggs took several years to collect, and which have been left unaltered save for a few.

senses the hollows nearby, Olive Abroholos Elephanta floats like a balloon to spy upon the enemies below, Millard Mullings is invisible and wreaks his own havoc, Emma creates flames with her hands while Hugh Apiston belches bees to attack intruders. As they travel into and out of time loops, they encounter hens that lay bombs, a talking, pipe-

Hollow City: The Second Novel of Miss Peregrine’s Peculiar Children by Ransom Riggs

Quirk Books, 2014; 400 pp; \$17.99

REVIEWED BY
Wayne Cunningham

smoking dog, a teenager with a circular hole in her mid-section that will “fill in in a day or so,” another who can encase a building in thick ice, and a folding man who fits neatly into a suitcase. When they arrive in London and travel through Sir Christopher Wren’s subterranean crypt, they find the city isn’t a safe haven for themselves and Miss Peregrine. But there’s more to be told in Riggs’s next volume. He promises it’s coming soon.

Filled with drama, thrilling action, and surprising wrenches of plot, the narrative is enhanced with more than fifty pages of “authentic, vintage, found photographs” that Riggs took several years to collect, and which have been left unaltered save for a few. Besides those depicting such examples in peculiardom as an emu-raffe and a house perched on a mountain of railroad ties, there are portrait shots of “peculiar personae,” such as Enoch O’Connor who can bring the dead to life for short spans of time, Claire Densmore who has an extra mouth in the back of her head and Fiona Frauenfeld, “A silent girl with a peculiar talent for making plants grow.” The group, like the boys on the beach in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* morphs into an ensemble cast of memorable characters with a blossoming romance between Jacob and Emma, fierce leadership rivalry between Jacob and Enoch, and strong ties between the excessively powerful Bronwyn Bruntley, and the excessively fragile Olive who must wear lead-lined shoes to keep herself grounded.

Whether in portraying the genes and talents of Miss Peregrine’s peculiar children or in exploring portions of the world of peculiardom, Ransom Riggs has done a peculiarly fine job. »



Poetry, if it's read outside classrooms, isn't something most people like. Reading a poem isn't just reading; it's work. And the object of that labour can, to average minds, seem pretentious and self-involved, an unproofread mess of language that pretends to be, through its head-scratching words, all deep and momentous. *Black Liquor* is one of a handful of poetry books I can think of that are decidedly *not* like that.

This book, which reads like a memoir pared down to lyrical episodes tracing the contours of a distinctly West Coast working-class life, is social realism at its best. Youth, travel, romance, death, history, and, above all, the work of living. One of the works in *Growing up Industrial*, the first of five parts that structure the volume, is "Mr Rage," about a WWII war vet who, in the speaker's recollection of being in grade six in 1964, was "a haunted house on lurching legs." Someday, he writes, "we would be at history's displeasure/like him/Ragged and enflamed." In "Green Canticle," the only poem I know that makes a lumber mill a sublime object, nine years have passed. It's 1973 and at work "We are/with callus and leather apron/resin souls/amid true boards travelling." Bolen doesn't mythologize labour, but a mythology of work is etched out in his delibera-

Bolen, who writes with Proust's hallowed sense of history and Chandler's knack for sharp metaphors, is just so damn good with words that you find yourself stepping up your reading, transfixed by the effects of syntax and wondering at the remarkable things language can do in the quietest moments of a poem, even as you want to push further in the captivating narrative arc he's built.

tive syntax. And so part one is a series of trenchant memories few would consider worthy of tender poetry, as are *The Great Wander*, poised on moving away from Vancouver Island, *Federal Parole Officer*, about Bolen's working life, *Attractions*, and *Somme Wheat Field*, the last part, an eerily melodic coda to a life and the remembrance of its past.

Black Liquor: Poems by Dennis E. Bolen

Caitlin Press, 2013; 128 pp; \$16.95

REVIEWED BY
Peter Babiak

But structure isn't everything. Poetry, like Northrop Frye once said, is "language used with the greatest possible intensity." And Bolen, who writes with Proust's hallowed sense of history and Chandler's knack for sharp metaphors, is just so damn good with words that you find yourself stepping up your reading, transfixed by the effects of syntax and wondering at the remarkable things language can do in the quietest moments of a poem, even as you want to push further in the captivating narrative arc he's built. Here's an example from

"On the Supposed Road," an homage to Kerouac where the speaker unfolds a road trip but pauses, wistfully, on the immanent nostalgia of impermanent relationships: "and I knew in a certain moment/...There would come a regret/and the thing most piteous/is how soon it came." And another from "Witness Statement"—which is hands-down my favourite because it reminds me of Al Purdy and is every bit as good—about a car accident near the Vancouver train station and a beautiful woman who witnesses it: "In me/or might/if time allowed/circumstance stood apart/from present necessity/or whatever/As long as she said something." Yes, charming occurrences happen to all of us but the attentive syntax, which stands out as Bolen's signature technique, demonstrates that the thought such events produce is never quite so simple.

According to the book's epigraph, "black liquor" is a "by-product of the kraft process"—how you get pulp from wood—and each of these poems is crafted with the exacting meticulousness of an industrial process of mechanical and chemical distillation. I know Bolen mostly as a writer of gritty stories, prose that renders urban ugliness so lyrically. His movement into poetry has only honed that ability. »

« CONTRIBUTOR NOTES »»

Jordan Abel is a Nisga'a writer from Vancouver. His chapbooks have been published by JackPine Press and Above/Ground Press, and his work has appeared in numerous magazines and journals across Canada, including *Prairie Fire*, *CV2*, and *Canadian Literature*. Abel's first book, *The Place of Scraps*, was published recently by Talonbooks.

Joanne Arnott is a Métis/mixed-blood writer and arts activist. She lives in the river. Mother to six young people, all born at home, she has published six books of poetry. She edited AWCWC's Salish Seas anthology (2011). New books: *A Night for the Lady* (Ronsdale, 2013); *Halfling spring* (Kegeedonce, 2014).

Peter Babiak is currently working on an as-yet-untitled collection of essays. He teaches English at Langara College in Vancouver.

Juliane Okot Bitek's writing has won awards in Canada, United States, and Britain. She is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Interdisciplinary studies at the University of British Columbia. She identifies as a diasporic person, a world citizen, and a guest on this land.

Jim Christy is a writer, artist, and tireless traveller. The author of more than twenty books, including poetry, short stories, novels, travel, and biography, his travels have taken him from the Yukon to the Amazon, Greenland to Cambodia. He has covered wars and exhibited his art internationally. Raised in inner city Philadelphia, he moved to Toronto when he was twenty-three years old and became a Canadian citizen at the first opportunity.

Emily Davidson writes and works in Vancouver, BC, far from her native Saint John, NB. Her poetry has appeared in *Arc*, *carte blanche*, *Descant*, *The Fiddlehead*, and *Room*. Her fiction was short-listed for *The Malahat Review's* 2013 Far Horizons Award for Short Fiction. She reviews for the *Telegraph-Journal*.

Raoul Fernandes lives and writes in Vancouver, BC. His poems have been published in *The Malahat Review*, *CV2*, *Poetry is Dead*, and *Event*, among others. In 2010 he was a finalist for the Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging Writers. He is an editor for the online poetry journal *The Maynard* (www.themaynard.org) and is currently assembling his first manuscript.

Jon Paul Fiorentino is the author of the poetry collection *Needs Improvement*, the novel *Stripmalling*, which was shortlisted for the Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction, and five previous poetry collections, including *Theory of the Loser Class*, which was shortlisted for the A. M. Klein Prize and *Indexical Elegies* which won the 2009 CBC Books "Bookie" Award for Best Book of Poetry. He lives in Montreal.

Beth Goobie's two collections of poetry are *Scars of Light* (winner of the 1995 Pat Lowther Award) and *The Girls Who Dream Me*. She is currently on a Saskatchewan Arts Board writing grant for poetry and lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Recent publication credits include: *Descant*, *The Antigonish Review*, and *The Malahat Review*, with poems forthcoming in *The New Quarterly* and *Prairie Fire*.

Alban Goulden writes in New Westminster, BC and Empress, AB—among other places. He can't remember whether or not he has an extensive publishing history, has won any literary prizes, obtained any university degrees, or whether he has ever taken or taught creative writing.

Laura Hartenberger lives in Toronto. Her writing appears or is forthcoming in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Cutbank Magazine*, *NANO Fiction*, *Dragnet* and others.

Gerilee McBride is a writer and designer working in the BC publishing industry. When not watching old episodes of *Magnum P.I.* she can be found biking, pickling things, or dreaming of her next trip somewhere sunny. She also occasionally blogs about these things at www.talkandnottalk.com

Robert Nathan's fiction has appeared in *The Maple Tree Literary Supplement* and *The Feathertale Review*, and has been longlisted for the CBC Canada Writes Prize. His literary journalism has been featured in *The Guardian* and *The National Post*. He is also a Killam Doctoral Scholar in History at Dalhousie University.

Stephen Osborne is publisher and editor-in-chief of *Geist*. He is also the award-winning author of *Ice & fire: Dispatches from the New World*. Stephen was the recipient of the inaugural Vancouver Arts Award for Writing and Publishing in 2004 and he won the CBC Literary Award for Travel Writing in 2003 for his essay "Girl Afraid of Haystacks."

Brian Palmu is a gambler living on BC's Sunshine Coast. His reviews have appeared in *Canadian Notes & Queries* and *Maisonneuve*, as well as his own site, brianpalmu.blogspot.com.

A graduate of Trent University and Ryerson University, **Philip Quinn** lives in Toronto and online at www.philipquinn.ca. Published books include: *Dis Location*, *Stories After the Flood* (Gutter Press 2000); *The Double, a novel*. (Gutter Press 2003); *The Subway* (BookThug 2008); and *The Skeleton Dance*, a novel (Anvil Press 2009).

April Salzano teaches writing in Pennsylvania. She is currently working on two poetry collections and a memoir on raising a child with autism. Her work has appeared in *The Camel Saloon*, *Writing Tomorrow* and *Rattle*. She is co-editor at Kind of a Hurricane Press and was recently nominated for two Pushcart awards.

Adam Elliott Segal is a Vancouver-raised writer currently living in Toronto. His work has been previously published in *subTerrain*, *The Feathertale Review*, *enRoute*, *Chatelaine*, *Reader's Digest* and *The Vancouver Province*. His novel *Tether* was recently accepted into the Diaspora Dialogues mentorship program where he worked with acclaimed novelist Shyam Selvadurai. His book *MMA Now!* is forthcoming in 2014.

Rachel Shabalin is currently working towards an English Honours Degree with a Creative Writing Concentration at the University of Calgary. She is a Research Assistant for the Zeugmatic digital humanities project, and her poetry has appeared in local punk rock zines.

Caroline Szpak was born in Istanbul; she's lived in Poland, Toronto, Calgary, studied writing at the University of Victoria, and now calls Toronto home again. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in *This Magazine*, *subTerrain*, *CV2*, *The Maple Tree Literary Supplement*, *The Week Shall Inherit The Verse*, and the chapbooks *Expense Account*, *Garland Get Your Gun*, and *Pomeranian Front* (from Horse of Operation).

Daniel Zomparelli is the editor of *Poetry Is Dead* magazine. He writes and works with magazines across Vancouver including *Geist*, *Megaphone Magazine*, *Sad Mag* and formerly *Adbusters*. His first book of poems *Davie Street Translations* was published by Talonbooks.

“Poetry can’t wind clocks, but it can tell the time.”

This Ralph Gustafson embedded aphorism, from the titular essay first published in 1949, denies the enthusiastic and opposite claims of poetry as isolation or propaganda. Arriving as it did in a climate of hotly critical debate, the three-page assertion picked its way through the often contentious arguments made by either side, marshaling the force of humanistic revelation against prevailing beliefs of poetry as useless amusement or godly science.

Poet, translator, pornographer, and memoirist John Glassco demonstrated, while wearing those different hats, his friend’s typically positive assertion that (Gustafson, in another essay) “a poem cannot lie; its delight is spoiled.” While Glassco’s untruths were often telegraphed, even prominently displayed, in various letters and prefaces about and to his prose works, his poems were meticulously ordered, his voice navigating complex emotional architecture with linguistic power and restraint.

Though Gustafson and Glassco embodied, in their art, the unapologetic nobility of poetry’s claims, the ironic and amusing divergences in their visions, one from the other, served to complicate the traffic between appearance and truth. Gustafson could walk a hundred yards from his house in winter, and note the “grosbeak/fight[ing] for seeds” (“Wednesday at North Hatley”), and even though “chance is against” the narrator, “a gentleness obtains.” For Glassco, this isn’t just foreign territory (he lived only a hundred or so miles from Gustafson), but a foreign inner world. He’d walk, or direct his horse, down milder spring lanes, but obsess over “[d]ull meadows that have gone to seed” (“Deserted Buildings Under Sheford Mountain”).

So who’s telling the truth? Or are the relativists correct that any assertion, positive or negative, is simply arrogance? Both, and no. Just because wildly different conclusions result from similar experiences doesn’t mean everything’s a subjective absurdity. In *Memories of Montparnasse*, that well-known reminis-

LAST WORD

What Time Is It?

BRIAN PALMU

cence of 1929 Paris, Glassco’s sprightly classicism couldn’t belie the skewed facts and fanciful escapades. But as the author stoutly claimed, when considering the life of another prominent memoirist, Casanova, “we grasp the truth that man is not only a living creature but the person of his own creation.” In another episode from the same work, Glassco recounts the sculptor Ossip Zadkine’s hilarious scorn: “Geometrical forms are a pernicious nonsense. I object to the full moon, for instance, as a sterile, stupid circle.” That encounter must have left a mark on the Quebec writer, who, in the last lines of his later and excellent “Gentleman’s Farm,” transformed that thought into, “[t]he grand design/Must marry the ragged thing, and of the vision/Nothing endure that does not gain through ruin/The right, the wavering line.”

But despite the omniprevalence of confessional verse the past half-century, poetry is manipulation. Consider the fantastical hyperdrama of Milton’s “Paradise Lost.” Or the rhetoric of Ginsberg’s “Howl.” The oversized narratives are as likely to occur as an accountant booming a Wagnerian aria when entering his crowded morning office. I’ve always been acutely puzzled when anyone promotes a movie or novel by aping the trailer-bite’s “based on a true story,” as if this automatically made the endeavour more authentic. (It’s interesting that Glassco began submitting poetry with a surrealist effort, though he later decried the mode.)

Any theory of “truth” necessarily follows—more exactly, puffs at the heels of—creation. Even in the realm of rationality, poetry has it over explication

(propaganda) or obfuscatory pride (isolation). The great R.P. Blackmur: “Art keeps reason on its toes, makes it jump and shift its ground, and jump again.” And prose, or reason, is paradoxical and problematic even at its best. Blackmur didn’t write poetry, and Gustafson was frequently didactic, an unfortunate propensity when it popped up, unintegrated, in his poetry.

I finished *A Gentleman of Pleasure*, the biography of John Glassco written by Brian Busby, this past February the second. The coda states that Glassco’s funeral was held on February the second of 1981. February the second was also the date Glassco mistakenly signed, in his last written words, and on the day of his death on January the twenty-ninth, as an inscription to Stephen Scobie for the latter’s copy of *Memoirs of Montparnasse*. Robert McAlmon, Glassco’s significant friend from those Paris travels, died on February the second of the same year I was born, 1956. February the second is, of course, 2/2, and mathematically and in certain longstanding spiritual traditions, 2 is the first number of duality, of falsehood—the dividing of 1, or of unity. And last (or last for now, since there’re no end to lies), February the second is Groundhog Day, and it was brilliant sunshine here, dawn to dusk. The rodent’s shadow, therefore, means the weather has to conform to freezing conditions for another six weeks. (Or maybe that’s only for marmots in Pennsylvania. Lies are confusing, but they’re often entertaining.)

Prose is filled with parallels, off-centre if not clumsy. Coincidences.

The best poetry is suffused with metaphors, the object as one with its observer, and with the other available objects.

The last alarm clock I bought was in 1981, a Westclox for eight bucks. I’d like to say it was on February the second, but I don’t know. I slot in a new battery every six months or so, but it still works even if I have to add three minutes once a week. But although everyone can readily access multiple and accurate working watches, clocks, and microwave digital read-outs, many still say it’s noon when it’s midnight, and midnight when it’s noon. »



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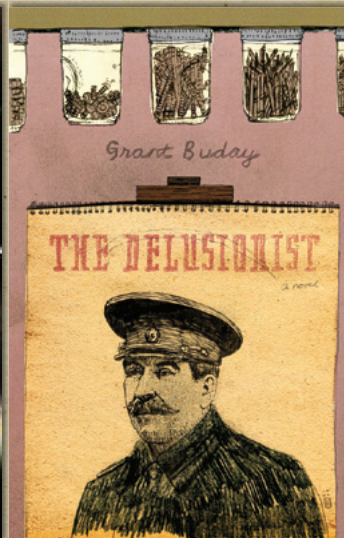
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