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TADDLE CREEK

VOL. V

SUMMER 2002

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COVER STAR

Laura Tobias, circa 1943. Photograph by M. Fred Tobias.

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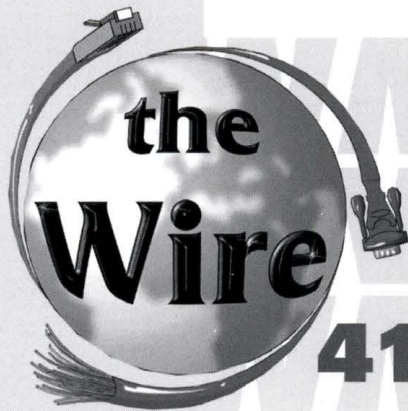
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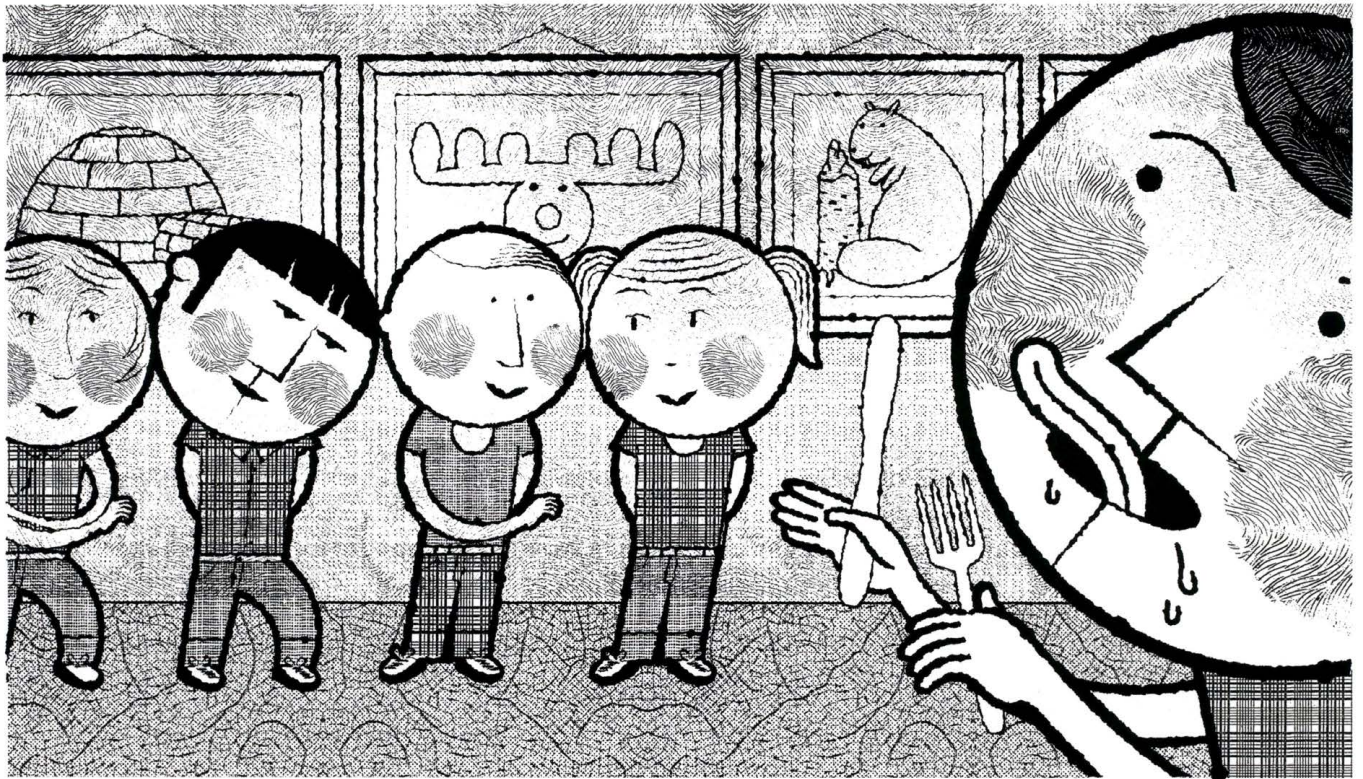
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THE USELESS

(For Derek McCormack)

FICTION BY HAL NIEDZVIECKI

I was nominated for an award. I didn't win.

Where are the artists?! the Mayor bel-
lowed. He opened his arms.

The Mayor wore a bright shirt splat-
tered with tropical flowers. His chest hair
billowed from between his open collars.

We are the artists, I said.

Keep on painting those fabulous pic-
tures! the Mayor roared.

He was very tan.

We live in peculiar times. I haven't
given up on understanding
them. There are elections, but nobody
votes. There are political parties, but they
all promise the same thing. Why not?
We are simple people. We want what
they promise us.

After the ceremonies, I began receiv-
ing invitations for receptions in
honour of art openings, special guests,
and foreign dignitaries.

Of course, in our country, we are free
to go where we like.

Nobody was watching me, but I felt
watched.

At the time, I was painting. I painted
fluently, speaking the language of col-
our and form. Dreaming of places I could
take myself to, I was travelling to that
space we all envision, talking foreign
tongues that, of course, do not exist.

I applied for, and received, several
credit cards.

We are permitted our dreams.

My life was different in many imper-
ceptible ways.

The party was an annual event put
on by an important gallery.

I chose from several invitations that I
received, basing my decision on the fine-
ness of the calligraphy and the thickness
of the card stock. If necessary, I reasoned,
I could pretend to be someone else.

I stood at the top of the landing look-
ing down at the bustling squalor of glit-
tering people. I wore a name tag. A
red rose had been pinned to my lapel.
Eventually, gripped by a growing un-

ease, I allowed myself to fall into the
congregation.

Oblivious to the silence that engulfed
them, the revellers talked, shook hands,
drank red wine and, all the while, flicked
canapés into their mouths—remarkable
organs that could chew, swallow, and re-
gurgitate appropriate utterances with-
out losing so much as a single flake of
pastry.

I thought of a series of paintings I would
do. *Here Is My Family?* I would call it.

There are no boundaries to free ex-
pression. Where we live, everything is
permitted except those few things for-
bidden by law.

Nothing is holding us back.

I accepted a drink, said thank you to
the server who looked behind her with
soft, startled brown eyes as she hurried
away. Thank you, I whispered.

We do not create. We find it more than
difficult to create.

Soon, I felt the wine drying on my lips,
and, in my stomach, a burning like
crushed glass.

But my suit was appropriate for the occasion.

Oh, there you are, the Director said. The Director was short and stout. She wore a shimmering dress and no cosmetics. Some said she was the most powerful person in the arts in our country.

The Director took my arm and led me around. It seems my appearance was considered a great delight, not to mention something of a novelty. Everyone was very kind.

What are you working on? they asked.

A series, I replied. A series of portraits to be called *Here Is My Family?*

Of course, they murmured. They slipped me their cards. Call me, they whispered.

He's mine, the Director joked, digging her sharp glittering elbow into my burning belly. I licked my lips.

Late that night, drunk and giddy with possibility, I heard voices in my head.

I closed my eyes to see the picture.

Where we live, we have many shows on television that we are invited to enjoy and even contribute our opinion to.

We are a people of opinions.

The talking picture, inescapable, magnificent, in my head.

Though our classic works of arts and letters remain the same, our video games, films, and television shows continue to improve.

We are permitted our individuality. We are permitted to attend the parties of friends. We are not obligated to have friends, but are encouraged to. We are, nevertheless, cherished for our particular accomplishments.

My sweatpants are the same sweatpants anyone might wear casually on a day off or on a weekend.

The TV show was a talk show, an interview with the Leader of the Opposition. In my mind, I could see him, a shrill, angry man making a concerted effort to remain pleasant.

We shall not permit it, the Leader of the Opposition was saying between the lips of a thin smile. The people of this country will not permit it. The Useless must not be allowed to disrupt society. The Useless have no respect for our great country's accomplishments. They drag us down. They hold us back. They claim our resources and deny us the right to a return claim on theirs. We shall not permit the Useless to eat freely from the apple cart unless they are willing to push it and fill it.

I nodded, transfixed, recognizing a truth like a bruise on a burnished fruit.

Let's assume I will be the next Leader, the Opposition Leader beamed.

Let's! the talk show host and I agreed.

The picture, clearer than anything I had ever seen before.

And then a kind of static in my mind, late-night fuzz, off the air, this clarity, this clear thinking. The Useless were new to me. I knew nothing of them. And yet I saw them perfectly.

I hated them.

I could not complete the paintings, because I had spoken them aloud.

We are permitted our say in this country, though we say nothing.

What I felt was paralysis of the pri-

vate regions. I had been seen for what I was. I had become afraid.

Instead, I commenced an affair with the soft-eyed server.

There are no class or racial boundaries now. We are not obliged to stick to our own in the pursuit of love.

I felt a great shame and we kissed passionately, her dark skin blushing.

We do not love.

She had come to my door with a brochure and a clipboard. She asked me if I had ever considered the Opposition as my party, the Opposition candidate as my candidate. Did I know the election was coming? Was I registered for the vote? Was I prepared to face the future?

What do you do? she asked, her pen poised.

Nothing would change, and yet everything would change. I trembled, telling her that she was an artist and offering her the use of my studio.

She demurred.

I got down on my knees and locked her bare thighs with my pale arms and begged her to paint for me.

She did. She was magnificent.

We are all artists here. Where we live, we are all given the opportunity, silent constituents to a recreation of the passion.

It was like a flood, the way my sperm shot out of me.

A representative of the Director asked me to meet him in the food court in the centre of the city.

We are a country celebrated for its natural beauty.



13
Mary-Lou Zeitoun

13
Mary-Lou Zeitoun

Mary-Lou Zeitoun captures the world of a teenager in all her funny, frightening, vulnerable, horrible, troubled and wonderful glory.... I loved it. — Roddy Doyle, Booker Prize winner for Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha and author of The Commitments

First time novelist Mary-Lou Zeitoun's *13* wryly evokes an unavoidable time and place in everyone's life — the teenage years — without rendering the experience into saccharine nostalgia. Zeitoun's imitation of the adolescent voice is dead-on. — Quill & Quire

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THE L-BOMB

Confused? So was he! In the latest dream the frames of his glasses could be converted to a full-sized radiation helmet. He needed help to see, help to lie down through the night.

What *was* the L-bomb? The threat of it *was* real, though it would never bulldoze mankind, rather it would manoeuvre him further and further into mad wilderness, wilder madness, trees that bare human hearts.

Planted in a hushed and tender place no one would suppose—the girl at the bar reading Hugo, drinking wine. Her courteous refusals, subtle dismissals, going off, a blood storm, going off.

— PAUL VERMEERSCH

I ate with a white fork that tasted of the thin cellophane wrapping it arrived encased in. The tines bent as I scraped my polystyrene plate.

The Director, began the Representative, has become . . . not impatient . . . but . . . disappointed.

I nodded.

The tremendous opportunity, said the Representative.

You will be obligated to repay the funds, continued the Representative.

Unless, said the Representative.

The Representative carefully showed me the papers I had signed, the grants I had received through the National Council for the Arts, the Federal Department of Heritage and History, the Provincial Division of Parks and Culture, the Municipal Bureau of Entertainment and Leisure.

Once, I drove a van, moved objects from place to place.

At night, I danced with an aerosol of spray paint in my hand.

The situation, I began to explain to the Representative.

He shrunk away.

I followed his gaze, the plastic fork in my fist.

My laughter disturbed the other diners. The Representative quickly gathered the papers I had signed once upon a time, and swept them into a briefcase.

The election came, and the Opposition Leader became the Leader. We are all encouraged to take part. We can choose, and then we can get up in the morning and begin our day.

We watched the new Leader on television, his beaming congenial smile and big voice stirring us.

She took my hand, squeezed it between her legs.

Under my mandate from the people, the Leader boomed, the Useless will be made to work just like the rest of the good citizens of this country. The Useless will be shown the value of an honest day's labour, they will be educated and trained and then they will be free to make a productive contribution to society.

And supposing, the talk show host interrupted, supposing the so-called Useless don't want to make a contribution?

But isn't that just the point, laughed the new Leader. Isn't that free-ride mentality what got us into this mess in the first place? The people of this country can see that! They know that if we have to knock over the apple cart to stop a few worms from fouling the bushel, then we will be the government to take on that responsibility!

So, you're proposing—

That night, I was exultant. I did not sleep. I painted a canvas that would have made anyone famous, let alone someone who had been given every op-

portunity the state afforded. I imagined myself on television—the host's smiling generosity.

We have not given up our love of beautiful things. Beautiful things are for sale, and we are permitted purchase of any object save those barred by law.

My lover begged me not to, but, of course, I set fire to the work in question, a masterpiece of intricate swirls—the unconscious shared hubris of our collective solitude.

Graffiti, I said.

The apartment stunk of smoke and curling colours drying to a rainbow vapour.

She packed her bags, but, instead of leaving, collapsed around me and cried on the bones of my chest.

My dark beauty, I said. We are permitted this. We are permitted everything.

A fist pounded on the locked door.

I called the Director's office. I pronounced my name. I asked to speak to the Director.

There was a long pause.

Again, I asked to speak to the Director. Who is calling? the secretary said.

In our country, we select names for our children according to our particular traditions and beliefs. If we do not have traditions and beliefs, we name our children anyway.

We have certificates, documents, passports, bank statements, and all reasonable freedoms.

We have fifty-three public museums devoted to the spectacle of the arts.

Can you hear me? I said into the phone. Can you hold? the secretary said.

I reported myself to the police. Crime? the stenographer inquired. I have become Useless.

Useless, the stenographer typed into the computer.

The stenographer swivelled the screen so I could see that my crime had been denoted and she had accurately recorded details such as my current address and my mother's maiden name. Profession was left blank.

They cuffed me and led me to a cell.

Hal Niedzviecki lives in Little Portugal. He is the author of Ditch (Random House, 2001) and We Want Some Too (Penguin, 2000), and is the editor of Broken Pencil. He has been writing for the magazine since 1997.

GOOD AND HAPPY

FICTION BY ALEXANDRA LEGGAT

I'm at my regular seat at the bar. A tall man in jeans and a ratty green T-shirt walks in and sits down next to me. I say hi. He sets his eyes on me. He's not from around here. I've seen every pair of eyes in this town and these are unfamiliar. He rubs his thighs, rubs his hands together like he's just come in from the cold. It's August. I look at him and smile. He orders a rye, throws it down his throat, and shivers. I can feel it warming his sleek insides. He puts his elbows on the bar and rubs the back of his neck. The skin around his fingernails is stained. It looks like rust. Maybe he works with cars, builds fences. He orders another rye, lifts it to his mouth.

Bottoms up, I say. He raises the glass to me, swallows its contents in a gulp. He wipes his mouth, looks over at me, and chuckles. He asks for my name. I tell him. He repeats it. Luanne, Luanne, Luanne. I like the way he says my name, the quiver in his voice. He tells me he's tired, been driving a while. I tell him, relax, you're in good hands. He raises his eyebrows, sighs, and tells me he likes me.

We have a few drinks. We talk about the long, hard summer. The dry heat. He tells me this has been a summer to end all summers. I tell him mine has been like every other one that came before it. It rains on the same days. He complains about his car, the broken air conditioning, the condition of the interstate. I tell him I've never been on the interstate but I've fallen into every pothole on Rural Route 1. He looks at me, but not at me. I jostle his knee. His jeans are damp and discoloured, like he'd spilled his coffee on them earlier. He raises my chin with his chapped hand. He says he could take me away from this. I give him my hand. Take me away from it, I say, whatever it is.

We stumble across the parking lot to his motel. Enter Room 29. He throws the keys on the table, himself on the bed. He holds his head and mutters something about the booze, the drive. I lie down next to him. He strokes the hair out of my eyes. His breath is warm

against my face, his arm tightly bound around my waist. He snores. It figures. I lie still for a moment staring at the ceiling. I move his arm. He doesn't budge. I get up and tiptoe around the room, look over my shoulder every few seconds to make sure he's still sleeping. He has a side to him. I saw it in his eyes. He would not be pleased if he caught me fingering his belongings. And I don't want to make this man mad. I want to make him happy—good and happy.

Today's paper is on the desk. The crossword is incomplete and lying next to unfinished coffees, old milk coagulating. Clothes are strewn across the chair. A black T-shirt, jeans, underwear, briefs—a bra. A bra? Strange. He's strange. A bra? I look at him. The bra is small. Too small for him. Too small for him—well, of course. I laugh at myself; at the preposterous notion that I thought for a moment that it was his. Then whose? Now it's not so funny. It's odd. It's more than odd. This bra. This tiny bra. A 32A, exactly. Must be a young girl's, a teenager's, a thin teenager, a thin woman, a thin older woman—an anorexic. He turns over, mutters something about another drink, something "bitch," something, and another drink. I drop the bra, look around, then plop myself into the chair. I sit and watch him sputter in his sleep. I sit here and wonder why I'm sitting here in this drunken man's motel room. A skinny wife on her way back any minute. A skinny girlfriend on her way back for her bra any minute.

It's long gone 3 A.M. and I'm still sitting here. He's cute, but he's not that cute. I'm tired. I guess that's it. Too tired to get up and find my way home.

The bathroom door's shut. I'm assuming it's the bathroom door. Maybe I'll have a bath. No. A bath's too noisy. And what would he think of me coming back to his motel room and helping myself to a bath. But a bath would be nice. Hot, bubbly. Would he care? He might like it, might join me.

With an eye on him, I get up and go to the bathroom door. I open it slowly and back into the bathroom. I close the door,

lock it, lean on it with my eyes closed, and sigh. Sigh like I'm safe, like I've escaped him. Escaped him successfully and now I'm locked in the bathroom. It smells. Smells like rot, like harm. I feel around the wall for the light. I flick the light switch and nothing happens. It's too dark to see where anything is. My eyes aren't adjusting to the darkness like they should. They're not seeing outlines of anything—not the mirror, the toilet, the tub. The tub must be close. I shuffle my feet around. Hit something. I can't breathe. I look up. A speck of something's gleaming in the corner. Gleaming in the corner like a small window covered. An iota of it not covered, letting light in from somewhere—the parking lot, the pool.

I find the toilet, put its lid down, stand on it, and reach for the speck. I grab what feels like cardboard. I dig my nails into it and rip it down. Light. I can breathe. I can breathe and I can feel the sweat drying on my brow and I shake my head at this lunacy. Shake my head, jump down from the toilet, and drop to my knees. I hold my stomach and vomit on the floor.

"Jesus Christ. Close your eyes, close your eyes." I say. "Please, stop looking at me like that."

There's a woman in the tub. She's screaming with her eyes. Her mouth is bound, her arms and legs bound. Her hair is oily dreads. Her body's thin, naked, blue. She is breathing. She is blinking and she is trying to say something.

"Don't make a sound," I tell her. "Just stay quiet."

Let me think. I can't think. Let me try to think. Oh, God. Dear God, don't let him wake up. Let him die, die in his sleep. Dear God, dear God, dear God, let this not be true. Let this not be true. I'm hallucinating. I must be hallucinating. I'm sick. This is sick. O.K., O.K., O.K. Take a deep breath. Get me out of here. Oh, God please get me out of here. The window is too small—barely big enough for a voice to get through. It doesn't look like it opens. If I yell he'll hear me. He'll burst through the locked door and kill us both. Let me think. I climb up on the toilet and study the window. It opens,

pushes out, pushes out but I can't see. I'm too short. I can reach it but I can't see through it. I could dangle something out of it. I'll dangle what? The bloody towel. That's it. I grab the towel.

The handle of the door turns. It turns and the whole door starts rattling. Jesus Christ. She's screaming with her eyes again, moaning. I'm searching for razors, poisons. He bursts through and I'm caught. I slump down on the toilet. He wipes his mouth. His face is red. He walks back into the room. I can hear him light a cigarette. That sound a specific lighter makes. The cigarette smoke

He pulls the chair into the doorway of the bathroom. Abby's straining her neck to see him, to watch him. I look at her and try to send a signal. Some look in code that he won't pick up on. She's not looking at me.

"You O.K.?" he asks.

"Me?" I ask. "Yeah, I'm O.K. I'm good. I'm fine. Sure. Me? Yeah, no problem. I'm good. Good and happy. Sure, everything's O.K. You?"

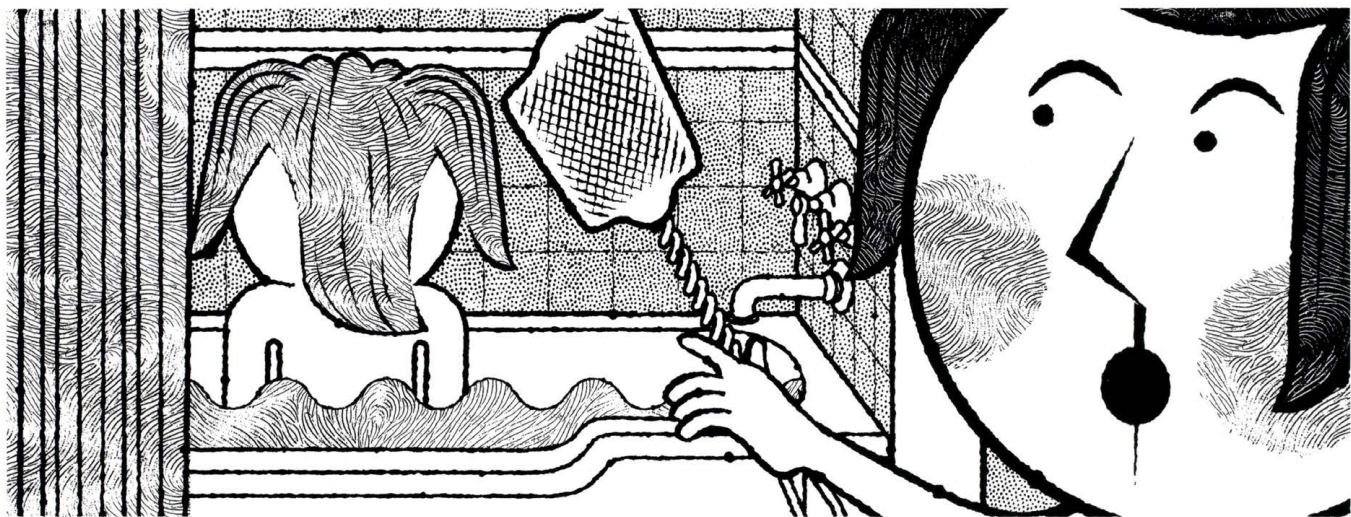
"Yeah, I'm a little tired. My head's sore. I guess I drank too much. But, Jesus, I just couldn't take it anymore. I woke up and the whole world was sitting on top

to be non-existent. That I can feel.

"I have to lie down," he mumbles. He gets up and goes into the room. I don't believe he's going to lie down. I can't see him. I can't move. I don't want to move. I look at Abby. She's looking at her toes. It seems like she's looking at her toes. Her eyes are pooling. She's staring at her toes, tears oozing down her defeated face.

"Abby," I whisper, "be strong."

I can't hear anything. I don't believe he's sleeping. I bet he's waiting outside the bathroom with a sawed-off shotgun for me to run out and make my way to the door. He's waiting for me to make a stu-



makes me sick. Again, I vomit on the bathroom floor. She closes her eyes. He comes back to the door with the cigarette and a drink in his hand. I cover the vomit with my feet.

"Well, looks like I made a big mistake," he says. "I should have known better than to get drunk in a shit-hole tavern and pick up a local girl and bring her back to my motel room. I should have known better than to think I could fall asleep without her prowling around my business. Should have known better than to think a pretty, little small-town girl wouldn't mind her own fucking business. I should have known better. Drink?"

"No. Thanks."

"Cigarette?"

"No."

"Uh, what's your name again?"

"Lou. Luanne."

"Luanne. Hmm. This is Abby."

"Abby? Hello, Abby," I say. I try to smile.

I tell myself, just be normal. Just act normal, like this is completely normal. A tied and bound and beaten girl named Abby in the bathtub of some motel, a man, and me—normal, perfectly normal.

of me. I thought, my God, where did I go wrong? I tried my best for my wife. We had a beautiful new child. I did my fucking best for them. I've got debts. But I work hard. Everything was under control I thought. Tables were turning I thought. But Abby lost it. She just up and fucking lost it. I tried to help her. I did. I did everything I could. I told her we needed to step back and think. I tried to keep myself together. I tried. But as soon as I parked the goddamn car, opened up the door to this quiet, little room where I just wanted to lie down for a couple of hours in peace, rest my head and think about what the hell we were going to do, she started on me. And, you know, I feel bad for her, I do. But I can't let it go. I cannot forgive her."

I look at Abby. She's looking at me and I'm thinking of everything. Where's the child? He said a wife and child? Where the hell is the child? But I'm afraid to ask. I'm afraid in general. I can't feel my limbs, my body. My body has disappeared. I'm a trembling mind on a toilet seat in a rundown motel, in a small town in the Americas. I'm insignificant, soon

pid move. He'll have to wait forever. But Abby can't wait forever. I get up and slowly walk into the room. He's lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

He looks over at me and whispers, "Will you help me?"

"Me? Ugh, yeah, yes, of course, I'll help you. What would you like me to do?"

"Kill Abby."

"What?"

"It won't be that hard. She's half gone. She's like a fly been trapped inside a house too long. One swipe and she's gone. Then we can go, go and start fresh, you and me. I like you. You've got a good head on your shoulders. We can go, go and find my boy. Go and find my boy. Find out what part of the lake she dumped him in."

Alexandra Leggat recently relocated to Niagara Falls from the Beach. She is the author of Pull Gently, Tear Here (Insomniac, 2001) and This Is Me Since Yesterday (Coach House, 2000), has recently completed a new collection of short stories, Meet Me in the Parking Lot, and is working on her first novel. She has been writing for the magazine since 2000.

NOT JUST MOUTHING THE WORDS

Camilla Gibb transforms from first-time novelist to writer with *The Petty Details of So-and-so's Life*.

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA CALDWELL

Henry Thoreau had Walden Pond. William Wordsworth had the Lake District. Camilla Gibb had a sun-beaten trailer.

The unlikely retreat, stationed in a trailer park on the shores of Lake Ontario, belonged to her brother, who graciously lent it to the struggling young scholar-turned-author. It was a long way from Oxford, where she had completed her Ph.D. in social anthropology; further still from Ethiopia, where she had conducted fieldwork.

Throughout the summer of 1997, the trailer served as Gibb's home away from home—a quiet place where she could shut out the world and think, writing on a laptop plugged into the vehicle's stove. She had set out to write short stories, but soon realized that a book was emerging. In 1999, with only a few published essays and even less published fiction to her name, Gibb's first novel, *Mouthing the Words*, was released by Pedlar Press, a small Toronto publisher. The book, which depicts a harrowing yet touching account of sexual abuse, madness, and recovery, soon became a cult hit, then a widespread success, published in twelve countries. It eventually captured the 2000 Toronto Book Award—a prize previously won by Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje—and is currently being adapted for film. All in all, not bad for a debut novel.

While Gibb, thirty-four, may have appeared to come out of nowhere, she had always wanted to be an author. Born in England, but raised in Toronto, she is an intense and private person who was a self-described moody teenager, writing short stories in high school that appeared in board of education anthologies. At eighteen, she showed an early attempt at a novel to her high-school English teacher, who told her it was pretentious. He advised her to have a life first, before devoting herself to writing. "All I knew about writers was that they lived in the West and were dead if they were Canadian. Or else, they were people like Raymond Carver, and I knew I was never

going to be a witty white man from the U.S., so there were no points of reference, and I had no idea how one did it. All I knew was one was supposed to go to university. So that's what I did."

After ten years of shutting fiction out of her life, Gibb found the urge to write too hard to resist. Then came the summer in the trailer.

The genesis of Gibb's second novel, *The Petty Details of So-and-so's Life* (to be published this fall by Doubleday), was much more traditional. Her brother had sold his trailer, so Gibb found herself writing in a tiny apartment in downtown Toronto ("My dream was to live in a place where you couldn't see the computer from the bed"), all the while coping with her newly established career, something she found daunting. Following the success of *Mouthing the Words*, Gibb was understandably worried about living up to the hype of her first novel. "I worried that I would never be able to do it again, unless I lived in a situation of complete deprivation, where I was alienated from all of humanity, poor—this was just after I'd finished being a student and had no money. I really did worry, and I thought the only way to overcome this worry was to start writing again. So, *Mouthing the Words* came out in September, 1999, and I started working [on *Petty Details*] that month. I may or may not have been ready to write a new novel at that point, but it was absolutely essential to my psychological well-being."

Gibb returns to familiar territory in *The Petty Details of So-and-so's Life*, which, on the surface, is another novel about coping with the potentially devastating fallout of domestic trauma. Brother and sister Blue and Emma grow up in an emotional wasteland in Niagara Falls, Ontario. After their increasingly unstable and abusive father, Oliver, abandons the family, the children find themselves alienated and looking after each other while their mother finds herself looking at the bottom of a bottle of scotch. The novel affectionately but honestly follows Blue and Emma on their different paths

to adulthood. Emma chooses to study archaeology at the University of Toronto, while Blue, a high-school dropout who becomes a tattoo artist after hooking up with a stripper, flies across the country in search of his father.

"With *Petty Details*, I had fragments of an idea, and the idea was how two people who grow up in the same family can share a number of experiences, yet the perception of those experiences and the outcome is so radically different. It's the nature-nurture culture; all the questions I asked as an anthropologist as well."

Petty Details is certainly a more conventional novel than her first book. Gibb shelved the poetic, lucid first-person style of *Mouthing the Words* for a less subjective third-person narrative. She deliberately wanted to explore writing from a different viewpoint, and her editors at Doubleday were supportive. Occasionally, Gibb found the editing process quite arduous, suddenly conscious of keeping the characters in focus and constantly justifying their every move and motivation. "First novels have a lifetime of gestation, and they come out more fully formed than any subsequent book will ever come out," she says. "{*Petty Details*} was a different experience, having discussions with an editor about what I was trying to do, which I never had to have with *Mouthing the Words*—it was clear to me."

Despite all the acclaim, Gibb says there are still moments when her eyes well up upon realizing she is making a living as an author. "After your first novel, you're someone who wrote a first novel. And when you write the second, you actually begin to think you're a writer. They're very different experiences." Already at work on a third novel, *Sweetness in the Belly*, Gibb is fast becoming one of the most important new voices in Canadian fiction.

The Petty Details of So-and-so's Life will be available in September from Doubleday. Rebecca Caldwell lives in the Danforth area and is an arts writer for *The Globe & Mail*. She is the magazine's founding copy editor.

PHILIP SMITH





THE SNOW GRAVE

FICTION BY SHELAGH M. ROWAN-LEGG

Strangely enough, Jane understood his reasoning, though she still found it hard to believe him when he said he was still in love with her and yet attracted enough to other people to have affairs—and not just one-night stands, but friendships that included sex. Peter had always been both a serial monogamist and overtly bisexual. He and Roger had been together for almost two years when Jane met him, and within a week he had moved out of his and Roger's apartment and taken one in Jane's building, which was only a few blocks away.

Jane was looking for a gift for her brother downtown when she saw them. Peter was standing at a streetcar stop with a woman who kept kissing his cheek and running her hands up and down his back. Jane waited until the streetcar came and took them east; Peter's office was in the opposite direction.

She confronted him about it that

evening. She was surprised at how frank he was.

"She's our new personnel manager. Her name is Kimberly. She's bisexual too."

"What does that have to do with it?"

Peter got up from the couch and walked to the stereo, changing the station. "She understands things that you don't. I love you, Jane, and I wouldn't want to be married to anybody else. But there are some things I can't discuss with you."

"So you have to find someone else to sleep with? Why can't you just talk to her?"

"Because I like her."

"More than me?"

"No, it's just . . . different."

"Is it the sex?" Jane always thought they had a good sex life. In fact, she was often more adventurous than he was. Once they were on a holiday weekend in Ottawa and, during a tour of the Parliament Buildings, she pulled him into a

storage closet and they didn't come out for half an hour.

"Well, yes, but not like you might think. I like sex with you, too. With her it's just, I don't know . . ."

"Different." Jane went to the bathroom and locked herself in. She heard Peter follow behind her.

"I love you, Jane."

"I'm supposed to believe that?"

"Yes."

She heard him move away and into the bedroom. Jane lay down in the bathtub, putting a bath towel behind her head. The next thing she knew she had a kink in her neck and her watch read two-forty-five. She went into the living room and slept on the couch. Peter left before she woke the next morning.

Peter called her at the office the next day and wanted to take her out to lunch. Jane managed to make an excuse, then called her friend Michelle and told her

what had happened. Michelle told her she was crazy, that Peter was a selfish bastard and she should kick him out that night. Jane kept that in mind on her way home that evening.

It had been snowing the night before and there was almost a foot of it on the ground. Jane passed a park where some children were making snow angels. She had done that often when she was a child but she never got out to look at them. She sat inside the angel for what felt like hours, just buried in the snow, relishing the perfect silence and stillness of the world. Her mother would have to drag her back into the house, afraid she would catch her death of cold. But Jane always managed to sneak back out.

Michelle telephoned Jane at home that night and berated her after Peter handed her the phone.

"Why is he still there?"

"Michelle, it's not that simple."

"Bullshit! He cheated on you. How can you cheat on someone you love? Answer: you don't. If you do, it's because you don't love them anymore."

"I don't know. Don't you remember when we were at the video store last week, there was that really cute guy, and I was flirting with him—"

"But you didn't do anything, did you? Just flirted. Everybody does that, but only jerks actually follow through."

"Yeah, I don't know."

"You love Peter too much to cheat. Listen, you can stay with me if you want to. Please, think about it."

When she got off the phone, Peter hugged and kissed her. Jane began to

unbutton his shirt and slip out of her shoes.

"Does this mean I'm forgiven?" he asked.

"No, it means I want to have sex."

It didn't take very long. Jane knew immediately she wouldn't have an orgasm, so she faked one after a few minutes and Peter followed her quickly. He fell asleep still inside her, and it took her a while to wake him up and tell him to move.

He whispered into her ear, "You know, if you want to try it with someone else, I wouldn't mind."

"So, I have your permission to have an affair? What if I wanted to leave you for him?"

"I don't want to leave you for Kimberly."

"How long have you been seeing her?"

"Only about a month, and trust me, I would never leave you for her."

"So, why do you keep seeing her?"

"God, do we have to go through this again?" Peter rolled over and went to sleep.

Jane considered his offer, though somewhat against her will. That night she dreamt of herself back at the video store, though only she and the man she had noticed were there. She was in the foreign film section, and he came up behind her, reaching his hands around and unbuttoning her blouse, then her jeans. She reached behind his head and ran her fingers through his hair. When she turned around, though, he was gone, and she was outside in the snow. She fell back into it and began to make an angel. The sky was grey and snow began to fall, quickly covering her. Jane woke the next morning tangled in the sheets, covered in sweat.

"You were thrashing around all night. What were you dreaming?" Peter asked.

"I don't remember." Jane quickly got out of bed and went to the bathroom. Peter came in while she was in the shower.

"I have a dinner meeting tonight. I don't know how late I'll be."

"Will she be there?"

"No."

Jane didn't believe him. Over the next few weeks, whenever Peter was late coming home or she didn't know where he was, she imagined him with her. Jane took up smoking again, which she hadn't done since she was a teenager. Not that much—she rarely bought her own pack—but there were enough people who were happy to give her one or two over the lunch hour.

On a particularly blustery day, there was only one person outside the building when Jane was coming back from her local café. She asked him for a cigarette.

"You know, you really shouldn't. I started out like you, just bumming a few at lunch. Before you knew it I was buying my own packs on my way home and finishing them before I went to bed."

Jane smiled as he lit one for her.

"My name's Sean. You work in the office next to me, I think—the internet company?"

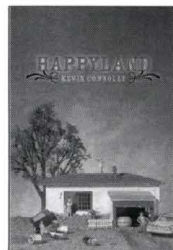
"Yeah. I'm Jane." She put out her hand, which he took and held longer than she wanted. She found him staring at her.

"Are you O.K.? I mean, you only started coming out to smoke about a month ago."

"Yeah, just decided to start a nasty habit. I need an excuse to get out of the office. Where do you work?"

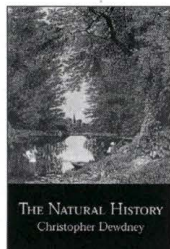
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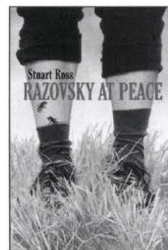


The Dagger
Between Her Teeth
Jennifer LoveGrove

Hamburger Valley,
California
David McGimpsey



David McGimpsey



RAZOVSKY AT PEACE
Stuart Ross

the fat kid
PAUL VERMEERSCH



PAUL VERMEERSCH

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"The marketing company. It's just part time, to pay the bills. I'm really a painter."

"Would I have seen your work anywhere?"

"Actually, there is some on display at the Bus Gallery, on Queen West. It's there for another two weeks. If you get a chance, I'd love you to see it."

"Well, I'll try." Jane butted out her cigarette. "Thanks." When she was safely inside, she turned back and watched Sean through the doors. He reminded her of the first boy she ever kissed. It was winter then, too, and she was playing with the boy from across the street. She was lying in one of her many snow angels when he bent down over her and kissed her lips. Jane didn't kiss him back; she didn't really know how. He never wanted to play with her after that.

Jane and Sean usually saw each other and talked every day after that. Finally, she went to the gallery. She thought it would be rude not to, with all the cigarettes he kept giving her. It was out of her way, so she left work early. The woman at the gallery smiled when Jane came in, and showed her around. Sean never told her that what he painted were nudes. Not that she was offended, but he hadn't mentioned it. She studied the work carefully. They were of men and women, some together, some alone, mainly indoors, in barren studio apartments, tiny bathrooms. Jane didn't know very much about art, but she thought she liked it.

The next day, when she saw Sean, she complimented him on his work.

"I'm glad you got a chance to see it." He looked at the ground. "I was wondering, do you think you would be able to pose for me for my next painting? I would probably need to see you once a week, for a few hours, for a few months. Do you have the time?"

Jane smiled in spite of herself. She had always considered herself attractive, but certainly no great beauty, and she was flattered. "Um, yeah, I guess. For a nude?"

"Yeah. I promise I'm not a psycho, and you've seen the kind of stuff I do. If you're not comfortable, that's O.K.—"

"No, I'd like to."

"Great." Sean reached into his pocket, and took out his wallet. "Here's my card. Why don't you call me tonight and we'll arrange a time on the weekend?"

Jane's hand was shaking a bit. "O.K."

"Great. I'll talk to you then." Sean went back into the building.

ROAD TRIP, SOUTHERN ONTARIO, 1999

We drive and drive until
we hit a lake.

At the edge of the lake
is a cairn.

The plaque reads,

"THEY DROVE AND DROVE
UNTIL THEY HIT A LAKE."

My father and I
trade glances.

A cold breeze ruffles
his thin grey hair.

Behind us,
the car idles,

the doors hanging open.

I shiver. He locks my head
in the crook of his arm.

I place my feet on his,
and he walks, giant-like,

toward the water,
carrying me with him.

"Take me to your planet,"
I say.

Jane called Sean that night when Peter was in the shower and arranged to meet him on Saturday. Later, getting ready for bed, she examined herself in the mirror. She was short, and not very thin, and her hair never stayed in place, so she always kept it back. She wondered if Sean would only want to paint one part of her, or perhaps without her face, as she had seen in some of his work.

"What's the matter with you?" Peter crawled into bed and fell asleep without waiting for an answer.

Sean's studio was near King and Dufferin. Jane had to pass by all the high-rises, where drug deals took place in the open with no effort to hide them. She had lived here years ago, when she first moved to Toronto, and it didn't take her long to realize nobody would give you any trouble unless you gave it first. She walked quickly with her head down until she reached his building. It was an old converted warehouse almost on top of the Gardiner Expressway. His room was at the top. When she reached his door, he was waiting for her, a cup of tea in hand.

"I thought you might like this."

Jane took off her coat and gave it to him, then sat down at the kitchen table. It was a large space, though most of the furniture was against the walls, to give room for painting space in the middle. There was an empty canvas on an easel and a stool a few feet away. Sean joined her at the table.

"I thought I'd work just on some sketches today."

"Where should I undress?"

Sean smiled. "You don't need to today. I'll just sketch your face and neck so you can feel comfortable."

They talked more than Jane would have expected. They had a lot in common. Sean had come from a small town too, and had moved to Toronto to further his career. He had never studied art anywhere, just picked it up from books and his own imagination. He wasn't sure how much longer he was going to stay. He needed to move to New York if he was going to get anywhere. Jane was never much of an artist in any way. She had sung a bit in high school, but it was hard to try and be different where she came from, where most of the girls got mar-

In the car again,
we are silent. The
sports announcer
says something about
sports. If we had been
born a century earlier,
and in Paris,
perhaps my father
and I would be walking
our turtles along the
boulevard, being silent
in French.

In two years,
my father will be dead.
The car will be mine.
Children will crack
the windshield. My feet
will touch the ground.
Oh, also, I'll have
one brother fewer. I'll have
one brother. When the snow falls,
I will catch it
and put it back.

— STUART ROSS

ried and pregnant right out of high school, if not before, and not always the former.

Jane didn't tell Peter where she'd been. She said she'd been running errands, though she didn't have any shopping bags. Peter had invited their neighbours over to have dinner and watch a video. Jane barely spoke the whole evening, letting Peter tell his usual jokes and stories. She went to bed before him and pretended to be sleeping when he tried to talk to her.

By the third week Sean had pulled out an old couch and Jane was lying across it with her back to him, her head looking over her shoulder toward her feet. Sean never made any comments on her body, except when he positioned her and asked her to make small movements or to sit still. He didn't have to ask that too often—Jane was amazed at how still she could be.

They would talk most of the time. They had similar tastes in movies and books. Once, when she was waiting for Sean to get his paints, she went to his stereo to select a CD.

"Oh, my God—you have Maxine

Sullivan. I didn't think anyone knew who she was but me."

"I love her. My grandmother actually saw her perform once, in Chicago."

"My husband doesn't like jazz. He thinks people only like popular music because it's not too deep and it means they don't have to think about anything too serious."

"That's crap! I mean, maybe the lyrics aren't all that profound, but they get to you." Sean had come over and began looking through his music collection. "Here, why don't you borrow this? And make your husband listen to it." He gave her an older recording.

Jane put it on for dinner that night. Peter didn't openly object, though he kept making comments. During dessert, he was silent for about five minutes, then sighed heavily, still looking at his half-eaten ice cream. "Kimberly broke up with me."

"Oh." Jane took another spoonful.

"That's all you can say?"

"Well, do you expect me to be sorry for you?"

"I guess not. But, I mean, well, you didn't really seem to mind me dating

Kimberly, so I was wondering—"

"I did, I mean, I do mind."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I did."

"Well, anyway, I was wondering if you would mind if I saw someone else."

Jane was speechless. She left the table and went into the bathroom. She sat in the bathtub for about an hour. When she came out, Peter was still at the dining room table.

"Well?" He looked up at her, wide-eyed.

"Will my saying no make any difference to what you do?"

"Well, I don't know. If you really don't want me to, I won't. I told you, I don't mind if you want to see someone too. In fact, I thought you were, with you being gone every Saturday afternoon."

"I'm not."

Peter looked at his hands. "Why are you still here, Jane? I mean, I don't want you to go, but you're still here after all I've said. I just don't know what to think."

Jane didn't answer. Why was she still there? Forgiveness didn't even seem to factor into it. It was just what happened, and she stayed awake most of the night, trying to decide what she should think or feel next.

My husband has been having affairs." Sean poked his head out from behind the canvas. "Excuse me?"

"My husband. He was having an affair with some woman from his office, and now I think he's seeing someone else. At least he said he wanted too."

"He wants a divorce?"

"No, no, he just wants to see other people."

"Why?"

Jane looked at him. "I don't know, I guess he doesn't get everything he needs from me."

"Well, no one gets everything they need from one person, but . . . I don't know, if most of it is good, you put up with the stuff that's not so good."

"I suppose. He says he still loves me."

"If he wants to be with more than one person at a time, I suppose that's his business. But he shouldn't be married." Sean sat down on the couch with her. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be so blunt. You're amazing, Jane. You should be with someone who wants to be with you." He smiled. "Boy, that's some load of bullshit, isn't it. I've never had a relationship that lasted more than six months. I know fuck all about it."

"What should I do?"

"I don't know. Have an affair, tie him to the bed and beat him with a stick, burn all his CDs. I bleached all my last girlfriend's clothes. She was a Goth." Sean got back up and went over to the canvas. "This is really weird. You're sitting on a blue couch, but I can't get the colour right. I don't think I want the colour there at all. I want to surround you in white. Must be all the snow that's outside."

"What am I doing?"

"Lying in white, in snow, I guess."

"Like a snow angel or something?"

"Yeah."

"Well, why don't we?"

"What, go out in the snow? It's freezing!"

"So, I'll throw on a coat." Jane jumped off the couch and raced to the door.

Jane had no idea what made her move so fast, but she was out the door and down the stairs before Sean could respond. She had only her coat and boots on; the sun was shining bright, and no one was around. Sean followed her with his sketchbook.

"I don't believe it, you're serious." Sean started to laugh. Jane did her coat up to the neck and threw herself into a snow bank. She began to make an angel, and Sean sketched as fast as he could. After ten minutes, he stood up. "O.K., you're going to get hypothermia. Let's go back inside."

Jane was staring at the sky. She didn't want to move; what did she have to move for? Would Peter really miss her if she didn't come back, since he seemed to have so many other options? Though he said he loved her, she always got the impression from him that he could take her or leave her. Why couldn't she just leave him then?

Sean sat down beside her. She looked at him and smiled. He bent down and kissed her, just for a few seconds. "Please, come inside."

Back in the studio, Jane got dressed while Sean made tea. They didn't speak while they drank. When Jane was leaving, Sean came up behind her and held her.

"Thank you."

"For what?" Jane turned around to look at him.

"For posing for me. You were a great model."

"So, you don't need me anymore?"

"No. But I hope we can still go out for tea sometime."

OR—

The Roma have no words
for *read* or *write*.
The closest is to carve
or count, to sing or
tell fortunes from the palm.

Solitude, a symptom
or punishment,
not a luxury.
Never something chosen.

Survival is
to lie, and move—
not shifting, but caravan wheels.
Not deception,
but a better story
is more
true, really.

— JENNIFER LOVEGROVE

"Why?"

Sean blushed. "I don't know, I mean, if things changed . . ."

Jane knew this was her chance. She could kiss him, she could undress, and undress him, and she knew it would be good. She touched his collar and leaned into him, putting her face beside his neck.

"I'll call you."

When Jane got home, Peter had made her favourite dinner, ratatouille, with a spinach salad and lemon meringue pie for dessert.

"I thought you might like a romantic dinner." He lit candles and pulled out her chair for her.

"You're not going out with someone else tonight then?" Jane took a sip of wine.

"No. I don't know, I think maybe that was silly, all that stuff. I guess some things just have to end." Peter went to the stereo and put on one of her CDs.

The dinner was lovely and Peter lavished attention on her. He left the dishes on the kitchen counter. When he came back into the living room, Jane took his hand and led him into the bedroom.

"Wow. We haven't done this in a while." She pushed him down onto the bed and went to the dresser. She had hidden two pairs of handcuffs in her underwear draw.

She had bought them several months before and hadn't worked up the nerve to bring them out. Peter undressed while she kept them behind her back and sat down on the bed.

"Close your eyes."

Peter smiled and obeyed. "You're feisty this evening."

Jane told him to lay back with his arms outstretched. She handcuffed his arms to the bed, then went to the closet, took out two of Peter's ties, and tied his feet down, too. She stood over him.

"Wow. This is a first." Peter began to move his hips suggestively.

"So what do you did with her?"

"What?"

"Kimberly. What do you do with her?"

"I don't know, the usual stuff, I guess."

"Never anything like this?"

"No."

Jane undressed slowly, kicking the clothes off the bed. She started at the top, running her hands through Peter's hair, kissing his face and neck. She moved over to his lips and opened her mouth. When Peter stuck out his tongue, she took it between her teeth and held it there. He began to laugh.

After a few hours, when they were finally exhausted, Peter fell asleep almost immediately, but Jane stayed awake. She went to the window. It was snowing again. Peter began to snore. After looking at him for almost an hour, she went to the closet and put on her blue nightgown. She grabbed the clothes she had been wearing from the floor, threw them into a knapsack, put on her coat and boots, and left the apartment quietly. Outside, she could barely see her hand in front of her face, the snow was so thick. She went north and stopped outside the corner house. They hadn't shovelled at all, and the yard was perfectly white and pure. Jane fell into the snow on her back and made an angel. After a while, she got up, careful not to ruin the angel—her angel. She made her way up the road and flagged down a taxicab.

Shelagh M. Rowan-Legg lives in the Davisville area. She has published poetry in a variety of literary journals, including Pottersfield Portfolio, Cormorant, and Lichen, and is currently working on her first book of poetry. She has been writing for the magazine since 2001. This is her first published short story.



THE BENEFIT

FICTION BY MARY-LOU ZEITOUN

Justin Grey was sexy. Justin Grey was rich. Justin Grey was a rock star. Hazel Peck was dumpy. Hazel Peck was poor. Hazel Peck was a bookkeeper. Hazel's gallery, TankHaus, was throwing a fundraiser featuring Justin Grey. The papers were going crazy. The arts community was trying to snag one hundred dollar tickets while pretending it didn't care. Back in the eighties, Sonja, TankHaus's general manager, played bass in a new wave band with Justin called the Telephones. They were still close. Justin had agreed to stay an extra day after his sold-out amphitheatre concert and do a short set at the gallery party. Hazel, as bookkeeper, was given the job of tracking ticket sales. She was not given a ticket. She was also supposed to sit in the reception area as a security measure during the show.

IAN PHILLIPS "Hazel, I'm so sorry," said Sonja sincerely, hefting a bottle of water onto her hip. "Ooh, nice earrings! Look, even my boyfriend has to work the bar to get in,

and we need someone at front desk. Have you lost weight?"

Sonja was one of those bright, elegant, accomplished women who did not go on to become a model but remained in the lesser gene pool, walking around and functioning to make everyone else look bad. She had a degree in arts administration and even a bit of celebrity from her association with the Telephones, who had had a couple of hit singles. At thirty-six, she was still teen-slender and she dressed casually in things like tan hip huggers and silk scarves loosely tied as halters. She matched her bracelets with the shimmering iridescence of her eye shadow. Every outfit she owned was a delight, a wonder of design, and a panacea to the eye, riveting. Her eyeliner, specially bought in India, stayed in place when she pulled all-nighters with tired, greasy Hazel, composing budgets for grant deadlines. She was an arts advisor to the city. The weekly entertainment magazine profiled her home. Once, she

had even been a lesbian, heading up the East Asian Lesbian Coalition and marching in the gay parade topless. She could often be seen on TV panels discussing censorship or cutbacks. It was rumoured that she would sell out and become an on-air personality on a new art-TV channel. Her current boyfriend, artist Conrad Levy, was this year's golden boy and travelled around the world with his installations. Sonja was a pain in the ass.

Naturally, Hazel was in love with Conrad Levy. She knew she was unworthy and that even thinking of his arms around her as she fell asleep at night sullied him. He had black hair in delicate punky spikes, blue-grey eyes that looked brown, a big chin, and a narrow forehead. His nose was a little fat and pug, but one rarely noticed. The line of his back was breathtaking. Sometimes, when he came in to get Sonja for lunch. Hazel could make him laugh by playing the role of Gielgud the snide butler to Sonja's Dudley Moore. "I'll alert the



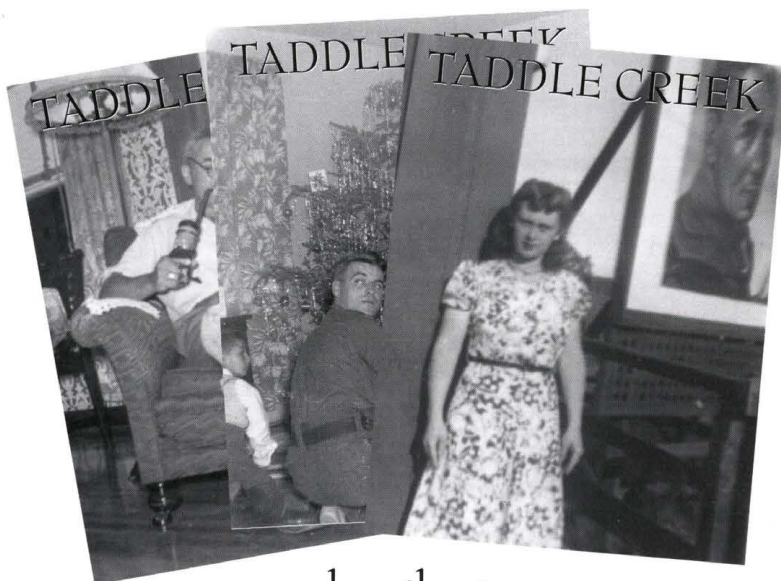
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media," she'd say when Conrad would come in and Sonja would holler, "I just have to pee!" Sonja always announced when she had to pee. It was her idea of being funny. Sonja had no sense of humour. Beautiful women rarely have to develop one. Conrad would laugh nastily at Sonja's expense, his only defence against her. As if he sort of hated her for her beauty. He had the look of a man who was trying to pretend he was with a woman for something other than her body. Guilty but lasciviously proud. Beautiful women have problems too. Lest you think this was a male-female dynamic, the gallery dykes also watched Sonja hatefully.

Conrad was not at lunch today, the day of the benefit. Justin was. Hazel saw Justin and Sonja together briefly in the bright terrifying lobby of the warehouse gallery. By his frequent nodding and compulsive arm touching, his head tilted to get eye contact, Hazel saw that Justin still loved Sonja. He had changed. Although he moved to Canada when he was six, he had always maintained a strong London accent, knowing this was hard currency in the music world. In 1987, he wore black leather and chains and dyed his hair blond-white. He had perfect Aryan Billy Idol features. "God," thought Hazel, rustling through her receipts, "he must have had more groupies than Elvis." The Telephones disbanded due to the heroin overdoses of the drummer and lead guitarist, and Justin went back to England to become a singer-songwriter. There, he lost a bit of his hair and gained some jowls, which was all to the good because it made him look more intelligent, and there's no creature more pathetic than an aging pretty boy. They don't seem to get more manly like normal guys, they just get papery and querulous, the flash of their once velvety eyes trapped in over-tanned flaccid skin. Like a homunculus, an experiment gone horribly wrong. Hazel had always preferred charisma to looks, like it made any difference. She was equally incapable of attracting either. Men usually only slept with her when they were very, very drunk, so she had started playfully charging on these occasions—a sort of emotional deprivation pay for their actual disinterest. It was working quite nicely for Hazel. The men actually seemed relieved with the straightforward transaction, and Hazel never felt hard

IDA RED

The dress Bette Davis wore in *Jezebel*, dancing at the ball.

A rotary-dial phone in the window of a retro shop curved handle and rounded base. I've been known to cross the street to show friends.

My ruby-red duvet.

The balloon. A French film reminding me of dark classrooms, flickering lights. When there was safety in being lost.

Sneakers, several sizes too big, that Beth found. We each wore one while painting our new place.

A sweater my mom bought on her honeymoon and I misplaced somewhere along the way.

Another dress, one worn by Maureen Stapleton in *Interiors*, a movie I remember in black and white, the red a product of my imagination. Her personality, brash and vibrant, a contrast to everyone else's grey.

The colour of Eve's apple. An easy one, I'll admit. But apples are my favourite fruit.

The strings on my banjo tattoo.

Georges de La Tour's *The Newborn Child*. Brilliant red lit by a shielded candle, that is anything but flat paint on canvas.

— KATHLEEN OLMSTEAD

done by afterward. She accepted cheques.

After about eight years of total obscurity, Justin released an album picked up by a major label and hit it big time when Hollywood bought a song for a famous doomed-lovers movie. Now, he hangs out with Courtney Love and Beck, does tribute albums to Bob Dylan with U2, and conducts highly publicized relationships with ex-supermodels. Everyone in the arts scene over thirty still claims to have slept with/been best friends with Justin Grey. At twenty-seven, Hazel was a bit young.

The night of the benefit, Hazel sat behind the reception desk, nursing her fifth beer and listening to the faded thump of music in the other room. It was 1 A.M. Justin's performance had been two hours late. There was a beer keg by her desk. She decided to drink from it like in the

cartoons. Kneeling, she tipped her head backward under the spout, mouth agape, and reached for the handle. She couldn't reach it. The music changed to applause and Hazel scrambled to her feet just as the door to the main gallery room opened. Justin Grey streaked by and slammed out the front door. Sonja, wearing a black leather jumpsuit and wriggling her wrists in distress, followed more slowly, a vinyl bag over her shoulder.

"Oh, God, Hazel," said Sonja. "Could you please, please, please go to the hotel and give Justin his satchel. We sort of had a fight and he forgot it and he flies out tomorrow morning. He doesn't want to see me. Take some beer money for a cab."

Conrad came up behind Sonja, put his arms around her sinewy waist, and nuzzled her neck.

Hazel took the money, although her bike was downstairs and she had already secretly pocketed a good thirty dollars from the beer sales. She went outside and mounted the old red coaster. She was way too drunk to ride her bike, her contact lenses were drying out, and she could barely see. She decided to ride on the sidewalk as a safety measure.

It took twenty minutes to get uptown to the hotel. She carefully locked her bike and walked into the lobby to call up. "Yeah," he said. "All right, c'mon up."

A deflated looking Justin opened the door to a blue and grey hotel room. He was alone.

"Come on in," he said. He was drunk. "Er . . . Harriet right? Thanks. You want a drink, luv?"

"O.K.," said Hazel. "Luv," she thought. "Ha."

There was nowhere left to sit in the cluttered double room, so each of them sat at the end of a bed and looked at the wall.

"Why a double room?" asked Hazel.

"Oh, I always order a double room," said Justin eagerly, as if he was imparting brilliant information. "I use one bed for sleeping and one bed for napping, yeah? It's better sleep hygiene."

Hazel was tired. She knew she wasn't being very professional as she dumped the satchel on the floor, but not only was the memory of Conrad nuzzling Sonja like ashes in her mouth, but Justin Grey had never been her type. Something about a man who wanted to prancy-prance on stage for attention just wasn't very virile to her. When Hazel watched music videos she often muted the TV to highlight rock stars' earnest, clumsy dancing. Bono was especially bad without music. He looked like somebody's dad after a few too many. Hazel, either trapped in her tall, dark, and handsome conditioning or innocently fuelled by genetic disposition, had also never liked blond men. Justin was both, a singer and blond.

"Yeah, I'm knackered," said Justin, getting up and pouring a scotch for them both. "Knackered," thought Hazel. "Ha." He was looking very mod in black pants and a bowler shirt. "Did Sonja say anything?" he asked.

"No, she was really busy," said Hazel, tugging on her leggings. She had worn a print baby-doll dress over leggings

with combat boots, a look that she knew was ten years out of date, but the leggings were nice and tight, gripping her shivery white belly, and the dress was loose and comfortable. Her blond hair looked very good though. She had just dyed it that morning and it had a shiny chemical gleam.

"You probably know we were together," he said, looking ahead.

"Yeah," said Hazel. They both took sips of their scotch.

"She's a right fuckin' cunt," he said.

"I know," said Hazel in a small voice. After a pause, this struck her as very funny and she snorted into her scotch glass.

Justin looked at her blankly for a second, then reluctantly divulged a wobbly smile. Hazel snorted again, bent over, then lifted her head, giggling.

"What? What?" asked Justin. He started to laugh.

"Right fuckin' cunt!" laughed Hazel. "Sonja is a . . ."

"A right dishrag. Yeah," finished Justin, laughing.

"Dishrag!" howled Hazel, and banged her palm on the bed. They laughed for about two minutes, affectionately, like giddy siblings after lights out. Blinking tears from her eyes, Hazel leaned to the side and saw a book on Justin's bedside table.

"Oh, you're reading *The Great Gatsby*," she said.

"Fascinating book. Never paid much attention in school, y'know," he said, getting up to refill her scotch. This time he sat next to her. "Catching up now on tour."

"Yeah," said Hazel. "I would guess you guys would concentrate on English literature."

"In England we just call it 'literature,'" he said. They laughed.

"Maybe you should write a song about Daisy?" said Hazel. "Good muse."

"Tragic female, yeah."

"Mia Farrow played her in the movie."

"There was movie?"

"Yeah. I think Robert Redford was in it," she said.

"Maybe I should write a song about Harriet," he said.

He reached over her to the night table and pulled out another book. She felt a little jolt of attraction, pulling her out of her sleepy state. On a bed with a man reaching over her, her body started drooling like one of Pavlov's dogs. Never mind that Pavlov gave the dogs electric shocks before they ate. They still wanted to eat.

Justin was enjoying the coolness of this plain, distracted creature, although he was quite certain he could have her if he wanted. Getting them to stay late was half the battle.

"You know, a fella can relax around you," he said. "I like you. My girlfriend—"

"That model Olai?" asked Hazel, remembering the latest tabloid.

"Yeah," sighed Justin. "She may look good, but she's got a mouth like a fucking trucker. A bloke gets sick of it, yeah."

"But she's gorgeous . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, she is, she is, but you know, she's not real, like you are." Hazel knew a line when she heard one. He was going to mention sex as much as possible now.

"She's always into this fantasy bed-

room shite, you know, whips and black rubber masks and stuff. Sometimes a guy just wants a straight fuck. I don't even think she likes sex."

He turned and met her eyes with his pale blue ones. Hazel tried not to snicker self-consciously.

"It's great talking to you, you know?" he said. "Olai's got nothing to say. She's either nodding off or else she thinks screaming and leg wrestling in bars is the same thing as being interesting, you know?"

Hazel nodded sympathetically, thinking, uncharitably, of Sonja.

"She's like Madonna that way," he put his head down. "That's why I miss Sonja so much, you know? She has it all. Brilliance, looks . . ."

Justin was, after all, the man who wrote "Sweetly In My Anger." He had depth. An artiste has needs. He slid his hand around Hazel's neck and pulled her mouth to his, planting a firm kiss on her lips.

"Your lips are so soft," he said.

"I don't do casual sex," said Hazel.

"I can respect that," he said. "You have a fellow?"

"No," she said. "Fellow. Ha."

"What do you do then?" he said

"I charge," she said.

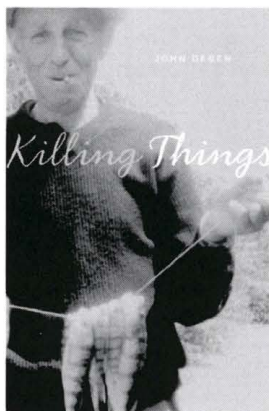
"What?"

"I charge."

"You're a hooker but you work at the gallery?" said Justin, standing back. "Sonja sent me a prostitute?"

"I'm not a prostitute per se," said Hazel. "Although I wouldn't care if you labelled me as one. I promise not to call

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between toes and sole, sock and leather will hold the planter, bind him
your woodsman, the rake to you, his nose to your heel for five days, four
nights & one long walk in any civic park (the kind splattered with sore-red impatiens,
cleomes sticky as rope weed, fleecy, tired dog roses, dull and broken grass lazy flowers
brought in trucks and planted with pole shovels, never touched by gardeners' hands)

washed in a bowl with lead shavings, frost-fattened currants & coils of hair (his hair)
one year later the leaves stain blue, false ink azure as a gas flame, as wet platinum;
eaten with orange peel and ginger, the leaves taste only of salt, of yellowed skin &
argument and must be chewed & spat out twice, onto newspaper else you're lost;
wrapped in vine leaves, the mint will kill any houseplant or mouse, anything weak;
but, tied with amber thread, steamed quills, or half a shoelace (his lace) in two bunches
of twelve cuttings & hung from two trees—one bending north, one east—the cures attract
finches, hatchling gulls, maimed crows & burn their pebbly gullets, in sympathy

— R. M. VAUGHAN

afterward, harbour fantasies of true love, and not to hope you'll call again. The money is enough for me to feel that an even exchange has taken place. I also charge a bottle of tequila."

Justin started getting that speculative glazed look that men get when they're anticipating sex. Hazel hated that look. A look that could even make Sean Connery as James Bond look stupid, and Hazel loved Sean Connery. Hazel had never really been in love though. Her speech had depressed her. Charging was getting a little old. She was going to have to start charging more to make things even; those feelings of violation were starting to creep back.

Justin took out his wallet.

"I gotta go," she said, as she walked to the door.

"Wait. Wait!" shouted Justin, dialing the phone. "Room service? I'd like to order a bottle of tequila. What do you mean illegal? Fucking bloody backwoods. O.K., how many shots in a bottle? O.K., send up twenty-six shots of tequila."

He hung up and looked at Hazel, his hands outspread.

"O.K.?" he asked.

She opened the door and walked out. He followed her down the hall.

"Listen, take my manager's number," he said. "I'd like to talk to you again. Call him if you'd like to see the Montreal show tomorrow."

Had he noticed that jolt, she thought, flustered as she took the paper from him? She left, her heart skittering as she went down the hallway, then down the elevator, then into the night street. She was very tired, her body almost floating away on a combination of scotch and no sleep, but her sore eyes were screwing her to consciousness. She unlocked her battered old coaster and started taking the uphill side streets to her apartment. Three quarters of the way home, she felt the lack of a weight on her back. Oh no. She had forgotten her knapsack.

All these parcels of identity passed back and forth. Justin's satchel, Hazel's knapsack. It was like an elaborately courteous mating ritual.

She turned around and started coasting down the street again. A group of teen boys leaning against a warehouse looked at her. "Bitch!" one yelled. The street, lined by the old brick warehouse, had one weak lamp, and was dry but looked shiny. Hazel pedalled hard downhill. Afraid to see if the boys were after her, she pedalled toward the main street about six blocks down. She'd be safe among cars, few as they were, but when she turned onto the main street, her front wheel got caught in the streetcar track and wrenched her off the bike. She fell onto a parked car and, in shock, jumped up and quickly lifted the bike out of the track. The front wheel had a sharp bend in it, her hands were scraped, and her knee

was drumming to her pulse. She limped the three blocks to the hotel, dragging the bike, crying a little. Damn. Now she'd have to spend the cab money. She dropped the useless bike against the hotel alley wall and it tumbled behind her to the pavement in a clatter of trembling spokes and abused fenders. Fuck it.

Shiny club-going hotel patrons swarmed around her as she went through the doors and trudged to the elevator. She got out on Justin's floor, walked down the hallway, and stood in front of his door. She hated doing this. He was going to think she had a crush on him or that she was a groupie. She wasn't good-looking enough to be a groupie. Well, she could be one of those fat Goth-chick groupies if she wore black lace with her leggings and black lipstick and had black hair. Stars liked to keep them around because they'd do anything to make up for their fatness. Hand jobs, blow jobs, golden showers, getting coffee, servicing a roadie. Cheered by her fatalism, Hazel knocked. He opened the door, grabbed her wrist and pulled her in.

"I forgot my knapsack," she said. "And I trashed my bike on the way back."

Mary-Lou Zeitoun lives in East York. Her first novel, 13, was recently published by Porcupine's Quill. She has been writing for the magazine since 2001. The above story is taken from a work-in-progress.

THE PLAYGROUND WAR

"Danger!" screamed the school trustees, as they tore down the monkey bars.

ESSAY BY ALFRED HOLDEN

Dale Brazao awoke to the sound of a backhoe making noise "so loud my house shook." Investigating the children's playground next door from his kitchen window, he was startled to see "this man at the controls of a Caterpillar," using the bucket to rip apart the Jungle Gym in the yard of Williamson Road Junior Public School, in his east-end Toronto neighbourhood near the Beach.

"I ran out, and there was a bunch of little kids hanging onto the fence, watching," Brazao, a veteran newspaper reporter, remembered. "A couple of them looked to be seven or eight years old, maybe in Grade 1 or 2. You should have seen the look on their faces."

It was near the end of the school year, the third week of June, 2000, and Brazao was witnessing what became a moment of infamy or, depending on your sensibility, of redemption in Canada's largest metropolis. No, this wasn't some rogue heavy-equipment operator—nothing like the madman who briefly terrorized an Etobicoke street with a bulldozer in the late nineteen-eighties. Nor was it a mistake, although many wondered—including the backhoe operator himself, an employee of Priestly Demolition who, remembered Brazao, "seemed to be expressing some doubt" as he took most of the day to pry apart the adventure playground, a huge Jungle Gym, thirty feet long, with a playhouse, stairs, netting, a slide, and monkey bars.

Any doubt that the hapless backhoe operator, the grimacing kids at the fence watching him, or journalist Dale Brazao shared that day would soon be passed on to thousands more. In the coming weeks, the Toronto District School Board, the largest educational institution in the land, ordered the demolition of play structures at public schools across the amalgamated city. "They loaded the pieces onto a truck and took them away," said Caz Zyvatkaskas, the parent of a student at Orde Street Junior Public School, in the heart of downtown Toronto.

"[T]he other day I was over at Bedford Park and saw two pieces of heavy ma-

chinery and a dump truck at work," Jim Coyle wrote in his *Toronto Star* column on August 10, 2000. "When they were done, all that was left of the playground was a sandpit, the wooden perimeter, and two small concavities worn in the ground beneath what was once the tire swing."

The demolition had no parallel in the history of Ontario education. By the time school reopened in the fall, playgrounds, or parts of them, had been razed at a hundred and seventy-two out of four hundred and fifty-one elementary schools, their names stretching from one end of the alphabet to the other, from Adam Beck to Withrow Avenue. Given such numbers, perhaps it was inevitable that a demolition crew would show up, crowbars in hand, at the wrong school. "It's not yours anymore," Patrick O'Brien, a janitor at École Élémentaire Félix-Leclerc—long since transferred to Toronto's French public school board—told a couple of men who arrived in a pickup truck. He guarded the targeted adventure playground until the crew double-checked its list, got back into the truck, and drove away.

The demolition bill came in at seven hundred thousand dollars. One estimate placed the replacement cost at \$27.5 million. Yet the reason for the demolition was, surely, the redemption part of this story: safety. "[T]he Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has removed equipment deemed a serious hazard to children," read the introduction to an upbeat F.A.Q. posted to the school board's web site that July, as the demolitions picked up steam.

In the F.A.Q. document, the board reviewed events leading up to the 2000 tear down: the September, 1999, revision of Ontario licensing requirements, apparently mandating that playground equipment used for child care centres (many hosted by Toronto schools) meet new supposedly voluntary Canadian Standards Association requirements; the subsequent and detailed third-party audit (such party being Jeff Elliott Playground Safety Inspections, based

in Waterloo, Ontario) which found, virtually everywhere, tripping hazards, loose bolts, places to get stuck, deep pits below tire swings, and such sandbox threats as "head entrapment between seat and side rails." The F.A.Q. might have mentioned, but did not, the "advisory" from the worried Ontario School Boards' Insurance Exchange. The co-operative agency suggested that the new C.S.A. standards, though not mandatory, should be met.

Under the circumstances, did school officials have any choice but to call in Priestly? "We acted morally, ethically and financially responsibly, recognizing the best advice of our experts," said Shelley Laskin, the school board's chair, in September, 2000. "We acted to prevent."

The safety mantra did not resonate. Public opinion was divided. "Penny Smith, a parent with McMurrich Junior Public School near Oakwood Ave. and St. Clair Ave. W., applauds the swift action," said one report in June. Yet, as the summer wore on and the equipment at playground after playground was trucked away in pieces, a certain incredulity registered at public meetings and in the letters pages of Toronto newspapers. Joy Kaufman, of North York, wrote to the *Star*, "The decision to destroy playgrounds at schools across Toronto has to be one of the most short-sighted and mean-spirited decisions seen in this city in many years." That September, Kristin Rushow, the paper's education reporter, wrote, "[A]s the dust settled on the mounds of dirt where playgrounds used to be, some angry parents started asking questions." Theories were batted about. Jane Mercer, of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care, blamed the tear downs, ultimately, on the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, which "opened up a Pandora's box" when it ostensibly required daycare centres meet the C.S.A. equipment standards. Since most schools also have daycare centres, it was game over for their playground equipment, she reasoned. Oth-



An empty playground greeted students on the first day of class at King Edward Public School, September 5, 2000.

ers cast a suspicious eye toward Marguerite Jackson, who, as director of education, was the Toronto District School Board's top bureaucrat. Critics of the provincial government were certain Jackson was the Trojan Horse of Ontario premier Mike Harris, the one-time teacher turned education budget slasher. Jackson's mission, this scenario held, was to maximize chaos in the public school system, contributing to the public's lack of confidence in it, thus building support for tax credits (in fact established in 2001), vouchers, and other incentives to send students to private schools.

Whatever the truth in such theories, they did not catch the public's attention any way like the emerging facts of the case did. A key tipping point was September 5th, the first day of school. That day, said Cheryl Moscoe, a parent of two at Faywood Public School, "Everyone was standing around, staring at this hole in the ground" where the playground wasn't. Meanwhile, the person responsible for writing the C.S.A.'s 1998 standards had been tracked down and found to be none other than the board's own Mike Jones. Jones was a civil engineer, retired after working for the school sys-

tem thirty-three years, where he had overseen the design and evolution of playgrounds. Far from being delighted that his standards were being enforced by his former employer, he was adamant, angry, indignant; the Toronto board and its trustees had got it wrong. Yes, the standards raised the bar for playground safety on new equipment; no, they did not somehow make existing playsets instantly unsafe. "Never, never, never," Jones told a reporter. "Nobody [on the C.S.A. committee] ever imagined this would happen." The man seemed to be kicking himself, too, for it had been he, while still in the board's employ, who had been a part of a 1999 task force on "playspace renewal," which, on one hand, had set in motion the board's reckoning but, on the other, had urged an altogether different course of action.

Jones's earlier document had recommended, for the Toronto public system's hundreds of school playgrounds, something akin to an airline fleet renewal program—a gradual upgrading that, over time, would have seen older equipment given greater scrutiny and, when necessity required and economics permitted, replaced with new. The recommenda-

tions "recognize that the playgrounds are not going to last forever, and we should be putting money aside to replace older ones and the ones that become un-economic to maintain," Jones said. But like those nineteen-sixties-era Air Canada DC-9s, whose performance record was stellar in 2000, the playground equipment was safe.

Not much came of the task force report, and when playground demolition began suddenly in June, 2000, no money was set aside for replacement, nor had a stick of equipment been specified or ordered. This fact, too, proved a tipping point in the court of public opinion. "Parents hammered me," acknowledged Sheila Ward, a downtown trustee. "[They said] 'You didn't have a plan to replace it, no statistics or data to back up your comment. There's no history in our school, in anybody's living memory, of any kind of serious accidents. Where do you get off ripping out the playground and not even coming and telling me and my kids?'"

Explanations went up on the board's web site. Public relations staff and sober bureaucrats smoothed things over with sentences like, "Facility Services will be compiling a complete database of the

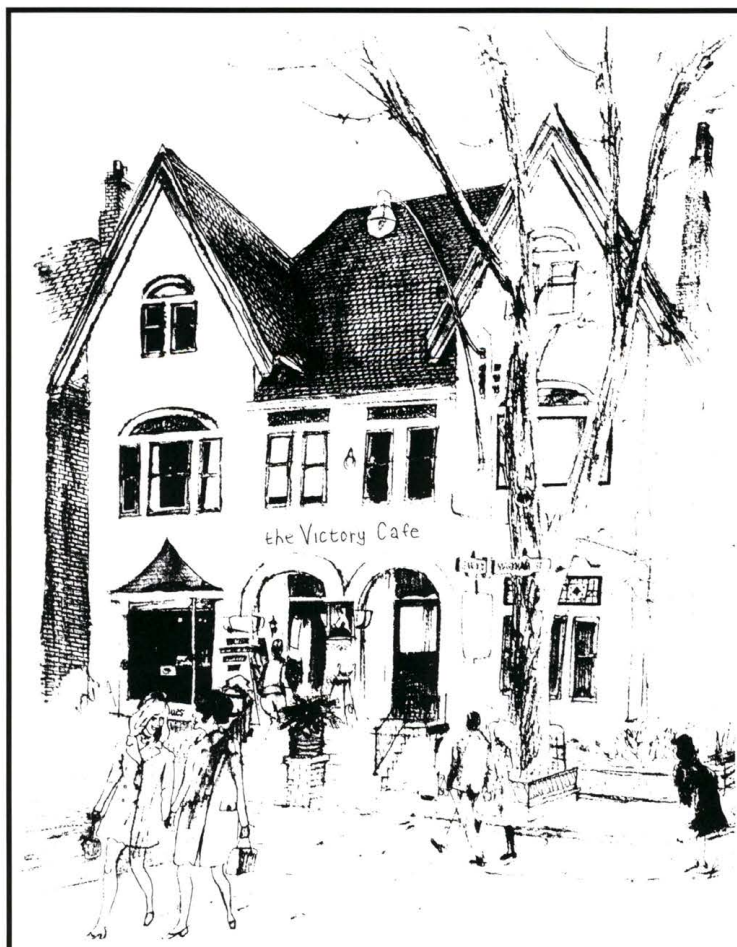
condition of units relative to C.S.A. Z-614-98 and will report to the Board," and "Facility Services staff will remove the unsafe units at no cost to the affected schools to ensure that no child is placed at undue risk." A September 5th news release stated, "The Toronto District School Board approved aggressive new plans to replace dangerous playscape equipment with new playground learning environments that promote student learning and physical health equitably at all elementary schools."

The earnest flow of information didn't seem to help. The board could not shake off the public's perception of a stealth operation poorly executed, followed by something like a cover-up—a feeling that the once streetwise Toronto public school board had succumbed to panic, liability chill, a trap set by the Ontario government, or—just as likely—an inability to see things in perspective. "Why now? Why 2000?" Caz Zyvatkaukas, the Orde Street parent, remembered wondering. "Was the accident rate suddenly high? It certainly wasn't at Orde Street. The number of accidents went up after they tore the playground down."

"Youngsters in playgrounds and schoolyards across the city keep the spirit of team sports and achievement alive," Zyvatkaukas wrote in a letter to Mike Volpatti, a marketing assistant with the Toronto Blue Jays, on May 24, 2001. "We, the parents of children attending Orde Day Care centre located downtown on a Toronto District School Board (TDSB) site are asking the Toronto Blue Jays to consider making a financial contribution . . ." Versions of the same letter, which went on to explain how the need for money to build playgrounds had come about, were also mailed to Toronto's other professional sports teams—the Raptors, the Maple Leafs, and the Argonauts. The campaign, during the final weeks of Toronto's bid for the 2008 Olympic Games, was undertaken on behalf of not only Orde Street, but other schools and daycares in central Toronto, and seemed coolly strategic. If the big sports teams came to the aid of tykes' playgrounds, would not the public reward the grown-up games bid with just the final show of local public support needed to push Toronto over the top at Olympic headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland?

Originally, parents weren't supposed to be so involved, nor did they want to be. "We were all so angry," Zyvatkaukas remembered. "The school board did this. Mothers shouldn't have to spend their time fundraising. It's not right." Said Sheila Ward, the Midtown trustee: "I have had a couple of parents saying, 'Not one cookie will I sell to replace this equipment.'" Mindful of this sentiment, the board had posted the question, "Will parents have to pay for the replacement of playground equipment?" on the web F.A.Q., way back in July, 2000. "No," it dutifully answered. "Parent fundraising will not determine whether a school receives replacement equipment for their school playground. The Board is committed to ensuring all children attending our schools have access to a safe playground."

But like former U.S. president George Bush's famous "Read my lips: no new taxes," the statement was a play on words. Bush raised old taxes. "It was just so obvious that if you didn't [fundraise] you got nothing," Zyvatkaukas said. "The playgrounds that were getting built were the places where the parents had all chipped in."



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In deference to parent anger, fundraising was to be a nineteen-nineties-style partnership with community leaders eager to be seen doing public good. The school board announced Partners in Playgrounds, a fundraising initiative with membership from local businesses and the corporate sector that was to “challenge corporate citizens to come forward to participate.” When ordinary people asked for money, it was begging, but this way, when successful business people asked, it would be an appeal.

The busker’s outstretched hand was primed with three million dollars of the board’s money, later doubled to six million dollars, the source of which was not made clear in official releases, though it was apparently scrounged from the board’s own renewal fund, diverted from fixing roofs, boilers, and other building repairs. That public money added up to nearly one quarter of the cost of rebuilding about a hundred projects, leaving a third to be raised. As an enticement, contributors were celebrated: “The law firms

of Shibley Righton LLP and Hicks Morely have . . . stepped up to the plate, to make a difference,” a news release reported in January, 2001. It also quoted veteran trustee Irene Atkinson, by this time the board’s chair, saying, “This is a grass roots initiative which is pulling together communities across this city to create an outdoor legacy for future generations. It’s simple . . . children need to play and communities need living green spaces to enjoy!”

But, in the end, the board did not discourage parental involvement. It was soon clear that fundraising of all types would fall well short. Fifteen months after the tear down began, just \$1.1 million—a mere fraction of the total estimated twenty-five million dollar replacement cost—had been raised. The qualified “No” was still up on the web F.A.Q. when parents were ushered formally into the cause with a parent-specific how-to fundraising package, dubbed Playgrounds . . . It’s Child’s Play, issued by the board. The kit included a hotline phone number to the board for advice,

information on giving out tax receipts, and the numbers of trust accounts in which to make deposits. Said Progress Report No. 1: “Many School Councils raise funds to support their schools and many communities are doing just that for their local playground.”

Neighbourhoods differed greatly in their fundraising potential. “We didn’t have any parents who had \$10,000 to throw,” Zyvatkaukas remembered, hence her letters to the sports teams, all housed in downtown Toronto facilities not far from Orde Street. Catherine Moraes,



The play area of Orde Street Junior Public School, after the razing.

the board’s senior manager of business development, reported Nelson Mandela Park Public School, on working class Shuter Street, got a thirty thousand dollar donation from the Ontario branch of the Directors Guild of Canada, while Rosedale Junior Public School, in midtown Toronto’s posh Rosedale, had raised close to six figures.

As months passed and new equipment failed to appear, more parents fell in. “We didn’t care, we just wanted our playground,” said Zyvatkaukas, who mentioned in her letter to Volpatti that, “To a three-year-old, this [waiting] represents an eternity.” So long was the rebuild taking at most schools that there were reports of four-square, spud, and marbles making a comeback, more or less with the board’s endorsement. As trustee Gail Nyberg said, “Some of these places had 11 pieces of [playground] equipment. Does a schoolyard need 11 pieces?” For schools at a loss, “Ms. Nyberg also recommends extra soccer balls and chalk for hopscotch squares,” Margaret Went

reported in her *Globe & Mail* column. They went one better than chalk at Wilkinson Junior Public School, on east end Donlands Avenue, where the school’s budget committee paid nine hundred dollars to have large hopscotch squares painted on the asphalt.

Parent participation in planning the rebuilding of playgrounds was invited with some fanfare, but interestingly the “suite of options” finally laid out in 2002 by the board in a playground report to parents hardly referred to actual equipment. An “exemplary playground” might include “spaces such as a court, yard, rink, pavement, tarmac, [or] walls.” Or there could be “Natural spaces for play and meeting such as gardens, woodlots, forest, wetlands, [or] meadows.” It may have been that such natural features were cheaper, if not remotely feasible in urban school districts. It was, said Sheila Cary-Meagher, a renegade New Democrat trustee elected in the autumn of 2000 on the heels of the tear down, a lot of “icing with no cake.” Other key considerations parents

ought to consider, a later progress report suggested, were whether vehicles can “safely and conveniently access the site without disrupting play? Is the playground well configured for pick up and drop off?”

What did the Jays, the Raptors, the Leafs, and the Argos give? Zyvatkaukas learned fundraising was not “child’s play”; it was a sophisticated enterprise where everything hinged on protocol, where connections mattered more than causes, where “rich people talk to other rich people. They don’t want to talk to a mother in daycare.” The Raptors sent back a form to fill in, the Leafs offered a signed puck, and the Jays suggested an autographed baseball to auction off.

“Stop the car! Stop the car!” Ross Maceluch, aged five, shouted somewhere in West Point Grey, Vancouver, riding with his parents in March, 2002. But he could have been a kid in Brussels or Saint John, New Brunswick, or anywhere, any day since 1900. “Invariably, no matter

where we go, that's what happens," said Ross's mother, Janice Turner, a former Toronto resident. "A new playground—an untried playground—is better than a toy store."

"It must be like a casino to an adult," reflected Zyvatkauskas, who spent the early months of 2002 on the committee planning Orde Street school's new playground. What did kids see in their playgrounds? The voices of children had been largely mute during the school playground tear down, but the Orde Street parents were determined to hear them during the rebuild. During the 2001–2002 winter, Orde Street students in different grades were asked to draw their dream playground. Working up their designs with pens, markers, and crayons, the youngsters may not have known what was good for them, but they knew what they liked: swings (especially tire swings, the most dangerous), tree houses (two, three storeys, reached with long ladders), teeter-totters (or see-saws, best used when there is subtle distrust between players), and fireman's poles. One drawing showed a stick man walking tightrope-style on the top bar of a swing

set. Another suggested a relationship between slides, height, and pleasure.

Much of what the children wanted was, to varying degrees, banned by 2002—full of "fault" in the lingo of the reports by Jeff Elliot Playground Safety Inspections, where terms such as "entrapment openings fault," "barrier panel height fault," "one-rung ladder handgrip fault," and "climber access fault" comprised a specialized vocabulary. These were defined in appendices to the safety reports, but even then not so easy to interpret, which, for good or bad, led to a measure of skepticism. The hazards might have been there, but when did proper concern about safety become hairsplitting and overprotection? Was a thirty-six-inch-high railing that didn't meet code really less safe than a thirty-eight-inch one that did?

In 2000, an era when only a few parents let their kids walk to school, it seemed impossible that those same caregivers—the baby-seat boomers—would refuse to get on the playground safety bandwagon, but they did. "The only logical thing to do is have lawyers to design the playgrounds," wrote one such parent, Linwood Barclay, the *Star's* hu-

mour columnist. "Here are some pieces of equipment our kids will soon be playing on," he continued. "The Litigator Teeter-Totter: As soon as children get on the equipment, they are tied up in red tape so they won't be thrown off. . . . The Paralegal Bars: Similar to parallel bars from which kids can hang, but with much lower standing. Children will have to scrunch down to get under them. . . . Contract Bridge: Before children can run across the hanging bridge that links one side of the climber to the other, they must sign a waiver. . . . The Remand Rink: Kids won't fall and hit their heads on the ice here. At this rink, there's always a sign that says it's closed. . . ."

Anyone who did check out the accident statistics found lots of numbers, again not so easy to interpret. Health Canada's Canadian Hospitals Injury Reporting and Prevention Program reported 4,261 playground-related injuries that required hospital visits in 1996, out of a database of 646,335 injuries of all types to all people. About half involved kids five to nine years old; most occurred between noon and 8 p.m.; more than a third were in public parks, an-

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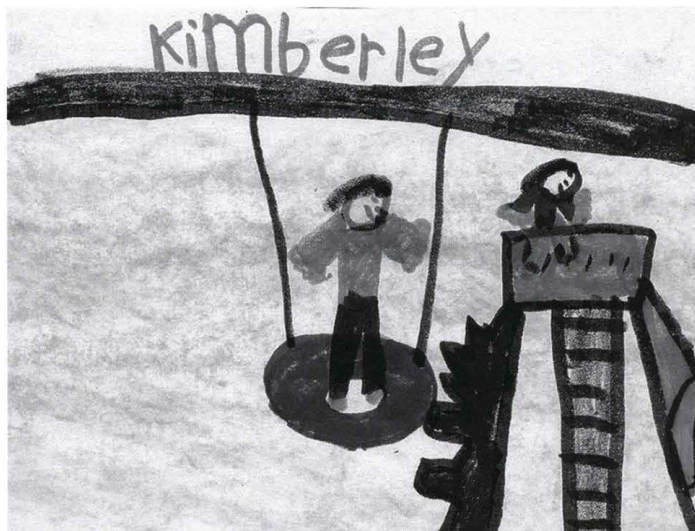
other third in school playgrounds; June was the worst month; slides were the most common cause of injury, with nine hundred and forty-two cases, followed by monkey bars and swings; an even hundred injuries were attributed to seesaws, twenty-eight to sandboxes, ten to rocking horses. The most common injuries were fractures, bruises, cuts, and minor head injury. Just under half of the kids were sent home with no treatment or treatment requiring no follow-up. The number of fatal injuries was zero. Wenté reported, "Some people have died on these pieces of equipment," an insurance official told me this summer. She couldn't say who, or when, or how, or whether this was in Ontario." Checking around, Wenté found that "no children have died on school equipment in Ontario since 1987, the year they started keeping provincial statistics."

Perhaps families knew instinctively that compared to injuries and deaths by automobiles and traffic, playgrounds weren't on the map. Wasn't this the idea behind playgrounds all along? "A quarter century ago when the movement for public playgrounds was getting underway, the playground was demanded as a haven from the physical and moral dangers of the street," Weaver Weddel Pangburn, of the Playground and Recreation Association of America and an early commentator on the subject, wrote in the highbrow *Annals of the American Academy* in the late nineteenth-twenties. "If it was needed then to protect child life, it is needed ten times as badly today . . . In New York City alone, 422 children were killed on the streets in 1926 . . . It may be taken for granted that public playgrounds are safety zones and that they save the lives of many children each day when in operation . . . Instances of fatal accidents on playgrounds are rare."

The "playground movement" Pangburn refers to was long forgotten by 2000, but had been an illustrious period in the history of education. Its seeds, arguably, go as far back as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great French philosopher. Rousseau urged lots of free play and a measure of independence for young children. A

playground was named for him in honour of his advocacy of play. The famous kindergarten system, which was developed by Friedrich Froebel in Germany, and is still very much with us, evolved around such "naturalist" ideas, which aimed to offer children a world of rich play opportunities.

But it was really municipal reform movements in the late nineteenth century that created the playground as we know it—the cliché park or schoolyard with a selection of hardware for youngsters to play on. By the mid-eighteen-



An Orde Street student's dream playground.

nineties, so-called "reform" movements had taken root in cities across North America. In Toronto, where there were in the neighbourhood of fifty public schools by 1895, "each of these is supplied with a playground," the columnist known as "Portia" wrote in a September 7, 1895, commentary in the *Star*. She voiced concerns, voiced again in Toronto more than a century later, that certain neighbourhoods got better playgrounds than others, "some large and beautifully planted with trees, as in the case of the Parkdale school, others in the heart of the city, much smaller." Just the same, she estimated that given the average walk to a school was between five and seven minutes, "27,000 children are living within seven minutes' walk of a playground."

The playground movement got a boost in the mid-eighteen-nineties with the publication of *How the Other Half Lives*, a book about the gap in standard of living between rich and poor, written by muckraking reporter Jacob Riis, who drew attention to the need for recrea-

tion activities in cities, particularly among the children of immigrants and the poor, whose dense neighbourhoods were far from the era's "leisure parks" where the wealthy went strolling.

Toronto was right in step—"Most of the newcomers joined Toronto's poor in the most densely populated and squalid areas of the city," planner Wayne Reeves wrote in the nineteen-nineties. "These new patterns created unease among Toronto's middle class, enabling reformers to turn children's leisure into a public issue . . ."

Everywhere, many of the reformers were middle- and upper-class women, who used their clout to agitate for government spending to create playgrounds in parks and schoolyards. It became a powerful international movement, with its own association and periodical, *The Playground*. The movement drew the support, over the years, of such luminaries as U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Chicago settlement worker Jane Addams, cereal magnate W. K. Kellogg, Central Park designer Frederick Law Olmsted, and, latterly, psychologist William Blatz, founder of Toronto's St. George's

School, which became the Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto.

In *The City Beautiful Movement*, a history of city planning after the eighteen-nineties, William Wilson suggested the playground movement was "explicitly controlling and manipulative," in imposing a middle-class outlook on working-class families, basically to keep their kids from wreaking havoc. Among the movement's more elaborate bits of propaganda was a 1910 novel, *The Girl from Vermont*, about a school teacher in love with playgrounds. Why? "If children are allowed to play in the streets, their first lesson is one of disobedience to municipal law," she dutifully declares. "The storekeepers hate him, the policeman drives him on, and he takes refuge in holes and corners where vicious idling goes on."

Despite all this social baggage, playgrounds were hugely successful. Over time, their popularity crossed all borders, classes, and barriers. In 1911, developer William Harmon gave a paper to

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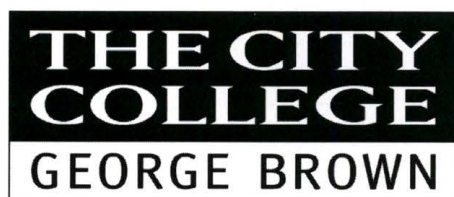
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the American Civic Association, extolling the real estate industry to give land for playgrounds out of "pure enlightened self interest," because it boosted property values. In the nineteen-nineties, the founders of Home Depot celebrated similar values: "One of the favourite company-supported programs is KaBOOM!, through which we build playgrounds for children all over the United States," Bernie Marcus and Arthur Blank said in their business autobiography, *Built from Scratch*.

Hardly anyone noticed how directly playgrounds reflected their times. How the vandal-proof, iron-pipe swing sets and climbers of the early nineteen-hundreds mirrored the classist attitudes that spawned playgrounds ("EVERWEAR STANDS WEAR AND TEAR," one equipment company declared in a 1916 advertisement; "PLAY-GROUNDS: 'ALL-STEEL' VS. ALL STEAL," said A. G. Spalding & Bros., the sporting-goods maker, in an ad in the trade journal *American City*). Few saw how climbers shaped like the Gemini space capsule captured nineteen-sixties Cold War culture's anxiety, expressing as they did the need to interest children in becoming scientists ("A real climber for small astronauts," said the maker of one such example, the Mexico Forge Inc., of Mexico, Pennsylvania). Or how the adventure playgrounds, which were evolving by the late nineteen-sixties, expressed the crunchy-granola spirit of an era when wood felt good and experiments in open-area schools were in full swing.

The epitome of the playground as the mirror of an era was surely reached when Cold War angst, television-based pop culture, and free spirit came together in one piece of playground equipment: the massive Space Cruiser, resembling the starship *Enterprise*, sold by Game Time Inc. of Litchfield, Michigan. *Star Trek*, starring Canadian William Shatner, had just completed its three-year run on NBC. On this massive climbing gym, kids could all but go into orbit: there was a cockpit pod youngsters could "beam" out of on something like a fireman's pole, wing slides, and jet engines the children could climb right into. The design was shown off at the National Recreation and Park Association annual conference in September, 1970. The play gym stood "an imposing 12' high;" it was thirty feet long and twenty-four feet wide. Imagine the lurking Klingons that Jeff Elliott, the playground inspector, would need to ex-

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A 1970 advertisement for Game Time's Star Trek-inspired Space Cruiser adventure playground.

punge. At warp speed he would surely consign this U.S.\$11,800 spaceship to the boneyard, somewhere on a distant star.

What would the school playgrounds being re-planned after the great Toronto tear down reflect? The forces shaping them would be many and not altogether harmonious. There were parents, some resigned, some converted, yet many still bitterly skeptical of the "experts" who'd been obediently responsive to obscure insurance collectives and ignored them.

There would be the influence of the city of Toronto, Canada's largest municipality, which in its own parks maintained an airline-style upgrading program that ensured long life for equipment while incorporating functional and safety improvements.

And there would be the Toronto District School Board itself, cash-strapped and in chaos in 2002 due to provincial education policy ("12 MORE SCHOOLS FACE SHUTDOWN," a headline in the *Star* read on April 17th. "Funding falls short, board says"). Hints of apologies and acknowledgements of haste and misjudge-

ment had appeared during the debate. "I am personally sorry for the situation we are in," a pressured Gary Parkinson, an executive officer with the board, told one parent council in September, 2000, but "the board is still ripping out playgrounds," it was reported the next day.

Meanwhile, dissent had grown among trustees after the fall, 2000, elections. David Moll, the trustee who had introduced the motion to tear down equipment deemed unsafe under the voluntary C.S.A. standards, was off the board. The curmudgeonly Sheila Cary-Meagher, an assertive, leftist, pro-playground former trustee, was returned in the dust of the tear down. But ultimately, most of the incumbents survived and administrators and a majority of trustees dug in their heels. Because of playground injuries, "There were lawsuits, claims against our board and other boards," trustee Judi Codd, from suburban Willowdale, would say in 2002. "It gave us an opportunity to make some changes where there should be changes."

So, was it a triumph of courage in the face of misinformed public censure and in defence of children's broader interest? Or a moment of infamy when public officials chose to hide haste and misjudgment and waste by exploiting, all out of proportion, unassailable values—the safety of young citizens?

The absolute truth wasn't clear, but telling was the fact that—Orde Street students' drawings notwithstanding—the most absent voices from the discussion would be those of children themselves. There were surely reasons for this—techniques of public protest and cross-examination of official statements and decisions were not in the kids' curriculum. "They're not like the high-school kids," said Caz Zyvatskauskas, "who can go to city hall and advocate for the [swimming] pools."

Another reason the kids weren't heard from might have been that, had they been able, they might have delivered a message few would have wanted to hear.

It would likely have been a profound



Children on the monkey bars at Charles G. Fraser Junior Public School in June, 1969.

point, about growing up and managing risk, accepting responsibility, learning independence, and exercising judgement. These were all essential life skills, but for a generation youngsters had been increasingly protected from discovering them through experience. The playground had been conceived as a place to become wise to the world—where limits could be tested in relative safety, but where nonetheless there could be consequences. It was this challenge that was playgrounds' essential ingredient, their draw, and their method of teaching—and it was this edge that such events as the 2000 Toronto playground tear down sought to remove.

"It's about how fast they can go, how sick they can get, and how scared they can feel," Michelle Martindale, a teacher at the University of Toronto's Institute for Child Studies, said about playgrounds in 1998. Her Grade 2 classroom was part of a small but real public school where the fabled institute founded by Dr. Blatz still evaluated techniques for broader application in the Canadian education system. In an informal but telling poll of

students, merry-go-rounds—anecdotally the most hated piece of playground equipment in hospital emergency rooms—topped the list of most-desired bits of playground equipment.

"Do you like the danger?" an interviewer asked pupil Shannon Curley, at the institute. "Yeah," she said, summing up in a word the tension that underlay the tear down.

Toronto's new school playgrounds would likely be splinter-free, plastic, rust-proof, and low to the ground. Would the kids like them? Children were never too concerned with playground fashions, so perhaps. Would they learn from them? Nothing real, nothing useful, it increasingly seemed.

In this, the playground tear down might be seen as a caricature of the broader trends in education in Ontario at the millennium—the dumbing down and demolition of a once diverse, challenging, public institution in service of the safe, the dull, and the much cheaper.

But really, it was simpler than that. Toronto school children were the innocents sacrificed in a war—a war, like

most, begun over misunderstanding, fed by stupidity, sustained by paranoia, and laced with incompetence.

It was a war that nobody won.

Alfred Holden is assistant financial editor of The Toronto Star and "City Building" columnist for The Annex Gleaner. In 2001, he was awarded a Heritage Toronto commendation for his work in Taddle Creek and elsewhere. He has been writing for the magazine since 1997.



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21st Century Soviet Scientist Predictions*

"People living in cities will very likely celebrate the New Year 2000 in the rays of a man made sun, blazing at a height of some 20 kilometres above the earth.

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TWO NIGHTS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

An excerpt.

FICTION BY CAMILLA GIBB

The drive from Charlottetown is flat, with a large winter sky hanging low above them, Edie chatting animatedly to her brother, Matt, the whole way. Matt, a picture framer who lives in Rochester, has driven up from New York state in his silver sport-utility vehicle with his golden retriever, Bartholomew. He's clearly in love with the dog because in the airport parking lot he says to his sister: "I hope you two don't mind sitting in the back." If Bart doesn't sit in the front he gets car-sick, apparently.

Matt calls his sister "fruit loop" and he greets Claire warmly.

"What about that woman you were dating last year?" Edie asks him.

"Janice?"

"Yeah, she was cute. She was a graphic artist or something, right?"

"Didn't work out," he shrugs. "She was allergic to dogs. What could I do?" he says, looking lovingly at Bart.

"Why can't you ever meet someone with a dog?" she asks him. "I mean, don't all you dog people convene at the park and exchange recipes for dog biscuits and stuff? There must be plenty of opportunities."

"I live in a condo, Edie. Bart runs around the roof garden with a bunch of poodles that also live in the building. And you know what they say about dogs and their owners."

There's nothing along this drive from Charlottetown apart from their friendly chatter and a succession of churches. All white clapboard and spires and strange angles. Matt points to their mother's house, a huge, rambling building standing solitary against the horizon. They have to drive past the church and through the graveyard before they pull into the driveway.

Claire imagines waking up on Sunday mornings and looking at a funeral procession out the window over breakfast. Picking the R.I.P. banner off a wreath to adorn a door at Christmas. Playing hide and seek in between the gravestones and planting carrots between them in the spring. Must be fertile soil.

"Fred bought the place for forty-five

thousand dollars," Edie says. "Can you imagine? That would barely make a dent in a mortgage in Toronto."

"Well, there's a reason for that," Claire says, somewhat sarcastically. "I mean, where the fuck is the nearest liquor store? Charlottetown?"

Matt looks back at Edie and they both laugh and nod their heads.

"It would make me a little mental," Edie agrees. "God, especially if it meant living with Fred. Or my mother, for that matter," she says. "Speaking of which," she gapes, pointing in mock horror.

Their mother is standing there in some outfit that belongs on a nineteen-fifties film star at cocktail hour on holiday in the Caribbean. She is alarmingly canary-yellow from top to bottom. Draped in a sleeveless yellow muumuu, she has plastic hoop earrings and sling-backs to match. The strangest thing is that it must be about minus twenty and she's standing there on the porch in that sleeveless muumuu. She's got a martini glass with a fluorescent stir stick spearing a grove of olives sticking out of it in one hand and an empty cigarette holder in the other.

"Is she for real?" Claire whispers, tugging on Edie's arm.

"Oh yeah," Edie says with emphasis. "Mum, I'd like you to meet Claire," she says, pulling her girlfriend forward.

Claire stretches out her hand and Edie's mother grins widely from a pink puckered mouth. "It's such a pleasure to meet you," she slurs.

"You too, Mrs. Day," Claire says, letting go of a damp and cloying hand.

"Gwendolyn," she says slowly, emphasizing every syllable. "Call me Gwendolyn. Don't make me feel like an ancient."

"Sorry, Gwendolyn," Claire shrugs.

"Come in, come in," she gestures wildly, turning her back to them. Edie rolls her eyes at Matt. "I'll send Fred out to get your bags," Gwendolyn yells over her shoulder.

"It's only four-thirty and she's hampered already," Edie says to Matt with

some measure of disgust. Claire's never seen disgust on Edie's face before—it's not unbecoming, it's just different.

"Cocktail hour appears to begin earlier on this edge of the world," Matt comments. "I don't think there's much else to do here in winter."

"Dee-pressing," Edie moans. "I wonder why she doesn't take up painting again. She used to be quite good. Landscapes, portraits. They really weren't bad."

"Is that where you get it from?" Claire asks her.

"No. I got it because I would have gone crazy if I hadn't," she says, laughing.

They pass through not one, but two kitchens. "The monks used to use this kitchen on Sundays, the other one the rest of the week," Matt explains.

"Yes, how very, very grand it all is," muses Edie. "Who gets the servants' quarters this year anyway, Matt?"

Gwendolyn is stretched out on a burgundy divan in front of a large and passionate fire. The room is otherwise ice-cold. "Come in, come in," she waves at them. "Fred, be a dear and get me another martini," she says to the tiny bearded man hiding in the corner patting a stuffed bird. "Oh, and get their bags out of the car and take them up to the servants' room, will you?"

"His eye's fallen out," Fred says sullenly.

"The bird," says Matt. "Fred's hobby. Taxidermy."

"Morbid, isn't it?" squawks Gwendolyn. "I can only stand to have the birds in the house, not the other . . .," she hesitates, trying to find the right word, "things."

Claire wonders what the "things" are. And where the "things" are. And whether they are wild "things." Does Fred keep them in the garden shed or perhaps in the deep-freezer in the first kitchen? Will they be having one of those "things" for dinner? She'd have to ask Edie later.

"Hello, Edie," beady-eyed little Fred says, looking like a bird himself as he pecks her on both cheeks.

"Hi there, Fred," says Edie in return.

"And this must be your friend Claire."
"Nice to meet you," Claire says, stretching out her hand.

"Likewise," he says, looking at the floor. "Be right back, dear," he says officiously to Gwendolyn. He's a man with a mission. Places to go, people to see, things to do.

"He's an oddball," Matt says.
"'Freak' is more like it," says Edie.
"Kids, don't go starting that again," Gwendolyn says from the divan. "Matt, honey, you know how I like my martini. Come and fill Mummy's glass, and get some for the girls, too," she says, pointing toward the bar.

"Edie, honey, come sit down and let

"Actually, Mum, no. I honestly and truly don't give a shit."

"Hostile, hostile," she chastises Edie.
"Well, what do you think of her bum, then?" Gwendolyn says, turning to Claire. "I mean, from a *lesbian* perspective," she drawls.

"Jesus, Mum. Like, she's only just arrived and you have to ask her that?" Claire blushes.

"Well, you want to know you're appreciated, don't you, Edie?" Gwendolyn says.

"I think Edie's got a great bum, Gwendolyn," Claire says plainly. She's tempted to say, "Actually, Gwendolyn, she

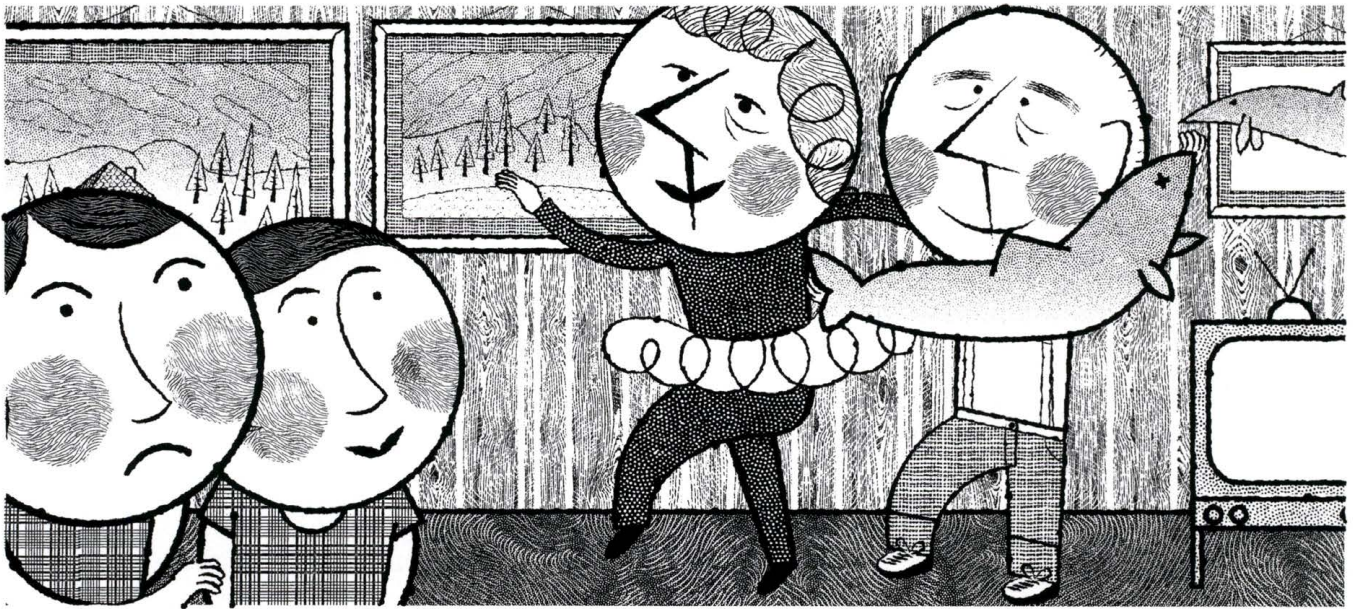
in the middle of nowhere with a devoted dog named Fred and three ungrateful children who only come and visit you once a year. You call that life?"

"Oh, Edie," she moans. "It's not that bad, you know it. I'm a lucky woman. Three beautiful grown-up children. Even if one of them is a little scrawny. And a lesbian. And another one is sleeping with his dog."

"And where's your other daughter?" Claire asks her.

"Paula's arriving on Christmas Eve."

"Paula's what you would call," Edie explains to Claire, "normal. With a capital 'N.'"



your mother have a look at you."

Edie sits, as instructed, on the edge of the divan and Claire sits down in an adjacent chair.

"Have you lost weight, dear?" she says, placing her palm on Edie's forehead.

"I'm the same weight as always, Mum," Edie says.

"It's just that you look awfully scrawny," she winces. "You've got no bum."

"Mum," Edie groans, "Do you have to embarrass me?"

"Nothing wrong with a shapely bum, dear. You should be proud of your womanly bits."

"Ugh," moans Edie.

"That's what men like in a woman, Edie."

"Mum, do you happen to recall that I'm a lesbian? I don't really give a shit whether men like my bum."

"Well, you still want them to look and like don't you? No sane woman wouldn't want a man to appreciate her."

has a superior ass—real tight, especially when I stick my tongue up inside her," but she doesn't think Gwendolyn wants to know quite how much Claire appreciates Edie and her bum.

"I used to be a Rockette," Gwendolyn boasts.

"So Edie tells me," Claire nods. Edie rolls her eyes.

"Now, *that* does wonders for your bum."

"Enough about bums, already," Edie groans.

"High kicking and high living—that was my motto. Till I met that fucking farmer."

"That would be my dad," Edie says as a sarcastic aside.

"Raymond," Gwendolyn drawls. "So convinced he was going to go places and wanted to take me with him. What a mistake. I could be living the high life in Manhattan now if it wasn't for Raymond."

"Too bad, Mum. Instead you're stuck

"You mean, married with kids?" She nods.

"Now, don't you go criticizing your sister, Edie," Gwendolyn says. "She's a good girl. A good mother."

"She's a born-again Christian," Edie explains.

Oh, this should be a treat, thinks Claire. Picture it: a drunken Rockette, a diminutive taxidermist, two dykes, a bestial brother and his four-legged lover Bart, and a family of born-agains sitting down for Christmas dinner in a room full of dead birds. She's looking forward to this.

Camilla Gibb lives somewhere between the Annex and Rosedale. She is the author of Mouth-ing the Words (Pedlar, 1999), which won the 2000 Toronto Book Award. Her next novel, The Petty Details of So-and-so's Life, will be published this fall by Doubleday. She has written for the magazine since 2000 and appeared on the first Taddle Creek album.

HORSE FEATHERS

An excerpt from *The Haunted Hillbilly*.

FICTION BY DEREK McCORMACK

The backdrop's a barn. The audience buzzes like a busted speaker.

Judge Roy Hay says howdy. "Get ready, folks. Here comes the Grand Ole Opry's brightest star—and do I mean bright!"

Spotlights big as milk cans. Hank steps on stage. Suit stitched with a farm scene. Sequined steeds. Beaded barbed wire. A Swarovski crystal creek.

The audience stands. Flashbulbs flash. He starts into his single *tout de suite*. I warned him. Flashbulbs fade fine fabric.

I'm watching from the wings.

"You're the tailor, right?" Ernest Tubb says.

"Couturier," I say. I size up Ernest's ensemble. His collar's unstable. The pants are odds.

"How's about making me a suit like that?" Ernest says. "Not exactly like that. I'm thinking maybe something with Texas." He tips his ten-gallon. "I'm the Texas Troubadour."

"I work exclusively for Hank." I walk away.

"What's he paying you?" Ernest yells. "I'll pay double! Triple!"

Hank and I duck out the stage door. Flashbulbs bleach the alley. Girls wait. They make a ring around Hank, waving autograph books. Pages pink and yellow.

Hank signs. I stand to the side. Out of the heel of my eye I spy them. Boys. They're loitering around the Cadillac.

Tinfoil taped to the yokes of their shirts. Duct-tape piping. Their boots painted orange. Their mothers' scarves around their necks.

"They're being you," I say.

"I'll be damned," Hank says.

"Well?" I say.

The store's a shell. Drywall daubed with undercoat. Dust like a splatter sheet. "What is it?" Hank says.

I direct him to a drawing tacked to drywall. "HANK'S CORRAL." Letters resemble ropes. The perspective's impeccable. "The artist's conception," I say. I'm the artist.

"A store of me?" Hank says. In the drawing, he's stylized, sketchy, like people on patterns. The decor's dude ranch. A chuckwagon check-out. Saloon doors swing on change rooms. A chandelier of branding irons. Dangling.

"What do I sell?"

"Prêt-à-porter."

"Pretty poor *what*?"

"Hi," Hank says.

We're in a sweatshop. Seamstresses sit at satin stitch machines. Pumping foot pedals like they're playing pedal steels.

"It's done piecemeal," I say. "This woman's stitching sleeves. This one's doing cuffs. At the end of it we have these."

Mannequins model. The shirts are stallion print. The prints bleed. Hank strokes one. Gets a spark.

"The thread count's negligible," I say.

For ladies there are gauchos. "A blend. The sequins are store-bought." I pinch one. It creases. "If your fans are going to dress like you, you may as well profit."

Hank rubs his neck. "You really think they'll buy it?"

"Show me something showy," Ernest Tubb says.

A men's store. Might as well be a bank. Mahogany and mirrors. Ties displayed in wickets. Dust swirls like paisley. A clerk leads him to herringbones.

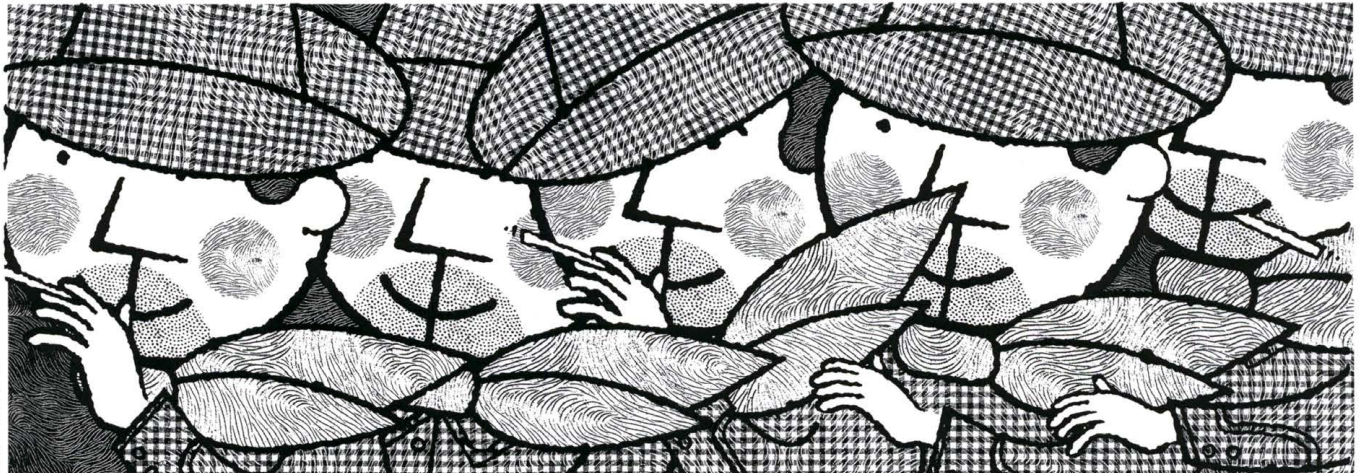
"No, no, no." Ernest runs his hand along hangers. They clink. Brown blazers flecked with grey. Grey blazers flecked with brown. He waves a page torn from *Hillbilly Fan*. Hank's glossy suit. "Don't you have something like this?"

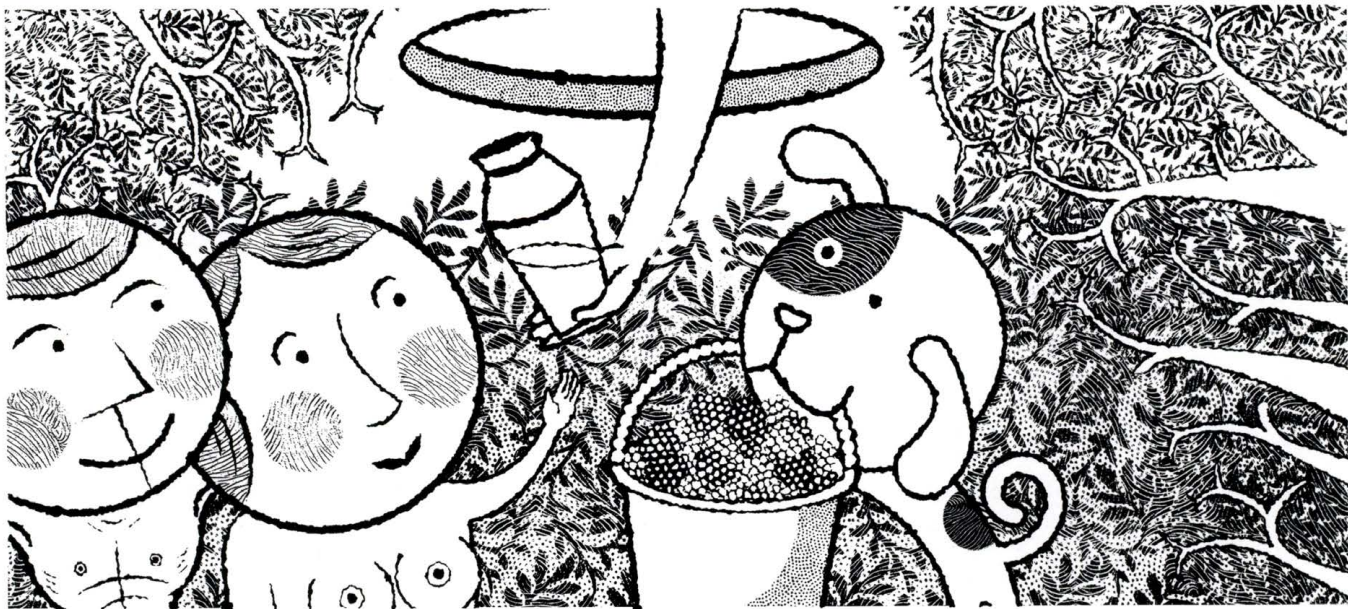
Ernest steps outside. Empty-handed. He walks upstreet. He steps into Gentry Esq. Menswear. He tries the Olde Suit Shoppe. Same story.

Then he sees it. In a store across the street. It sparkles. A suit. He dodges cars. He runs for it.

It's a locksmith's. The suit's a rack of keys.

Derek McCormack lives in Sussex-Ulster. He is the author of *Western Suit* (*Pas de Chance*, 2001), which is also taken from his upcoming novel, *The Haunted Hillbilly*. He is also the author of *Wish Book* (Gutter, 1999), *Halloween Suite* (*Pas de Chance*, 1998), and *Dark Rides* (Gutter, 1996), and co-author (with Chris Chambers) of *Wild Mouse* (Pedlar, 1998). He has been writing for the magazine since 1997.





ONE SWEET DAWN

A history of the alcoholic fruit cooler, Part I.

FICTION BY JASON ANDERSON

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day" and the darkness he called "night."

And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water." So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. God called the expanse "sky."

And God looked upon the waters and said, "I wonder what would happen if I put that water in some kind of . . . shaker?" Thus, he created another kind of liquid. God named it after himself—the Spirit of God—and then shortened it by dropping the last part.

Six days later, all there was to be found in the heavens and earth had been created, all except for man. Then God did create man in His own image. God called the first man "Adam." Then, sensing Adam's restlessness, God did create Eve in the image of Adam, albeit enhanced with a pleasing curviness.

The two new beings were joyful in the

garden created for them by the Lord. God then instructed them to continue His holy task of naming all they found there. And so they did. When the task of creating words for all the works of God was completed, Adam and Eve compared their achievements. Eve was pleased with Adam's names for "dog," "fibula," and "coral," while Adam thanked his wife for "gazelle," "water lily," and "salamander." Adam and Eve celebrated with frolicsome behaviour.

And the Spirit of God appeared, hovering over the garden.

"Hey, you two," He said. "Get a room."

Adam and Eve laughed at the jest of the Lord, for shame had yet to despoil this place. They rearranged their bodies and told the Lord of all the names they had created for His works. God smiled, nodding and hovering at what He heard, complimenting Adam and Eve's names with phrases such as "That's a good one" and "That's so much better than the one I had."

It was many hours before Adam and Eve finished reciting the list to their Lord God. By then, it was neither light nor darkness, but a mixture of the two.

"Excuse us, Lord," said Adam. "We shouldn't have kept you."

"*Au contraire*," said God. "Your company

has been a delight to Me. And I have something that should be a delight to you as well."

And with a flourish of His mighty hand, God revealed to Adam and Eve a beautiful vessel containing the shaken water, which he called "spirit."

"I do believe," He said, "it is the hour for a libation."

In their hands, God placed two silver cups and did fill them with liquid from the vessel. Adam and Eve looked upon the cups with amazement and wondered at the immenseness of the Lord.

God looked down upon them. "Well," He said, "bottoms up!"

Adam was the first to drink. He felt a tingling in his lips as the liquid wet them and then a sensation in his mouth, startling and vivid. When he swallowed, the liquid felt hot in his throat. The taste was new, but familiar, and excited Adam greatly. He shivered with pleasure and gasped.

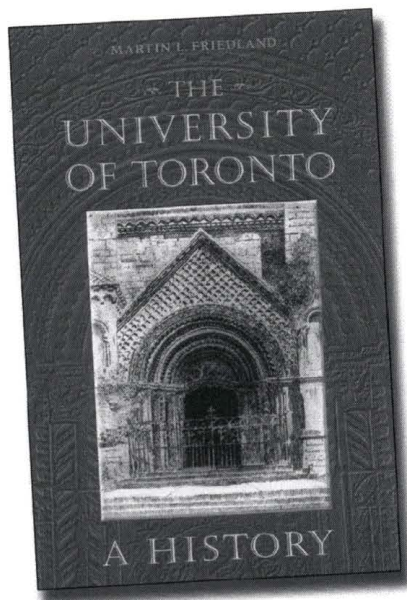
"Pretty good, huh?" asked the Lord God.

"Oh yeah," said Adam. He looked to his wife and said, "You've got to try this."

And Eve looked warily down at the cup in her hands. "I don't know," she said. "It smells awfully strong."

"C'mon," said Adam.

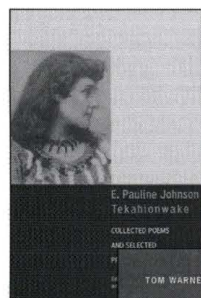
"Yeah," said the Lord God, "try it."



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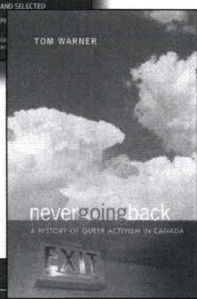
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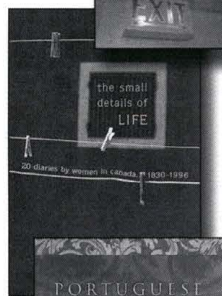
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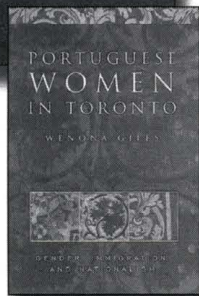
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Eve sniffed at the liquid. Then she lifted it to her lips. After they were touched by the merest drop, she lowered the cup. "You know," she said, "I have an idea."

She turned to the first and most loyal of the creatures that rested near them, the one they called "dog." "Could you be a darling and go get me some berries?" she asked.

"Sure thing," said Dog, which then took its leave.

"Eve," said Adam, "aren't you pleased with this gift from our Lord?"

"Of course," she said. "Why, everything He's created so far has been just terrific." She looked up to God. "Really," she said.

God hovered.

Dog returned to Eve's side, clutching a bucket of berries in its gleaming teeth. "Here ya go, lady," it mumbled.

And Eve did take a handful of red and purple berries and held them over her cup, wringing out the fine sweet juice.

"There," said Eve, as she wiped her juice-stained hand on a flank of her newly-created backside. Once again she lifted the cup to her lips, but this time she was unafraid. Instead, she drank deeply.

"Mmm," she said. "Oh yes."

"You diluted it," said God, with not undue sternness.

"No, silly," said Eve as she began to giggle, "I improved it."

She drank again.

"Here, you try," she said to her husband. And she gave him her cup.

Though confused by the look he saw upon the shining visage of the Lord, Adam did consume the darkened spirit.

"Hmm," he said. "That's fine, though it is a little sweet for me."

"I think it tastes perfect," said Eve.

"Oh, do you?" said God.

And Eve giggled again. "Oh, God, You know what would taste even better? If we mixed the berry juice with that mashed grape drink You gave us with lunch. That would be, like, *a double fruit sensation.*"

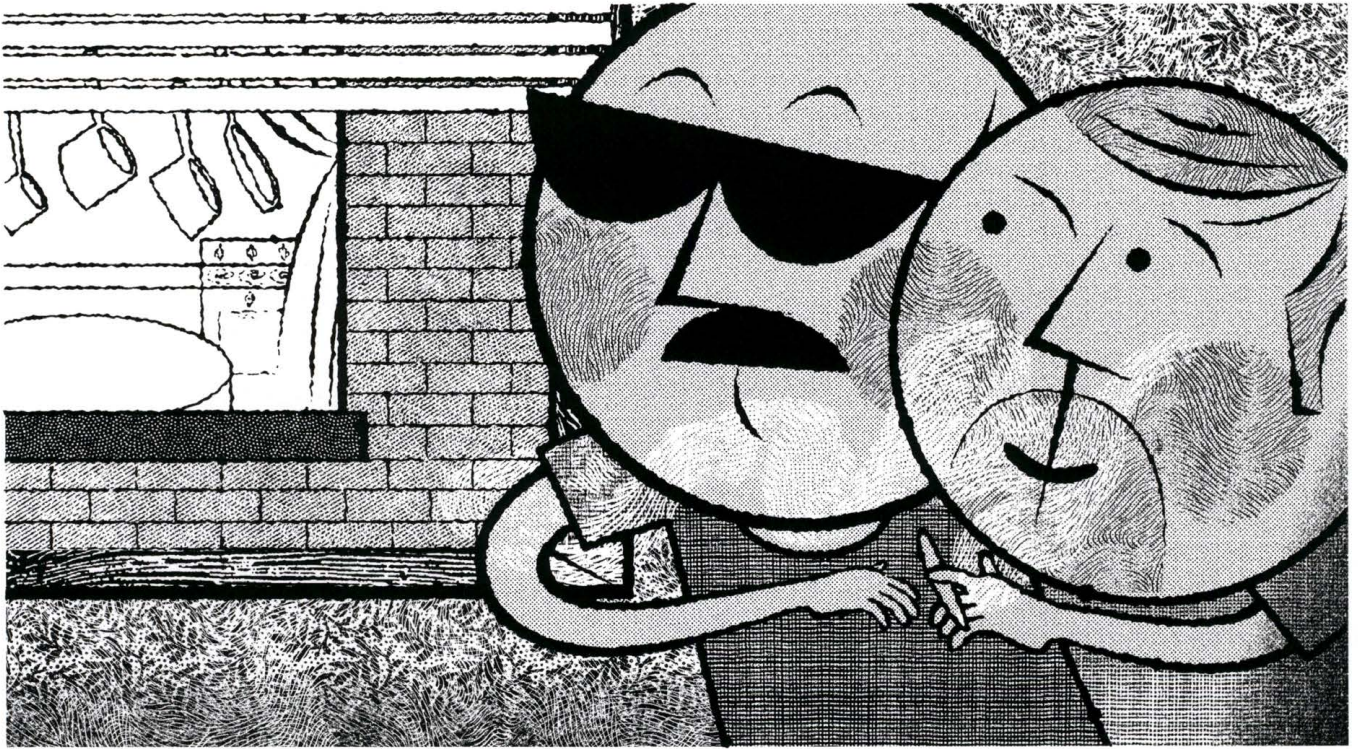
"Yeah," said Adam.

Hovering and immense, the Lord could not conceal His displeasure. But His creations paid him no mind.

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Jason Anderson lives just north of Seaton Village. He is currently writing a book of short stories. He has been writing for the magazine since 2000.



NEIGHBOURS

FICTION BY PETER DARBYSHIRE

I walked everywhere in those days. I had a car, but I couldn't always afford gas. Sometimes at night, I went up to the windows of houses and looked inside. In the dark, you can stand right on the other side of the glass and no one ever knows you're there. From the street these places always seem like the kind of homes you see in magazine ads—all red walls and leather furniture. Close up, though, it's mostly just people watching television or doing the dishes. Although, once I saw a woman feeding soup to a man with two broken legs. There was nothing wrong with his arms, but she fed him soup anyway, kneeling beside him on the couch and carefully lifting the spoon to his lips.

Another time I saw a man putting on eyeliner. I was standing deep in a driveway between houses and looking into a bedroom. I could see him through the cracks between the blinds. He was sitting at a vanity with lights around the mirror. When he was done with the eyeliner he put on eye shadow and lipstick. Then he cleaned his face with a Kleenex and blew himself a kiss. After that, he

walked out of the room and didn't come back. I wondered whose makeup it was. His wife's? His roommate's?

And once I came across another man doing the same thing as me. I started down a driveway and saw him kneeling on the ground at the other end, his face shining from the light of the basement window in front of him. He never looked away from it, not even when I went back up the driveway. I don't think he ever knew I was there. I never went back to that house again.

I was twenty-three or twenty-four at the time, I can't really remember anymore. I hadn't worked in months. My divorce papers had just come through. Sometimes, I would wake up with shooting pains in my stomach, like someone had stabbed me while I slept. The doctors said there was nothing wrong with me.

On one of these walks I met a blind man. It was around five or six in the evening. I could tell he was blind because he wore those dark glasses and he was tapping around the base of a telephone pole with a long white cane.

When I tried to walk around him he swung the cane into my legs. It bent like it was made of rubber. I had to stop because he kept the cane in front of me. I couldn't move without jumping over it.

"I'm a little lost," he said, as if I'd asked him how he was. "There's not a newspaper box around here, is there?"

"No, there's nothing but the telephone pole," I told him.

"There's supposed to be a newspaper box," he said, "but I guess my counting got thrown off somewhere."

"Yes, that's most likely it," I agreed, even though I didn't really know what he was talking about. I waited for him to move the cane, but he didn't.

"I was walking to the school," he went on. "But I should have come across it by now. You don't see a school anywhere, do you?"

I looked around. We were standing in front of an old Victorian house with vines growing up the front of it. A young girl in white pajamas stood in the front window, watching us. There weren't any lights on behind her. She was just a white silhouette against the darkness.

"No," I said, "there's nothing but houses around here."

"Wow," he said, shaking his head. "I'm really messed up."

The girl didn't move at all, didn't even seem to blink. I wondered where her parents were.

"I could really use some help here," the blind man said.

The blind man kept his free hand on my arm while we walked, like he was afraid I would run away if he didn't. All the way down the street he tapped the ground in front of us with his cane and counted under his breath. Now that I was taking him back the way he had come, he seemed to know exactly where we were at all times. Every intersection we took he guided me in a different direction. Soon I was the one who was lost.

"I have it all memorized," he told me as we went along. "I go for the same walk, to the school and back, every night. Turn left out the door, two hundred and seventeen steps to the first right, four hundred and eight from there . . ." He went on like that for some time and then ended with, "And that box has always been there before, a hundred and one steps from the intersection after the second left turn. Always. I don't understand it."

"How do you know when you're actually at the school?" I wanted to know. "I mean, even if you take the proper amount of steps, how do you know it's the school and not something else, like a bank or a high-rise?" I pictured him tapping his way around a building, trying to figure out what it was just by its size and shape. Maybe counting taps like he did steps.

"I can hear the kids," he told me. "There are always kids in the playground, even in the middle of the night. It's like they don't know where else to go."

Later, he said, "You're probably wondering why I go to the school every day."

"No, not really."

"I'm no Humbert Humbert, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't."

He led me to a large house with a fence around the front yard. The fence was taller than me and had trees all around the inside of it. The address was printed on the door in red paint. It looked like a child had done it.

"Here we are," he said.

"Why do you have such a big fence?" I

asked. None of the other houses on the street had fences around their front yards.

"It's so no one can see us," he said. "I think the neighbours complained or something."

"Us?" I asked.

"It's kind of like a group home," he said. "For people like me."

I pictured a whole houseful of blind men, bumping around the halls and asking each other for help just to get out the door.

"Would you like to come in?" he asked.

"For a coffee or something?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"Maybe something to eat," he said. "I can make you a sandwich."

"No, I've really got places to be," I told him.

"I have drugs."

We entered through the front door, which wasn't locked. As soon as he opened the door I heard a woman scream, then the sound of gunshots. I was ready to run away, or maybe hide behind one of the trees, but he walked in like this was normal, so I followed him.

Just inside the entranceway was a large living room, and this was where all the noise was coming from. Two men were sitting on a couch underneath the window, watching a big-screen Sony across the room. On the television, some cops in black body armor were standing around a man lying on the ground. He was wearing nothing but shorts,

and blood was running out of several bullet holes in his upper body. A woman was standing on the porch of a nearby house, and she was the one who was screaming. I wasn't entirely sure, but I thought I might have seen this before.

The two men on the couch turned to look at us when we came in, but they didn't say anything. One of them raised a beer can to his lips. "Hello," I said. They still didn't say anything.

"Don't mind them," the blind man said. "They're deaf."

They looked back at the television when the scene changed to an outdoor shot. Now a bear was mauling someone on the other side of a parked car. Someone had videotaped the whole thing rather than

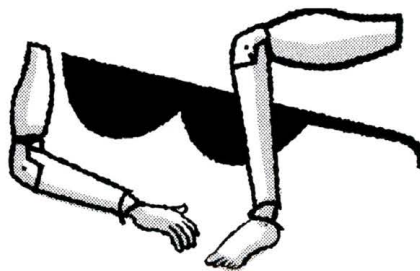
help. The deaf men started laughing, making noises like barking dogs.

"It's just down this way," the blind man said, leading me deeper into the house.

For a while during these days I dated a woman who had a metal arm. It was the first woman I'd been with since my ex-wife. She'd lost her real arm in a car accident. She talked about the accident like it didn't mean anything to her. "We were going too fast around a corner and the car rolled. That was it, just one of those stupid one-car accidents." She never said who the other person was, or which one of them was driving. "Silly me, I had my arm hanging out the window and it got torn off when the car rolled over it." Silly me. She really said that.

She didn't mind having a metal arm at all. Not that it looked metal. When you put it beside her real arm, you could barely tell them apart. But when you touched this fake arm, it was cold and hard.

And it would move on its own. She would take it off and lay it on her dresser, but the fingers would twitch for hours afterward, and sometimes the elbow would even bend. "It's just going to sleep," she told me. But one night she was moving around and whimpering with some dream and the arm matched all



her movements. It jerked and shook on the dresser, and the fingers balled up into a fist, and then the whole thing fell on the floor. I wouldn't get out of bed the next morning until she'd picked

it up and put it back on.

She lived in a basement apartment with only one window. We had to leave the bedroom door open while we slept for fear we'd suffocate. She couldn't afford anything else because all she had was some sort of disability pension. She wanted to be an actress, but she hadn't worked as anything but an extra in years. Who would hire a woman with only one arm?

We liked to tour condos that were for sale. Only the new ones, though. Never anything that had already been lived in. We'd walk through them and make notes in a little notebook we'd bought, talk about the view, look in the cupboards. The salespeople acted like they believed we could actually afford these places.

BICYCLES

It is about airplanes
I can't help thinking
when in a squeaking fleet of bicycles
on the blackest of roads,
tree dark and every second pole
not quite lighting the way home,
bicycles like airplanes in the night.

Is it possible that fighter pilots,
who have never eaten lake trout,
never danced with all of you,
or drank exactly that beer, that way,
feel something like what I'm feeling
swooping in formation
over the empty deeps,
a little capsule of proximities,
a cluster of arts,

each glowing shape nearby
a name and some funny story
they can really only tell each other,
quirks in the mechanism
like faces?

Do they measure speed in terms
of inches closer to catch the scent
of hair and sweat, to hear
the murmur of exertion
before it drifts into the lake?

Of course they don't;
these are just bicycles and
when we fly,
no one gets hurt.

— JOHN DEGEN

They were a hundred, a hundred and fifty thousand each.

One woman opened a bottle of wine for us while we were there. She gave it to us in little plastic glasses. "I'm sorry about that," she said, "but would you believe someone actually stole our real wine-glasses?" It was the best wine I'd ever had.

When the woman asked us what we did, I told her I was a marketer for I.B.M. and my girlfriend said she was a nurse.

This woman showed us around the model suite. When she brought us to the living room, the sun was just setting, as if she'd cued it. The entire place filled with a golden light and I held my

girlfriend's hand—the real one—until it passed.

"Now there's a Kodak moment if I've ever seen one," the saleswoman said.

My girlfriend stood in the middle of the smaller bedroom and looked around. It was a young boy's room, with blue walls and a bed in the shape of a race car. "We'd want to paint, of course," she said. "When we have the children."

"Are you expecting?" the saleswoman asked.

"Oh no," my girlfriend said. "But someday." She looked at me and laughed.

"Cheers then," the saleswoman said and refilled our glasses.

She brought us into the kitchen last and

sat us down around a glass-topped table. There was an espresso maker on the counter and the fridge had an icemaker.

"Does the place come with all the appliances?" I asked.

"Oh yes," the woman said. "And there's a pool and a sauna in the building."

"A pool and a sauna," I repeated.

"That's right."

"And we don't have to pay for that?" my girlfriend asked. "We can just use it like everyone else?"

At the end of it all, the woman gave us a blank contract to look at and a pamphlet full of measurements and costs. I looked at all the numbers and said, "I don't know. I think it's a bit more than we wanted to pay."

"It always is," she said, still smiling.

"I mean, I don't know if we can afford a place like this," I said.

"But if we could," my girlfriend said, and shook her head.

The saleswoman poured the last of the wine into our glasses. "The question you need to ask yourself," she said, "is how can you afford *not* to have a place like this?"

My girlfriend eventually left me for a man with an artificial leg, someone she'd met in her amputee support group. They'd been having an affair for months, pretty much the whole time I'd been dating her. She told me over breakfast one afternoon.

"What are we going to do now?" I asked, unbelieving.

"I don't know what you're going to do," she said, watching the fingers of her fake hand flex on the table, "but I know what *I'm* going to do."

"His cancer is going to come back, you know," I told her, starting in on my cereal again. "It's just growing somewhere else in his body right now."

"Well, if my mind wasn't made up about you before," she said.

"One day he's going to start having seizures because of a brain tumour or something. Where will you be then?"

Her hand spread itself out flat on the table and was still. She looked at me. "I won't be sitting here having this conversation with you," she said.

After that, I began spending all my spare time in movie theaters. There was one—a Cineplex Odeon with eight screens and Starbucks coffee—that I

went back to over and over. It had air conditioning and, by the time I left, my nose would be running, like I had a cold. Whenever one movie ended, I'd get up and go to the next one. Sometimes I'd come in halfway through it, sometimes it would be just beginning.

Once a man in dress pants and a golf shirt sat right beside me. He held a bag of popcorn between his legs and asked me if I wanted any. I moved up several rows and he didn't follow me.

Another time, an usher woke me by shining a flashlight into my eyes. "You've been here all day," he said.

"I paid, I paid," I told him. I looked at the screen but it was blank, the curtain drawn. There was no one else in the theatre.

"You paid for one show," he said. "You've been here all day." He was young, a teenager, with slicked-back hair and a thin mustache.

"I fell asleep."

"You have to leave before the next movie starts." He kept shining the flashlight in my eyes, even though the house lights were on.

"The place is empty," I said. "What difference does it make?"

"The difference is that you only paid for one show."

"Come on," I said. "Help a man out."

"Do you really want me to get the manager?" he asked.

But I have to tell you about what happened in the blind man's room.

We smoked a joint that tasted like cinnamon. He told me it was laced with a mild hallucinogen. "It's the only way I can see these days," he said.

We were sitting on his bed and he'd taken his glasses off. He was staring at a spot two inches over my head. Now that I looked at him close, I could see his eyes were all scarred and the skin of his face pocked, like someone had taken a small knife to him. I was fully expecting him to make a pass at me, but he never did.

At some point in the night I asked him, "What kind of home is this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, is everyone who lives here blind or deaf or something?"

"Oh yeah. But none of us was born this way. We were all normal once. You can't get in here unless you've been in an accident or something. Like the deaf guys. One of them blew his own eardrums out when he shot himself in the head."

"He shot himself in the head and he didn't die?"

"Yeah, the bullet hit his skull and travelled around, went out the back. Never even touched his brain. But it made him deaf for some reason. The doctors couldn't explain it."

"What about the other one?" I asked.

"I don't know. It was some disease or something."

"Jesus," I said. "I had no idea there were places like this."

"You should see the people upstairs," he said. "Some of them can't even walk. They just lie in their rooms all day, watching television and talking to God, if they can even do that."

"I don't think I could live like that," I told him.

"Maybe not," he said, "but what else can you do?"

There were no lamps in his room, but I could still see because there was light coming in through the window from somewhere close. I got up and opened the blinds. The neighbouring house was only five or six feet away. I was looking into someone's kitchen. It was a big room, with an island in the centre and stainless steel pots hanging everywhere. It looked like an Ikea display. There was

a woman sitting on the island, in between a wooden dish rack and a stack of magazines. Her skirt was pulled up around her hips and a man was kneeling in front of her, his head and one of his hands between her thighs. She was looking right at me. I wasn't sure if they were really there or if I was just imagining them.

Looking back on it now, I'm pretty sure I imagined them. But back then, I just didn't know.

"I think your neighbours are fucking," I told the blind man.

"You can see my neighbours?" He stood

and came over to the window, turned his head from side to side.

The woman kept looking out her window but didn't seem to notice either one of us. She leaned back on one hand and ran the other through the man's hair. He had a bald spot at the back of his head.

"You can really see them?" he asked. "Where are they?"

"They're in the kitchen. They're fucking right there on the counter."

"Tell me what they look like," the blind man said. He had his hand on my arm again.

"She looks like Meryl Streep," I said. "I don't know about him. I can't see his face because he's going down on her."

"Really?" He leaned forward, until his nose touched the glass.

"She's got her legs wrapped around his shoulders and everything," I told him.

"Wow. What are her tits like? Are they big?"

"I don't know. She's still dressed. She's just pulled up her skirt."

"But what do they look like? Do they look big?"

"They're all right, I guess."

"What about her panties?"

"I don't know. I can't see them. Maybe she wasn't wearing any."

"And her skirt?"

"It's a red floral thing. And a white shirt. Some sort of silk material."

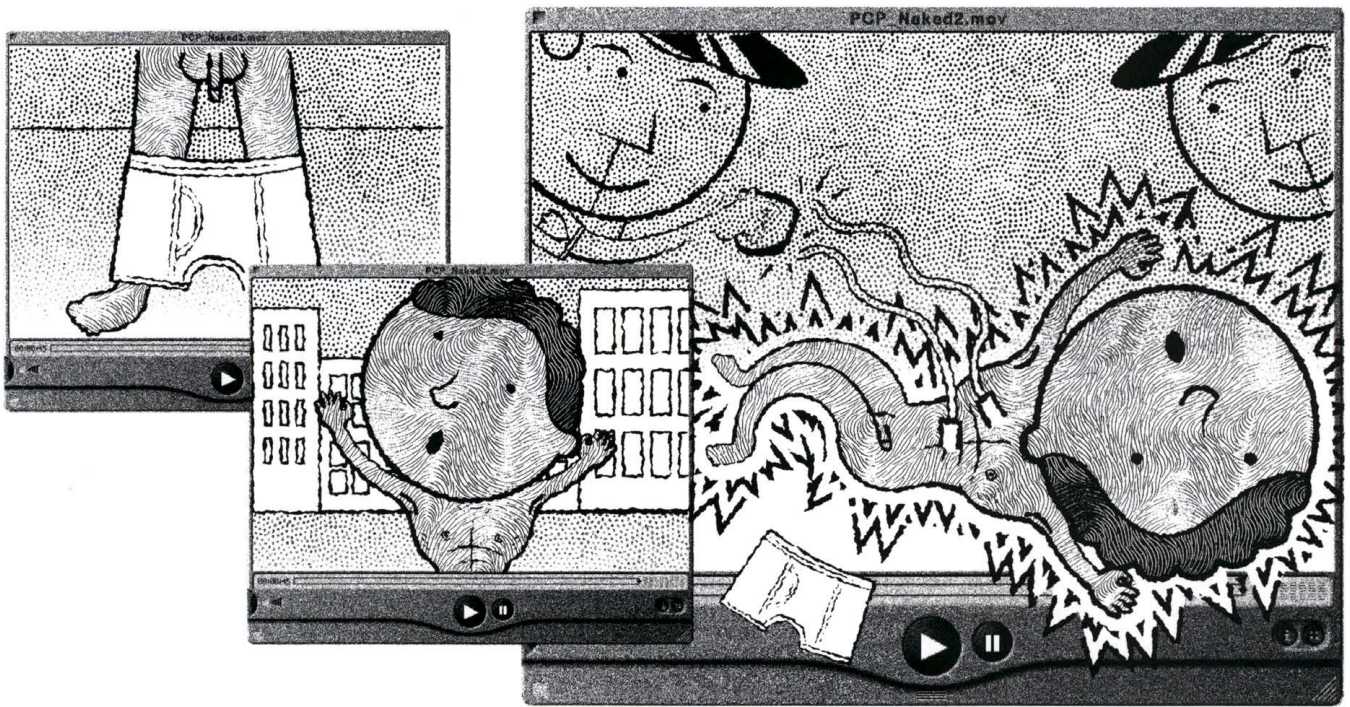
"Oh yeah," he said. "I can see it."

The two of us stood there in silence for a moment, me watching this couple having sex, the blind guy staring in their direction and not seeing anything, or maybe seeing something only he could see, and the woman staring back at us. If she was even there at all.

She closed her eyes when she came. From this close, I could see the flush of her skin. The man stood up and grabbed a dishtowel from the counter, wiped his face with it. She hit him lightly on the shoulder and laughed as she hopped down off the counter. They went out of the kitchen and didn't come back again. I never did see the man's face.

"Tell me what they're doing now," the blind man said when they were gone.

Peter Darbyshire lives in Bloorcourt Village. The above story is taken from his first novel, Please, to be published this fall by Raincoast. He has been writing for the magazine since 2000.



PAST DUE

A companion to the science fiction novel, Everyone In Silico.

BY JIM MUNROE

Jim Munroe's new novel, *Everyone In Silico*, is set in 2036 in a future even more corporatized than our present. In order to demonstrate in a realistic and believable fashion how advertising in this future had intensified, many brand names are used throughout the book. Munroe says he believes books still have a cultural power "that allows us to speak to ourselves in a profound and honest voice. Allowing the same kind of ad saturation in books that we allow in other media means that we're willing to trade-off this power for something much less important." As a result, he was uncomfortable giving these companies and products what amounted to free advertising. He decided to invoice ten of them for product placement at a rate of ten dollars per mention. He received a few responses—though none with cheques enclosed. When the invoices continued to go unpaid, Munroe wrote follow-up letters. Several of these letters and responses are reprinted below.

— CONAN TOBIAS

Received February 21, 2002
Rec'd at Hershey. Who placed order?

Need Hershey contact name to make payment.

HERSHEY MARKETING DEPARTMENT

February 22, 2002

DEAR SIR OR MADAM:

Received your inquiry re: January 10th invoice, asking who in the marketing department placed the order.

While I feel that answering "someone named Bob" might expedite the payment, I must be frank: no one ordered anything. I am pleased to see, however, that an invoice charging you ten dollars for product placement in a novel did not strike you as unthinkable.

Nor should it. Just last year Fay Weldon's *The Bulgari Connection* came out with HarperCollins and Grove. Commissioned by the [Bulgari] jewellery company for an undisclosed sum, the established Weldon was required to mention the brand twelve times. Unlike magazines with their almost infinite capacity for advertisements, the book has been ad-resistant for years. Why not take a page (so to speak) from equally ad-resistant movies?

And your company has a special place

in history on this, doesn't it? Although the script of *E.T.* called for M&M's, M&M turned down the offer, and Reese's Pieces' subsequent involvement shot sales through the roof. It wasn't the first product placement in a movie, but it certainly popularized the strategy.

But that's ancient history. What does the year 2036 hold for Hershey's? Let's look at page 126 of my futuristic novel, *Everyone In Silico*:

Andre glowered at him. Nicky looked from one to the other, remembered their secrecy in the train yard. "You guys, man," she sneered, "spy versus spy." She went into the kitchen, her stomach having ordered her into forage mode. She knew there was nothing in the fridge, so she looked through the cupboard and found a package of Reese's Oreos.

She brought them back to the living room. Andre declined, but Simon dipped his dirty hand in, licking his lips.

Mmm . . . aren't you licking your lips now, Sir or Madam? Not only will there be a tantalizing merger between your company and Nabisco, but you've come out on top—it isn't Oreo's Pieces, after all.

But it might be in the American edition, if you fail to remit your cheque.

Hoping you won't M&M it,
JIM MUNROE

To Starbucks

February 22, 2002

DEAR SIR OR MADAM:

It is with surprise and disappointment that I serve you this past due notice.

I had originally assumed that yours was a cutting edge company in regards to product placement. Having Dr. Evil's lair in [*Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*] turn out to be a Starbucks building was one of the most provocative placements of the last decade. Even if Myers referred to it as "the snake eating its own tail," most people were impressed by your ability to laugh at yourself.

I assumed it was a perfect match—your ads often featured well-to-do café goers reading books. And you must love science fiction, otherwise why would you have named your company after a certain dashing captain from *Battlestar Galactica*?

Confident about this, as early as page three I was writing you in, demonstrating that in the year 2036 you had improved both market penetration and branding techniques:

In the first Starbucks she saw she noticed some kids she knew, so she waved and kept on going. The Starbucks a block down looked clear, however, so she held her watch on the rusty plate until the door buzz-clicked.

Breathing a silent relieved breath—she hadn't been positive she had enough for a coffee—she threw her stuff at a table near the window and went up to the counter. As the machine filled her cup, she watched the people bustling by. Spring was all over their faces, as obvious and gleeful as strawberry jam.

Nicky put sugar and two Milkbuds into her coffee and watched the door. Mostly tourists, since the kids from the Drive favoured the outlet she had passed by. The steam from her cup curled around and coalesced briefly into the Starbucks logo, then dissipated.

When I heard nothing from your office, I did a bit of research on your company. In '95, you were facing a boycott from people concerned about the welfare of your coffee pickers. You responded by saying that you would look into worker conditions, and the boycott ended. It wasn't until '97 that it was discovered that no

feasibility study had ever taken place—in fact, that you had done nothing. It wasn't until three years later, faced with the threat of another boycott, that you finally started to sell fair trade coffee—and then only in the US, where it matters, not in outlying regions like Canada.

It's too bad that your beneficence in regards to shagadelic spies does not extend to dark-skinned foreigners languishing for years and years in extreme poverty. But it's even sadder that you're unable to see this unique opportunity I'm offering for expanding market share in the 18–34 demographic.

Yours,
JIM MUNROE

Telephone call, March 14th, 2002

JIM MUNROE: Hello?

CHRIS GORLEY: Hello, can I speak to Jim Munroe from No Media Kings?

JIM MUNROE: This is Jim.

CHRIS GORLEY: I'm Chris Gorley, from Starbucks in Seattle, and we were wondering about your invoice . . . ?

JIM MUNROE: Yes?

CHRIS GORLEY: Who did you talk to about pre-arranging this?

JIM MUNROE: I didn't talk to anyone.

CHRIS GORLEY: Well, it's a very minimal amount, but unless you talked to someone in the Starbucks family about pre-arranging this . . .

JIM MUNROE: Uh-huh. Well, it's just such a small amount compared to what you pay for movies . . .

CHRIS GORLEY: Yes, you're right. I deal with the film and TV arrangements . . . I received your original invoice, but, quite frankly, I didn't know what to make of it so I sat on it for awhile . . . and I just got the letter . . . It sounds like, from your letter, that we're on your bad-guy list. I'm sorry about that. This bit about "dark-skinned foreigners languishing" . . . what did you mean?

JIM MUNROE: Well, it's just that the pickers who provide your coffee get paid very little, and it's only recently that you've even considered fair-trade sources. And Starbucks quashed a boycott many years ago by promising to investigate this, but never did . . .

CHRIS GORLEY: Well, the media never gets the full story. If you go to our web site you'll see what we've been doing . . .

JIM MUNROE: When will you be making fair-trade coffee available in your Canadian outlets?

CHRIS GORLEY: Well, there's all these tariffs and . . . trade laws . . . I'm not being very articulate here, I'm sorry.

JIM MUNROE: Uh-huh.

CHRIS GORLEY: So, is the book published?

JIM MUNROE: Yes.

CHRIS GORLEY: Well, I'll have to see if I can get it at Amazon.com.

JIM MUNROE: O.K. Well, thanks for calling.

From: Steve Tuttle
[mailto:Steve@taser.com]
Sent: Monday, January 28, 2002 3:56 PM
To: 'jim@nomediakings.org'
Subject: Invoice from No Media Kings?

I just got a bill for \$70 for product placement in the novel *Everyone in Silico*. I have absolutely no idea what this invoice is for? Can someone assist me?

Sincerely,
STEVE TUTTLE

Director of Government & Law
Enforcement Affairs
Taser International

February 22, 2002

DEAR STEVE,

Received your e-mail inquiry re: January 10th invoice, stating that you have no idea what this invoice is for.

Let me clarify things for you, Steve.

I am a science fiction author. This means I invent the future. SF writers wrote about rocketships—we got them. Cell phones—ta da. Tricorders from *Star Trek* are basically Palm Pilots.

I have used the word "Taser" in my novel seven times. Admittedly, the people that have them are the unthinking guardians of evil corporations, and often use them on homeless people and cyclists, but I have guaranteed the future of your product—at least until the year 2036, when the novel is set.

Frankly, you need this kind of exposure. The Taser might have been scary in the '80s, but now it's been upstaged in the media by tear gas. Recently, a television show of the extreme genre showed your product being less painful than pepper spray. Pepper spray, Steve, something that doesn't even look like a gun! Your "proprietary technology to incapacitate dangerous, combative, or high-risk subjects that may be imperious to other less-lethal means" is falling out of fashion—but only if you let it.

Your forward-thinking attitude, something I look for in my corporate partners, is obvious from your internet presence—I especially enjoyed the video featuring the takedown of the naked black man on PCP. I've never seen a product demonstration quite like it.

Hoping you'll help me to help you,
JIM MUNROE

To U.P.S.

February 22, 2002

DEAR SIR OR MADAM:

I regretfully enclose a past due notice for an invoice I sent January 10th, 2002. I say "regretfully" because of all companies, I expected you to promptly deliver the cheque—not just because of what your company does, but because of what it *didn't* do. I hope I don't ruffle any feathers when I say it: *Cast Away*.

Now, the fact that your brown-suited employees are more often seen on the screen than postal workers makes it clear that UPS believes in the power of product placement. That *Cast Away* featured Tom Hanks as a FedEx employee must have been hard to deal with. Especially when you found out that they didn't pay a cent for the ninety-minute commercial, just provided props. So naturally, I thought you'd jump at the chance to beat FedEx to a new frontier: product placement in books.

In the book, you'll be interested to know, a character calls UPS for a locksmith—that's right, in the year 2036 UPS delivers services instead of packages. It was only a matter of time before the paperless society became more than hype, but your company obviously made the transition successfully.

To sweeten the deal, I can write in a dramatic gun-fight between a heroic UPS deliveryman and a craven FedEx flunky but only if you remit your cheque quickly. The US edition is going to press very soon.

I have faith you won't cast away this golden opportunity,
JIM MUNROE

To McDonald's

February 22, 2002

DEAR SIR OR MADAM:

I am writing in reference to an invoice dated January 10th that is now past due.

I suspect that you get a lot of mail at a company of your size, and so I imagine it

was a mere oversight on your part—perhaps it was misrouted to Ronald McDonald, although I clearly marked it "ATTN: ACCOUNTS PAYABLE." Or perhaps that Hamburgler is at it again.

Ha ha. That was a joke.

"Ha ha" always looks so stiff in print, doesn't it? "Hee hee" or "he he he" sound, to my ear, high pitched and maniacal. The emoticons, ;-) and such, look out of place on a business letter—a little too casual or something.

Ideally, I wouldn't have to say anything—you'd know it was a joke. But as we have no previous contact, I'm forced to be explicit—I can't have you thinking that I believe that your cartoon mascots are real, although I'm sure many children think/hope they are.

And I, sir or madam, am not a child, although I hope I retain a child's sense of wonder. I am in fact a science fiction novelist and my invoice is in every way an adult's invoice, and I expect to be paid.

I think you'll be pleased by McDonald's as it appears in *Everyone In Silico*—not much has changed by 2036, except that people order their Big Mac and Fries (should that be capitalized?) at an ATM style machine. You're welcome to implement this idea for free, once you've paid the invoice. No more having to close down an outlet for costly days when a staff tries to unionize!

Have a good day,
JIM MUNROE

To Gap

February 22, 2002

DEAR SIR OR MADAM,

I am writing because you have failed to pay for the services rendered as detailed in the January 10th invoice.

Maybe your accounting department is in the same country as many of your clothing factories, and this accounts for the delay. Regardless, I will take this opportunity to impress upon you the advantages you may have overlooked in having your brand appear in a novel.

While there's only three brand impressions in the novel, the title, *Everyone In Silico*, is an obvious nod to your "EVERYONE IN LEATHER/VESTS/DENIM" ad series. (I've thrown that in for free, by the way.) It was unfortunate that so many artists and writers latched on to the fascist overtones of such a bold slogan, and made it seem like you were trying to turn us into

consumer-clone zombie-Nazis. But think about that for a second—who are these people, anyway? Who are these people that think of Hitler when they think of the Gap instead of the good, happy models dancing across their TV screen? Who find something sinister in fresh-faced lovelies dancing to tasteful break beats?

They're book readers.

And ponder this: who are these people who are complaining about "sweatshops," who are so concerned that your employees overseas have running water and don't have to bring their sleeping bags to work? Who are these greasy-faced, ugly losers fucking with your bottom line with their boycotts and investigative journalism?

They're book readers, too.

It's a small demographic, but can you afford to overlook it?

Yours truly,
JIM MUNROE

Received April 4, 2002

DEAR VENDOR:

We are returning the attached invoice(s) because we are unable to process it. An invoice must be signed and coded by the GAP employee/department Purchasing the product/service before payment can be initiated and Processed.

Invoices should not be sent directly to Accounts Payable.

Please address ALL invoices to the appropriate GAP Inc. employee or Department responsible as follows:

GAP Inc.
900 Cherry Avenue
San Bruno, CA 94066
ATTN: (Name of your contact/Dept.)

If you have any questions, please call your point of contact.

Thank you, for your anticipated understanding and compliance.

Sincerely,
THE GAP, INC.
Accounts Payable

Jim Munroe lives in the Annex. His latest novel, Everybody In Silico, was recently released by No Media Kings. He is also the author of Angry Young Spaceman (No Media Kings, 2000) and Flyboy Action Figure Comes with Gasmask (HarperCollins, 1999). He has been writing for the magazine since 2001. Additional letters from the above series—and any future responses—can be viewed at www.nomediakings.org.

NOBODY LOVES A FAT KID

In his new collection, poet Paul Vermeersch stands up for the beaten, the bullied, the misunderstood.

INTERVIEW BY KERRI HUFFMAN

Anyone who has ever been to a literary event in Toronto has likely seen or met poet Paul Vermeersch. A veritable whirlwind on the local scene, Vermeersch serves as both the curator and host of the bi-weekly IV Lounge Reading Series and the poetry editor of Insomniac Press. Now, less than two years after the release of his well-received debut collection, *Burn*, Vermeersch has returned with a follow-up volume, *The Fat Kid*.

As its title suggests, *The Fat Kid* is about growing up overweight. Its main character, Calvin Little, is born a fat kid, grows up a fat kid, and deals with the pressures of society, family, and friends as a fat kid. Vermeersch dedicated the book to fashion designer Calvin Klein, the man he considers to have made the most visible contribution to the crisis of body image in contemporary culture. The name "Calvin Little" is actually a play on both Klein, the purveyor of "perfect" bodies, and the main character's decidedly non-little size. "I think people are only starting to discuss the pressure that men are under to look their best, to measure up to accepted models of male attractiveness," says Vermeersch. "I think that this issue probably gained steam again in the nineteen-nineties, when [Klein] introduced his new design for boxer-brief underwear and posters sprang up across the continent on bus shelters and the sides of buildings with Mark Wahlberg's 'perfect' torso . . . I don't think the general public had ever been exposed to advertising that so glorified the male physique before."

Vermeersch has the ability as a writer to critique accepted social norms without making grandiose statements or being overtly political. Instead, his poems explore the landscape of human experience through mundane day-to-day activities. In "Come See What's On Sale Now At Sears," Calvin is forced to confront his increasing girth while trying on new clothes. When a pair of pants doesn't fit him, a salesgirl must tell

Calvin's mother the pants don't come in his size. "I was a fat kid," Vermeersch says. "Being a fat kid was lousy. Everything's harder when you're a fat kid. Playing sports is harder. Making friends is harder. And getting a member of the opposite sex to like you—forget it! Of course I had a body image problem. How could I be expected to like my body when no one else did? I think I created Calvin Little partly to exorcise my lousy childhood; to create a vessel where all the negative things could be stored and maybe even treated with a little humour. I still have an inner child, I guess. He's not a very happy little boy, but he's funny sometimes."

Vermeersch's involvement in the Toronto literary scene dates back to 1998, shortly after he moved to Toronto from London, Ontario. Finding the city to have a vibrant culturalscape he wanted to be a part of, he founded the IV Lounge Reading Series in a tiny bar on Dundas Street West. Originally known as the Café Za Che Zu Reading Series—quickly shortened to just the Café Readings Series—Vermeersch had been the only person to respond to an E-mail call from the now-former proprietors, who wanted to institute a regular arts night. "When I first arrived in Toronto, a little over four years ago, I was, quite frankly, astounded by what seemed to me the endless possibilities in the writing scene. I wanted to jump in with both feet and have fun with it and be active," Vermeersch says.

The series has since become one of the most interesting and popular literary events in town—a fact made obvious by the various latecomers who vie for standing room near the IV Lounge's door and often end up on the outside landing until intermission. Since its inception in May, 1998, the series has featured a wide range of writers, from Natalee Caple to Christian Bök to Lynn Crosbie. Vermeersch admits his approach to programming relies largely on his own taste, though he often tries

to book people who are travelling through town to give the series a more national flare. "[I]f someone's work isn't to my taste, if I can spot the quality, then I'll book that person. I think it's always important to recognize artistic accomplishment beyond one's own taste," he says. "Every now and then a dud sneaks in, but that's part of the game, too, and I won't mention any names. Just as often I can be surprised by how startlingly good a person's performance is, particularly if I was previously unaware of the person's work."

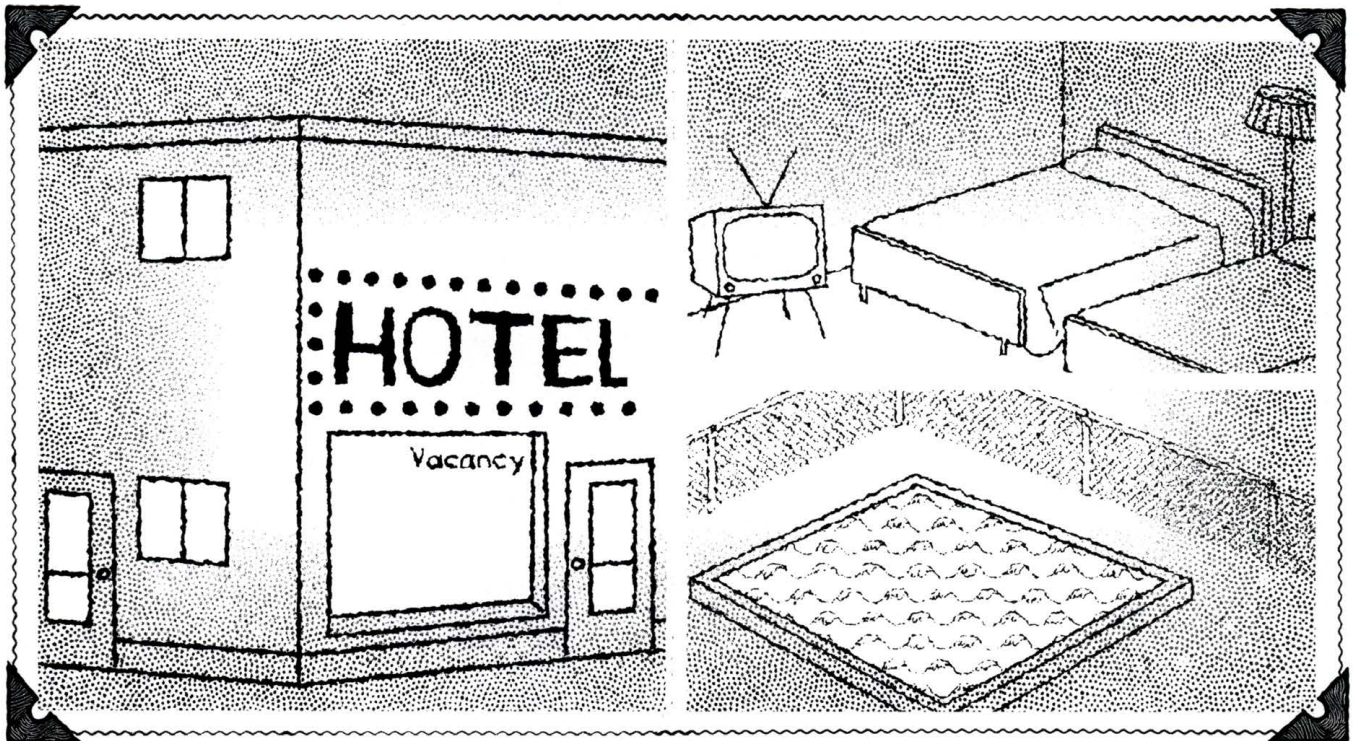
In 2001, Vermeersch edited *The IV Lounge Reader*, a collection of largely-new work by several of the authors and poets who had contributed to the series. While at first glance the mix of various writing styles and authors at varied career stages seems like an odd collection, Vermeersch says his choices fit with the mandate of the series itself. "I approached the people whose work reflected my own impression of what the IV Lounge Reading Series is and what I think it represents and what it's trying to achieve. There's everything from Sherwin Tjia's very creepy text experiments to poems for adolescents by Dennis Lee."

Lee, Toronto's poet laureate, best known for his children's poem "Alligator Pie," sums up Vermeersch's work most aptly: "Paul Vermeersch has developed one of those improbable energy crossroads that manages to be the right place for its time. The joint is tiny; the quality fluctuates all over the map. But if I wanted to take the pulse of new writing [in Toronto], there is no other place I'd look first."

The Fat Kid is currently available from ECW Press. *The IV Lounge Reading Series* takes place every second Friday at the IV Lounge, 326 Dundas Street West. Kerri Huffman lives in Little Italy. Her own poetry has appeared in various journals, including *The Fiddlehead*, *the Hart House Review*, and *Kiss Machine*. She is the magazine's founding associate editor.

PHILLIP SMITH





SUMMERLAND

FICTION BY ANDREW DALEY

THURSDAY

Hunched over the wheel, Mitch squinted into approaching headlights, shaking his head to jumpstart his brain. "SUMMERLAND," a sign read. "AN ALL-SEASON DESTINATION CITY." Mitch had been driving all day and it was seven hours, probably more in his exhausted state, to his home on the outskirts of Ottawa. Summerland sounded fine.

He chose the second exit, hoping for the motel strip. Mitch passed the Loyalist farmhouses and perfect lines of fruit trees—apple, peach, and pear—for which the area was famous. The cherries were ready, their redness almost incandescent in the hazy summer moonlight. As the horizon took on a faint orangish glow, Mitch remembered visiting the city once on a high-school trip to an annual theatre festival honouring some dead Englishman.

Soon the rows of grapevines gave way to farm equipment dealerships and used-car lots. Streetlights appeared next, spreading a warmth over the empty parking lots of drug and grocery store plazas, as the highway became Watts Street. Mitch sat at a red light alone.

The humid night air wove halos of colour around the neon lights of carpet outlets and roadhouses. He felt he should eat something, too, but wasn't attracted to the red lipstick kiss of the Dairy Queen or the yellow glow of the Denny's.

After the gas stations came the motels, most featuring glimmering swimming pools. The Orchard Inn needed its mint green paint replaced and there were three bikers smoking cigarettes beside their machines in the parking lot of the Coward Motel. The North American Motel looked better maintained, but was beside the red and white Kentucky Fried Chicken. Another had what were obviously long-term residents sitting out front. Mitch wanted the national chains, which provided fewer surprises.

Beyond the next traffic light, beside a cool, watery blue Chevron station, Mitch saw a Holiday Inn Express. A Super 8, a Comfort Inn, and a Howard Johnson soon followed. Mitch looked now for somewhere to turn around. Then, ahead, just before the first of the maples that covered the old centre of town, Mitch spotted the familiar yellow sunburst sign of a Days Inn. Across the street

from it was an Applebee's restaurant, a chain he and his wife, Emily, sometimes visited at home.

The Days Inn consisted of two parallel rectangular buildings separated by a swimming pool and a parking lot. Mitch pulled his maroon Hyundai up in front of the office in the building on his left. The evening air, after the air-conditioned cool of his car, was thick and smelled of exhaust. Bathed in the yellow of the overhead sign, Mitch stretched out his long limbs. The submerged lights of the swimming pool illuminated a pale green fog of humidity above the still water.

Inside the office, a chubby black girl was watching one of the new million-dollar game shows from behind a cluttered counter. Despite the chilled air, she looked hot and bored. "I'd like a room for the night," Mitch said.

"For how long?" she asked. The television audience broke into applause.

"One night," Mitch said. "And just myself." In his scrambled head he was still careening down the highway. He placed the company's American Express card on the counter and flipped through

a display of tourist brochures, thinking he and Emily could visit one weekend.

"Smoking or non, Mr. Dickinson?"

"Oh, non. And call me Mitch, please. Reagan is my first name, but everyone calls me by my middle name, Mitchell." The girl had a faint accent he couldn't place—African, maybe, because it wasn't Caribbean. He filled in his address and cell number on the card the girl had provided, thinking now that, despite her chubbiness, she was pretty, her hazel eyes sparkling and her hair pulled back into a girlish ponytail. Early twenties, he guessed, a whole decade younger than he was.

"Eighty-seven thirty-seven is your total. Will you be watching a movie?" Mitch now saw that her blouse was missing a button, revealing a diamond of brown tummy.

"No, thanks," Mitch said, smiling at her blunt efficiency. "TV's fine."

"Then you're in 237. That's the building opposite," the girl said, pointing with her pen to a laminated diagram of the motel complex. "That's on the other side of the pool. Our continental breakfast starts at seven."

"Oh, I'll be long gone by then," Mitch said, as he took the card key from her.

Confronted by warm, stale air, Mitch turned on the air conditioner in his room to its highest setting as soon as he entered. He found the converter on the bedside table and clicked on the television as he flopped onto the bed. He changed the channel three times while dialling a number into his cell, settling for coverage of some seniors' golf tour on the sports station.

Emily answered after four rings, her voice thick with sleep. "Hi," Mitch whispered. It was a little after eleven. "Sorry I woke you."

"Where are you? Is something wrong?"

"Summerland. No, everything's fine. The meeting went late 'cause they postponed it twice. I didn't think I should be driving this tired."

"No, you shouldn't," Emily breathed into the phone.

Then there was a pause, during which he lowered the volume on the television and flipped the channel over to one of the new sitcoms set in the nineteen-seventies. Same shows as what he got at home, just in different places on the dial. Mitch kept flipping. "How are my girls?"

"I got Liana down as usual, but Erin

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wanted to wait up for you. I told her that wasn't going to happen, but you know how she gets."

"Tell her she'll see me after lunch tomorrow. And I'm sorry you got stuck being supermom for a couple of days." On the television was footage of an overturned tractor-trailer Mitch had passed a few minutes before leaving the highway; he'd found the local news station. "You go back to bed, honey. I'll do breakfasts for the next week."

"O.K., deal. I'll see you tomorrow," Emily said before hanging up.

Mitch watched the coverage of the truck wreck, then stared blankly at commercials for grocery stores and an American amusement park. Sinking deeper into the floral duvet, Mitch wondered if he were wound too tight from driving for sleep. He removed his shoes and socks, then his shirt, feeling his flesh grow cold in the chill pumping from the air conditioner. The news anchor returned, a handsome, sandy-haired fellow with freckles. He reported on a smog alert for the elderly and then threw to the station's meteorologist, who was none other than Gillian Beer,

Mitchell Dickinson's former high-school sweetheart.

Or was it? Mitch slid to the foot of the bed. Gillian's curly blond hair was now cut short, but Mitch could see it was Gillian, even on the television, from her deep green eyes. Her face was fuller, too. He listened as she bantered—in slightly deeper honey tones than he remembered—with the sandy-haired anchor before launching into her coverage.

"Muggy weather will continue," Gillian was saying. Ten years, Mitch was thinking. Ten fucking years. No. Ten since he'd last heard of her, when he left for Vancouver, but more like fifteen since he'd last seen her. Now all of her beautiful hair was gone and she was in a peach pantsuit.

There were commercials on again, one for a used-car dealership, another for a fundraising draw for the local hospital, and Mitch realized that the complete weather was yet to come. How did Gillian Beer become a weathergirl in Summerland? Hadn't she wanted to be a vet? He recalled the horse she had kept, a big bay mare she called Chloe after an aunt who had died. He couldn't

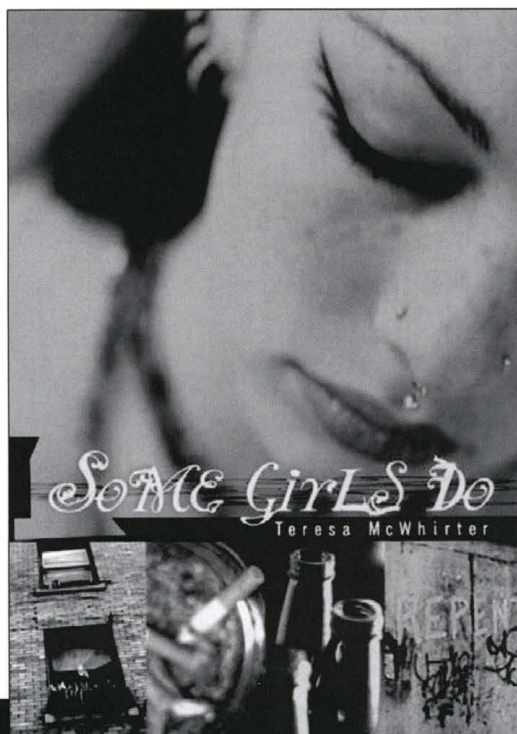
believe that he remembered so much.

Then Gillian was back on. She stood before a full-screened radar image of the peninsula and upper New York state, across which clouds swirled. "We can expect some relief by Saturday when a system of cooler air moves in from the American Midwest. So it should be cooler by Saturday for those Founders' Day barbecues." Mitch sat mesmerized by her voice, her presence, the way her arm reached over her head to trace a spiral of the clouds; there were things about us that we can never change.

He remembered Gill's butter-yellow, girly bedroom with the mounds of plush toys on the bed. She only ever allowed herself to be called "Gill" when they were fucking and he wondered quickly if that rule remained intact. Mitch and Gillian had been together for the last two years of high school, but it was only in the last year that she let him have sex with her. And with others, as it sadly turned out.

"Chance of thunderstorms tonight and Friday evening. That's normal when the two varying systems collide." Gillian was now in front of a screen displaying the

Warning: #!*@¢%*#!



Meet:

CARROTGIRL: often inebriated, who finds her carrot-themed wardrobe at thrift stores;

OLIVER: an aspiring writer who moves in a world of "bald men holding positions he wants";

JEZEBEL: icy but irresistible, who wakes up to Metallica before cycling to her studio to paint "red swirls and cold cold metal";

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Suppose you don't have to prove yourself—prove everything—all the time, to everyone when you share your life some: take a lover, a roommate, a classroom, a route for Meals on Wheels, a wife, a child. See how it feels.

Easy to believe the loner capable of any number of horrible acts: from burning garages through to snuff films and back beyond to committing simple acts of occasionally pretty haiku.

How much a pirate radio superstar are you—when the world can't find you on air? Then the crime you're committing is more like littering: or just another simple act of occasionally pretty haiku—

Alone in his room
He played Smiths records and talked
Awkward D.J. between songs

Alone in his room
He imagined her living
Alone in her room

Or he hoped she was
Living. In her room. Alone.
There's . . . always . . . TV

Alone in his room
He dreamt the perfect outdoors
He plotted some things

A tree falls in trees
Deep in untended black shapes
Hiding in plain sight

One room. One city.
Deep in untended black night
Shapes. Hide in plain sight

Approaching shadow
Lapping up the western face
Thinking: tomorrow

— CHRIS CHAMBERS

weather outlook for the next five days, her small, round hand flitting over graphics of yellow sunshine and dripping rain clouds. Mitch, however, was still in her girlhood bedroom.

As he listened to Gillian describe the

expected conditions on the lake for the next few days, Mitch unzipped his fly and took hold of his erect penis. Choppy gusts to twenty-five kilometres an hour. They'd have sex immediately after arriving at her house on those afternoons, usually

an energetic romp about her bedroom. He remembered how her small, pink-tipped breasts shook as he thrust into her, and how he never lasted long.

They would sleep, but hunger always woke Mitch an hour later. He would dress and drift down into the Beer family kitchen to heat soup and make sandwiches. He'd have to call Gillian a few times to get her downstairs. She'd arrive in a dark-green silk kimono, and he couldn't get his lunch down fast enough in his haste to get her back upstairs and into bed.

Now spread-eagle on the bed, Mitch was overwhelmed by the poignancy of these memories. Sex was that comforting thing he did with Emily once or twice a week. He was surprised, too, to remember he was ever so young and allowed to engage in anything as frightening and mystifying as sex. He must have been fearless then.

Their pace was more languorous in the later afternoon. Gill often took control and seemed to enjoy herself more. They never got into the same position and sometimes, seeking a thrill, fucked on the living room couch or, once, when she was mad at them, on her parents' bed. There was more petting and tenderness, and, on the hotter afternoons toward the end of the school year, they would soon be covered in a sheen of sweat. Mitch could remember slipping off her backside and could still taste her sweat as he pushed his face through her blond hair. Girls wore Gloria Vanderbilt perfume then, or maybe Charlie by Revlon. He got her to suck his cock and could soon expect it from her. How could he ever have forgotten the way she flipped that blond hair out of her face?

When Mitch looked up again, Gillian was gone. In her place was a late-night talk show host and his movie star guest engaged in some pointless banter. Mitch found the converter and shut the television off. Then he walked to the washroom and used toilet paper to clean up the mess from his stomach and hand. He flopped onto the bed and fell instantly asleep.

FRIDAY

Mitch was woken by female voices speaking a language he didn't recognize. Housekeepers, probably, which meant it was later than he had hoped to waken. Hunger pangs rumbled up from

his stomach, reminding him that the last thing he had eaten was a Burger King cheeseburger on his way to his meeting in the Falls the previous afternoon. Days ago, it now seemed.

Mitch saw he was naked beneath the bedcovers, which hadn't been turned down. The air-conditioning was off, leaving the air in the small room close and vaguely musty. He must have risen in the night, freezing cold, to shut off the air conditioner and climb beneath the covers. Now he was sweating.

Nine-thirty, if the clock radio was to be trusted. Even if he left immediately, he wouldn't be home until late afternoon. And he had to eat something.

He called home, and after five rings wondered where the girls might have gone so early, especially without a car. Then Emily answered, breathless: "Hey. Where are you? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing like that. Why are you out of breath?"

"Oh, I was doing laundry and Li Li stole that pair of tights she likes and I had to chase her around the basement because that load was ready to go in." Emily paused to catch her breath. "Then

I had to run upstairs to the phone because, if you remember, there's no extension down there."

"I remember. Where's Erin?"

"In the backyard with little Gail from three doors down. Everything fine?"

"Oh yeah," he said assuredly. "Except that outfit in the Falls wants another meeting. I just checked my messages when I stopped for breakfast and Turner says they want to see me back again today. I don't think I'm going to make it home today. Sorry about this, Em."

"No, you said this was an important account. These things happen."

"Will you guys be all right?"

"We need groceries, but I can get milk at the store around the corner. Mitch, I should go. I hate leaving Li Li down there by herself for too long."

"Sure," Mitch replied. "I'll call you when I know what's going on."

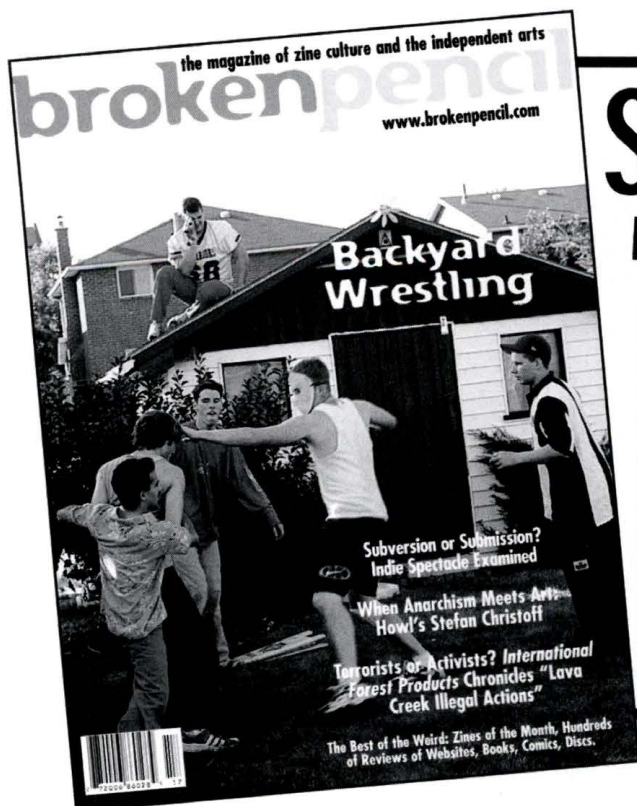
Mitch went directly from the bed to the shower, thankful for the motel soap and shampoo. Yesterday's clothes, a wrinkled pair of pleated chinos and a light-blue, short-sleeved shirt, lay in a pile at the foot of the bed. He would need fresh clothes. Razors, too. The disposable kind.

He turned the air conditioner back on before he left the room.

The morning he stepped into blazed white-hot and was suffocatingly humid. Mitch blinked rapidly as he crossed to his Hyundai, then stopped suddenly to sneeze twice. There were two cars parked beside his own that hadn't been there the night before, big new Buicks with Ohio plates, one beige, the other white.

Mitch found his wraparound mirror sunglasses beneath a pile of papers on the passenger seat. Not bothering to wait for the air conditioning, he rolled down his window and drove back along Watts Street. Traffic shimmered in the heat. At Denny's he wolfed down the biggest breakfast he could order—eggs and pancakes, sausages, toast, home fries, and coffee. Then he drove across the street to the Wal-Mart, where he purchased another pair of beige chinos, two more blue golf shirts, as well as socks and underwear, deodorant, disposable razors, and some allergy tablets. He had to leave the checkout line to hurry back for a toothbrush and toothpaste.

It was almost eleven-thirty when Mitch parked back in front of his room



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and skipped around the swimming pool to the motel office. The girl from the night before was working again—or still—in the same blouse with the missing button. “Mr. Dickinson,” she said. “We were worried you’d left without checking out with us.”

“I’m going to need my room for another night. Two maybe.”

“I don’t know about the second night. We have a tour arriving on Saturday. When would you know how many nights you needed?”

“End of the day, latest.” Mitch sneezed twice again. “I’m here for some meetings, only I don’t know how long they’re going to last.”

“That’s fine.” The girl hesitated, mulling something over. “I also have to tell you that there was a problem with the credit card you left last night. It was declined three times, so I have to ask you for another.”

Mitch pulled all his cards out, the company Amex, plus the Visa and MasterCard he and Emily used. Odd that the company card had been declined. He offered his MasterCard, confident that the company would redeem the previous night. “I’m going to try this new card first, Mr. Dickinson,” the girl said. “Then we’ll see about the additional nights.”

“Call me Mitch, please.” A cold drop of perspiration was running down the centre of his back. “What’s your name?”

“Aqua.”

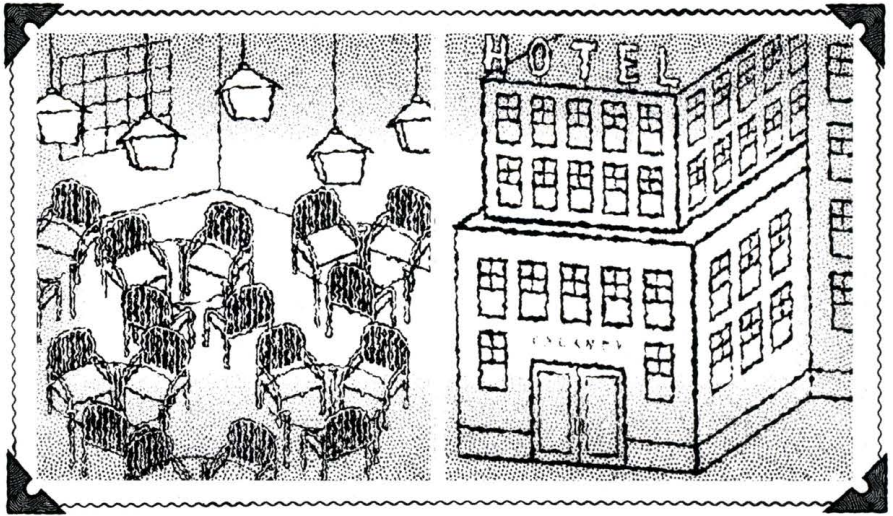
“That’s pretty,” Mitch said, though he failed to receive a smile. What he really wanted was to hear the electronic hum of approval from MasterCard. He didn’t have much cash on hand and knew the Visa was full. Then he remembered that Emily would have to charge groceries to the MasterCard. “They sure work you a lot around here.”

“I help my family as much as I can,” Aqua said in that accent Mitch still couldn’t place. “When I’m not at school.”

“Where do you go to school?” Mitch asked. The machine hummed and clicked and the girl offered him a receipt to sign. The amount was larger than he expected, but there was nothing he could do about that now.

“In Toronto. I’m doing a Ph.D. in molecular biology.”

“Smart girl. Research, I bet,” Mitch said. An overweight and sweating old woman in lavender stirrup pants and a massive floral shirt slowly entered the



office. Mitch didn’t want to stick around to hear what she had to say. “O.K., Aqua, thank you. I’ll let you know about tomorrow night.”

“And if we don’t have a room we’ll find one somewhere else,” Aqua said.

Outside again, he walked along a shadeless Watts Street, in a hot wind stirred by passing traffic, to the busy Chevron station. He purchased a city map and was surprised to find Gillian’s home number in the telephone directory at a pay phone. A few years before, a sportscaster in Ottawa had been murdered outside the station he worked at.

As her number rang, he realized he should have driven to the gas station instead of walking over; it was people without vehicles in suburban areas that got noticed. Even trees looked out of place among so much concrete and steel. Henceforth, Mitch resolved to remain in his car. Gillian answered on the third ring, said hello twice, and then hung up.

Gillian’s home, at 729 Hancocks Street, was a new, two-storey, red brick townhouse near the lake on the other side of town. In the driveway sat a silver Acura. The short lawn against the driveway was already burnt brown by the summer sun, which was all Mitch needed to conclude that there wasn’t a man in the house. There was no sign of any person either in or outside the house, so Mitch turned around at the nearest cross street.

The television station, which was only two streets over from the Days Inn on Wiley Road, he found just as easily. It was a sprawling, single-storey complex hidden behind some pine trees in an industrial park. Both the building and the parking lot were surrounded by a chain-

link fence. Mitch couldn’t imagine himself needing to get any closer to the station than where he sat parked outside.

It was two o’clock when he returned to his room. Mitch dropped onto the unmade bed and watched a Yankees-Red Sox game, reminded again of how close to the border he was. But the ball game soon bored him and, without realizing he’d done it, Mitch turned on a pornographic film. On the screen, two women and a man were having sex in a variety of positions on a deck chair beside a swimming pool. Mitch didn’t think he’d seen pornography since before he was married, almost four years ago. The man, who kept his sunglasses on, never got out of a prone position in the deck chair, the two women, their bikini pieces hanging off their necks and thighs, moving over him.

The scene ended abruptly when the man orgasmed. Another started, this time just one man and one woman on a living-room couch. Mitch thought the woman, a pale, thin redhead, was very pretty, but was somehow repulsed by her activities. He couldn’t understand how a woman could so easily enter into intimacies with a man who had probably been a stranger half an hour before. Her willingness seemed to cheapen the sex Mitch had enjoyed in his life.

A third scene commenced, another threesome, this one consisting of two men and a woman with unbelievably inflated and unmoving breasts. Mitch noticed that his erection had subsided. Too much thinking again, Emily would have said. Sex had always been stressful for him. Yet sometimes he suspected that he might have missed out on something, that there was part of him that wasn’t satisfied. Mitch clicked the television off.

When he woke an hour later he felt ashamed of watching the film. The pornography he'd seen when he was younger had been silly sex farces with laughable plots. He thought about Erin and Liana, how the acts of their conception were so different from what he had seen on the television.

Outside, the stifling, breathless afternoon felt stalled. The overweight woman in the lavender tights he had seen earlier in the motel office was leaning against the front bumper of the white Buick in front of the room next to his own. She was smoking a long, brown cigarette. Mitch nodded as he passed. "Pretty hot, eh?"

"Too hot to sleep, too hot to screw," the lavender woman laughed in a deep, raspy American voice. "Say, you one of the actors in the shows?"

"No," Mitch said quickly without looking back. He pulled his sunglasses on and jogged around the swimming pool. "Should be," he heard her say.

"Mitch," Aqua said, genuinely and warmly, as Mitch entered the freezing office. "I was going to call your room. I'm afraid we're full tomorrow."

"That's O.K.," Mitch said. "Listen, I accidentally turned on one of those pay-per-view movies. Can I settle that now so it doesn't show up on my bill?"

"That's not a problem," Aqua said. She looked into her computer monitor. "Oh. I see. Fourteen ninety-five plus tax comes to \$17.20. How do you want to pay?"

"Cash," he said, setting a twenty on the counter. He had only two left, but didn't anticipate many more expenses. "So I'm gone after tonight?"

"But the good news is there's a room for you at the Summerland Motor Inn. It's just as nice and they have rooms available right into next week."

"So, do I need to go tell them that I want it or what?"

"No, I can do that for you. So, will you be going to any shows while you're here? The new production of *Hay Fever* is good."

"*Hay Fever*," Mitch muttered as he accepted his change. "Unfortunately, I'm in meetings all weekend. But thanks for the advice." Aqua simply smiled and nodded. Mitch didn't know what to make of that response—it was acknowledgment, at least—and so he retreated back outside.

Twenty minutes later he was parked three houses down from and on the opposite side of Gillian's townhouse. He sat as low as possible and, despite the heat,

had his scarlet company windbreaker wrapped over his head. He had rejected the same light rock and mixed pop crap he heard on the radio in every town, and was listening to Erin's *Curious George* book on tape, which he had found beneath the windbreaker in the back seat. Mitch didn't have to wait long—George had only just fallen off the big ship while

trying to fly when Gillian, in faded blue jeans, sandals, and a loose white blouse, walked from her house to her Acura.

Mitch let her get out of sight before following. Gillian drove along Watts Street, toward the station. But then she turned into a crumbling, half-empty shopping plaza near the older motels. She drove up to a pink store beside a va-

CONTRIBUTORS

Paul Vermeersch ("The L-bomb," p. 5) lives in the Annex. His latest collection, *The Fat Kid*, was recently published by ECW. He is the author of *Burn* (ECW, 2000), the editor of *Insomniac's* poetry imprint, 4 A.M. Books, and host of the *IV Lounge Reading Series*. He has been writing for the magazine since 1999 and appeared on the first *Taddle Creek* album.

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Kathleen Olmstead ("Ida Red," p. 17) lives in Kensington Market. She is looking for that special someone to share quiet talks and moonlit walks. He should know the value of a good meal and a kind heart. Romance is not dead—it just feels a little shy these days. She has been writing for the magazine since 1999.

R. M. Vaughan ("Mint," p. 19) lives in Little Portugal. He is currently working on his third novel, *The Re-Creators*, while waiting for his second novel, *Spells*, to hurry up and be published. He has been writing for the magazine since 2000.

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Chris Chambers ("Awkward D.J.," p. 47) lives in the Palmerston area. He is the author of *Lake Where No One Swims* (Pedlar, 1999) and co-author (with Derek McCormack) of *Wild Mouse* (Pedlar, 1998). He loves hockey and poetry. He has been writing for the magazine since 1997 and appeared on the first *Taddle Creek* album.

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Ian Phillips ("21st Century Soviet Scientist Predictions," p. 29) lives near the University of Toronto. He collects junk and runs the small press *Pas de Chance*. His hand-bound editions of poetry, short stories, and artwork are on the shelves of book collectors worldwide and have appeared in galleries from Moscow to San Francisco. His new book, *Lost: Lost and Found Pet Posters From Around the World*, was recently published by *Princeton Architectural*. He has been the magazine's illustrator since 1998.

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Conan Tobias (editor-publisher) lives in the Annex. He is an editor at (another) national magazine and a freelance journalist whose work has appeared in *The Globe & Mail*, *The National Post*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Vancouver Sun*, and *Now*. He founded the magazine in 1997.

BEST VIOLIN

with the very best violin
strapped to the back
of his dad's grey trench coat
he survived somehow
wrote bad poetry
rode that rotting skateboard
like a blocked beat poet in search of inspiration
and God, the class belle loved his scent of pallid suicide

skipping class, palms sweaty
he was chubby acid-wash jeans
she was laughing blue eye shadow, mascara smudged, black cat earrings
oh, could they ever talk on the phone for hours

they were Betty and Archie
skating in Kensington Market
a year of punks,
subway stations,
escalators,
vintage clothing shops

he wrote *love* in her yearbook
she introduced her mother
and, though she faked it,
she never could play the violin to save her life

— EMILY POHL-WEARY

cant unit called T.L.C.: Tender Loving Corn Gourmet Popcorn.

Mitch had difficulty hiding himself and his Hyundai. There were few other cars at the plaza and he eventually chose the parking lot of the Dunkin' Donuts across the street. After waiting five minutes, Mitch popped the *Curious George* tape back into the deck. He assumed the half hour Gillian spent in the store was an owner—not a manager or employee—length of time. And she didn't have any popcorn with her when she left the plaza. Mitch let her go; he had pressed his luck enough for one day.

Driving by the Days Inn office, Mitch saw that Aqua was still at the counter. In his room he turned on the television to catch the stories that had made Summerland hum that day. The news was read by the sandy-haired fellow again, whose name, Mitch learned, was Dan, and the sports were covered by a young blond kid named Jody.

But it was Gillian's show. She was in a full-length, old-fashioned lacy pink

dress, a costume piece for the Founders' Fair, which accentuated her perfectly shaped breasts. Gillian explained that, after another full day of sultry weather, storms were expected sometime Saturday evening. Until then, mariners could expect safe, if breezy, sailing. Mitch enjoyed watching her, but was disappointed that he didn't get another erection.

After the news, Mitch drove over to the Applebee's across the street and sat in the smoking section to avoid the many noisy families in the main dining room. He parked back in front of his room, thankful that the two big Buicks were absent, and stood to contemplate the beautiful twilight sky. Clouds low over the northeastern horizon were lit orange and red and then purple and black by the mercifully setting sun. He knew he was admiring the smog people like himself and the scary Ohioans produced every day.

Mitch stretched out on the bed and called home. Remembering that Erin had recently started answering the phone,

Mitch was grateful to hear Emily's tired voice. "Hello, old bean," he said. "How are you making out?"

"Oh, it's you. Are you coming home anytime soon, Mitchell Dickinson?"

"Not tonight. I've got another meeting early tomorrow morning."

"You can't expect me to just hang in here alone like this!"

"I know this isn't fair," Mitch said. The sound of Emily's breathing changed as she walked through their house. "But I'm committed to this now."

"Oh, I know you are. I just don't know what to do, whether I should call my mother to come for a few days, or maybe Brenda—"

"You don't need to call your mother. I'll be home by this time tomorrow, I promise." Mitch could hear splashing and squeals. "Is it bath time?"

"Yes," Emily said. "You picked another great time to call."

"Let me say goodnight to the girls, O.K.?"

"All right, you win again," Emily said. Mitch could hear her ask who wanted to say goodbye to Daddy. Mitch only heard Erin speak, though Liana, in her defence, probably hadn't understood the question. Then Emily was back on the line. "Come home as soon as you can."

"Of course I will. Saturday night, Sunday at the latest."

Mitch found a James Bond movie on a Buffalo station. *From Russia With Love*, or maybe *You Only Live Twice*. He'd expected to feel guilty for the lies he'd told Emily, but was instead strangely calm. After half an hour he found himself fighting sleep and so he walked around the parking lot in the sticky night air. He could see Aqua in the motel office, watching television again, and skipped over. He felt like a thief.

"I thought I might have a cup of your coffee," Mitch said as he walked toward to the kitchen area where breakfast was served.

"That's been there all day," Aqua said. "There's a coffee maker in your room, you know."

"Oh, why dirty that when all's I want is a little cup?" Aqua was watching the same Bond film. Mitch took his time preparing the coffee in the Styrofoam cup and thanked her before leaving the office again.

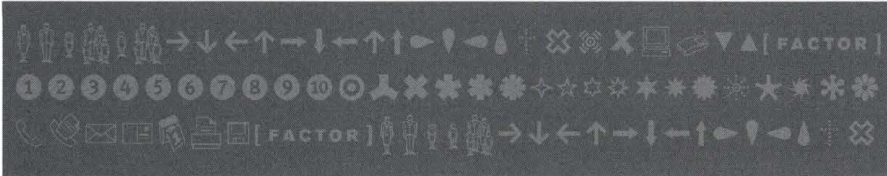
When the Bond film was over at eleven, Mitch drove over to the television station.

want coffee?



why fuck around?

jet fuel coffee shop 519 parliament street



He parked across the street in the lot of a factory, turned off his cellphone, and sat in the dark with the car windows open. He listened to the crickets chirp in the breathless, summer night air, the scarlet windbreaker over his head again. Gillian left the station at eleven-fifty. This time, Mitch waited until she was out of sight before even starting his car.

Gillian drove straight home. Mitch passed 729 Hancocks Street, turned around, and then cruised back to park four doors away from her house. He watched as the lights in the townhouse winked on and off. No one else arrived and after an hour all of the lights were extinguished. He waited ten minutes more before driving back to the Days Inn, jockeying with Friday-night teens in their cars, in another fog of illuminated humidity.

SATURDAY

By nine o'clock, Mitch was showered and shaved and dressed in the clothes he'd purchased at the Wal-Mart. Outside, the morning was deceptively cool, though the sky had already taken on the featureless whitish hue of the last few days. Tossing his old clothes and few other belongings into the back seat of the Hyundai, Mitch suspected that Gillian's prediction of another blazing hot day would be fulfilled. She must be pleased with her work.

Aqua was speaking with an elderly couple in the motel office, loud Americans who were demanding their change in American funds. Mitch fixed himself another Styrofoam cup of coffee. Instead of her uniform, Aqua wore a dark green tank top, black walking shorts, and sandals. It was the first time Mitch had seen her out from behind the counter. She was slimmer than he had first thought; it was just her breasts that were large. "Is that your Saturday uniform?" he asked when the Americans finally left.

"Oh," Aqua said. "No. I'm off on weekends. I'm just covering for my mother while she takes my sister to her football tournament."

"I want to settle up. And what's that other motel called again?"

"The Summerland Motor Inn. It's down the street toward the highway," Aqua replied. Mitch felt his eyes drop back to her breasts. She really was a lovely girl. "But I don't think they would be ready for you yet."

"Oh, I've got more meetings and some

errands to run for awhile. So what are you going to do with your day off?"

"I'm going swimming this afternoon."

"If you're not doing anything later, would you like to meet for a drink?"

Aqua froze and Mitch thought she looked concerned. "I don't know," she said after a moment. "I'll have to think about that."

"Why don't I call you here later?" Mitch said. He folded the receipt she handed him and slipped it into his wallet.

"O.K., that's fine. But I'm not making any promises."

"Sure." Mitch was sure she'd warm to the idea as the day progressed. "Thanks for all your help, Aqua. You sure made me feel welcome here."

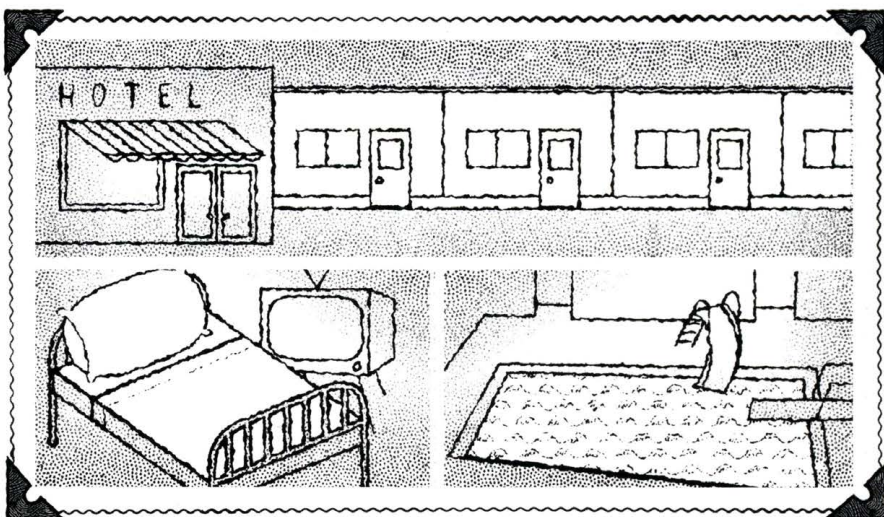
"It was my pleasure. Have a nice stay in Summerland."

"I will," he said from the door. "And I'll give you a call later."

The Summerland Motor Inn was just beyond the Chevron station where he'd bought the city map. It was an L-shaped, three-storey motor court of white brick and brown wooden trim across the street from a mini golf. In front of each room sat one red and one yellow plastic bucket seat. There was another swimming pool, too, beside which two teenaged girls were sunbathing. Mitch thought he could spend the night here if he needed to.

His next stop was the drive-through of the McDonald's, where he ordered two breakfast burritos, an orange juice, and another coffee. There was a confusing detour around the street festival and it was after ten when he stopped at a plaza half a block from Gillian's townhouse. He would have to watch 729 Hancocks closely from that distance, but felt less conspicuous in front of a convenience store and a tattoo parlour. He settled in to wait.

In the first hour he thought about other friends from high school, only two of which he was still in contact with. After high school, Mitch worked at nothing for a few years before drifting out west for the skiing. Eventually, he enrolled at a college in Vancouver, where he got a diploma in sales and marketing. He'd had a couple of girlfriends out west, too. One, Jennifer, had told him that she wouldn't have sex until she was married. Soon after Mitch broke it off she started sleeping with his friend Craig. Mitch had found it easier to spend his time with his college buddies on the ski hills.



When the sun became too hot on his face, Mitch took Liana's Winnie the Pooh sunshade from the back-seat window and placed it on his own. By the end of the second hour he'd decided that he would have dated more women if he had known that almost as soon as he moved back to the Ottawa area he would re-meet Emily Green. He had known Emily in high school, too, though she was three years younger. They dated for a couple of years, in which time he got his present job with the company. Then Emily got pregnant with Erin and Mitch was a father at twenty-nine.

Down the street, 729 Hancocks shimmered in the heat like a mirage. Mitch had almost decided to knock on Gillian's door and say hello when she left the house. She drove toward him, back into town and the confusion of the Founders' Day parade. Mitch slipped the *Curious George* tape back into the cassette deck and listened as George mistakenly called the fire station. When he lost Gillian in the side streets of the detour he felt a rage well up within him and slammed his fist against the dashboard. Only after five minutes of frantic driving was he following her at a safe distance again.

But instead of driving on to the television station or the Tender Loving Corn store, Gillian turned into the parking lot of the Silver Moon Motel. It was one of the older motels Mitch had rejected, a single row of about fifteen dusty, pale-blue and white units stretching straight back from Watts Street. In the time it took Mitch to park across the street in the lot of a Kelsey's Roadhouse, Gillian had left her Acura beside a blue Ford Bronco near the centre rooms. He

wouldn't know which room Gillian was in until she left it.

Mitch had no doubt that Gillian Beer was involved in a motel room affair. That was part of her allure. Never far from his mind since rediscovering Gillian was the memory of the evening she admitted to having sex with one of his buddies on different afternoons than the ones set aside for Mitch. He had had no choice but to quietly break up with her then. In those days her activities would have reflected more poorly on him than on her. He'd long ago forgotten how stupid she had made him feel.

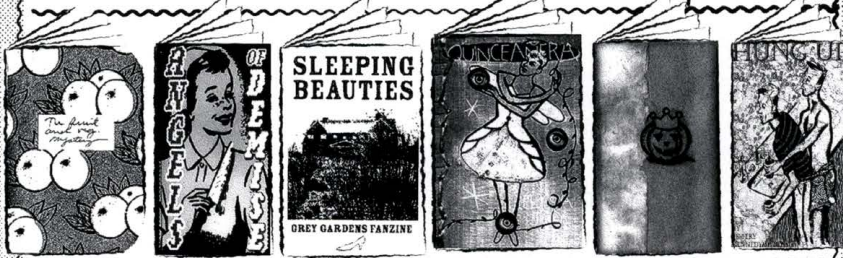
After an hour, Gillian, wearing the same blue jeans and white blouse from the day before, emerged from Room 8, followed by a dark-haired man with a moustache and greying temples in a blue sports jacket and khaki dress pants. Instead of getting into their vehicles, they walked the length of the motel patio toward Watts Street. They were halfway across the street before Mitch realized they were heading for the Kelsey's behind him.

He immediately opted to stay in his car and duck down rather than risk Gillian recognizing him on a dash across the parking lot. He stuck the Winnie the Pooh sunscreen up again and reasoned that it was unlikely she would look directly at him. But as she and her now obviously older companion passed the car Mitch stared at them. Gillian looked older than she appeared on television, and her heavily made-up face looked puffy and tired, like she had been crying. She seemed not to see Mitch or his car. He watched them enter the restaurant through his rear-view mirror.

He wouldn't follow them in. Gillian

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Beer looked miserable and Mitch couldn't blame her. She lived alone in a small city and was the aging weathergirl on an obscure little cable station. She had a failing business in a derelict strip mall. And whatever arrangement she had with the older gentleman wouldn't allow the man to visit her at home and Mitch had to wonder how an almost-thirty-four-year-old woman could be satisfied with that.

Beyond Mitch's windshield, Watts Street was now busy with Saturday shoppers. Mitch drove over to the office of the Summerland Motor Inn. There, a bald, hunched old man dribbling cigarette ash checked him into Room 23. Mitch's Visa, by some miracle, was accepted. He felt a weariness settle over him as he climbed the wooden staircase to the third floor. He barely glanced around the room before flopping onto the bed.

The voices of children running by outside his room woke him. Mitch lay sweating in the dark, hot room, unwilling to rouse himself any further. The bedside clock radio read six-thirty; he had slept the entire afternoon away. He hauled himself into the washroom, unwrapped the paper from a tumbler, and swallowed some lukewarm water. Then he dug the receipt from the Days Inn from his wallet and dialled its phone number. An older woman with a thick, African accent answered. "Can I speak to Aqua, please?" Mitch asked.

"She's not here," the woman answered. "Can I leave a message for her?"

"Yeah, O.K. Tell her Mitch will call her again, all right?"

Mitch closed his cell and sat on the edge of the bed. If Aqua returned to his room with him he would like to have something to offer her; snacks, maybe a bottle of wine. He remembered passing a Sobeys grocery store on his way into town and walked back out into the thick, wet heat of early evening. He was still tired, yet felt strangely elated.

His cell phone rang as he drove and, hoping for Aqua, Mitch answered. "Where are you, Mitch?! You haven't called all day," Emily demanded.

"Can't talk right now, Em," Mitch said quickly. "I'm headed into a meeting."

"On a Saturday evening?! What the hell is going on with you?"

"I'll call you back just as soon as I know, O.K., honey?" Mitch snapped the phone shut again.

HOOP

A heavy key
On an iron hoop
Admitted me

To a cubicle room
Where a desk and a wooden
Chair were the only appointments—

Aside from a pole in the corner and on it—
One
Long

Man's blue coat.
It wasn't yours to offer, but you did so nonetheless,
Extending the coat to the coatless

Like St. Vincent de Paul in an act of goodwill.
Bone-cold, all torn up by attachment,
I declined to take it

Though I didn't have to with-
Hold, it was
Lent.

— ELANA WOLFF

After the warmth of his motel room and his car, the chill in the grocery store felt unnatural to his skin. The aisles were thronged with boisterous families doing their weekly shopping. Mitch grabbed a basket and found an in-store boutique selling local wines. In another aisle he chose a box of crackers, an expensive, gooey looking French cheese, and some aged cheddar. In front of a long deli counter he contemplated cold cuts, pickled vegetables, and rice wrapped in vine leaves. The twelve-dollar bottle of white wine would account for a lot of his remaining cash. Yet he was hungry now, too. He placed an order with a teenaged girl for olives and some Hungarian salami and waited.

"Are you having a little party?" The voice belonged to a tall, deeply tanned woman with long, stringy blond hair who had slid up beside him.

"Something like that," Mitch said. "Only I'm not sure yet. This might be my dinner." She was wearing a purple tie-dyed dress that barely concealed her full, brown breasts. There was a tattoo of a lizard or a salamander around her left

ankle and one of a rose on her right bicep.

"I hear you. I'm taking the kids over to Six Flags tomorrow and would rather pack a lunch than let them eat the crap they sell over there."

"What's Six Flags?" She was older than Mitch, her brown skin almost leathery, but still an attractive woman.

"It's an amusement park over on Grand Island in the States. I didn't think you were from around here. Where are you staying?"

"The Summerland Motor Inn. I'm here on business."

"I'm Lorraine," the woman offered her hand. "Pleased to meetcha."

"Mitch. It's nice to meet you."

"Listen, if your little party doesn't get started and you still want some company, tell Rick to give me a call for you, O.K.?"

"Come again," Mitch said.

"Old Rick. On the desk," Lorraine said, slowly and sweetly. "The Summerland Motor Inn, right? Tell him to call me. You won't regret it."

"Oh," Mitch said, suddenly understanding. The girl behind the counter was handing the salami to him. "No. I don't think

so. Nothing personal, though."

"Of course. But if you change your mind, tell Rick to call Lorraine."

Left alone again, Mitch stared blankly at the selection of salads beneath the deli counter. He had never been approached like that before, not even as a young man, and wondered if he emanated a sense of desperation. He felt sick to his stomach, like he had to use the washroom, and noticed he was sweating in the icy cool of the store. When the girl returned with his olives, he said: "I don't need them now. Sorry, O.K.?"

Mitch walked away from the counter to return the other items he had selected. In a panicky daze he wandered into a squabbling family as he rounded a corner. The three young children had dirty faces and one little girl was crying; their parents looked as if they hadn't spoken to each other in months. Mitch thought he might vomit. He set the half-filled basket on top of a display of mineral water and left the grocery store quickly.

Outside, in the warm early evening, Mitch sat on a parking curb while his stomach slowly settled. The sun had begun its long descent behind the escarpment. The air was clearer now, the sky finally blue, and a strong breeze whipped up dust in the parking lot. Mitch looked into the back seat of his Hyundai and saw the clothes and toiletries he had thrown in there that morning, and, most importantly, his briefcase. He didn't think he'd brought anything with him into the room at the Summerland Motor Inn.

He rested his head against the steering wheel, feeling calm return. What was it he had decided about not leaving his car? Mitch rolled onto Watts Street, instantly indistinguishable in the Saturday evening traffic. Along the road the sun winked in and out of the rows of fruit trees and grape vines. Just before the on-ramp to the highway he stopped at a roadside fruit stand and purchased two pint-baskets of cherries. These he ate, spitting the pits out his open window, as the fading sunlight slanted into his eyes and the day slipped into night along the many miles of highway that separated him from his home.

Andrew Daley lives somewhere between Little Italy and the Village of Brockton. He has been writing for the magazine since 1997.

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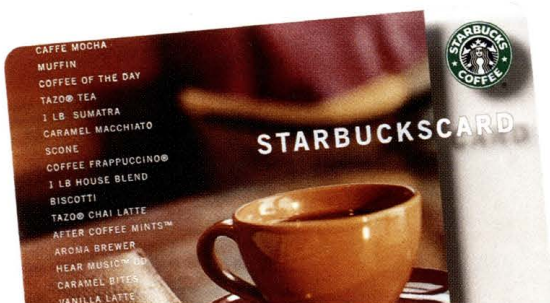
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