

TADDLE CREEK



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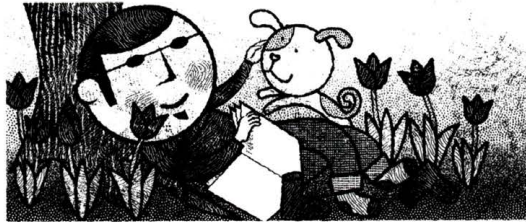
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TADDLE CREEK

VOL. VI, NO. 2 • SUMMER, 2003

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COVER STAR

Unknown, circa 1963. Photographer unknown.

ON PUNCTUATION

If there is one thing *Taddle Creek* hates, it is the use of extraneous spacing after terminal punctuation—more specifically, the leaving of two spaces after a period. This rather quaint practice dates to the pre-computer days of the manual typewriter, which spaced characters so loosely that extra room between sentences was often needed to improve readability. Today, however, word-processing machines not only allow authors to kern type for maximum readability, but usually do it for them automatically.

And yet, *Taddle Creek* continues to receive countless submissions typeset with two spaces after terminal periods. This, despite the fact that *Taddle Creek* Guideline for Submission No. 7.5 clearly states: “Under no circumstances leave two spaces after terminal periods.” The magazine has long blamed the Modern Language Association for this typesetting travesty. Since 1951, the M.L.A. has published style guidelines that are widely used by academics and university students, and began promoting the use of two spaces after punctuation in 1970. It would appear that, like Pavlovian dogs, most authors have continued this punctuation faux pas in their post-education life. *Taddle Creek* was preparing to begin an extensive lobby aimed at persuading the M.L.A. to cease and desist encouraging this practice, when it discovered that the association had not been actively encouraging it since 1995. “Since word processors make available the same fonts used by typesetters for printed works, many writers, influenced by the look of typeset publications, now leave only one space after a concluding punctuation mark,” reads the M.L.A.’s current position. “Because it is increasingly common for papers and manuscripts to be prepared with a single space after all punctuation marks, this spacing is shown in the examples in the *MLA Handbook* and the *MLA Style Manual*. As a practical matter, however, there is nothing wrong with using two spaces after concluding punctuation marks unless an instructor or editor re-

quests that you do otherwise.” While the magazine disagrees with this concluding sentence, it concedes the M.L.A. is doing its part for the war on extraneous spacing, while still looking out for its own best interests. As Eric Wirth, the M.L.A.’s assistant editor, recently wrote *Taddle Creek*, “We actually receive many manuscripts in Courier [a typeface very similar to that of a manual typewriter] from academic authors, and some editors here choose Courier for printing copy. *{sic}* As a manuscript editor, I’m grateful for extra space between sentences in mono-spaced fonts and even other fonts.”

Very well. With the M.L.A.’s position in mind, *Taddle Creek* sees only two remaining solutions: (1) eradicate Courier, or; (2) encourage authors to recognize their audience, keeping in mind that no book or magazine publisher uses two spaces after a period. The magazine admits to having a soft spot for Courier, and so, for the time being, will attempt the latter. Authors, the magazine implores you: please stop sending in submissions with two spaces after the period. The extra five to ten seconds it takes to reformat your piece could be better spent attempting to convince Oxford to lowercase “Internet.”

Comments on this or any other topic may be sent to editor@taddlecreekmag.com.

Following the publication of its Christmas issue, *Taddle Creek* was saddened to learn that it would be losing two of its founding staff: Kerri Huffman, the magazine’s associate editor, and Rebecca Caldwell, the magazine’s copy editor. *Taddle Creek* thanks them for their five years of service, wishes them well in their respective writing endeavours, and hopes their bylines haven’t graced its pages for the final time.

Finally, a hearty congratulations to John Degen, a long-time *Taddle Creek* contributor, whose poem “Bicycles,” from the magazine’s summer, 2002, issue, was recently nominated for a National Magazine Award. ✎

TADDLE CREEK

“Nothing can kill the Grimace.”

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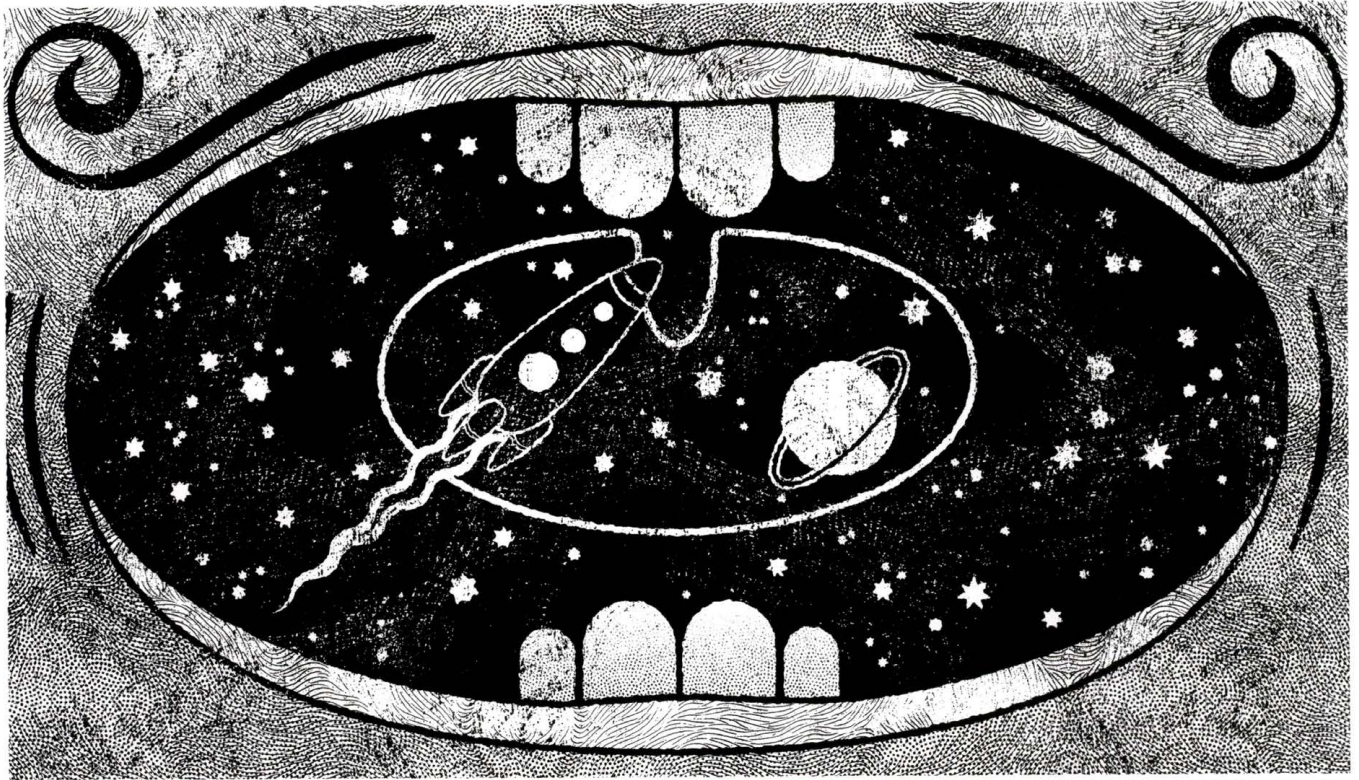
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TADDLE CREEK (ISSN 1480-2481) is published semi-annually, in June and December, by Vitalis Publishing, P.O. Box 611, Station P, Toronto, Ont. M5S 2Y4 Canada. Vol. VI, No. 2, Whole Number 10, Summer Number, 2003. Submissions of short fiction and poetry may be sent to the above address, provided author resides in the city of Toronto. Please view guidelines at www.taddlecreekmag.com/submit.shtml before submitting. Annual subscription rates: In Canada, \$7. In U.S., \$7 (U.S. funds). Overseas, \$16 (U.S. funds). Canadian Publications Mail Agreement No. 40708524. PAP Registration No. 10688. The magazine acknowledges the financial assistance of the Government of Canada, through the Publications Assistance Program, toward its mailing costs. The magazine also acknowledges the financial support of the Ontario Arts Council. *Taddle Creek* is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association, and is indexed by the Canadian Literary Periodicals Index. © 2003 by Vitalis Publishing. All rights reserved. Printed in Canada. Rights to individual works published in *Taddle Creek* remain the property of the authors. No part of this periodical may be reproduced in any form without the consent of *Taddle Creek* or the individual authors. In the case of photocopying or other reproductive copying, a licence from Access Copyright, (800) 893-5777, must be obtained. To inquire about advertising, circulation, subscriptions, submissions, and single and back issues, write to the above address, telephone (416) 324-9075, E-mail to editor@taddlecreekmag.com, or visit the magazine’s web site at www.taddlecreekmag.com.





UVULA SHADOWS

FICTION BY GARY BARWIN

The doorbell rings and I open the door onto a bright sunny day. The mailman is standing on the porch and when I look into his mouth I see the universe. Snow-capped mountains, radishes, raindrops, Piccadilly Circus, storm clouds, lightning, India, floral dresses, beautiful limbs, archways, shipboard navigation systems, pipe cleaners, discarded frost-free refrigerators, sidewalks, fire, Louisiana, Teflon cookware, radiators, hardwood flooring, lemons, rain barrels, solar flares, Chicoutimi, bailiffs, portly saboteurs, dancing children, Mount Fujiyama, eternity, galvanized eavestroughs, manhole covers, binary stars, subway systems, waves, squids, discount stores, old people, pterodactyls, reticent rhythm-and-blues spokespeople, Tuscany, neglected deck chair manufacturers, neutrinos, Buxtehude deniers, disgruntled conservation-authority parking-lot attendants, monsoons, tsunamis, bicycles, uvula shadows, taste buds, and a hundred thousand stars like

distant cavities in the vast black dental work of the sky.

"Can you please sign?" the mailman says, holding up a clipboard. Planets are spinning where his tonsils should be. The bright blur of a comet streaks across his soft palate. In all this vastness, I feel certain that life exists. Surely we could not be alone in all this possibility. Cells or galaxies come into being behind his wisdom teeth. Signals are sent from earnest transmitters in his pharynx. "We are here," the signals say. "We are not alone. We look for companionship in the incomprehensible massiveness of space."

I feel sick. I am still in my pyjamas. I've only half eaten my breakfast and here is everything in the mouth of a mailman. His eyes are hopeful, plaintive beneath his blue cap. In his ordinary hands he holds a clipboard with my name printed below a list of what I take to be the names of living things. I hesitate. I don't know what I would be committing myself to if I sign. "Who

are you?" I ask. "What is it you are asking of me?"

As he opens his mouth to answer, I see whales, the future, carpeting, truth, suffering, and, between two teeth, there we are, the mailman and I standing on my porch in the bright morning. "I could use a shave," I think to myself. "Who else has seen me like this?" The mailman looks O.K. though, his tiny clipboard illuminated by stars. I see myself waving stupidly at my unshaven larger self standing outside the mailman's cavernous mouth. It is as if I were on TV and were greeting my friends and family. Is this what Gandhi or Maimonides would do? Even Groucho would not have been so inane. "Hi, Mom!" he'd say. "Outside of the mailman, the universe is man's best friend. Inside of a mailman, it's too dark and sticky."

But I am beginning to suspect that this is not the normal mailman. In truth, I do not recognize him. Perhaps this is not his usual route and he is filling in for the regular guy.



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BETWEEN THE WALLS

That there's lightning is a guess he's only too willing to hazard; thunder shakes the windows almost as often as raindrops moisten them, but exterior light doesn't come here, not even in slivers. The centipedes

won't hear of it. A plate of eggs will have to do, and some toast of course, and one of the fuzzy channels the TV's been receiving lately. He has it pretty good, he'd say, though the work hasn't been enough. There's three pills left,

but he's been in the pink recently and figures he'll just quit taking them, skip the refill, cling to the hope that things will pick up, i.e., with work, say, and the doctor, and the rain will stop eventually, and

the centipedes will, instead of drying out between the walls, die and fade away or turn into silvery flakes of money.

—PAUL VERMEERSCH

I begin to speak but wonder what the mailman can see in my open mouth. Have I flossed recently? It has been a while since I brushed with diligence. I am willing to admit that perhaps my oral hygiene is not up to universal standards. My mouth is a vibrant organic place, an address not rich in highly developed life forms and advanced consciousness, but, nevertheless, a place where life may have a chance, where galaxies and solar systems could be born and eventually spawn the nimble feet of

gazelles and the soul-scouring calls of owls heard amidst the complicated verse forms of creatures who have learned to mediate their conception of the world through a system involving the coordination of muscle contractions in their mouths and abdomens.

The mailman looks at me curiously. He is holding not only the clipboard but also a pen. It is a sure sign that I have some breakfast caught between my teeth. He is offering me implements that would be helpful in the removal of

items foreign to my dentation. The clipboard is a possibility but the pen will be more effective. I take it from his hand. The mailman smiles and the universe disappears in his closed mouth.

I raise the pen to my mouth. The mailman looks pleadingly at me. I aim the pen tip at my teeth. I intend only to dislodge the breakfast fragment that has become trapped, but, as the pen comes close to my mouth, desire, like the tremendous gravitational pull of a gas giant, sucks me into its orbit and I push the entire pen into my mouth. There's a flash of bright light and the shadow of vast interstellar darkness as the mailman again opens his mouth to speak. I begin to chew on the pen, feel the satisfying crunch of blue plastic, the juiciness of the ink as it spurts onto my plain human tongue, just a small red rectangle of inner-city backyard beside the borderless acres of the mailman's cosmic maw. I taste the acrid nectar of the fossil glow as I swallow. I turn and go back inside my house. I will not need more breakfast. ✦

Gary Barwin lives in Hamilton, Ontario, with vague yet colourful delusions about Toronto. He is a writer, composer, and performer. His books of poetry, fiction, and writing for children include Raising Eyebrows (Coach House, 2001). His next two books, the fiction collection Anxiety Magic and the poetry collection Frogments from the Fragpool (with derek beaulieu), will be published by Mercury in 2003 and 2004, respectively.

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LOVE AND LIGHTNING

FICTION BY JAY PINKERTON

It was a dark and stormy night, and rain fell from the sky in dark and stormy ways. Raul looked out the window. "Raining again," he said, cupping a cigarette to his mouth to take a long and pensive pull in the stormy darkness.

"Sure is stormy and dark," Paulette added, entering with tea and setting it down on the coffee table. She went to the window and gazed at the streaks the rain made against it.

"Is it night already?" asked Raul suddenly, jumping out of his chair and piercing her with his hot stare like a knife into butter. She melted before him. "Yep," she answered. "It's night. A dark and stormy one."

"Damn!" cursed Raul violently. "That's what I thought." He scratched at his chin.

"What?" asked Paulette, a nervous lilt in her voice.

"I think," said Raul, tilting an eyebrow, "that we're trapped in a poorly scripted short story."

"Are you certain?" asked Paulette, craning her neck upward to take a look at the previous paragraphs. "Perhaps you're just not giving it a chance."

When she'd finished reading, she sat back down, pouring their tea in silence. "It's certainly moody, at any rate. That's something." Lightning cracked loudly, slicing through the sky like the hottest of butter knives through the warmest of butter.

"Oh, anyone can be moody. It's not difficult," replied Raul, his eyebrows clenching. They sipped at their tea.

"Did you read that horrible sentence about the butter?"

Suddenly, a long pause. Paulette, sensing something was wrong, looked up and reread the paragraph. She stopped suddenly. "Who asked that, you or me?" she asked.

"I don't even know! This is scripted so horribly! Either one of us could have asked it. The man is a hack, Paulette, a talentless hack." He spun around sud-

denly. "I mean, come on! We're already twelve paragraphs into the story, and he hasn't even tried any characterization or plot development. Where are we? Who are we? What do we look like? What are we supposed to be doing? I don't even know the colour of my hair!" he yelled, his brown hair glinting in the moonlight.

"Too late!" Raul yelled. "And besides, it's storming, remember? There couldn't possibly be any moonlight!"

There was a hole in the cloud cover. The moon could have—

"Shut up," said Raul wearily, sitting down in a worn leather chair. The chair creaked under his large weight. "And stop editorializing," he added.

Paulette, who had been reading the sentences above, now craned her neck back down, looking Raul in the eye. "He's certainly not a very original writer," she said. "He's used two butter metaphors already."

Well, look, as long as we're splitting hairs, they were actually similes, and pretty good ones when you—

"And," said Paulette, marching on in an attempt to ignore the narration, "he keeps using the same words over and over again. Like 'suddenly.' Did you notice? Everything's happening 'suddenly' this and 'suddenly' that." She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "I don't think he's very intelligent. Perhaps we shouldn't poke fun."

"Oh, don't humour him, Paulette. You're always such a damned bleeding heart."

This made her stop. "What?" she said, startled. "How do you know? He hasn't told us anything yet. I think it's fairly presumptuous to assume we've had a history together. We could be total strangers." She looked away from him out the window.

The rain patted quietly against the window frame. Suddenly, more lightning! Moody darkness struck the room as lightning pierced the sky like a knife through margarine!

"Oh, God. He's using exclamation marks now." Raul cupped his temples with his hands.

And listen, I don't have to take this, you know.

"Like a knife through margarine?" mocked Raul.

Well, you said you were sick of butter metaphors.

"It's the same exact thing!" yelled Raul, who in my opinion was completely overreacting, as usual. "This is horrible. We're going to end up in some bargain bin gathering dust with damaged copies of *A Separate Peace*."

Hey, hold on now. That's a darn good book.

"It's a crap book and this is a crap story," said Raul, who, it must be noted, has never studied literature in any professional capacity and obviously has no idea what he's talking about.

Something was nagging at the back of Raul's mind. He thought back to what Paulette had said earlier. It came to him suddenly.

"Paulette?"

"Yeah?" She looked over at him absently.

"What did you mean when you said we don't have a history?" Raul asked, an injured tone in his voice.

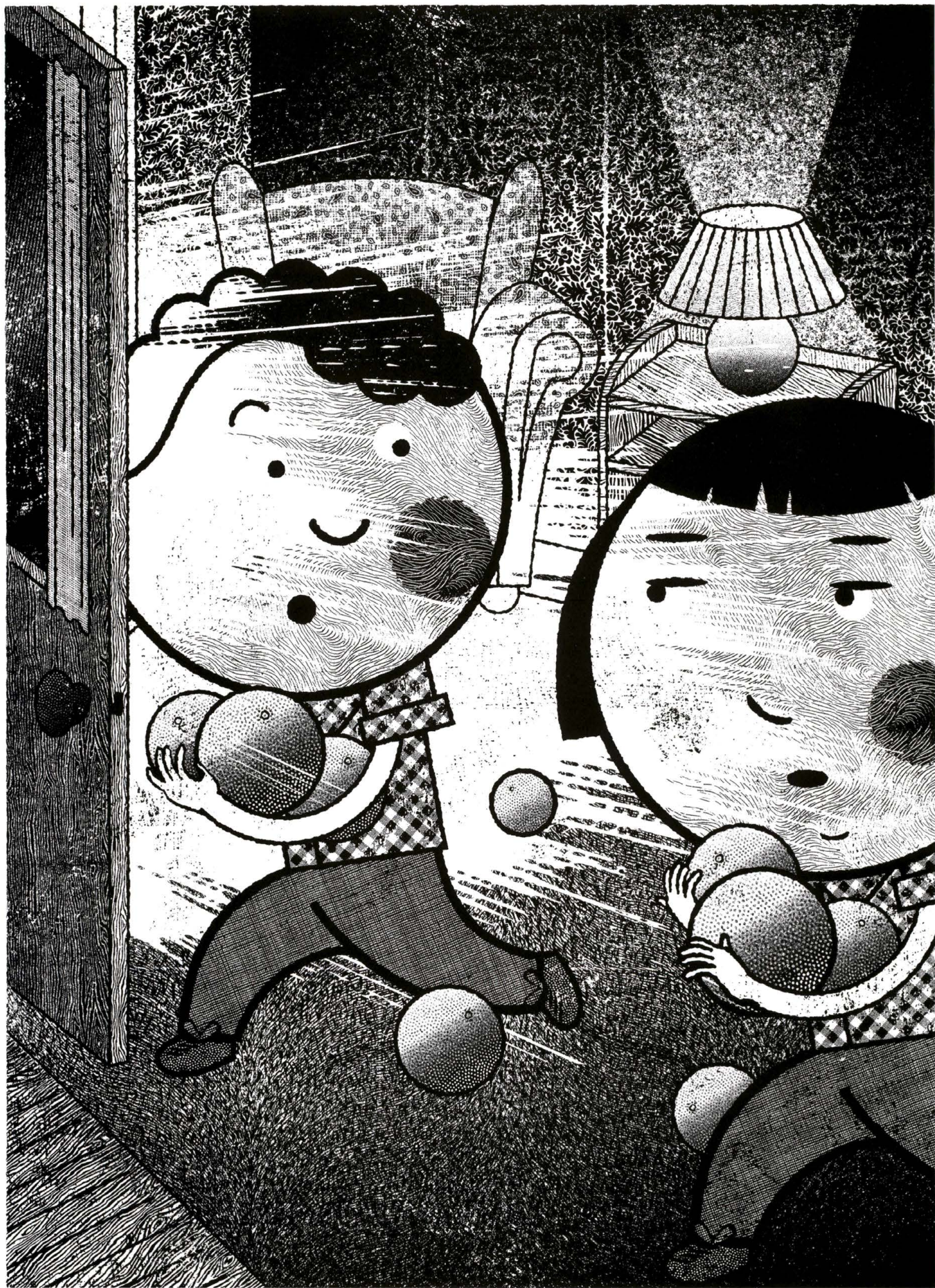
"I just think it's presumptuous, that's all," Paulette said, resting her cheek in her arm and looking out the window at the rain. "We could be total strangers."

"Two total strangers? Alone in a study in the middle of a thunderstorm?"

"Are we in a study?" Paulette crinkled up her nose as she surveyed the room around her. "Bookshelf, leather chairs—yeah, I suppose this could be a study. Say," she said suddenly, her eyes brightening, "do you suppose we're rich?"

"We? We're total strangers, remember?" Raul pouted, slouching deeper into his chair.

"Oh, get over yourself, Raul. I was only thinking out loud," Paulette said, seeing the sad-sack look on Raul's face.



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She looked at her watch, trying to change the subject.

"Has anything even happened yet? I'm fairly certain something should have happened by now."

Suddenly, the door opened, as thunder crashed suddenly!

"Ah," said Paulette.

A man in a suit entered, clasping an envelope. "Raul! Paulette! You must come quickly! The revolution has begun! The Zorganites will pay for putting the people of earth into slavery!" Lightning flashed!

"A hack," muttered Raul. "A damned hack." He got out of his chair slowly. "All right, all right. At least it's something. A plot. Somewhat, at any rate. Do we get guns?"

"Guns?" laughed the man. "No. Guns would be quite useless against the Zorganites, my friend." He quietly handed Raul a grapefruit. "Onward!" With this, he left.

Raul sighed. "Care to save the world, my darling?" He glanced over at Paulette while thunder crashed all around them. "I mean, if it's all right with you. I wouldn't want to assume anything here."

Paulette stood up. Silence filled the room, except for all the thunder. She eyed his hand, stretched out to her like some large buttery bridge.

"Yeah," she said finally, walking over to him and grabbing his hand. "Yeah, why not. Raul, was it?"

"Yeah. Raul." He held up the grapefruit for her to see and they smiled. He began to get a sense that the story, for better or worse, was about to end, and turned to stare at the door the man had left through. "I think when we walk out that door," he said, nodding at it, "this story is going to end."

Paulette looked over at the door. "Yeah. I get that feeling, too," she agreed.

They continued to stare at the door.

"Then what?" asked Paulette.

"I don't know," said Raul. He laughed ruefully. "Maybe we should have been nicer to that hack writer, huh?"

"Actually, I think it was you who said most of the bad things," Paulette said.

Raul turned to her with hurt in his eyes, just in time to catch her laughing. "I was kidding." She smiled warmly at him. They both started giggling.

ON VISITING THE ALICE SHOP IN OXFORD AND TELLING THE SHOPKEEPER ABOUT STEPHANIE BOLSTER'S POEM ABOUT VISITING THE ALICE SHOP IN OXFORD

Once upon a time, there was a book
of some renown
in my country. I am here
as well, the shopkeeper
busy telling the story of the sheep and the barley sugar
to two Americans. Forever
I watch items remain still
in small bins, on hangers, sometimes behind glass.
I dream I buy souvenirs.
A vague recollection. The salesman wishes
I'd brought a copy, but I just stutter,
can't remember the words.

Later, all I can do is pose
behind hedges. Since I drowned
in my Ph.D., even the Bodleian Library cannot excite me.

Once there was a book that led me
to produce a grant proposal out of my ass.
My head explodes
with something so abstract
it fills my head with ideas—
only I don't exactly know what they are—

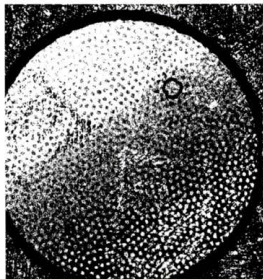
Oxford is such a lovely abstraction, I think,
and pour tea
to a cup where a cat smiles up
at me, drowning.

—K. I. PRESS

"You know, I think we must be married," said Raul, still laughing.

"Why's that?" asked Paulette, who was beginning to sense the same thing. She moved closer to him.

"Because you get on my nerves something awful," he said, sweeping Paulette up into his arms and kissing her. They melted into one another like some romantic dairy product, lost to the ages. Then, slowly, they separated. Holding one another's hands tightly, they walked toward the door.



"I guess this story wasn't all bad," Raul said as they walked, looking into Paulette's eyes.

"No," she agreed. They walked through the door to face their destiny. "No, it definitely had its moments."

The door closed behind them as lightning crashed, sending silhouettes coursing through the empty study, tendrils of white-hot nothing illuminating bookshelves and wood for an instant and then gone.

Raul opened the door again and put his head through. "See, that wasn't

bad," he said to the room. "Yes, he's definitely improving," came Paulette's voice from behind him.

Hey, thanks.

"Don't mention it," said Raul, closing the door again.

And the rain pattering against the window slowed, slowed more, and then stopped. Outside, a clear full moon poked out from disappearing clouds. ∇

Jay Pinkerton lives near the Church and Wellesley area. His various essays and articles have been published in National Lampoon, Modern Humorist, and many other fine publications. More of his work can be viewed at www.thetrailertrash.com.

CIRCUS NOTEBOOKS, 1927

FICTION BY ELISSA JOY

We are all clowns. Some of us know it.

Bored and impatient. Though it's only March, it's already hot and damp in Florida, and we don't go on the road for another week. "Working out the bugs," says Mr. Enescu. A sick elephant, a few acts still incomplete. What to do with the latest young runaway—send him home, get him a mop and bucket, or fit him for an acrobat's costume? But we need to get moving.

Wagons loaded, finally. The first show is several days away—Enescu couldn't arrange anything nearby (Why not? Competition? The economy?), so we'll be bumping along for a while, too close for comfort, but so it goes. In the wagon train we clowns are always stuffed into some tiny space as if that old routine weren't a joke but rather our everyday reality, in or out of costume.

And speaking of costumes, what a motley array Enescu and company have come up with this year! No pun intended. *The Arabian Nights* gone bad. I mentioned something about it, jokingly so no one would take offence. But Enescu didn't laugh. "Everybody knows," he pronounced, with his cheeks all red and his absurd Romanian mustache quivering, "there's nothing funnier than a gypsy."

The reason we're not appearing in Florida is that the Ringling Bros. multitude has been wintering only about three towns away. We passed right by their camp to-day, as well as by John and Mable Ringling's famous mansion, whose tasteful neo-classical facade is personalized by two giant lead Sphinxes that guard the front entrance. Edwin, the young clog dancer who joined the company as a stowaway earlier this year, was riding up front with Mr. Enescu (hmm . . .) and said that Enescu's mustache was twitching when they went by the mansion. I don't doubt it. I've been with this circus five years

now, and I can say for sure that it'll be a cold day in hell when Enescu gets a house like that. Not in a million years.

My livelihood is on the line the same as everybody else's, but still, all I can do is laugh. What happened is that the showgirls, all of them, just up and walked off the job after the show last night! Split, quit, and that's the facts, Jack!

Who could blame them? They're the lowest-paid performers, and the biggest attraction, as they well know. They've been asking for a raise since the winter, with Enescu and Goodman just pretending to be deaf in response. A couple of them, wobblies I guess, were even talking about organizing a union! Complete with child care and medical benefits for all circus performers. The Department of Labor would probably laugh at that one, but the point is they were mad as hell for a long time and nothing happened, so now Enescu is pacing around in circles sputtering, "Girls! What in God's name is a circus without girls?!" It's true. A two-bit circus like this, with only a couple of mangy animals and a bunch of hobo and ex-con types providing the entertainment, is little more than a glorified strip show. And now, no girls.

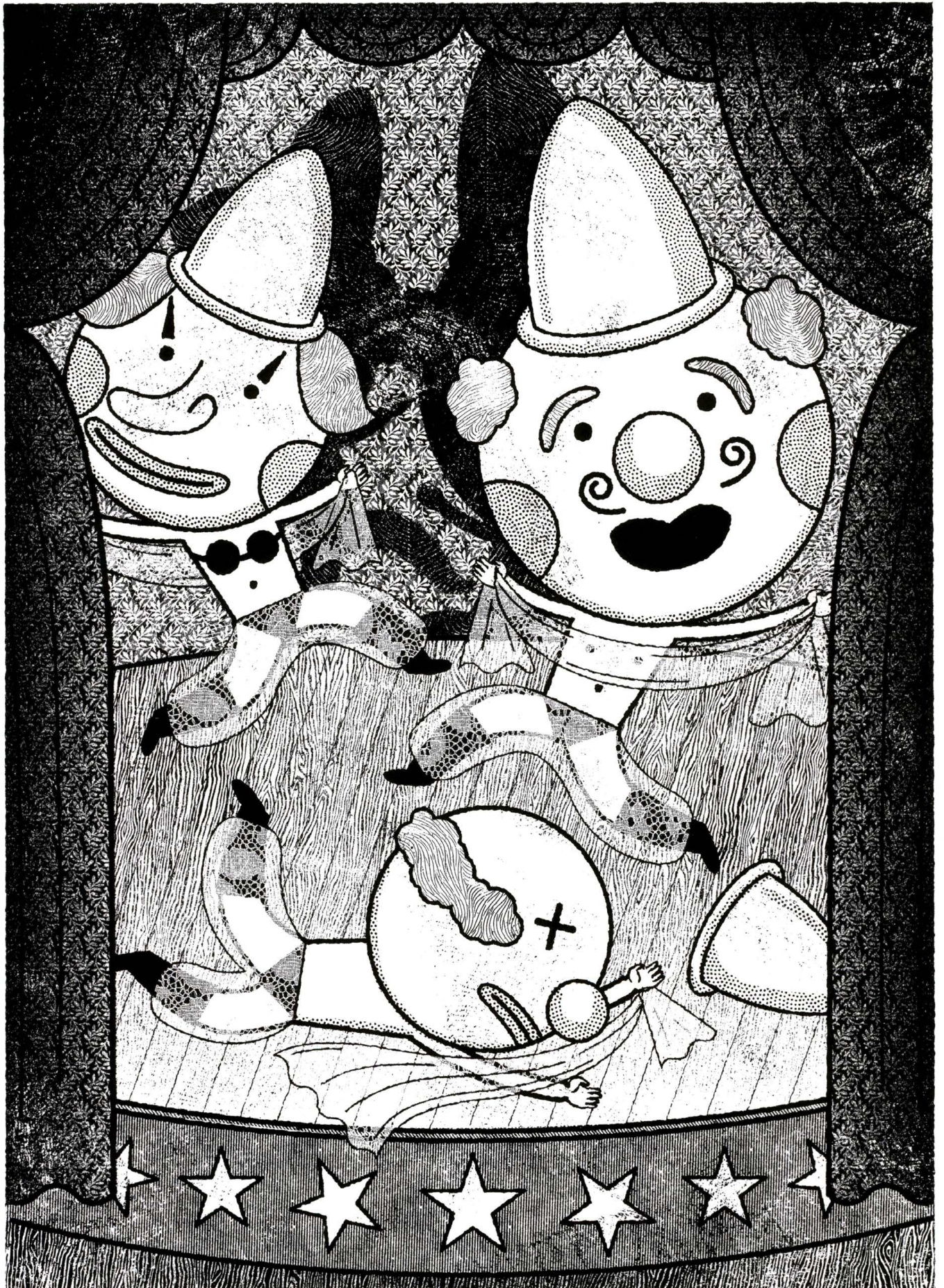
Everyone's been yelling about it for hours; no wonder my head hurts. I'm going to bed.

Well, you've got to hand it to Enescu; the new showgirl act is truly a scream. I only hope the audience doesn't run screaming for the exits when they see the new, improved "scab" showgirls that crazy Romanian came up with, namely myself; Jacques, the whiteface clown; Tom, who was previously part of the team handling the sick elephant (which, by the way, has been roaming the great savannah in the sky since the end of last month, much to Goodman and Enescu's accountant's chagrin); Edwin, the clog dancer; and anyone else with time to switch be-

tween his regular costume and the gypsy finery with which all us lovely "ladies" have been provided. Edwin, it must be noted, is more than handsome in clean, swirling crepe de Chine and peacock feathers; Enescu has shown uncharacteristic good taste in choosing him to be the act's center, a role that consists of assuming various "glamorous" poses vaguely situated within scenes from currently fashionable theatrical plays and films. The rest of us, however, are a motley crew indeed, although I am confident that with a little more practice we shall be dancing a wicked cancan (thanks to Jacques, whose Parisian accent and moniker may not be fake after all, as most of us assumed). I can only wonder if Enescu is not putting us out as dupes, thinking that once the real girls hear about our act they will feel sorry for us and come back to the circus. The truth is, they will laugh themselves silly . . .

April Fool's Day is long past, but it might as well have been to-day—the debut of the Vaude-Vedettes in the pre-show parade as well as in the ring. A funnier sight has undoubtedly not been seen in this Delaware burgh for quite some time, if ever. I myself was the inadvertent star of one stellar moment: stepping onto the stage in a ragtag harem dancer's costume to the beat of sensuous Egyptian drums, I promptly tripped over my veil! Young Edwin saved the day, gallantly (or as gallant as a lad can be, dressed as a lady of the highest society) catching and leading me in an improvised tango that brought on the audience's strongest applause of the night, or so I imagined in my rather exalted state. Whether they were laughing at the pratfall or actually sensing and sharing my awe at the heretofore unknown delight of Edwin's embrace, I dare not speculate . . .

The Vaude-Vedettes are the sensation of the circuit, according to the papers. Enescu reads the articles

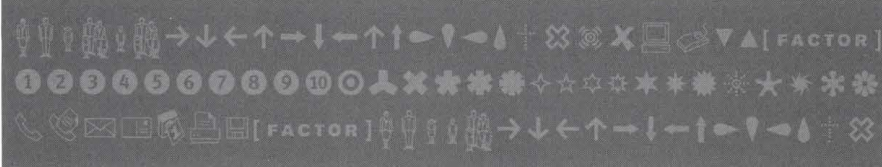


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aloud, his grin a wide-open abyss. "The Ringlings are fuming," he cackles. "Fuming!" We still don't get a raise, however.

Enescu, sensing the growing chemistry between myself and his cherished favorite (young Edwin), has begun to behave in a hostile manner toward me. Suddenly, my costume consists of the worst rags of all, and my performances are subtly sabotaged—scheduled to dance a solo tarantella, for example, I will break a shoe, or trip over some object on the floor that had not been there earlier. Yet these mishaps become part of the comedy, and the contrast between Edwin's eloquence and my bumbling (the classic clown entree!) wins the heart of every crowd that witnesses us. What's more, our joint success brings us ever closer together, in friendship and in physical proximity. The circus is thriving, yet, for the first time in five years, I fear that my position is in jeopardy. Nevertheless, I am happier than I have ever been . . .

Some people came to-day to photograph the Vaude-Vedettes for the moving pictures. Edwin was very excited; he has always wanted to be a movie star. I don't believe that the risqué act that Tom and Jacques put on will make it to the cinemas, however. It would be easy, at this point, for things to go too far.

Not at all to my credit, I rely increasingly on Edwin's companionship—Compassion? Affection? Words, in proximity to the boy's enchanting presence, fail me—to get me through each day. But I know he is not serious. When this tour is over I feel sure that he will be out of my life. Although months yet remain, the solitude is overwhelming.

Enescu and Goodman are seriously considering selling the circus to the Ringlings. The latter only want the Vaude-Vedettes, but are prepared to buy out the entire company in order to discourage Enescu from starting a new show-girl act or hiring us back as competitors. No one knows where this will leave us. Enescu won't even talk about it, but Goodman sent an employee all the way from his Chicago office to assure us that

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JOHNNY CASH

He asked me if I would feel bad about being like Johnny Cash,
all messed up, wearing black, singing about the Sioux and walking the line.

He asked me if I wasn't more like June Carter, wearing silver
jangling boots and eating fries from a chip wagon at the Calgary Stampede.

There's no Johnny Cash to visit the Kingston Penitentiary for Women,
carrying a song and sticks of chewing gum and spitting tobacco.

There's only me, casting ballads with a left-handed dictionary and
eating slips of pencil shards while looking at a bar-crossed world.

There's no momma stood outside my dark cave lodged deep
into the heart of my simple rose-coloured addictions.

How can you leave the kids behind, Johnny Cash? While you head out
on the road building dreams like a fire full of sticks and burnt matches.

I can't forget them. Even though I fill my dreams with the Grand Ole Opry,
Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline, Stompin' Tom, the Stanley Brothers, and Tom Jackson.

Late at night, I think I am Morag Gunn, living in thirty-degrees-below weather,
wishing I could hear the crickets that sound like Memphis, Tennessee.

Late at night I think I am June Carter, spending hard times singing
for the souls incarcerated, singing with you, Johnny Cash.

See, it's just like I said, there's no momma stood up outside this window,
this empty window, to save me from throwing away my own self.

Late at night you asked me what we should name the baby, in purgatory,
left to its own devices, history. "Rosanne" is what I said.

"Rosanne," I said, and she'll grow up to look just like me, with a touch
of you, with a guitar and a swing step, broken voice and a gun.

Looking just like me, Johnny Cash.

—DEANNA MCFADDEN

we'd at least be finishing out the season.

Privately, I am for the change; without Edwin, I'm afraid I would have to seize any excuse to leave this otherwise satisfactory way of life, as the circus would no longer be bearable without him. Unlike the rest of us, he possesses both talent and ambition, a combination that will inevitably carry him to larger outfits like John Ringling's soon anyway, if not directly to California and his beloved moving pictures. And what would the Vaude-Vedettes be without their adored, adorable star?

The Pacific Ocean is bigger—no, not bigger, but brighter than I thought it would be. So many years wasted on the shores of Lake Erie, Lake Michigan, the accursed lakes and swamps of the mosquito-ridden South, unaware of my own simpleton's ignorance! Of course I can say that in retrospect, forgetting the happy times simply because the present has brought me such far greater happiness . . .

Enescu's Broadway Brothers Traveling Circus is no more, having succumbed to the inevitable power of the

Ringling's all-American monopoly. For me, however, the last straw came earlier, in the Southwest, when one of the large poles from the big top suddenly collapsed, maliciously crushing my right arm. There is no such thing as compensation in this business, and no alternative: the show must go on and me along with it, two shows nightly in full dress plaster, but not for long. Upon our arrival in California—the last segment of the tour—we were greeted by a posse of Hollywood agents, all eager to sign Edwin at practically any price. "The next Doug Fairbanks," they called him! Blushing and stuttering just enough to alert them to his charming modesty, he handled the situation with extreme finesse. "Well, you men will have to speak to my manager," he informed them. And pointed to me . . .

So, we are living at the seashore, and to hell with everything. The strangest things wash up on shore! The Pacific, Mother Nature's capricious clown, disgorges great clumps of kelp—its thick vines ending in bulbous polyps that could well be the fanciful ships of an alien species—tangled with opalescent abalone shells, driftwood, and the occasional Chinese bottle, ornate vessels whose long-lost contents are a mystery. Gazing toward the rounded horizon, one almost imagines the arrival of Columbus's galleons, or a ragged Ulysses clawing his way up the drifting slope of sand. They tell me that at certain times of the year, whales swim by, spouting great sprays of water and waving their tails in the air.

They tell me Enescu is managing a successful female impersonator stage show in San Francisco. I do not know; it doesn't matter. Edwin is a swashbuckler and a movie star. There are parties, opening nights, and long, long afternoons in our front yard, which is the ocean, which is the entire world. Life is sweet. ♪

*Elissa Joy lives in Mexico City. Her latest book, *Drinking Songs*, will be published this year by *Pas de Chance*. She is the author of *What We Do Is Secret* (*Pas de Chance*, 1998), *Quinceañera* (*Pas de Chance*, 1996), *On Seeing Montgomery Clift Drunk As He Was* (*Pas de Chance*, 1996), and other works of fiction, poetry, and cultural studies.*

A BREAK WITH CONVENTIONS

With a new book of short stories, a successful series of chapbooks, and the editor's chair of Broken Pencil, Emily Schultz scores a D.I.Y. hat trick.

INTERVIEW BY JOANNE HUFFA

There are books you read in childhood and adolescence that stick with you forever—books that you read and reread until they become dog-eared and smeared with traces of snacks long since digested. You can quote from them twenty years later as if you had read them last week. It is a markedly rarer occurrence when a book resonates that strongly in adulthood. Sometimes, as age and experience creep up, it seems as though everything from youth was more vibrant, more important—just more than it was.

But sometimes, the haze of adulthood is punctured. *Black Coffee Night*, the first short story collection from Emily Schultz, can burst the most jaded of bubbles. Throughout eleven stories, Schultz inspects and dissects love, friendship, mortality, and the importance of a good shade of lipstick, among other things. Most of the book's characters are in their early to mid-twenties and have yet to find the life they once imagined they'd lead. One character watches friends take a magazine quiz, smug with the knowledge that "B" is always the smartest, most normal answer; another knows her mother won't live much longer but is unwilling—or unable—to stop playing the part of the needy daughter.

The beauty of *Black Coffee Night* is that Schultz doesn't rely on irony or cynicism to bring life to these situations. The characters have depth, the plot lines are real, and Schultz gives these urban (not-so) hipsters a warmth often missing from other works of twentysomething angst. Her no-bullshit eye cuts through our culture until people and places stand exposed. In "The Amateurs," a character sees the city as nothing more than plywood and girders. The first line sets the tone: "The city was nothing but scaffolding that I could see straight through." It's

not a pretty image, but one anyone who lives in an urban centre will understand. As construction season steps up (though really, with the seemingly endless influx of condos in Toronto and just about every other North American city, does it ever go away?), it's not difficult to see the world as a series of skeletal structures.

"Accessories," while in many ways the lightest story of the bunch, lets a fashionable *Sex and the City*-style woman hang by her own rope as she shows what it means to be self-absorbed. Where Carrie, the story's protagonist, would, in a similar tale, be a sassy, fun-loving, hair-tossing girl, here she seems pathetically jaded. "We used to do all that stuff together, all these fundraisers and protests, it was so exciting," the character says of her best friend, Lydia. "It was like a big party except you were there with like a purpose. I felt so united with all these really interesting people. But I don't know, after a while it just seemed so pointless. They were always looking down on me 'cause the food I brought to the potlucks wasn't organic. . . . Yeah, me and Lydia were really close though. She was like my sister. When she was in my life, I just knew that I would always be okay. I still call her sometimes, but I feel like she always has something else she has to do. . . . She's really . . . Yeah, she's just . . . so sad."

Hal Niedzviecki, the founder of *Broken Pencil* magazine, who, after seven years at the helm, recently handed his editorial reins over to Schultz, is enthusiastic about her collection. "I'm particularly interested in the stories that delve into the lives of the not-yet-adult, post-university set. A lot has been written about high school and university age, but not much about what is developing as a kind of perpetual adolescent twilight as twenty-five-year-olds struggle to hold

on to vibrancy and meaning while dealing with the urge to acquire and achieve."

Niedzviecki, also an author of young-adult-lost books, such as *Ditch* and *Smell It*, has a point. Although "The Value of X," arguably *Black Coffee Night*'s strongest work, is the story of a pair of misfit high-school students, its stories like "The Physical Act of Leaving" and "Measurement Listings in the Catalogue of Memory" that anchor the collection. Both have at their centre a character named Leigh. In the former, Leigh celebrates her birthday by getting high and jumping in a river. In the latter, she feigns normalcy in the days before her mother's death.

"I was worried about that one," Schultz says. "Both my parents are alive, but I have a friend who went through something similar to what happens in the story. I was worried that she would think I was taking her story or that she would be angry about me not writing about what I know, but I think she liked the piece."

While Schultz may not have dealt with that situation directly, she handles the story without succumbing to emotional manipulation. It is a brutally sad work, but more so because it's so real (Leigh berates herself for cringing when her parents share a moment of tenderness at the dining room table) than because of heavy-handed melodrama.

It's not that Schultz spends her time morbidly deconstructing the world. Though she speaks thoughtfully and with a sense of seriousness, there is also an element of fun about her, a glint in her eye that makes her admission that she sometimes gets carried away when she drinks come as no surprise. At twenty-nine, she appears utterly content with her home in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood, her marriage, and





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her predominantly nocturnal existence. Perhaps the fact that much of her life is in place makes Schultz so adept at exposing the tiny and not always pleasant details of North American behaviour.

Born to American parents (U.S.-Canadian relations figure in a number of her stories), Schultz grew up in Wallaceburg, a small town in south-western Ontario. She attended the nearby University of Windsor, where she studied English and creative writing and began to give her first readings, followed by a year in the publishing program at Centennial College in Toronto. Schultz worked a variety of jobs following graduation, including night-shift proofreader of Harlequin romance novels, and production assistant for a pharmaceutical advertising company ("I was terrible at it!" she says. "You could call my old boss, and she'd tell you that, too."), all the while catching up on her reading. "When I graduated [from Centennial] I went to Virginia for a year, and that year was when I really started reading because I had a lot more time to myself. I was ready. *{Black Coffee Night}* starts with an Anaïs Nin quote. I've read quite a bit of her work, and I think that she's been really underrated. I kinda started everything late. I should've been reading, but I wasn't."

In 2002, Schultz made the decision to give up full-time employment and make writing her regular gig. With the help of two government grants and the support of her husband, Brian Joseph Davis, she did just that. Along the way, she has continued to work as a freelance writer and editor upon occasion, including a stint as a travel writer for *Naked News*. The result of her decision was the publication of *Black Coffee Night*, which was published this past fall by Insomniac Press.

Amidst the fairly straight prose with which most of *Black Coffee Night* is written is "Watering the Dark," a numbered, experimental story that Schultz admits works best as a sound piece, and the one that gets a more positive response when read aloud than it did by reviewers of the book. But while the story may seem anomalous to this collection, Schultz is certainly no

ERIC'S TOP TEN REASONS FOR CHANGING HIS E-MAIL ADDRESS

1. I now have beautiful curly hair.
2. I have lost 22.5 pounds in three weeks.
3. I look and feel great in time for summer.
4. I am currently retaining top-notch attorneys for pennies a day.
5. I have been granted several Ph.D.s by prestigious educational institutions, based on life experience.
6. I am on track to instantly win cool prizes from Hat World.
7. I have recently had seventy-two hours of unlimited psychic advice (and I am a little tired).
8. I have received my complimentary three-pound bag of M. & M.'s.
9. Now that my breasts are bigger, men are noticing, and bathing suits fit me the way I want them to.
10. I get too much spam sent to squair@interlog.com.

—ERIC SQUAIR

stranger to literary experimentation. Her latest ongoing venture is the Pocket Canon, a series of small chapbook-zines, curated by Schultz and co-published with Davis. Inspired by nothing more than "the tradition of anonymous publishing," and the desire to do something fun, Pocket Canons never reveal their authors' true name. Writers are encouraged to step outside of their regular style and create something new, fun, and unusual.

"I can't say for sure what makes a piece of writing suitable for Pocket Canon," Schultz says. "I can just tell straightaway if it is or not. There has to be something about it, but I couldn't make an outline of what it should or shouldn't be." According to Schultz's web site, Pocket Canons are for "the libertine, that lover of free expression, gilded editions and independent means. We love small books, but not small ideas. Hence, the pocketbook format is packed with something explosive. Burn us at the stake, ban us from Kinko's if you must; The Pocket Canon series is by and for authors who know their true identities."

Maybe it's the confidence that comes from knowing one's "true identity" that is the X-factor in an author being chosen for the Pocket Canon series. Or maybe it's the brashness that comes with knowing that one's name will not be revealed anywhere on or near the

publication. *Anais*, the first Pocket Canon (published in August, 2002), was, unsurprisingly, a parody of the nineteen-forties erotic works of Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller. An amusing little work (of the five Pocket Canons published to date, it is the heftiest, at forty-three pages), what makes *Anais* shine is the quality of the writing. Instead of being a ham-fisted laugh riot, it slips effortlessly into the language and style of its source material. It's not so much of a goof as a loving tribute, paid without fear of being called out for copping someone else's style. That Pocket Canons are presented as lovingly detailed little books—with a print quality slightly higher than that of a zine but less than that of a professional chapbook—is just gravy.

Schultz's search for suitable Pocket Canon fodder is endless, but by no means her only project. In another recent incarnation, Schultz is the new editor of *Broken Pencil*, Canada's guide to zine and do-it-yourself culture. Founded in 1995 by the ubiquitous literary presence Hal Niedzviecki, *Broken Pencil* was originally considered by some to be a second-rate version of its U.S. predecessor, the legendary *Factsheet 5*. Nearly eight years later, *Broken Pencil* has taken on a life of its own and has outlasted the now-defunct *Factsheet 5*, as well as many of its imitators. It has grown well beyond being a simple

zine review roundup and become Canada's indie-culture bible. While it still reviews and excerpts zines, as well as comics, music, and books, it also contains a variety of articles by, for, and about the people who participate in all areas of non-corporate culture, from D.I.Y. poster pirates to backyard wrestlers. As much as it reflects ideas found throughout the indie world, it has also been inextricably linked with Niedzviecki; his humour and outlook grounded the magazine's content and style. Schultz accepted a huge challenge when she became editor this past November, not only in the sheer amount of work it takes to edit a magazine, but also in injecting her personality into its pages. "It's a lot of work," says Schultz, a self-described occasional reader of *Broken Pencil*. "I haven't worked in magazines before, so I'm still trying to learn the ropes, but it's awfully exciting."

For his part, Niedzviecki feels that, after more than seven years, his time had come to move on, and he is excited to see what Schultz has in store for the magazine that made him a low-income-household name. "I think that after eight years, I was feeling like the magazine could really benefit from a new perspective," he says.

"I wanted to focus just on writing books and that was starting to show in the pages of *Broken Pencil*. When your enthusiasm starts to flag, it's time to find someone else. I'm still working behind the scenes as an advisor and contributor and general ideas guy . . . and just generally overseeing the mag as head of the *B.P.* board of directors."

Though Niedzviecki will remain a key member of the *Broken Pencil* team, it is Schultz's name that now tops the masthead. While some may be skeptical about her being in charge of the publication, given her relative newness to the self-publishing world, Schultz has shown an excellent understanding of the genre so far with the Pocket Canon. The quality of writing in the series is far above the average first zine (there's a lot to be said about waiting until you have something to say before you start talking—or publishing) and the format is beautiful. Even the typesetting recalls dime-store novels, the sort that are coveted by book geeks and pop-culture junkies alike. At a recent launch for *Kiss*

Machine, a Toronto-based zine, Schultz arrived with lovingly rendered poems printed as invitations, complete with envelopes.

"Emily has a clear sense of style," Niedzviecki says, "a strong vision editorially, and good skills as someone who can keep a project moving forward. She also has connections in the community. She isn't just parachuting into a job. She understands the *B.P.* ethos of championing do-it-yourself creativity. All in all, [she's] a great candidate and exactly what we were looking for."

While Schultz may not have spent her young adulthood cutting and pasting, she has the requisite traditional organization and editorial skills, which are of an equal, if not higher, value for a project such as *Broken Pencil*. Heading up the magazine requires not only an editor to oversee day-to-day operations (the magazine currently has a paid circulation of about two thousand), but also a de facto publisher to keep finances in line (and grants pouring in) and an events organizer to ensure its annual Canzine festival continues to run smoothly. Schultz is also putting faith

in her section editors, who include Emily Pohl-Weary, a writer and editor of *Kiss Machine*, and Renaissance man Terence Dick, to ensure the magazine's continued success.

"I don't really want to change it very much," Schultz admits. "It's not my magazine, and Hal's definitely developed a readership for it, so mostly I want to keep it the same. Any ideas that I want to put into place were probably in place in my first issue, although I'm sure I'm gonna learn based on reader response. . . . I'd also like to see the magazine have a little more structure than it's had. I think it's a little hard to locate yourself in it sometimes, especially since it has so many components. Basically, I figure it will take about a year before I get a hold on the magazine, figure out the demographic, and learn what I need. I definitely want to try to bring the production quality up, but only in the sense that we need to correct the proofs and make sure we're not getting any errors."

While to many, independent publishing—especially zine publishing—seems like ephemeral if not inconse-

quential work, Niedzviecki and Schultz are steadfast in their belief of the importance of *Broken Pencil* and the self-produced art that it champions.

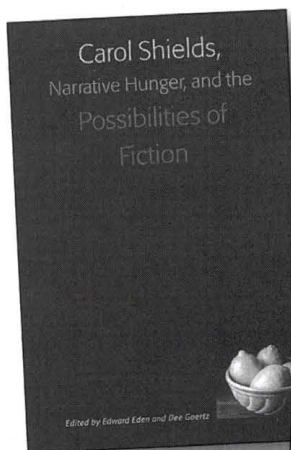
"I think indie culture and D.I.Y. become more and more important as technology makes more cultural production possible, but distribution and corporate systems shrink our cultural options and our ability to communicate to each other," Niedzviecki says. "So *B.P.* will continue to be there to bridge the gap between the explosion of creators and the inability of those creators to find an audience for their work because cultural channels are controlled by corporate systems."

Although the Pocket Canon series is her first foray into the zine world, Schultz understands the itch to publish all too well. She's also no stranger to the obstacles faced by a person with big ideas. "A couple of years ago I wanted to start a real magazine," Schultz says, "but I was right out of the Centennial publishing program, and I was just really naive. There's only so much work one can do. But I think you have to sort of be naive. I mean, I'm sure that when

Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction

Edited by Edward Eden and Dee Goertz

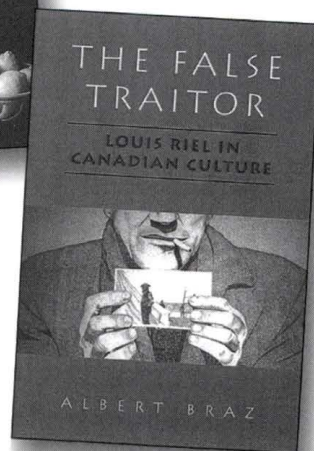
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Hal started *Broken Pencil* he didn't know how much work it would be, either. But I wasn't able to sustain the energy.

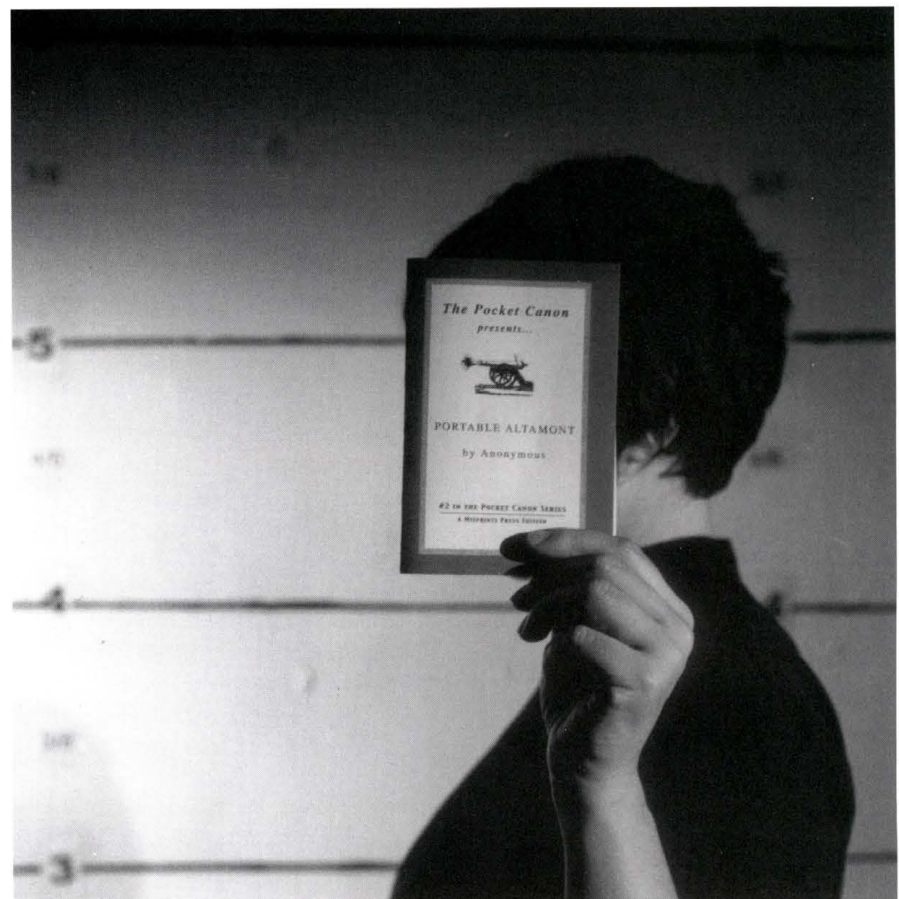
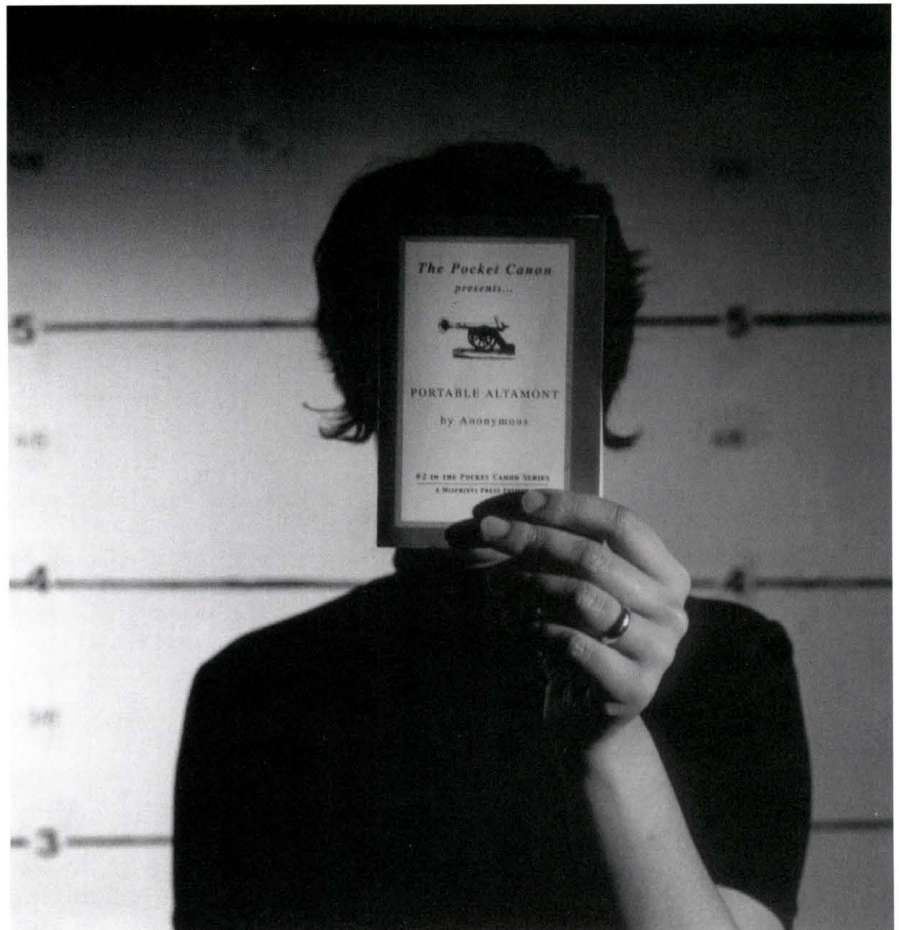
"It was going to be called *SheBANG*, and it was going to be a girlie magazine, in all senses. It was gonna be a pin-up magazine, but it was also going to be a feminist chickie space. It could've been a fantastic project and I think it still could, but I don't have the energy and I don't have the resources, either. It's not like I have start-up funds, especially if anybody, even one person, is gonna get paid. . . . We went to *Canzine* a few years back [to promote the project]. We were a bit ahead of ourselves. We probably should have had a magazine ready before we started promoting it."

It's a little ironic that Schultz once attempted to generate hype prior to finishing a project. These days, the work seems more important to her than the buzz surrounding it. At times, she seems hesitant to discuss her work and shy when complimented on it. Her lack of arrogance is charming, however, which surely brings more people to her side. Schultz seems to enjoy a sense of community, whether it's among old university friends, fellow writers, or just people from her neighbourhood. Even the waitress in her local restaurant knows her by name. When confronted with the fact that the anonymous publisher of the *Pocket Canon* is growing less anonymous by the day, colour rises in Schultz's cheeks, just as it does when asked what she likes to do beyond work and drinking with friends.

"I flirt," she says, looking surprised that she made such an admission.

No doubt, people flirt back. ♪

Joanne Huffa lives between Portugal Village and Rua Agores. She is a writer, music freak, lover of zines, and the review editor of Chart magazine, and was once known for her presence at a Toronto alternative weekly. She writes short stories, but feels more comfortable talking about other people. Black Coffee Night is currently available from Insomniac Press. Pocket Canons are available in Toronto at Book City, Pages, and This Ain't the Rosedale Library, and on-line at www.24bourarcade.com. Broken Pencil (www.brokenpencil.com) is available at fine newsstands and bookstores coast to coast.



GIRL CONFESSES

FICTION BY CAMILLA GIBB

On Sundays after church, they greeted each other with outstretched arms, sometimes kisses, and patted me on the head as they joked, "Graziano, your little Angelina is growing like a broad bean! She'll be taller than you by the time she's in first grade."

I smiled back at them, but I wasn't interested in their chatter, their mouths moving somewhere at the end of long legs. Instead, I stared, mesmerized by their hairy knuckles, their pointy, shined-for-Sunday shoes, and the holes in the smoke rings that curled from their lips. When I wasn't busy staring, I was sticking my tongue in the froth of the *caffè latte* Babbo had ordered for me. He would look at me fondly; he didn't care that I wasn't a boy—I was his first-born and he was proud to have me by his side. This was our Sunday ritual.

Every Sunday morning I sat in front of the mirror of my mother's vanity and winced as she combed my hair back, pulling it into a tight ponytail on top of my head that spilled over like a fountain. "Don't fidget, *cara*," she would chirp in her Topo Gigio voice as I wriggled in my chair.

"But why can't you make me look like Jackie O. or Patty Duke?" I pleaded with her. I wanted to be all coiffed and pouffy and North American, like the women on the covers of the fashion magazines in the hair salon. She and my father cut and styled hair for a living. My father did classic cuts and haircuts for dead people in caskets, while my mother was decidedly more experimental—incorporating Styrofoam balls into big hair at every opportunity. They had taken their diplomas together after arriving here in the new country, and had proudly opened Graziano's Unisex Hair Salon in 1958, two years before I was born.

All the other men in the community worked in the steel plant or drove vans with names like "LUIGI'S ROOFING AND FIXING" on the sides. They teased my

father because he had a woman's job, although secretly they were jealous that he got to spend his days running his hands through the hair of other men's wives. And I knew other men's wives enjoyed his hands because I heard them moaning "Oh, Graziano" while I loitered in the shop after school, flipping through the pictures in film magazines.

"Stop fussing, Angelina," my mother would say, wrenching my dark hair backward with a brush. "I can't make you look like them because you're Italian," she said, as if that made any sense. But "because you're Italian" would have to suffice as an explanation for the reason I was "different" for years to come.

After my hair was glued into place and the pink frilly dress pulled down over my long green-bean body, Daddy and I and Nonna left for church. Ma had gone to the early mass, so we left her in the kitchen rolling out dough the length of the table, humming Frank Sinatra songs to herself. In the cathedral, the priest would blather on in Latin, which no one understood, and I would stare up at the fresco of the people burning in hell.

Then the angels would begin to sing—my father among them. Nonna and I always sat together on the same splintery pew where I could have a good view of Babbo singing in the choir. I watched the men's mouths move, their lips wrapping around sacred hymns, but it was Daddy alone who sung the love songs of angels to me from above. I would mouth the words back to him: "Oh, *spiritus sanctus*. Oh, Daddy, you are so handsome. Perhaps after dinner you will let me stand on your feet and waltz me around the living room."

It was right there on the splintery pew one particular Sunday that I determined I would be a famous singer when I grew up. And every Sunday after that I affirmed it through prayer: "Oh, *spiritus sanctus*. I will be a famous singer one day. Please, God, give food to the poor

people, and take care of Nonno in heaven, and let me be a famous singer one day. Not an angel singing from above, but a rock 'n' roll star right here on earth. I will not be Italian any more. I will be international. I will tell my public that I was born in the middle of the ocean and I will be loved."

In real life, outside my family, I wasn't loved. I was smelly. I was olive-oil lipped with pungent garlic emanating from dark skin. I was a girl with a grease-stained bagged lunch of veal scaloppine and grilled eggplant. I was a wop. I didn't know what that was, but I knew Paolo in my class was one, too, because they called him that. And my parents. And Paolo's parents. We were all wops, which seemed to mean people who raised pigeons and grew arugula in the backyard, and ate lasagna for dinner instead of Kraft Dinner or Hamburger Helper. I *wanted* to eat Kraft Dinner and Chef Boyardee and Cheez Whiz on Wonder Bread but my mother wouldn't let me.

Wop was different.

It didn't occur to me until much later that wop wasn't the only difference. Even in the wop world, my family was different: my dad had a woman's job, and I was the only girl in the mafioso espresso bar on Sundays after church. I watched cigarette butts fall to the floor and pointy toes grind them into the linoleum. Some of the other men brought their teenage sons, all pimply, with erratic facial hair, and gave them cigarettes and said, "Don't tell your mother," as the boys coughed their way through smoke they weren't enjoying but wanted to.

I asked Babbo why I couldn't have a cigarette, too.

"Because you're too young," was his first explanation. "Because you're a girl," was his second.

So some things were as they were because I was Italian, and the rest were as they were because I was a girl. And then, of course, I grew up some more

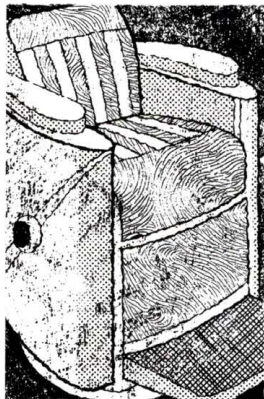


and discovered that it was even more complicated. Seems that's the way of life—just when you think you've got it sorted out, there's yet another layer of complication.

I was happier after sixth grade, when I found myself surrounded by other wop girls in the School of Our Heavenly Father on Pendulum Road. We traded grease-stained brown bags. Stuffed olives for melanzana, biscotti for tiramisù. Competed for who could hike her green kilt up higher, closest to the crotch of her white-cotton-to-her-navel underwear. Sometimes I won, and for that, I would get respect from the other girls and glaring admonition from the sisters. Occasionally, I would get a detention. I told my parents that I had to stay late for basketball practice. I wasn't *exactly* on the basketball team, but when I could, I would observe the senior girls' practice.

I loved to watch long, tall movements across the floor. I loved to watch girls get mad at each other—so much so that I would follow them into the shower room once the mock game was over to tell the captain, Mary Catherine, that she had been absolutely right, that was a foul, but I would lose my words and my nerve as soon as she stripped her uniform off. She kept talking to me through her nakedness, though, telling me it was nice to have a fan club, that boys at mixed schools had cheerleaders, and that being at an all-girls school was a real drag.

I didn't really think it was such a drag, and I didn't really mind detention either, because it was presided over by Sister Faith Camilleri, who appeared to be a hard and crusty woman but actually had a soft amaretto interior. Only I could see it, though, taste it on my tongue. The other girls called her Sister Fart the Crustacean and said she was better off taking a vow of chastity than ever attempting anything involving sex. She could be hard as a ruler, but I took to saving her the clementines from my lunch, and slowly she melted—not exactly like butter, more like a candle; a slow drip, spreading her wax in a big



puddle before me, talking to me about scripture and asking me why I couldn't be just a little more virtuous when I clearly had a brain in my body.

I couldn't say, "But then I couldn't offer you oranges and sit with you after school pretending to do my homework while I write song lyrics and doodle lewd pictures in my notebook." I couldn't say, "Because I like this vice more than virtue. Because I like to have my skirt hiked up to my crotch and feel the wind flirt against my bare thighs, and

wear tie-dyed vests over the white shirt my mother has laboriously starched and ironed. Because I'm going to be a famous rock 'n' roll star." I wanted to ask her whether she understood that "freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," but I knew I couldn't dare; I knew she thought she was free.

I believed I was, but I didn't understand why the rest of the world wasn't. So that's why I picked

IF I WERE AN EGGPLANT

If I were an eggplant,
I would not be writing this.
Instead, I would be a politician
or a lawyer.
Considering the current state of politics,
I ask you,
who wouldn't vote for an eggplant?

If I were an eggplant,
I would go to the theatre
and watch movies all day long,
because no one ever asks an eggplant
to pay for a ticket
and even if they did,
where would I keep my money?

If I were an eggplant,
I'd probably be upset
a lot of the time
because people would often mistake me
for a zucchini.

Wouldn't that upset you?

abortion as the topic for my presentation in Grade 9 religious ethics class. Our teacher, Sister Phillipa Neary, an acne-faced, nervous novice who'd clearly committed herself to virginity long before she'd ever known about the concept, was not impressed.

I was all for proposing the provocative: Why shouldn't a woman have a choice? What if she had been raped? A deathly hush overtook the room. I wanted to shout, "Come on, girls! This is a debate!" but no one appeared to be rising to the bait.

I thought I'd liven it up then with some dramatic framing; I was, after all, going to be a famous media personality. It was a beautiful spring day, warm sun pouring through the window—I would just move me and my provocative stance to the sympathetic backdrop and let them forget my words if they refused to understand them. I'd dazzle them with my fabulous stage presence instead.

In front of the window, I gesticulated wildly. "Choice," I said, inviting them, *any of them*, to respond. "What does it mean to have a choice? Are we free

If I were an eggplant,
I would sneak into adult stores
(you know the kind I'm talking about)
and I would disguise myself
as a dildo
and be taken home
as a housewife's plaything.

If I were an eggplant,
I would free my people from oppression
and march to the capital,
demanding equality for all vegetables no matter the colour of their skin,
their religious beliefs,
or their ability to go well with poultry.

If I were an eggplant,
I would do the right thing
and divide myself
to feed families
who, in turn,
would look beyond
my purplish appearance
and appreciate eggplants
for more than their ability
to dream of greatness.

—TREVOR DAVIS

agents? Do we possess free will? How do we reconcile free will with a Catholic lifestyle?"

Deadly silence greeted me in return. "But what if a woman is raped?!" I shouted, flailing my arms and, suddenly—God alone knows how—smacking the Virgin Mary in the midriff and sending her flying, backward out the open window. Horror struck the room. I turned in shock to watch our holy sister fly out into the gorgeousness of the spring day. Silently, I wished her a good flight. "Good for you, Mary, stuck for centuries in that fixed mask, finally tasting the sweet salt of dangerous wind on your lips." Oh, but then I heard the crash. Mary's freedom was short-lived. I'd forgotten that she was only a lady made out of clay, and she smashed into a gazillion pieces, courtesy of me and my solo pro-choice rally.

Oops.

Every day for the next three months ended in detention. Every day I told Sister Faith that it hadn't been intentional. I mean, I fundamentally believed—and I still do—that we all

should be able to make our own choices, and that means without pressure, or having someone else literally push us over the edge. And I meant it. Even the Virgin Mary. I think Sister Faith understood me the first time I said it, but she nevertheless let me natter on and absolve myself in the way that I thought I had to. I blessed her for that. And then I asked Father-through-the-little-latticed-window for forgiveness for my sinful thoughts about what she looked like in her underwear.

But then the end of the year came, and Sister Big Cheese, the principal of the school, said, "I suggest you find yourself a place in another school for next September." I suppose this was diplomatic. I mean, she spoke my language, said it in such a way as to imply that I had a *choice* about where I did Grade 10. But really, I think it's because my father was doing her—I mean her hair. He did all the sisters—and God knows even a nun is vain enough to want a good coif under her habit.

Whatever the reason, she didn't tell my parents, and I was grateful for that. I seized the opportunity for freedom,

but not without a provocative jab. "I've been looking for mixed-sex opportunities," I said, thanking her. "My parents will be *so* glad that you've suggested this."

And secretly they were. My father had been worrying about my fascination with women's basketball and hoping that I'd become an adolescent girl he had reasons to ground. He wanted to yell at me about boys calling at ten o'clock at night and pulling up on the curb in their fathers' Monte Carlos, and in an all-girls Catholic school, I wasn't giving him much opportunity. Unfortunately, though, mixed school gave him more reasons for the concerns he didn't want and fewer reasons for the concerns that he, as patriarch, wanted. The girls here wore what they wanted to—or at least they did so during the day, before changing behind trees back into the conservative clothes they'd left their houses wearing in the morning.

I brought up the topic of the pill not to horrify my parents but to say without saying that I had a crush on Mary Lennox, who was on the pill, and I wanted to be just like her. My father seized upon this and threatened to get out his belt. My mother calmed him down and said, "Angelina, good Catholic girls are not supposed to know what sex is." Secretly, though, my father was conflicted by the fact that he was pleased that I had some interest in what girls did with boys. I was only interested in prevention, though. Preventing Mary from doing anything with a boy.

I continued going to confession because I did not think girls should have sex with boys. I confessed that I had sinned that week by drinking chocolate milk one night after dinner. Father-through-the-little-latticed-window congratulated me. Told me I was a good girl. Asked me whether I had ever thought of the sisterhood. I told him, proudly, that I'd been thinking of little else for years. ☩

Camilla Gibb lives somewhere between the Annex and Rosedale. She is the author of The Petty Details of So-and-so's Life (Doubleday, 2002) and Mouthing the Words (Pedlar, 1999), which won the 2000 Toronto Book Award.

PICKERS

FICTION BY ANIA SZADO

Lily's here at the Goodwill again, feeling the coats.

Whenever Lily sees an old coat, her eyes fill with colour and notions: mauve bouclé wool, three-quarter raglan sleeves, purple buttons like thick plastic bowls.

I've seen her in the aisles with six coats piled up. I've scooted around from behind the counter to roll extra shopping carts her way.

"Here you go. I'm Gina," I've tried to say, but before I could get it out she'd already be shifting stuff from one cart to the other, deciding which coats to buy.

But you know what always happens. She has to take them all. If she didn't save them, who would?

I'm not Lily's mom, though I'm sure old enough. And I'm not exactly who she'd pick for a friend. She's got that thick red hair and those skinny eyebrows. She's young and beautiful, and I'm . . . well, you know.

But I found out some stuff about Lily a while back.

Eric was new as the manager then. His very first day he asked us about pickers—customers who resell the merchandise to vintage stores.

"We got 'em," I said. "All the Goodwills do. Weren't for pickers, I don't think this store would last a week."

Eric scowled. "Weed them out," he said. "This isn't the place for free-enterprising freeloaders. Tell them to come back when they're unemployed. Tell them to shop at the Bay. They should be donating, not picking us clean and leaving the junk behind."

Right away I thought of Lily.

All week I worked in the back room, sorting donations, stuffing my hands into pockets. I threw out a mountain of Kleenex. I found some underwear in the pocket of a pair of jeans, and I threw that out, too.

But I kept all the change I found, and by Friday morning I had enough.

My plan was to invite Lily out for

coffee so I could warn her about this picker stuff. I wasn't sure she was one, but how else to explain all the coats she bought?

She came in around three. In a few minutes, I swung an extra cart her way, and she gave me a little smile. Nice, you know, but not the kind of smile you can start talking to.

When she finally came to the counter I said, "That's four times twelve dollars is forty-eight dollars."

I'd planned to look her in the eye and suggest coffee, but her eyes weren't having nothing to do with mine. They were all over her old coats. Her face was melty.

She wasn't going out with me. She was going home to bond with her clothes.

What could I do? With a quick glance at Eric's back, I locked the cash and followed Lily out.

It was lucky I had that money, because Lily and I took a bus. I sat staring at her from a few seats back.

Then she rang the bell. On the sidewalk, she bounced the bags in her arms like they were lumpy children.

I followed along until she turned at a boxy duplex, then I huffed up.

"Excuse me? I'm Gina. From the Goodwill. Can I talk to you? Because you buy so many coats. You do. And the manager is going to make you stop."

Lily froze.

"Maybe it'll be O.K.," I said, "but I need you to tell me about it. Why you're buying the coats."

That's how it happened. How I was invited into Lily's coat-swaddled apartment.

Outerwear was everywhere. Covering the couch, spread on the floor, laid out as if for burial on the kitchen table.

I picked up a mohair overcoat and stroked its silky bristles. "It's like a brush cut," I said.

I guess I said the right thing.

Lily spoke. "Isn't mohair wonderful? I used to think it was prickly and too

open in its weave. But then I realized that it isn't some sloppy, thistly thing. It's just old. People get warts and bumps. Their skin loosens up and sprouts things. That's what mohair's going through."

I got a tingle then, right at the back of my neck. I pointed to a scarlet A-line number with glossy cherry lining. "What's this one?"

She crossed her legs. "It's a bit sleazy, isn't it? I almost didn't buy it. But then I thought, is it right to leave it there, squeezed in with all those nylon bomber jackets?"

I clucked.

She prodded what looked like tangerine upholstery fabric, stiff as plastic. "Or this one. Can you believe someone made a coat out of this material? Is that fair—to deliberately create a failure? It must be thirty years old and never worn. Someone has to notice these things. The world doesn't care, you know."

I remembered seeing that coat in the back room and almost pitching it into the Dumpster. I muttered, "Guess you're no picker," but Lily didn't hear, and I was glad.

I didn't get fired from the Goodwill that day. I told Eric I was trailing a picker. That cheered him up.

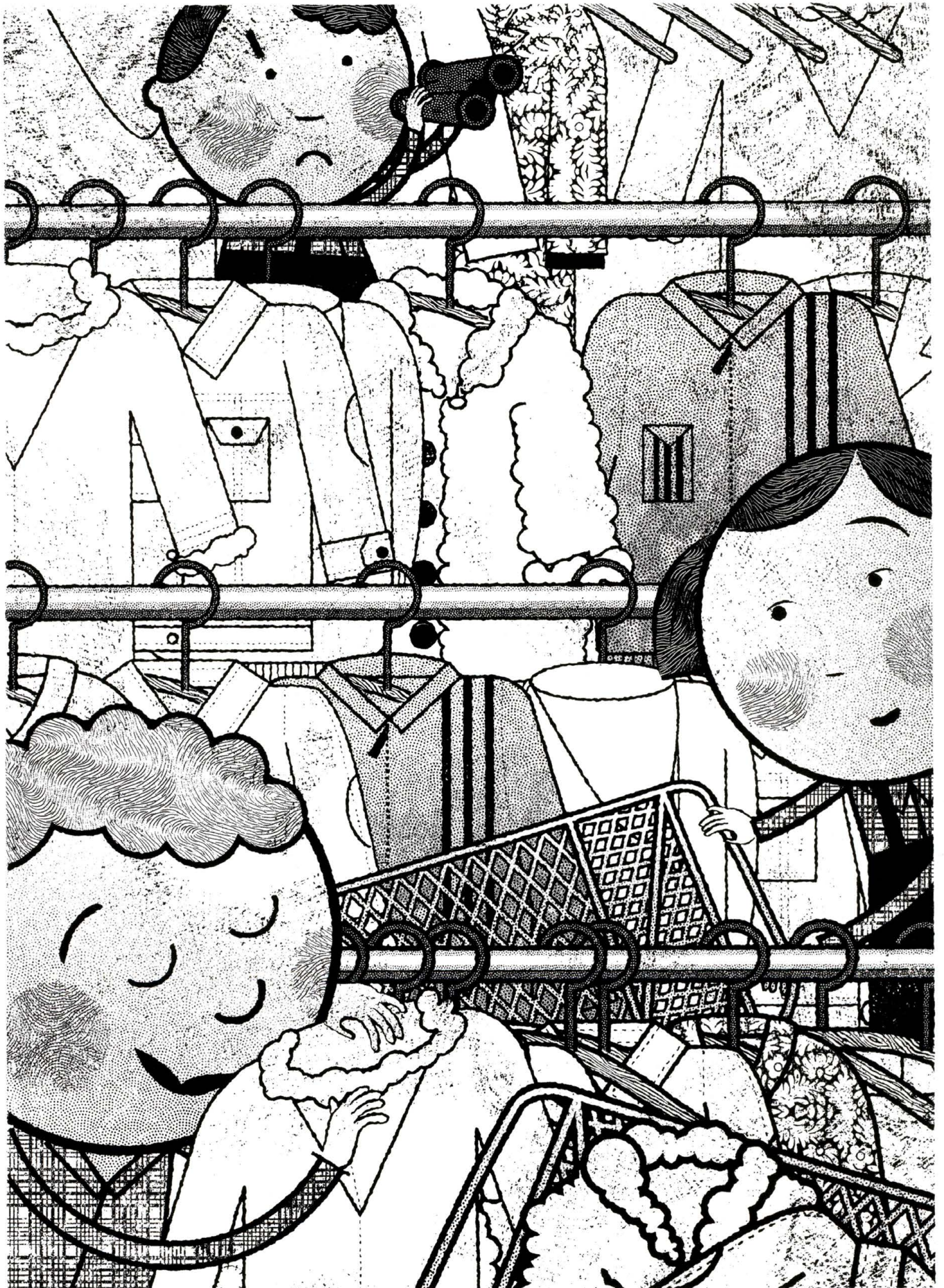
I warned Lily about piling up her carts. I told her to be discreet. Come more often, buy one or two pieces at a time. Come on weekends; I work weekends.

Now there aren't so many needy coats on the racks, anyway.

It's not that I buy into the whole thing. I'm not a saviour. I still chuck out the odd coat. But I've also got my little pile set aside.

Not for me, not because I feel for them, but for Lily. Because it makes her happy. ☽

*Ania Szado lives in Riverdale. Her first novel, *Beginning of Was*, will be published by Penguin in the spring of 2004.*



DO YOU HAVE ANY BEE STORIES?

MY NAME IS KALEB, AND I HAVE TWO.

THE FIRST BEE STORY I HAVE IS THE ONE ABOUT THE GREYHOUND PUPPIES.

A WHILE BACK, I WAS WALKING THROUGH THE PARK, AND THERE WAS A WOMAN COMING TOWARD ME WALKING THESE TWO REALLY CUTE GREYHOUND PUPPY DOGS.

I COULDN'T HELP BUT SMILE (I LOVE DOGS) 'CAUSE THESE PUPPIES WERE REALLY, REALLY CUTE.

I REALLY LOVE DOGS.

AS THE PUPPIES GOT CLOSER, I BECAME MESMERIZED.

IT WAS SUCH A NICE SURPRISE TO GO FOR A STROLL ON A SUNNY AFTERNOON AND SEE THESE AMAZING LITTLE DOGS JUST TROTTING ALONG, TONGUES WAGGING, THEIR LITTLE BUG EYES GLAZED OVER WITH INEXPERIENCE.

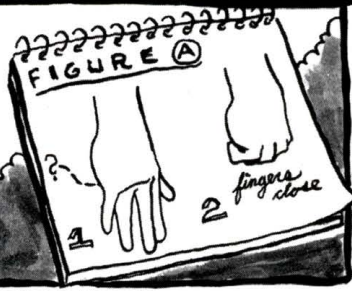
MAN, IT WAS REALLY AWESOME

THEY WERE AMAZING.

MY MIND WAS TOTALLY BLOCKING OUT EVERYTHING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD EXCEPT FOR THESE LITTLE DOGGIES. IT WAS THEN, JUST AS THEY PASSED ME, THAT I FELT A SMALL OBJECT TOUCH MY HAND. MY PALM, REALLY. INVOLUNTARILY MY FINGERS CLOSED AROUND THIS THING, TRAPPING IT.



BUT I WASN'T DONE LOOKING AT THE PUPPIES.



I WATCHED THEM WALK FURTHER AND FURTHER AWAY FROM ME UNTIL THEY HAD DESCENDED DOWN THE SAME HILL I HAD JUST CLIMBED.

AFTER THEY DISAPPEARED FROM SIGHT, I TURNED TO CONTINUE MY WALK.

JUST THEN, I REALIZED THAT MY HAND WAS STILL CLOSED AROUND THE MYSTERY OBJECT.



I OPENED MY HAND AND A BEE FLEW OUT.

A BEE.

YEAH. YOU TELL ME.

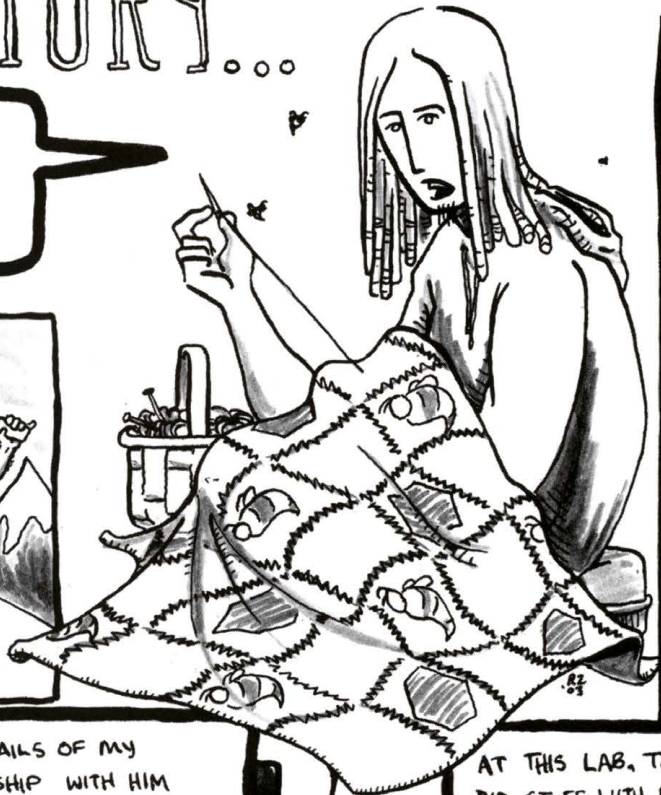


THE OTHER BEE STORY

ISN'T SO MUCH A STORY...

IT'S MORE LIKE JUST A COUPLE OF LINES THAT DESCRIBE THIS GUY I KNEW.

WHAT A CHARACTER.



I KNEW THIS GUY, THIS CRAZY GUY, WHO WORKED IN A LABORATORY SOMEWHERE.



THE DETAILS OF MY RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM ARE HAZY, AND UNIMPORTANT. BUT HE DID WORK IN SOME LAB AS A SCIENTIST, OR AN ASSISTANT, OR SOMETHING.



AT THIS LAB, THEY DID STUFF WITH BEES.



THEY TESTED THEM, I THINK. FOR WHAT, I DON'T KNOW.



I REALLY WISH I COULD REMEMBER WHAT KIND OF WORK THIS GUY DID...



EITHER WAY, HE WAS A LITTLE BIT WEIRD, WHICH I DO REMEMBER ABOUT HIM, AND HE HAD SOME BEES AT HIS HOUSE AS PETS.



NOW I HAVE TO INTERRUPT MYSELF FOR JUST A MOMENT AND ASK THIS: YOU KNOW HOW SOMETIMES THEY FREEZE INSECTS? AND THEN WHEN THEY'RE THAWED OUT, THEY COME BACK TO LIFE?

WELL THAT'S NOT A RUMOUR, THAT'S SCIENCE FACT. I KNOW, BECAUSE I'VE SEEN IT FOR MYSELF.



(BACK TO THE STORY.)

SO THIS GUY USED TO PUT HIS BEES IN THE FREEZER FOR A COUPLE OF MONTHS.

THEN, HE'D TAKE THEM OUT TO SEE IF THEY COULD STILL, UH... BE ALIVE.

BUT! BEFORE HE LET THEM COMPLETELY THAW, HE DID SOMETHING WHICH YOU MIGHT FIND PECULIAR.



HE, UH... HE WOULD FASTEN A STRING AROUND THEIR TINY LITTLE NECKS SO THAT WHEN THEY WERE TOTALLY THAWED OUT (AND ALIVE AGAIN) HE COULD TAKE THEM FOR "WANKS."

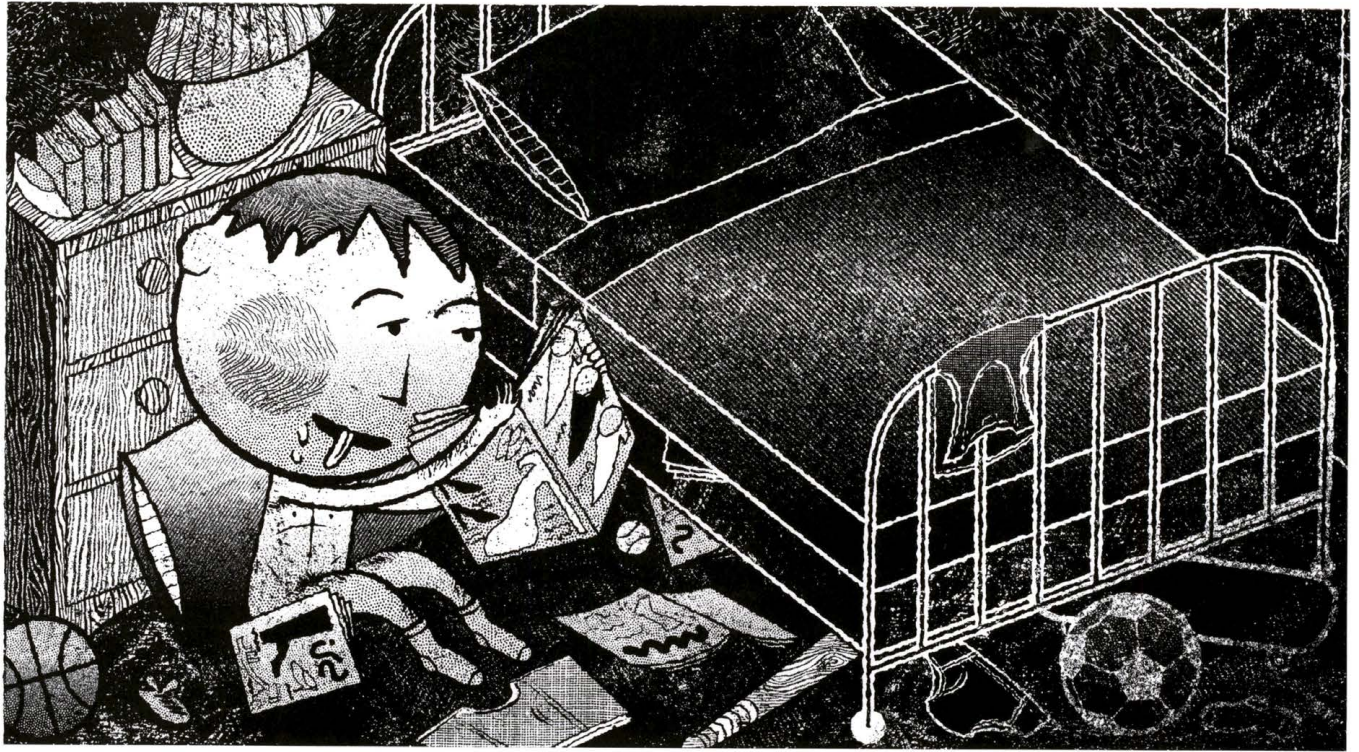


AND IT WORKED.

WEIRD, HUH?

(BROUGHT TO YOU BY: RAJO ZAKIC)





SNATCHER

FICTION BY DIANNE SCOTT

I climb the library stairs and stop abruptly, my right leg hitched over the next step like a comma. I stand there, entranced. I know I will replay this scene in bed tonight, trying to recapture its exquisiteness, staring at the cracks in my ceiling while I slap my cock into remembrance.

"Excuse me."

A body presses by mine and I shove my knapsack over on the step to let the woman pass. I watch the broad denimed ass of the woman climb the stairs, her grey ponytail bouncing at each step. She turns left at the top of the stairs and disappears.

I return to the view. There are twelve desks on the second floor of the library that overlook the staircase between the first and second floor. Nailed to the back of each carrel is a plywood modesty panel that begins eight inches off the floor. From my position halfway up the staircase, I can see the enclosed back of the desks and a dirty gold-beige carpet spotted with balled tissues and the hunched backs of gum wrappers. I scan

the bottom of the desks, ignoring the scuffed leather Nikes and the scruffy men's loafers and look for the flesh that I had seen moments before. I spy the edge of a black nylon purse, the tan crease of a leather knapsack, and feet.

Beautiful feet.

My nails dig into my palms . . . the girls, the women, are so exquisite, as if they have decided to embrace this last breath of summer by exposing their feet to the sun, the air, the world.

Under a desk at the far end, two strands of hemp string emerge from a pair of sandals, the rope criss-crossing a smooth brown calf to tie in a bow under the knee, as if her leg were a gift. Two desks over I see the side profile of one baby-blue platform sandal, the toenails splashing artery red against the pastel innocence, pointing me to the adjacent desk where ankles cross demurely above flat-soled thongs, the white leather noosed around the big toe like an embrace, the skin lightly freckled with September sun. To the right I spy black wedge sandals pressed tightly together

like soldiers in formation, the green vine of a tattoo curling gently around an ankle.

So much flesh—a cancan of heels, toes, tender nubs, and arches. Calling to me. Inviting my glance. Asking me. Demanding me.

To admire. To cherish. To adore. And I do. I do. I do.

I can't remember the last time I was so intoxicated.

At the beginning, all of it was intoxicating. Five years ago, all it would take was a stroll through a mall and I would have to hurry back home and jump in the shower, sometimes coming three times in an hour, remembering the inviting smoothness of a cream Italian slingback or the pebbled allure of a snakeskin pump. And the women. Sashaying up and down the narrow aisles of the shoe store, arching their backs as they peered at the angled mirrors on the floor, pivoting in front of me, for me, as I watched their feet hungrily from behind a rack of last season's

boots, my face partially hidden by the blue nylon collar of my Centennial Secondary School jacket.

I would save the department store flyers and stash them under my mattress until my parents finished watching Lloyd Robertson and the house assumed its night stillness. I would slide my face against the image of a Browns strappy dress shoe, the butter-soft blackness like a mask against the shocking innocence of white, taking little licks with my tongue, leaving damp teeth marks on the newsprint. Or I'd place the inked outline of a Kenneth Cole thigh-high boot against my cock and crinkle my way to orgasm, leaving oily smudges on my cock and sheets, sometimes having to wash whole words and phrases off my dick.

I even bought a pair of women's shoes once. Red stilettos. I kept tissue balled inside so that when I took a shoe to bed with me, I could ejaculate right into the crinkly stuffing. I would grab them, my bookend lovers, and roll them over my chest, my legs, my groin, rubbing them like breasts until I felt one loving me back.

Today seeing so much flesh, so much splendour, washes me with my adolescent fervour, my cock wagging awake, snaking up my underwear in applause. The view of the naked feet is so unexpected, so pure, without the distraction of torso or face, that I can't tear myself away. Patrons ascend and descend the stairs in clots of friends or trios of mothers herding children while I move up and down the steps, drowning in the intimacy of the exposed feet.

I pause on the landing in the middle of the staircase and look around. No one is watching. I turn my back to the desks, lean into the stair railing, and scan the bulletin board in front of me while my hips begin to rock back and forth. I slide my hand over my crotch, my fingernails scratching lightly against my zipper, and lean into my hand.

There is a sign: "BE ON ALERT—WATCH YOUR BELONGINGS." And below it: "PURSES AND WALLETS HAVE BEEN STOLEN FROM THIS LIBRARY." I think about the feet by these purses: innocent, guileless witnesses. I move my fingertips down an inch or so. "GIVE BLOOD.

IT'S IN YOU TO GIVE." The computer clip art of a nurse and donor begins to blur, the red of the man's tie bleeding into the metal blue of his suit as I try to contain my grunts. On Thursday night is a talk about "MANAGING GESTATIONAL DIABETES."

I am about to come. I squat, trying to contain myself.

"Hey."

I look up, trying to locate the voice.

"What are you doing?"

I move my hand away from my crotch. I crouch on the landing, unmoving, while inside my head, photo images explode before my eyes: my parents' twenty-fifth anniversary, my sister receiving the Grade 11 English award, playing ping-pong in the common room with my arts and science buddies.

"You O.K.?"

I focus on the gunmetal grey of the security guy's pants. I follow the grey, my neck arching painfully as I finally reach the round face, pouchy and wrinkled but calm. The brown eyes under the wispy balding crown observe me.

Probably his son is not masturbating in a library, I think. He's probably in

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medical school, making his dad proud, validating his father's toil in a string of underpaid and tedious jobs.

He continues to observe. I know what I look like. My face is flushed, sweating, my eyes dilated—the look I've watched on my own face as I masturbate in front of the bathroom mirror.

"Not really." I am relieved when I hear my own voice coughing out a reply.

"Do you need help?"

"I think I'll be O.K."

"Are you sure?"

I nod. "I'm . . . uh . . . I'm . . . diabetic."

"Maybe I should call an ambulance."

He reaches for the black leather holster on his hip that contains his walkie-talkie.

"No." I straighten up, reaching for the railing for support.

"You going to pass out?"

I shake my head.

"You need to sit down."

He helps me to my feet. I read the name on the pin on his lapel as I walk beside him, slightly crouching, covering my diminishing penis. Ali Murugiah.

Ali. My god. My saviour.

We walk down the steps to the first floor and Ali settles me in a chair near the magazines. I smile weakly at him while he walks away, still looking at me. I wait there until he is out of view, then go to the men's room and wash my face, standing bent over the basin for a long time with the water dripping from my chin. I plan to leave quickly through the library's front doors.

As I exit the bathroom and pass by the bottom of the stairs, I pause to shift my knapsack onto my back, feeling the heavy weight of my university textbooks. I think about my comparative religions test tomorrow. I have over two hundred pages of readings to get through and I can study better at the library than I can at home. All I need to do is find a stuffy carrel on the second floor and get down to work.

I shuffle up the stairs slowly, not wanting to be drawn in, trying to resist, yet achingly arched toward them. I'm almost at the top of the stairs when I see, like a poppy peeking through the snow, one courageous display of abandon.

I lick my lips, my tongue sticking on the chapped edge of my mouth. The silver and red strands of her sandal lie in a band across the top of her foot like gos-

samer netting, like gift wrapping. Her feet look so soft, so smooth, so touchable, the velvet toes calling me to pay homage to them, to give them the gift of my touch, my lips, my tongue. Her toes are spread slightly apart in a come-hither pose, nails painted a frosted pearl, so cool yet so inviting, asking to be kissed, to be warmed by my mouth.

The feet shift away from view. All I can see is the sole of one shoe, half in shadow.

"Please come out. Pretty please." I stare at the bottom of her shoe and the edge of flesh extending over the side, admiring the curve of foot, the oval heel suggesting internal health, the hint of baby toe. She shifts. Now I can see her entire foot, its lovely outline, pink and smooth and alive, the second toe long and curvy, an omen of fertility.

I walk across the step until I am three inches from the back of her desk, my head level with the carpeted floor.

Her feet provoke, daring me to touch, to love, to risk. The delicate bones surrounded by flesh, encased in silver, like fairy-tale feet.

I slide my right hand along the carpet under the desk, feeling my way past wads of discarded paper, until I feel something smooth and soft and square. Her purse. My fingers shuffle sideways until I feel the heel of her sandal.

She doesn't move.

I can tell she feels my presence. She is absorbing it. Embracing it.

I open my hand and place it lightly over the entire sole. I shudder with the intensity of our communion.

I feel something plunk down on my shoulder at the same time I feel a kick from the sandalled foot. I crouch there half kneeling, like Christ on his way to Calvary, my hand grabbing the lip of the carpet for support.

"What are you doing?" Ali, the security guard, says as his hand clamps my shoulder.

"Not feeling well," I mumble, trying to slither out from under his grasp.

"I remember." The skin around Ali's brown eyes wrinkles into a web of suspicion. Still staring at me, he grabs his walkie-talkie and calls loudly on the radio for security backup. I feel curious glances from three girls walking down the stairs.

"What are you doing?" I ask, straightening up.

SECRET ORIGINS

my stepsister made elaborate runaway maps
the street names misspelled or unfamiliar
far from my realm of movement
i would tell her they were wrong. (they were.)

i skipped rope
alone
one end tied to the tree at the base of our driveway.
i had to stop to let people walk by
eyes cast low at sidewalk cracks.
lonely only city kid.
i never strayed very far.

i played with dolls.
i gave them boyfriends, parties, jobs.
i was always bored.

i watched TV with hooded lids
suspicious
of unreliable narrators,
lawful good heroes.

i didn't want to get my hopes up.

—STEPHANIE EARP

"You know," he says, looking over my shoulder, moving slightly to the right to block my way down the stairs.

After a pause, I sputter, "No. No . . . I don't."

His walkie-talkie crackles again. Ali picks it up and says, "I think I got the purse snatcher. Call it in."

A young man in an identical security suit appears at the top of the stairs. Ali motions with his head to the desk beside us on the stairwell and his co-worker disappears. A minute later he reappears with two young Asian women. Out of the corner of my eye I see the library lights glint off the silver threads in the shoes of the girl on the left. She looks at me and looks away. The security guard talks with her and the friend puts her arm around her waist. After a minute, the two women walk away from the top of the staircase, faces averted, hands clutching their purses. The guard loudly pounds down the stairs to where the two of us are standing. Several people watch us from the bottom of the stairs.

"No," I say as each man takes a posi-

tion on either side of me.

Ali asks, "Did you call the police?"

The young guard nods.

"I didn't . . .," I begin to say. The young security guard looks at me and my voice falters.

"You didn't what?" With his crewcut he looks like he should be in the army. Or the police.

"I . . . I didn't steal anything," I manage.

"So what were you doing underneath the desk?" he asks, his slate-grey eyes returning to mine. "She felt you."

"I was . . . just . . .," my voice trails into a whisper.

He stares at me and then looks away. We walk like a trinity down the stairs, Ali's profile blocking the feet from my lingering view, and I hear a siren wail in the distance. ▽

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CONTRIBUTORS

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PITCHED

FICTION BY JULIE WILSON

This part I hated more than anything. Twice a week, the two camps crossed a clearing to play coed baseball—as if trees could keep them apart the rest of the time—and, twice a week, I spent the afternoon sitting on a bench. In front of me, two boys busied themselves shoving fist over sweaty fist, until one finally cupped the nub of the bat and threw it down as if they'd been caught circle jerking. Each liked to win, but not at the cost of having to touch another boy. I didn't turn up expecting to play, even though I could; everyone knew that. This wasn't about sportsmanship. It was an unspoken ritual—breaking the camps off into couples, the victor getting first choice.

I looked down at the ground, at the tan lines from my tube socks. Our counsellor had insisted I take them off for no good reason and now I was stuck waiting for the ridges to fill in. I think it was payback for getting me again this summer. Only now she was a full counsellor, so she could get away with stupid stuff like this. She made me uncomfortable, always watching me. I don't know who she thought she was. At fifteen, she wasn't much older than the rest of us. She'd been giving me trouble since I turned up this year—probably thought I'd never come back. She had the thick calves of a field-hockey player and walked like her pad was too big. I glanced toward the fence and there she was, wincing in the sun, arms tight across her chest like she was trying to hold something down. The boys laughed when she ran the bases. "Black eyes," they'd snicker. Sometimes I'd find her practising by herself, ball after ball soaring into the long grass. I bet she figured if she hit them far enough she wouldn't have to run as much.

The girl next to me elbowed my side, gesturing to the boys. The captain's finger hooked, beckoning me across the infield. I shuffled forward, shoving my hands deep into the pockets of my jean shorts. If I'd known that mine would be

the first name to spill from his lips I would have feigned illness, stayed in my pup tent, and played with the painted rock my secret friend gave me. I would have reread her letters again and again, waited for her to come looking—the girl who let me wash her back, kiss her breasts, rub her middle over her pants.

Her name got called next, and we both crossed the gravel to opposite sides of home plate. I reluctantly took his side, the top of his head barely reaching my shoulder. The diamond was alive with whispers and giggles. I scanned the line of the opposing team. She was smirking, poking a finger in and out of the "O" she made with her hand. So that was it. I was his girlfriend. I felt an urge to comb my hair, change into a skirt, finally get my period—something to mark the occasion. How could this keep happening? I thought they got it. They shouldn't let us mix.

Last summer, it was Shawn Crawley and John Thomson. They fought behind the mess hall to decide who would date me—John won. Later, Nancy Williams backed him into a tree and stuck her tongue in his mouth, so that was that. I didn't know about any of it until Nancy told me. That was O.K., I liked Nancy. But when I hit a line drive into her nose no one believed it was an accident. The ambulance wailed toward us, kicking up dusty patches of outfield, and I leaned over to apologize, my heart breaking.

"You fucking lezzie!" she hissed.

The counsellor-in-training broke through the lines and planted her stubby hands on my shoulders. Her belt buckle pressed into my spine, she ushered me out of the crowd, almost gleeful.

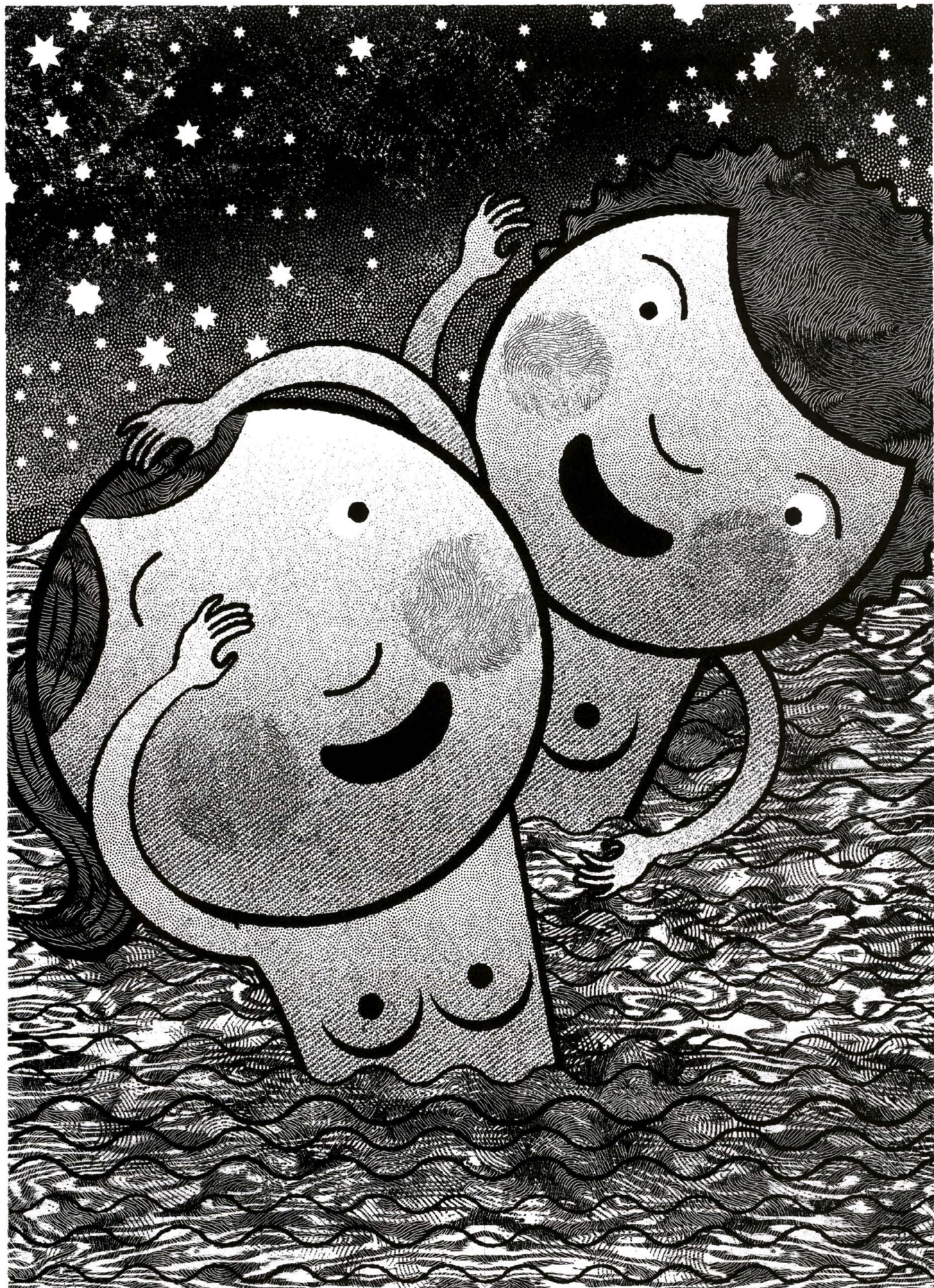
"Get ready to pack your things."

The camp's nurse turned away from her lunch to find me standing in her doorway. She looked me up and down and rolled a chair over for me to sit in. We agreed that I would not be reprimanded for the unfortunate injury that halted Nancy's budding career as a catalogue model, nor sent home, but there

was the question of the other "incident." A word had been uttered—did I understand its meaning? In the background, the C.I.T. levelled me, her gaze a mixture of anger and fear. I looked down at the fleecy fur of my legs, bleached by the sun but still standing at attention in the slight breeze. The other girls were smooth and glistened with the cocoa tans of bottled blonds from the commercials. I listened politely and nodded in all the appropriate places. Whatever it took to relieve her of my troubles. I wasn't one of the girls, but I didn't want to be a boy either, this I knew. I was something other and it would take some explaining. I just wasn't going to confess to anything then and there with the door closed. I was excused from all future baseball games and ended out the summer packing the tent I never left.

This year was different, though—the difference being the girl mocking me now from the opponent's team. My grasp was thin, but she was happy to pass the time with me. She had been teaching me things I couldn't have imagined, things that made me quiver like a rushing tap. In the end, she left me wrecked, half a person, but the truth was the closest I'd come to kissing a girl was a game of sleeper Truth or Dare, but that didn't count because it was supposed to be gross—a double dare. This girl wanted to be alone with me. She hadn't so much as said it, but I think we were in love.

Something caught my eye then, floating from across the emptying field, its path deliberate. My punishment for becoming popular. Someone had made an obscene wish that I should be humiliated, a wish that landed splat in my lap. Fucking dandelions. I pretended not to notice the seeds spilling one by one, going off like fireworks against my crotch. Then it happened. My captain leaned over and plucked the fuzz, holding it to his lips and blowing it back onto the air. The boys howled. "Ohh! He took her flower!"



I ran, tears streaming harder than the time I fell on the kitchen linoleum, rewarded with a handsome nose. Such a handsome young man, they'd say. Such a handsome young *woman*, I'd correct. Light footsteps echoed mine, catching up just as I hurried to zip my tent. She fumbled in beside me and knelt close, soaking up my sobs with butterfly kisses.

At dusk, we snuck down the hill to the water, wading close to the shore to a secret cove where we took turns floating one another. I steadied her on fingertips, stroking the curve of her spine, back and forth across the pits of her knees, while she closed her eyes to the visions that dazed her.

"If I was a boy . . .," she started.

"If I was a boy . . ."

I thought hard. These moments couldn't be wasted.

"If I was a boy, I'd date Kathleen Turner."

She opened one eye a crack.

"Really? She's so husky. Huh. Who else?"

She settled her arm around my hip, hanging her thumb off the waist of my bathing suit.



"Jessica Lange?"

"Ooh, that's a good one!"

It was such a relief when she approved.

"You go," I said.

"I don't *want* to be a boy."

She spread her legs to wrap about my waist and we sank until only our chins grazed the surface, bubbling bay water.

"If you *were* a boy . . . you'd want to date me."

She wiggled free from her straps, helping me from mine.

"Spin me."

We whirled quietly against the current, the echoes of pots and scraped plates bouncing around us. The chill of water curled against the rise and fall of our baby breasts. Her face changed.

"But I wouldn't date you."

She pushed off, retreating with long backstrokes while I struggled to keep afloat, waxing circles. I waited until she'd gathered her clothes before starting back to shore, the fresh waters salted and stung by the likes of me.

She came hard from behind, laughing, and turned me on my back with such force that my breath caught. I was suspended, perhaps lost, in the impossible image of her straddling my leg—bull rushed. I lay frozen on the sand, looking up into the void of her silhouette, surrounded by the pink wisps of evening sky. She bent forward, her drenched locks hanging around my face, closing us in like a curtain, and began to rock. I could only hear the

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FOLDING CLOTHES

pulling wooden pegs off stiff
white T-shirts
everything smells clean and cheap somehow
like bleach
and my face is hot because I believe
everyone passing is looking

knows

I wash my clothing in the bathtub
and yours too

I fold clothing to the
afternoon news
lottery numbers and car wrecks

knows

I scrub and brush and polish
to *Nashville Skyline* and later
Nighthawks at the Diner and I'm hungry for
breakfast all day

knows

I have seven dollars for groceries and three hours
to look pretty and cook dinner
set out dishes
make the bed and forget that you said
all of the things we will do when we have money and
time
and remember to run my fingers
along the window sills and tend to the potted
geraniums

—EVIE CHRISTIE

sound of her breathing. I was too afraid to move. I was dizzy from her sighs—soured meatloaf and ketchup, butter-scotch topping. I forced my eyes wide in the darkness, searching for traces of an expression, catching only the glisten of spit at the corner of her mouth. I rested my hands on her thighs, rubbing to the folds of her groin and slightly beyond, the creases of her bathing suit soft like the silken underbelly of an old dog. Her legs tightened around mine and she settled like a pet that has learned to trust you.

She sat upright and the peripheries spilled in. Above, two branches creaked, bark splitting like the thin skin of

a blistered ankle. Below, the shore swirled, lapping, the gentle pull of a receding undertow lulling me into a trance. She continued to glide, pulling me to her chest in a hug, her arms slung tight around my neck, her chin digging into my shoulder. My back burned. Lying down had been much easier on my part, but I didn't know yet what my part was. I focused on the glitter riding the crest, slapping up against the dock, canoes and kayaks knocking gently over bob and swirl. In the distance, a game of dodge ball, the stings of rubber welting against bare thighs.

I couldn't sit like this much longer. She was getting heavy. My toes twitched

as a cramp started to build, and my foot pitched suddenly. I must have hurt her because she whimpered, falling in a slump, shaking. I held her close, cautioning that people would hear us, while I tried to think of all the ways I could tell her I was sorry. Her hair razed my lips and I drew a strand to my mouth, sucking it dry like a face cloth—strawberry mist. I held her close and cautioned that people would hear us. She snapped up her straps and grabbed her sweatshirt, scaling the slope, a wrinkled lip hanging in a scowl. "Don't talk to me."

The next night the titters around the site confirmed it—I had been dumped. Decided by the sudden and somewhat desperate affections of a girl I knew only too well.

"I never wanted him!" I yelled from inside my tent.

I threw up in the woods and made my way along the treeline into a private clearing and the unfixed shadows of a small campfire. I had heard of this place. She was there with him, huddled by his side on a stump. Some boyfriend. A few other boys circled the edges looking for attention.

"You're not supposed to be here," I announced, but no one budged. She scoffed into his sweater and let him touch her cheek.

Someone passed a pen and pad and I watched as the others scribbled their messages. Some inked out just a few words, a repeated request to get lucky. Others wrote the full page, front and back. One by one, they floated up, ashen, disappearing out of the flames, presumably into the heavens. It occurred to me to throw in a blank sheet in protest, but upon seeing her offer him the freshly stripped skin of her marshmallow I made my plea. *Take me.*

I ducked back into the forest and watched a moment longer until a sporadic beam and rush of snapping twigs sent us all running back to our tents. I snagged a dangling thread on my way through the doorway and a spike came loose outside. The roof sagged, exhausted but grateful. And again she was on me, thigh pushing up the split, sticky tongue swirling mine. She pushed the hem of my sweater up to kiss my belly, her fingers tracing a path

of shivers up my side. Rolling my shorts down, she hushed:

Big X,
Little dot.
Question mark to mark the spot.
Tight squeeze,
Ocean breeze,
Crack the egg,
And now you freeze.

I awoke to find her snuggled beside me, stroking my back, reading from a small journal.

"I was alone, running down a country road at night. The wind tore at my coat and swept my hair back from my forehead in a mass of whirling untidiness. The trees by the roadside bent with its force and dipped and swayed as though they, like me, felt deep within them an indescribable joy, a reckless freedom. The yellow moon, obscured, now shining brightly, always changing, never still. I paused, and watching it suddenly felt the mediocrity of my petty trials. It was good to be alive."

I took the book from her and held it under my pillow.

"What? It was nice. Your grandmother's handwriting is so neat. Not all messy like yours."

She straddled my back and began to trace figures.

I loved her touch but hated feeling so thankful.

"It feels like you're cutting through water," I whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I dunno . . . Just does."

I pulled the journal out and flipped through the pages.

"I think she sounds kind of sad. Like she's going crazy or something."

"Crazy? I don't think so. She says she's happy."

She sketched big letters, my stomach flipping every time she brushed my neck.

"No, she said it was good to be alive." She wasn't going to get it.

She finished with a flourish. Elephant shoes! I reached back to squeeze her thigh. *Oh, I do love you too.*

She stretched out over the full length of my back and put her hands beneath me, down the front of my shorts, past the band of my underwear.

"Besides, isn't feeling alive the same thing as being happy?"

I forgot to respond. The bubble pad wheezed under us and she pressed her-

THERE ARE NO SOLID GOLD DANCERS ANY MORE

On Liberty Street, I think, "There are no Solid Gold Dancers any more." Then I get hassled for change outside the textile merchant's store I've been thrown out of for dropping ribbon spools and "making a fine mess, thank you very much."

I start to walk and think, "Who can think of love when it's hard getting enough out of being alive?" Nature tries to cover me like velvet, make everything seem more romantic, but I gotta learn to ignore that shit.

Internet cafés, homeless guy, psychic, dollar-store music, and used condom swimming in puke: all within one block. And *thank God* that, in the end, technology will save us all, make us all the same.

All I need is one late-night glass of habit and I'll be through, in just one year I'll be through with sweating red wine from my armpits, all my tense pores. Just one year, that's all it'll take and then I'll be through with this street, this town.

Red light. No cars coming, and who cares, I'm fucking walking, I'm like an immigrant here, anyways. What I do, what I've done, will make a mighty fine epitaph: "LIVED, LAUGHED, DIED." You'll be able to look up my name in a dictionary and it'll have a definition, a lexicon, a history. Hmm.

I'm counting my time down as I walk one last time north on Liberty, picking at my cracked lip, my hands colder than when I was born, in my pocket is opium for the people—*thank God* I always could make 'em laugh—oh, and a song as catchy as any Irving Berlin could compose:

I wanted to try, oh
how I wanted to say
to you so many things

that it's funny, wishing on a star
how stupid I think we all are

how little it all means
in the wider scope of things

and now, how better off it seems
to just have me and my little dreams

—ADRIENNE WEISS

self against me to reach deeper than ever before, resting her mouth on my ear.

"Boys put their things in there."

She dissolved into a fit of giggles, tweaking my nipple.

"Get off!"

I bucked my hips, knocking her into the side of the tent.

"Careful, it's wet!"

She scrambled to right herself.

I rolled onto my back in a huff, legs crossed tight, glaring at the dip in the ceiling, embarrassed.

"I didn't say you could do that . . ."

"Do what? Geez, sor-eee."

She really wasn't ever going to get it.

She dragged her nails along the inside wall and then across my chest, tiny beads rising.

"What does *that* feel like?"

I slapped her hand and turned on my tummy, burying my face.

I heard her wrestle her bottoms away from her feet.

"I'll let you put your finger in my belly button."

I drew my elbows up under me, cupping my chest to punish her.

"Why would I want to do that?!"

"Cause it feels good."

She lifted her shirt over her head and puckered, waiting.

I lowered my head, watching my arms pimple at the thought of being inside her. *Break*.

She rearranged me so that we were sitting entwined in each other's laps and started to tickle the thin grin of her belly.

"There's a place—if I breathe just right—it's like touching my spine. It buzzes."

"Jesus . . ."

We'd never been like this, face to face and naked. She scared me. She took my hand and licked the pads of my fingers, taking one into her mouth and sucking it until I could feel the back of her throat—coarse sponge, swollen. She circled my finger around the opening, sliding it in and out until it began to draw on its own. All I could think about was the dirt under my nails and how I must be hurting her. Just as quickly she forced me out and pushed my finger up under my nose.

"What the fuck?! It smells!"

I tried to back into the corner of the tent, but not before she stuck her finger two knuckles deep inside me. I sat stunned, pot-belly heaving, as if I'd been stabbed. The ceiling collapsed over us.

I didn't say you could do that.

Suddenly, the tent was crowded, and the counsellor shamed us with her flashlight, dragging us into the night.

"That is enough, girls! You will both go *straight* to sleep! And you . . ."

She cuffed me by my neck and hovered for the longest time, her grip choking.

"You will be leaving us tomorrow." ▽

Julie Wilson lives in the Danforth area. She is currently at work on a book of short stories about growing up in a queer little world as a queer little girl. This is her first published work.

TADDLE CREEK RECOMMENDS

Taddle Creek does not publish book reviews. However, the following books were recently written by contributors to the magazine and are, thus, highly recommended. (● indicates books containing work originally published in Taddle Creek.)

● *Hey, Crumbling Balcony!*, by Stuart Ross (ECW, 2003; \$24.95). Available at last in one collection: the best of Stuart Ross! All of Ross's hits from his three ECW books (*Razovsky at Peace*, *Farmer Gloomy's New Hybrid*, *The Inspiration Cha-Cha*), along with long-lost works from twenty-five years of self-published chapbooks, postcards, and leaflets. Plus—twenty-eight all-new bonus poems, never before available! Order today! . . . But seriously—if anyone deserves a retrospective anthology, it's Stuart Ross. The lengthy afterword detailing Ross's career from his teen years to the present day is worth the cover price alone and, on top of that, a quarter of this collection is new work, making it, as they say, a "must-have."

Dislocations in Crystal, by Michael Boughn (Coach House, 2003; \$16.95). That *Dislocations in Crystal* is sprinkled with quotations from the likes of William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Samuel Beckett suggests that Michael Boughn is a poet rooted in the traditional. While this is true to a large degree, he also isn't afraid to reference such modern topics as Mr. Potato Head, *Star Trek*, or Wal-Mart. The result is a thought-provoking, deeply intense read that can alternate between the serious and the humorous (or sometimes both at once).

The Original Canadian City Dweller's Almanac, by Hal Niedzviecki and Darren Wershler-Henry (Viking, 2002; \$25). As the title suggests, *The Original Canadian City Dweller's Almanac* is a guidebook to the hip and happening in Canada's biggest cities, from *Adbusters* to Moses Znaimer. Learn the difference between Saint John and St. John's, find out whatever happened to your favourite *Degrassi* kid, and discover how using an A.T.M. can potentially kill you. Best of all, you can read an interview with *Taddle Creek's* own Alfred Holden.

● *Please*, by Peter Darbyshire (Raincoast, 2002; \$21.95). *Please* examines the day-to-day minutia of a young man's lackadaisical life. Obsessed with the loss of his ex-wife to the point that his days become almost dreamlike, he encounters many absurd people and situations. Peter Darbyshire's skillful writing, however, keeps the story believable, without losing any of its sharpness or humour.

Scouts are Cancelled, by John Stiles (Insomniac, 2002; \$9.95). John Stiles's look at life in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley might be considered offensive if it wasn't so dead-on. An examination of the life of a farm community corrupted by a greedy developer, Stiles's poems are presented in a regional dialect that is humorous yet frighteningly accurate. While the full effect of Stiles's poems can only be felt by hearing him read in his equally unique manner, *Scouts are Cancelled* remains thoroughly enjoyable.

● *Excessive Love Prostheses*, by Margaret Christakos (Coach House, 2002; \$16.95). The jacket copy for *Excessive Love Prostheses* claims the book "takes the confessional lyric poem and runs it through Kathy Acker's Cuisinart," which turns out to be a very accurate statement. Margaret Christakos's fourth collection of poems runs the stylistic gamut from fiction-formatted pieces to traditional poems, from bizarre lists to works that consist of only a single letter. It's also one of the most visually attractive books of poetry in years.

ALBUMS

Small Town Murder Scene, by FemBots (Independent, 2002; \$14). If Harry Smith had made his field recordings of folk-roots murder ballads sometime in the future rather than the past, it may have sounded like *Small Town Murder Scene*. The FemBots' sophomore disc is a twisted, jerry-rigged assemblage of deconstructed country blues, built upon a guitar and keyboard base. From the opening screams of what sounds like an analogue robot trapped in a toy shop, to the fading of the "Outro," these songs are strung together with an assortment of hisses, ticks, sirens, clipped phone messages, and other found-sound fuckery.

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