

# TADDLE CREEK

A black and white photograph of a woman with dark hair pulled back, sitting on a bed. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved button-down shirt and dark pants. She is looking back over her right shoulder towards the camera with a neutral expression. To her left is a dark wooden bedside table. On the table sits a vintage rotary telephone with a coiled cord extending upwards. A lamp with a dark shade is partially visible on the left edge of the table. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

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# TADDLE CREEK

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*Unknown, circa 1963. Photographer unknown.*

# ODE TO THE EN DASH

Pity the poor en dash. Never has a piece of punctuation been so noble and yet so misunderstood at the same time. Back in the day, when typesetters ruled magazine design, the en dash had power; the en dash had cachet. Since the dawn of desktop publishing, however, it seems anyone who can click a mouse fancies himself a designer. Unfortunately, these would-be art directors know little of the history of typography and even less in the ways of properly typesetting a page. Ironically, they also know very little about their own computer keyboard and its nuances. As a result, age-old practices, such as the use of the en dash, a piece of punctuation not granted its own special key, have fallen by the wayside.

For those readers unfamiliar with the en, it is the middle brother in a trio of dashes. On the short end of the spectrum is the oft-taken-for-granted hyphen. Slightly shorter than a mathematical minus sign, the hyphen's two main functions are to join compound words (such as "co-op") and to separate characters, such as in the case of phone numbers, serial numbers, and the like. It is also used as a divider when breaking a word over two lines of type.

On the opposite end is the oh-so-flexible em dash (also known simply as "the dash"). The em dash's use is not dissimilar to that of parentheses or the comma. It is often found in pairs—setting off a parenthetical statement, such as this—or on its own, indicating a sudden break in a sentence.

In between these two powerhouses of punctuation, longer than the hyphen but shorter than the em, is the en dash, also with two main functions. First and foremost, the en dash is used to express a range, usually a numerical one (such as "pages 4–10" or "January 12–22,"), the idea being that, where a hyphen is used to separate numbers, an en dash is used to join them. But it is the en dash's second use that is truly fascinating. The en dash may also be used in place of a hyphen to connect a prefix or suffix to an open compound ("post–Second World War" or

"New York–based"), to connect two open compounds ("the Bloor Street–Danforth Avenue subway line"), or to connect two hyphenated compounds ("a quasi-good–quasi-evil plan").

"Oh, but why be so fussy?" you ask. "Couldn't you just use a hyphen and be done with it?" Yes, you could. But you'd be wrong. And it's exactly that kind of lazy thinking that has nearly pushed the en dash into extinction. This summer, an article in the *New York Times* revealed that the editors of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, one of North America's great style bibles, briefly flirted with the idea of removing the en dash from its recently published fifteenth edition. Thankfully, as the *Times* reported, "the idea was met with strong opposition." Granted, few would blink an eye were you to use a hyphen in a number range, or even when connecting a prefix to an open compound—in fact, it's done every day. But with such a strong, interesting piece of punctuation so easily at your grammatical disposal (Ctrl+Num+- on the PC; Option+- on the Mac), good Lord, why would you want to?

Sadly, not all magazines are created equal. Today, it is mainly the highbrow magazines such as the *New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* that continue to fight the good fight on behalf of the en dash. And yet, there is a glimmer of hope in the knowledge that these magazines are also joined in battle by the somewhat lower-brow *Entertainment Weekly*. And what of *Taddle Creek*? As you may have guessed, *Taddle Creek* is a strong supporter of the en dash, and uses it often—eleven times in this very issue, in fact. (It has recently even convinced a sizable Canadian bi-weekly to follow suit.) And while the magazine does not blacklist any authors unversed in proper en dash usage, it happily encourages and educates them in the ways of this superb piece of punctuation, and will continue to do so until the en dash regains the respect it once held in the world of typography.

*Vive le en dash!* ✪

# TADDLE CREEK

... is not an eleven-letter word.

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CONAN TOBIAS

Guest Editors  
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MARY-LOU ZEITOUN

Copy Editors  
KEVIN CONNOLLY, LUBA KREKHOVETSKY

Proof Reader  
JOYCE BYRNE

Photo Editor  
PHILLIP SMITH

Illustrations  
IAN PHILLIPS

Technical Assistance  
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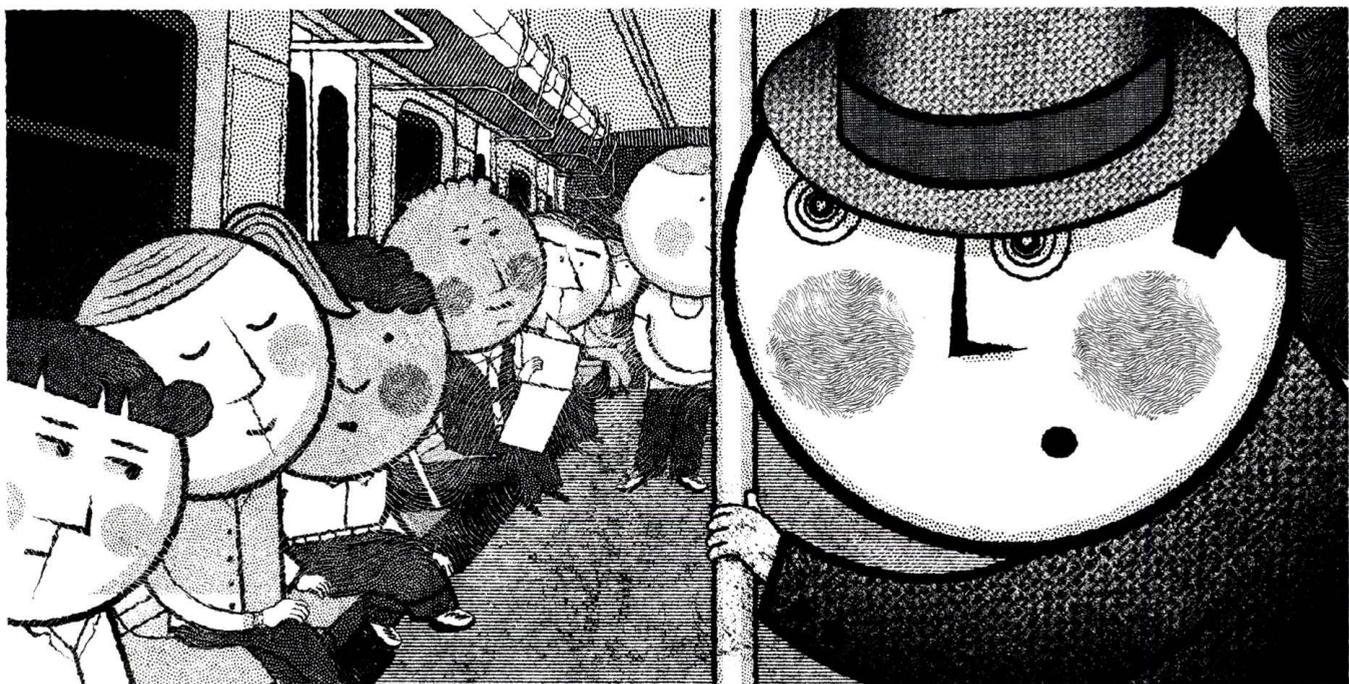
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## DAILY ROUTINE

FICTION BY JAY PINKERTON

My day starts like any other. I get up in the same bed. I walk to the kitchen and eat the same breakfast I've had every day for years: three-day-old toast. No stories to tell there. It is intensely dry, and when chewed for fifteen minutes with five cups of water, is just what I need to get the day started.

I have a shower, using the same soap I always use: Dove. Nothing beats that. I am also, as always, careful not to wash anything that doesn't actually reek of perspiration. This way, I don't waste soap unnecessarily. Some people might use soap like it was going out of style, but I think what they gain in cleanliness they lose in thrift. Not this customer—I wash what smells. It is this same principle that has allowed me to use the same bar of soap for eight months.

But again, this is nothing new—from every angle a perfectly ordinary Monday morning. I make sure to buy a large coffee from the Scandinavian woman on the street outside my building, as I've done every day like clockwork for five years. She explains to me, as she has explained patiently every day for five years, that, in fact, she is a vagrant, and

that I am once again trying to wrestle her tip cup from her. I apologize for the honest error, tip my hat in my regular fashion, and walk into the coffee shop behind her, which I deduce is a far superior place for purchasing real coffee. I buy my usual large mocha java, place a dollar fifty in exact change on the table, and, as always, have an entire cup of scalding coffee thrown in my face.

I caper about, clutching my smoking head in the usual way. The woman behind the counter reiterates for the thousandth time in as many days that I am her ex-husband, and will continue to get my coffee in the most inconvenient way possible if I continue to forget my child-support payments. I fumble with apologies and ask for a cool, damp cloth.

"Honestly, Phil," says the woman claiming to be my ex-wife (whose name escapes me at the moment). "You're so persistent. I don't want to have to dash hot coffee in your face every day. But you just keep coming back. It's like you're daring me to."

"No need to offer explanations, you," I say. "I only need to know two things."

"What, Phil?"

"What's your *name*, beautiful, and what are you doing Saturday night?"

One further steaming cup of coffee to the eyes later, I am thrown bodily onto the sidewalk, right on schedule. Jogging briskly to the subway depot, I pause only briefly to purchase my daily paper, look at the front cover, and scream.

"Good Lord!" I yell. "The year 2003? Where am I? What planet is this?"

No answer is forthcoming. I'm in a bit of a hurry anyway, and so, whistling as I go, I'm off down the stairs to catch the 8:05, right on time, just like always.

Once off the subway, I note with whimsy that my face is no longer steaming. In the open air again, the skin-bubbling subsides, and I manage to crack a small smile. Ignoring the blistering this causes, I walk down the bustling sidewalk to my place of business. On the way, I can't help but notice the most adorable puppy in the window of a pet shop: a cute golden retriever with paws pressed up against the glass.

"What the hey, you only live once," I say aloud. "Am I right, Miss?" I say, snaking out my arm with predatory lightning speed and clamping down

with intense pressure on the shoulder of a woman walking by.

8:28 A.M.—Mace in the eyes. You could set your watch by it, and I do just that. Then I claw my way blindly into the pet shop and purchase that very doggie in the window, marvelling at my own impetuous, carefree mood this morning. After this, it is off to work.

Just like any other morning, it is one brief elevator ride to the twenty-fifth floor. I complain loudly and often about the horrible smell radiating from one of the passengers. For my own amusement, I point accusing fingers at a small, heavy-set woman in a floral-print dress, arching my eyebrow accusingly as I expose her, Sherlock Holmes-like, as the farting party. As always, someone quickly deduces that the smell is coming from my own buttocks, and my smokescreen is discovered before the ninth floor is reached. These folk are savvy, and I tell them as much as I step off the elevator. My compliment is greeted with silence.

“Why don’t you all go fuck yourselves, then?” I cheerfully suggest. I toy briefly with the idea of launching the puppy at the unsuspecting passengers as the doors close. Ultimately I do not, though it would certainly serve them right if I had.

I push for ten minutes on the entrance to my place of work, getting more frustrated as the minutes pass and my attempts become more frantic. Eventually, and near tears, I solve the mystery, laugh knowingly, and pull on

the door instead. Once inside, I am greeted by the lobby receptionist and, as always, I ignore her.

In my office, I drop the puppy on a pile of puppies, some dead, some merely starving, behind my door. Messages? You bet! I check them all, careful to write every one down. Today, as with any other day, I am to be as busy as busy can be. For instance, I am to appear in court seven times for various infractions, one of which involves, according to the answering machine, exposing myself in a Wal-Mart franchise.

But first, a meeting. I rush to the main briefing room, where I am greeted with my first surprise of the day.

Now, my life is built on routine—so you can only imagine my shock in discovering the presence of a face I don’t recognize. Our new vice-president of marketing: a large and menacing Kodiak bear. I know this because he is introduced to me as such, and takes a playful swipe at my face before I put up my briefcase up as a crude shield.

“Who hired this animal? I won’t work with bears!” I say.

My boss, blanching, asks to speak to me in the hallway, and I comply.

“Phil,” he says, offering me his finger to suck on, which I gladly accept. “I know this must come as a bit of a shock, but we have quotas to fill. The Kodiak bear stays, Phil.”

“For Christ’s sake, Bill,” I say, removing his finger from my mouth. “That thing must weigh a ton. Did you see those teeth?”

“My name’s Clarence, Phil,” he corrects me. “And I can’t have you acting up over this. I’m already looking at a P.R. nightmare. Somebody tried to bait the bear with a trout this morning in the staff room. It put its paw through his torso and pulled out his heart with one claw.”

“Really?” I say in disbelief. “But its paws looked so adorable.”

“See, that’s what I said.”

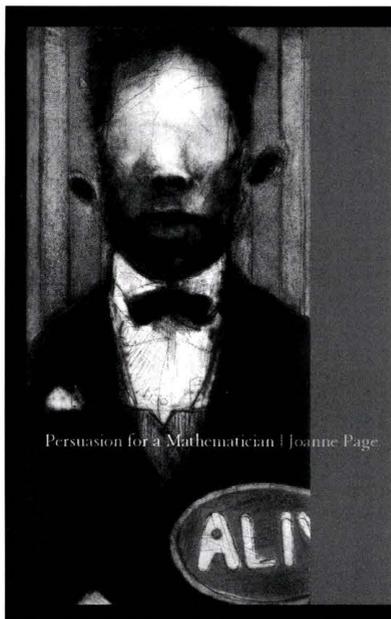
“I understand. I’ll do what I can. But I promise nothing!” I put his finger back in my mouth and scowl at him.

“That’s all I ask, Phil,” he says. “Let’s get back to the meeting.”

We open the door to carnage. Blood coats the walls like salty paint, and the Kodiak bear stands on the boardroom table, its snout in the hollowed skull of Jeff Simmons from accounting, contrary to every rule of office etiquette in the book.

“Let’s get down to brass tacks, you filthy goddamn animal,” I say, briefcase safely in front of my face, and Clarence throws bags full of fresh salmon to distract the meat-gorged beast while I get on with my first-quarter presentation, because I’m a professional, my friend—a man of order. I step over the corpses and get down to some brass tacks. ♪

*Jay Pinkerton lives in downtown Toronto. 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.jaypinkerton.com](http://www.jaypinkerton.com).*



Persuasion for a Mathematician | Joanne Page

## Persuasion for a Mathematician

by Joanne Page

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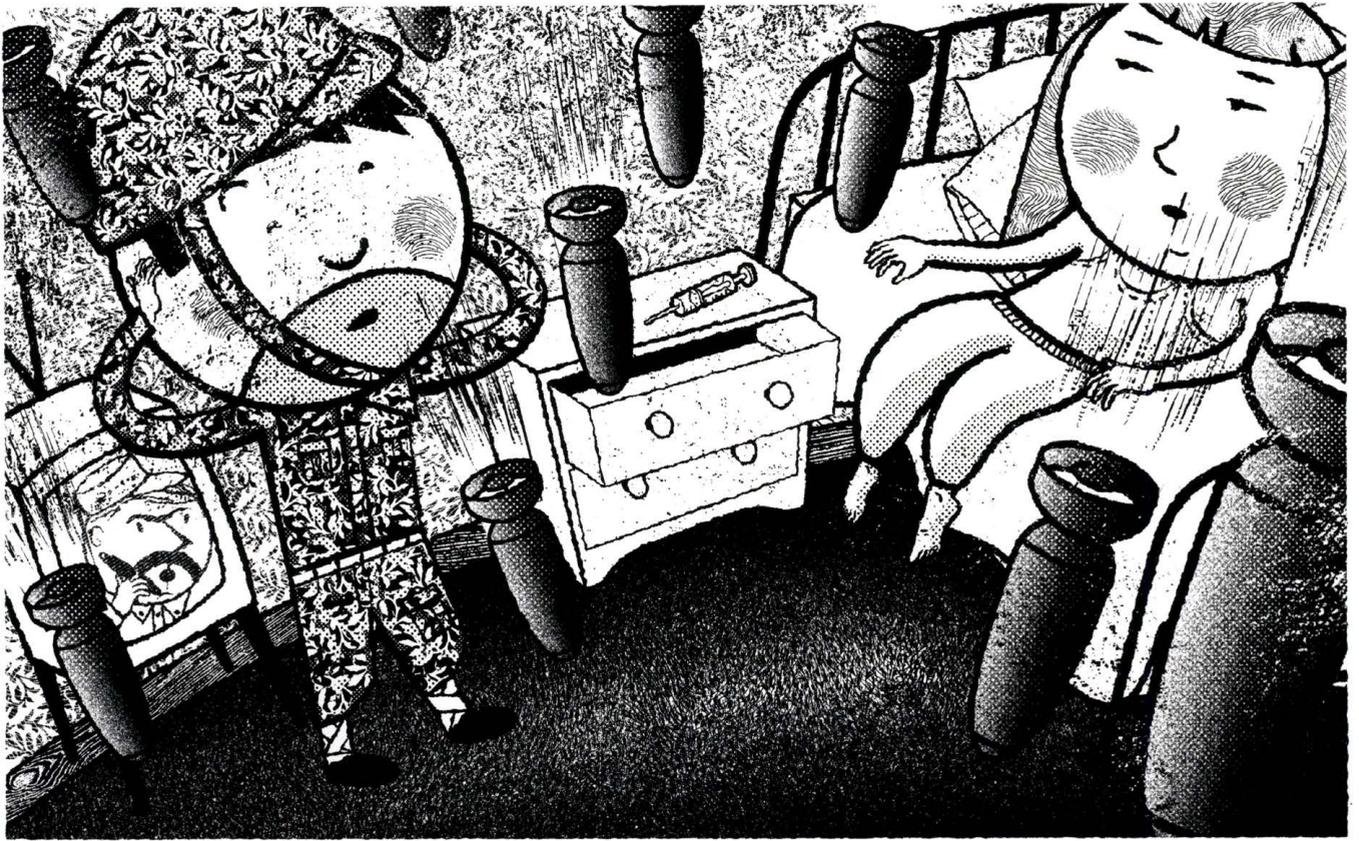
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## A TIME I NEVER KNEW

FICTION BY ALEXANDRA LEGGAT

In the lobby of the Falcon Motel, a young Spanish woman leans on the front desk, snapping her bubble gum. Her dirt-brown hair rolls with curls. An orange-and-red scarf keeps it off her face. Squeezed into a lilac tube top, her breasts are full like her hips and she bares her belly button without shame. She paints her fingernails gold. I clear my throat. She looks up, then down. I tell her there's people spying on us from the rooftops. They're wasted, I tell her, desperate. A hundred eyes leering through our window.

She says, "Close the curtains, señora. Turn off the lights. People on rooftops."

A stocky, ebony-skinned man comes in from the outside. Looks at me through the corner of his eye and sneers. He mutters something to the young Spanish woman. She giggles and snaps her gum. I shiver from standing barefoot on the cold clay floor. A gecko scurries by, missing my toes by a hair.

Back in the room, I study the window. The people have taken a rest. Returned to their families, their jobs. The rooftop is barren but for a single clothesline, one white sheet floating in the wind. I had ripped down the curtains to make a new dress. I neglected to consider the consequences. I wanted a new dress. The heavy fabric laden in daffodils and baby's breath promised warmth and comfort, some style. I had yearned for a change. Sickened by my unwashed Everlast sweatpants and your Fruit of the Loom undershirt. There was a time I was so pretty.

I walk across the stained beige carpet to the bed. The man on the TV yaps about Cuba. He smokes a fat cigar. I light a cigarette and reach into the night-table drawer. Remove the blue velvet bag, unwrap it, and arrange the apparatus before me. Ever since I was a child, needles haven't frightened me. The nurses would say, just look away.

The blood would flood into the tube, my eyes widened in amazement. There it was—my blood bursting into the vial like scarlet rapids. I'd yip with excitement. The nurses would look at me in disgust. I think it was disgust. To think it flows beneath my skin like a river and I never feel it, running and running and running without a sound.

I stick the needle in my neck. Blood turns to cream. Cool and thick, covering my entire body like strawberries. My head bobs, eyelids become weighty. My mouth dries. Wind gusts through the room. The window is shut. The bed sways. I am captain of my own ship.

I hear footsteps. You run across the room, cease to make noise, then clomp hard like you mean business. Reluctantly, I open my eyes. You're in a soldier's uniform. There has not been war here for years. You were never a soldier—nor was your father. You weren't even born when the bombs blew your

ancestry to pieces.

"What disguise is this?" I ask. "What vision?"

"I died. I will fight and die again," you say.

"Who are you?"

"The bombs drop and they drop and they drop," you say.

"Nothing changes. I agree with you," I say.

I look back out the window at the smoke-filled streets. Hear screaming babies, running feet, howls.

"What trick is this?" I ask you. "What nightmare?"

You kiss my cheek. A leaving soldier's kiss. My stomach tightens, turns, a new sickness. I'm riddled with the dread of you going, never returning, falling bullet-ridden onto strange ground. I fall to my knees, grab your ankles. You drag me a few inches then shake me loose. You don't turn around. I'm lying on a crusty motel-room floor in a time I never knew.

I call the lobby. The young Spanish woman answers the phone.

"I need a new room," I tell her, "one with curtains. I need curtains now that

I'm alone."

"You're alone now, señora?" she says.

"Yes, I lost the only love I ever had."

"Where did he go?" she asks.

"To war," I say.

"What war?"

"Well, that's the question. What war?"

"I have the key, señora."

"The key?"

"To your new room, señora."

"The one without windows?"

"The one with curtains. You said you wanted curtains."

"Oh, yes. Do you have one without a door? No door, so no one can leave me again?"

Sheers don't keep the light out. But I don't think the voyeurs can see in. I don't think they will return, maybe the occasional drifter. What is there for them to see now? I am faceless, bodiless. I just sit here and that's not worth watching. No.

Are you there? Are you there? You are not. Were you ever really there? I go to the window, peek through the curtains. Are they there? They are not. Did they follow you? Your army. Was it you they

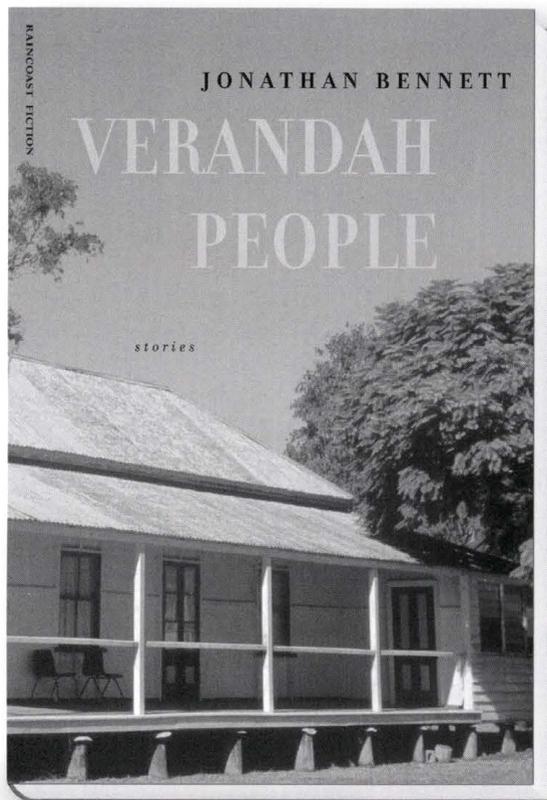
watched? No, it was us. It was because it was us. Apart we are nothing, to them or to each other.

It must be true that heat rises. This room is too warm. The young Spanish woman moved me up and, though I'm afraid of heights, I feel like I'm making progress. I get up. Walk to the sink. In the mirror looms a grey replica of myself, hair stringy and painted to my scalp. I run the cold water, stick my wrists under it. My mother told me it's a coolant. This is the desert, a murdering heat. I dry my arms. You warned me there'd be down times.

There's a knock at the door.

"Your paper, señora, your milk," says the young Spanish woman.

She knocks and she knocks. Can't she tell by the old news piling up on the outside that I have no interest in the paper; by the sour milk, no interest in nurture? Yesterday's news sits outside my room and she thinks today will be any different. Is she really so concerned, and yet not concerned enough to use her house key to come in and see what is what? It's that almost-concern that is more hurtful than helpful—that apathy.



From the author of *After Battersea Park*

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# IN MANHATTAN ONE EVENING WITH THE REVEREND AL SHARPTON

It's a shoe-store city that smells of what  
rivers leave behind.

There is a bit of sky left, and insistent,  
distant water, a headache for days.

If I see another bridge from street level;  
If I see one more desk from my car,

one more Coke in a bucket,  
or suspicious package on the road.

The whole thing is a metal plate above a hole  
and it bounces, it squeaks, but will not break.

I know, because I'm trying to break it  
when you, Al Sharpton, come out of the restaurant,

all rings and entourage, all shortness  
and you say, "Hey," and I say, "Hey."

You are *Fly Fishing in the Catskills*, a great  
American novel about justice and revenge.

I want to smell your dinner; I want you to explain  
your shoes. I am you, Reverend Al. I am you.

—JOHN DEGEN

Are you there? Are you there? Were  
you ever there? Were you ever here? I  
believe that you were. I have scars to  
prove it. I'll turn myself inside out and  
bare the damage. I'll strip this window  
of its curtains and bare it all. I pace the  
room. The chair is losing a leg. The  
desk light burnt out days ago. The mice  
keep their distance.

I flop down on the bed. What now?  
Let me see what I can pull from the ceiling.  
What cobweb remains?

I call the front desk.

"I need a new room."

"What room?" asks the young Spanish  
woman.

"What's left?"

"The honeymoon suite."

"The honeymoon suite?"

"Yes, but you haven't paid for your  
other rooms. I can't keep you. I cannot

let you stay."

"You cannot turn me loose. Where  
will I go? Not yet, soon, soon. He will  
bring money when he comes back and  
he will buy the whole motel, buy it all  
before he leaves again."

"He will leave again?" she says.

"They always leave again," I say.

"When is he coming back?"

"He's on his way."

"You've talked to him?"

"Sort of."

"Ah. I have the key."

"The key!"

"To the suite, señora. Do you want  
champagne? You will want to celebrate,  
no?"

"Yeah, two bottles of champagne.  
Two bottles and two glasses, yeah."

The honeymoon suite is big, bright,  
distastefully decorated. It's red, pink,

and frilly. Smells of baby powder and  
aftershave. Who consummates marriage  
in such a room? Who sleeps here? Who  
can? I see something out of the corner of  
my eye. You are lying on the heart-  
shaped bed like a newborn child. You  
are two steps ahead. I knew you would  
come.

"Are you safe?" I say. "Are you in  
pain?"

"It is not safe here," you whisper.

"No, it isn't. I know," I say. "Did you  
fight for this?"

"What?"

"Did you lose? Did you win? Have  
you won?"

"Won what?"

"The war?"

"There is no winning."

"You lost?"

"You can only lose."

"You came here to tell me that?"

I walk to the window. You raise your  
voice louder and louder.

"I'm talking to you!" you scream.

"No, you're not. You are listening to  
yourself. Listening to your own voice,  
and why I do not know. Why you don't  
get tired of your own excuses amazes  
me. You have been saying the same  
thing for years. Go to sleep. Sleep and  
be silent for both of us. Sleep and be  
silent, or come up with something new.  
Where did you go?"

"Go?"

"When you left. Where was it you  
went? Did you not learn anything  
there?"

"I didn't go anywhere."

"You left. Left me alone."

"I was here."

"But I was alone."

You sit on the edge of the bed looking  
at me like I'm mad—like I am mad.  
You, feigning ignorance, suddenly am-  
nesia-ridden. Have you forgotten the  
dramatic exit, the inexplicable leaving  
lines? All I had was the draft blowing  
through the closed window, across the  
room, straight through me, and out the  
door. Then back through the door,  
across the room, straight through me,  
and back out the window I didn't want.  
In and out and in and out, draft after  
draft after draft. And you wonder what  
I'm talking about?

We stare at each other, then out the  
window. Your mouth drops. I grab my  
things and leave.

"I need a new room," you tell the



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# IF I WERE BURT REYNOLDS

I'd never be afraid.  
One smirk at the lens leaves  
Smokey eating my dust.  
Shoot the rapids with ease—  
ace the Cannonball Run.

Tight shirts—tight slacks—tight smile  
perfect blonds every night.  
Never afraid to look you  
in the eye and say: Hi,  
my name is Burt Reynolds.

—KARYN BONHAM

young Spanish woman behind the desk.  
“One with a new wife. Then I’ll need  
the old room back.”

“I thought you had a wife,” she says.

“She left.”

“Oh, when did she leave?”

“Recently.”

The young Spanish woman snaps her  
gum.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Here’s the key.”

“To?”

“Your new room, señor.”

“Does it have a wife?”

“No, señor, but it has a phone and a  
phone book. You can look one up.”

The phone rings. It’s you. You tell me  
you’re lost without me. You never leave  
your room, where do you get lost?  
Surely, not in your room. In your head?  
I watch it ring sometimes, the phone. I  
sit carefully on the three-legged chair  
and watch it ring. It stops, and some-  
times I regret not picking it up, but I  
know it will ring again. Why you call is  
beyond me.

You tell me you speak to other women.  
I know it’s a big phone book, lots of  
women to get to know. And that you  
talk to God. I wonder how you talk to  
God. You can’t afford long distance.

I never see you, and my eyes long to, I  
must admit. I hear you and hear you  
and my ears are sick of you. My head  
hurts. You don’t ask to meet me. You  
don’t leave your room. You are satisfied  
where you are. I forget to ask why you  
call. Why do you call? I forget to ask  
myself why I answer. I’d draw the cur-  
tains but there are no windows here.

The phone rings. You tell me you met

another woman. She’s young, and it  
won’t lead to anything, but you had to  
keep in with the young to keep up with  
what’s going on out there. You said she  
calls and she calls.

“Why are you telling me this?” I ask.

“It’s news,” you say.

“It’s nothing,” I say.

“Exactly.”

“It’s something to me. It’s nothing in  
general. News would be you’ve turned  
the corner. Had an epiphany. Can’t live  
without me. Made plans for the future  
and I figure prominently in them.  
You’ve seen the light and you are com-  
ing to pick me up by it.”

“I can’t help you,” you say. “Atlas car-  
ried the world on his shoulders, but  
there are no more men like that.”

The phone disappears

The young Spanish woman warns me  
that if I throw one more phone down  
the hole I made in the floor they will  
throw me out on the street. I say, if they  
keep replacing the phones, I’ll throw  
myself down the hole I made in the  
floor and I’ll be harder to pick up. I pace  
the room. There are traces of intruders,  
hairs, a merciless scent of sweat. How  
they get in, I don’t know. I thought I  
locked everything up from the inside.  
Still, they manage to weasel their way  
in. I want no one here. And that phone,  
that link. That one vein I cannot punc-  
ture and drain dry. An umbilical cord  
that links me to you. The telephone  
cord. A telephone cord.

I call you. Another man answers.

“He isn’t here,” he says.

“What do you mean, he isn’t here?”

Who are you?”

“I live here,” he says.

“You didn’t live there yesterday.”

“And that means what?”

“That means that you only live there  
as of today, and that someone else lived  
there yesterday, and you probably know  
who, and why he is not there now.”

“No, I don’t know. The room was  
empty.”

“Except for a phone?”

“Yes.”

“And a phone book?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look.”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No, there is nothing else.”

“Did you look everywhere?”

“There is nowhere else to look.”

“I see.”

The young Spanish woman cleans the  
lobby windows. Her jeans grip her hips  
awkwardly. Etched into her lower back  
is a fire-breathing dragon. I gasp, start-  
ling her. She shifts her hips, folds her  
arms across her chest, and hisses at me. I  
shuffle back to my room and peer out  
the window. My hands ache. The skin is  
cracked, rubbed to the bone.

You walk through the door with two  
coffees. A brown paper bag protrudes  
from the pocket of your red velvet  
blazer. You’re unshaven, hair in clumps.  
Your skin’s ruddy but not like sunburn.  
You tell me it’s a beautiful morning.  
The sun’s on fire, not a cloud in the sky.  
The off-licence on the corner is closed.  
You had to walk over to Harvey’s con-  
venience, then meet Frank for the  
goods. I throw myself on the bed. You  
stroke my head, tell me I’m sweating.

Your face changes, eyes roll and  
widen. You stand up, turn in circles, ask  
why the bed covers and clothes are  
strewn across the room, the phone  
ripped from the wall, desk and chair up-  
turned. You storm over to the window.

“What the hell have you done to the  
curtains?” you say. “I leave you alone for  
five fucking minutes and this is what  
happens?” ☽

---

*Alexandra Leggat lives in Niagara Falls, Ontario. She is the author of Pull Gently, Tear Here (Insomniac, 2001) and This Is Me Since Yesterday (Coach House, 2000). Her new book of short stories, Meet Me in the Parking Lot, will be published in spring, 2004, by Insomniac.*

# DEREK McCORMACK SPEAKS IN COMPLETE PARAGRAPHS

*Toronto's midnight cowboy rises from the gutter with a new book to scare up readers.*

INTERVIEW BY CONAN TOBIAS

“He steps out. A gasp goes up. His suit’s starry. Spotlights bend off his blazer. He sings his song. The one on his suit. About being blue. The place goes ape. Folks hoot. Folks holler.”

The preceding could be a scene from the glory days of the Grand Ole Opry, just as easily as it could be text from a Derek McCormack–penned story. In fact, it’s both: a passage from McCormack’s recently released novel, *The Haunted Hillbilly*, a fictionalized account of the rise and fall of the country music star Hank Williams, as told by Nudie, his vampire manager-courtier. But replace a few words—“shirt” for “suit,” “reads” for “sings,” and “politely applaud” for “holler”—and the passage just as well describes the first of two October launches for *The Haunted Hillbilly*, held in the Brigantine Room at Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre. Often wary of the public spotlight (he once had a friend, the author Tony Burgess, read in his place at his own launch), on this night McCormack charmed the crowd of more than one hundred for nearly half an hour. Instead of giving an obligatory reading from his new work and saying good night, McCormack explained the origin of his attire that evening: a vintage black cowboy shirt with gold piping, smiley arrowhead front pockets, and a gold bar of musical notes across the front and back, purchased in Nashville by a friend who presented it to him earlier that day. From there, McCormack proceeded to give the audience a brief history lesson on the seedy underbelly of nineteen-fifties Nashville—the inspiration for his new book—before closing with a quick reading of *The Haunted Hillbilly*’s first two chapters. Hooting and polite applause followed.

Painfully shy one minute and playfully catty and self-loathing the next, McCormack’s most endearing trait is his mock arrogance. “Make sure you say,

as in all *Vanity Fair* profiles, that I speak in complete paragraphs,” McCormack instructed a few weeks earlier. It’s true: McCormack is well-spoken and interesting, especially when talking about the subjects that make him, and his writing, tick: country music, carnivals, county fairs, Christmas, and Halloween. It’s ironic that McCormack speaks in complete paragraphs. Anyone who has read his work will instantly recognize his quick, choppy prose—a style that takes Strunk and White’s style rule “Omit needless words” to heart. But despite his chattiness, a *Vanity Fair*–style day-in-the-life profile is out of the question. McCormack’s typical day consists of “a series of naps,” broken up by several hours of television, web surfing, eating, and writing. Readers of this interview will have to be content with McCormack’s back story.

McCormack, thirty-three, was born and raised in Peterborough, a quiet town in Southern Ontario and a gateway to cottage country. His father, Murray, a former real-estate salesman, and his mother, Cynthia, owned and operated a five-and-dime in nearby Lakefield. Housed in a century-old building complete with the original fixtures and shelving, the inventory of Ryan’s Five-and-Dime consisted in part of a large back stock of mid-twentieth-century pop-culture paraphernalia, from Davy Crockett hats to Cold War–era sci-fi ray guns. So plentiful were these former department-store staples that a young Derek and his sister, Melissa, along with a childhood friend, launched a satellite store in the family garage. (“We never opened to the public,” McCormack says, “because the neighbourhood kids would have torn us to shreds.”) As a teenager, McCormack worked summers in Ryan’s, first as a bagger, later as a stock boy, cashier, and display designer. During the holiday

seasons, he accompanied his mother on trips to Wm. Prager, a Toronto-based manufacturer and distributor of store fixtures and display products, where they purchased giant Easter eggs, plastic ivy, enormous candy canes, and eight-foot-tall nutcrackers. “My mom would buy this stuff not only for the store,” says McCormack, “but that’s the stuff we’d decorate with at home, so we’d have, by far, the nicest house at holiday times.”

By his early teens, McCormack was openly gay to his sister and close circle of friends, and assumed gay by everyone else, including his teachers. Peterborough in the nineteen-eighties—“a time when everyone wore Iron Maiden T-shirts”—wasn’t exactly a shining example of homosexual acceptance. McCormack, who flaunted his sexuality defiantly with flamboyant clothing, jewelry, and hair dye, was openly mocked not only by other students, but also by his teachers, and threats of physical violence were a daily affair. “If someone said, ‘Hey, fag!’ in the hallway, I’d say, ‘Yeah, fuck you. Of course I’m a fag,’” McCormack says. “It’s weird now that I had the strength to go through it. I would never admit to anyone that it was a problem. I would never show any weakness at all. . . . I don’t think it was bravery; it was just blind defiance. I just loathed them so much that I couldn’t back down at all, and I really felt being gay made me way better than those people.”

Considered an outcast by most of his peers, McCormack latched on to books at an early age and developed a heartfelt kinship—in the way only a lonely teenager can—with the outlaw tradition of such authors as Gebet, Rimbaud, and William Burroughs. “I really felt like I was one of them; I was a brother, I was in that circle, and it just seemed so infinitely superior,” McCormack says. “Then, when I was in high school, I got a subscription to the *Face* magazine and



it was just a barrage of gay culture, so it just connected me to a world that was more cultured, cooler, smarter, sexier. . . . That was a very gay moment in pop music, where you could have trashy pop like Dead or Alive or you could have Morrissey, but it was all there, and it was really, really flaming. . . . I felt that was my heritage and it was way better than these scuzzball trash-can types. Of course I was completely deluded, but it got me through." He pauses. "Did you notice that I'm speaking in complete paragraphs?"

McCormack's love of gay fiction, and his self-described verbal ability to charm or insult at will, convinced him he wanted to be a writer. Having read about and been fascinated by Tod Browning's 1932 sideshow epic, *Freaks*, but without access to a repertory theatre, McCormack wrote his own version of how he thought the script should read. In the fifth grade, he wrote his own Hardy Boys book. For an English assignment in Grade 11, he wrote a story centred around an imaginary out-cast from Andy Warhol's Factory. "I was really pretentious," McCormack says. "I

was always bothering the teacher 'cause I'd put 'fuck' and lots of swear words and lots of gay stuff into my stories." McCormack graduated high school in 1987 and left home to attend the University of Toronto, but dropped out after earning only six credits when he realized that spending four years obtaining a post-secondary education was "at odds" with his romantic sense of what a writer should be. He moved to Spain to write his first novel, a retelling of Petronius's *Satyricon*. "It was terrible," McCormack recalls. "I realized I was going to have to buckle down and really learn how to do it right."

Although McCormack's unpublished *Satyricon* novel was written in his now-familiar sparse style, it lacked nearly everything else that has since come to embody his stories. When he returned to Toronto after a year in Spain, McCormack wrote a short story about a young Peterborough-area teen afflicted with lupus, titled "Antibody: An Autobiography," which was accepted and published by *Grain* magazine in 1992. Over the next several years, McCormack

honed his writing in a series of stories, all set in Peterborough in 1952 and all starring characters named Derek McCormack—"an ephemeral being obsessed with ephemera"—who were not necessarily the same character from story to story. This time around, McCormack was reaching into his own life for subject matter. By 1995, his stories had appeared in nearly a dozen literary journals, and he had struck a deal with Gutter Press, a small Toronto-based publisher, which released his collected works under the title *Dark Rides* the following year.

The fictional Derek McCormacks of nineteen-fifties Peterborough bear more than a passing resemblance to the real-life teen Derek McCormack of nineteen-eighties Peterborough, with comic effect. The Derek McCormacks of *Dark Rides* are often shown as arrogant rubes—know-it-all who are ostracized and beat up by their peers. "That's me," McCormack says. "They're totally annoying, totally pretentious, and by the end of the story, something has broken them. It's bravado like I had in high school. I would walk down the hall of

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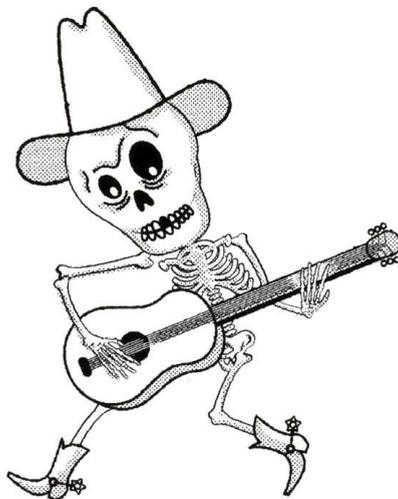
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Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute thinking I was David Bowie, circa Thin White Duke. . . . Every story in *Dark Rides* was based on some emotion or situation I'd been in, with the exception of any time Derek has sex, because I didn't have any sex in high school." Setting *Dark Rides* in the nineteen-fifties "was kind of accidental," McCormack says. In a precursor to *The Haunted Hillbilly*, one *Dark Rides* story, "Men with Broken Hearts," tells the tale of a young boy frantically attempting to make his way to a Hank Williams concert, only to arrive in time to see his hero being carried offstage, drunk, during his opening number. "Hank Williams played in Peterborough in 1951, and when I found that out I wanted to write a story about him playing there. *Dark Rides* came out of that feeling once I started to think about what it would be like to be young and gay in Peterborough in the nineteen-fifties, how claustrophobic and dark it would have been."

McCormack followed up *Dark Rides* with two side projects released in quick succession: *Halloween Suite* (Pas de chance, 1998), a handmade collection of four interconnected stories about death, despair, and deception in nineteen-thirties Peterborough, and *Wild Mouse* (Pedlar, 1998), a collaboration of carnival-themed short stories and poems, written with the poet Chris Chambers. But it was his next major collection, *Wish Book* (Gutter, 1999), that brought McCormack back to the five-and-dime. While *Wish Book* contained the Halloween and carnival suites of his previous two publications, much of it centred around Turnbull's, a nineteen-thirties department store, first introduced, albeit briefly, in *Dark Rides*, and based on the real-life Peterborough store famous for catching fire and collapsing in 1913, killing six. "The thirties are interesting for so many reasons. I guess that's particularly from my grandparents' stories of the Depression, how hard it was, the huge wildness of it, people being desperate. Peterborough had a huge hobo encampment, a lot of gypsies coming through, a lot of railroad bums coming through. It was like everywhere else in the Depression, but it's all so romantic in my mind, it seemed like a perfect period to have a lot of oddballs show up, a lot of craziness, a lot of desperation—a

good time for dime stores."

Though all of McCormack's stories take place decades before he was born, they are told with an authority that shows his love of his subject matter. He obviously draws heavily on the memory of working in his parents' five-and-dime, but also manages to give perfectly detailed descriptions of candy wrappings, carnival games, and fake gorilla fur. "I do a lot of research for the stuff I'm interested in, and the rest I guess," McCormack says. "That's why I think the books take me so long to



write. That's why even though they're short, I don't really think they're light reads. . . . I think there are only so many times you can drop facts like that and not have people think you're being ironic or coy or campy or something, so I have to really narrow it down to what's important to me."

As in *Dark Rides*, the characters in *Wish Book* (some of whom are again named Derek McCormack) are arrogant and self-important and usually meet their match by story's end: a Boy Scout is duped by his fellow Scouts into believing he will never be a true tracker without seeing visions of an Indian master; a department-store employee is caught masturbating behind the two-way mirror in a changing room occupied by the crooner Bing Crosby; a naive reporter who fancies himself a newshawk is beaten by carnies who catch on to his attempt to expose the midway's fixed games. "I think *Wish Book* has the most pompous people," McCormack says. "People just caught in little worlds that they take to be very important, which is also a retail thing. It's like having dominion over the

hosiery department but still being unmanageably rude, being dictatorial. It's like at Tiffany. Those guys are great. In the end, they don't own Tiffany and they can't afford anything they sell, but they carry themselves with that unbelievable wealth and privilege. I love that put-on."

While not a complete departure from his previous books, *The Haunted Hillbilly*, released in September by ECW Press, shows signs of a shift in McCormack's work. Despite it being his first book in four years (not including *Western Suit*, a sneak peek pamphlet of the book released in 2001 by Pas de chance), and impossible as it may seem, McCormack has learned to tell a longer story with even fewer words than before. The origins of *The Haunted Hillbilly*, McCormack's first published novel, stem from a passage in *Country*, Nick Tosches' revealing 1977 book about the country music industry's dark side. Tosches reveals that the Country Music Foundation, located in Nashville, possesses two taped interviews with the legendary promoter Oscar Davis. Throughout his career, Davis had worked closely with such artists as Hank Williams, Ernest Tubb, Hank Snow, and Elvis Presley. In the interviews, conducted late in Davis's life, in 1974, he revealed the many great, untold scandals of country music—a "who fucked who," straight, gay, underage, and otherwise. The foundation has never allowed access to the Davis tapes. McCormack's curiosity was too much for him to handle, and his mind began to wander. A long-time fan of Hank Williams and Nudie Cohn, the famous tailor to such stars as Williams, Presley, and Dolly Parton, McCormack mixed his love of country with his love of monsters, resulting in a phantasmagoric gay Nashville horror story, with Nudie as the vampire manager obsessed with Hank's "museum-quality" ass. Nudie both makes and breaks the career and life of this very fictional Hank for little more than his own evil amusement. "I sort of got the idea to write a story where Hank had a gay manager. . . . This manager had to have absolute power over Hank, it had to be a Col. Tom Parker thing. . . . I read in a magazine published by one of Hank's band members after his death—a little tribute magazine—that all Hank ever

read were comic books. And then when Hank was in the hospital after back surgery, this band member would bring him monster comics, which were his favourites. So then I thought, 'I'll write it like a *Tales From the Crypt*,' and that gave Nudie that absolute power. I know it's kind of a lame metaphor, the manager as vampire, but it also let me completely bust out of the reality of it. I couldn't find a way to write it where Hank would be so unquestioning. If I'd written about the real Hank Williams, it would be impossible because he was quite a feisty, clever character, so I just totally invented a story of him being a really passive good guy."

If David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* had been set forty years earlier and aired on HBO instead of ABC, it likely would have resembled a Derek McCormack story. For all their quirkiness and quaint pop-culture throwbacks, McCormack's characters are often violent, if not physically or mentally, then in their intent: a novelty-store clerk drugs and then strips a young customer in order to shave his pubic hair, which he then uses for itch-

ing powder; a teen rapes a friend after accidentally knocking him out; a sideshow giant anally rapes a carny who has been selling plaster casts of the giant's hand. As much as McCormack is lauded for his work, he also receives a fair share of criticism for the violence portrayed in his stories. But McCormack-style violence is more comical than anything else. "I think it's funny. That scene with the giant is the first step toward what I think the new book is, which is completely *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*-style violence, where the violence is metaphorical," McCormack says. "The violence is endlessly regenerative. In *Dark Rides*, Derek keeps coming back for more. I don't think anyone really dies."

McCormack's work is equally analyzed for its treatment of gay characters. In his paper "Derek McCormack: In Context and Out," published in the spring, 2001, issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing*, Peter Dickinson, a professor at the University of British Columbia, writes, the

commingling of the sexual, the scientific, and the scopic is heightened in *Wish Book* through the presence of fluoroscopes, X-rays, Spectro-

Rays, and all manner of other arcane electromagnetic devices designed not just to see but also to see *through* bodies. Together with his penchant for cataloguing (ailments, behaviours, goods, practices, types), woven into the very narrative fabric of *Wish Book*, the presence of these mechanisms for reading the "diseased" body—and, by extension, one's impure thoughts—suggests an almost Kinseyesque quality to much of McCormack's writing.

McCormack admits to playing occasionally with the idea of the deviant gay body, but suggests this is one of many cases where his work is over-analyzed for a deeper meaning that isn't always there. In this particular example, McCormack actually spent a great deal of time in the hospital as a child, and again in his late teens. "Hospitals are as fascinating to me as department stores or carnivals because what's great to me is what's behind the scenes—the lingo and the machinery and the pecking order of the people working there—so hospitals became another staging area."

McCormack doesn't always agree with critical analysis of his work, but says it's important to him as a form of validation. He considers himself a

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member of the gay canon over the Canadian canon (his favourite authors being Dennis Cooper, Matthew Stadler, and James McCourt), but worries he's not. "I'm trying to be part of a lineage, which I think I've mostly connected in my head. Those writers I love so much, straight people don't even read. Straight people don't even know about them, so that gets my back up and I feel, yeah, I am a gay writer because they're enormously talented writers and poets that just beat the crap out of most of the stuff the *New Yorker* publishes, but no one reads them except gays who come across them in gay bookstores. So it makes me a little more defiant about it. I always make this argument, and people say, 'What about Michael Cunningham and *The Hours*?' Not only was it the first best-selling gay book, it wasn't even about gay men. It was about women. It was a multi-generational women's novel!"

Though arrogant, Nudie, the narrator of *The Haunted Hillbilly*, is no rube. Unlike most of McCormack's lead characters, his cleverness allows him to live to tell his tale. But Nudie's day may yet come. McCormack has plans for two more books starring Nudie. The next will show him working his evil, ass-sucking magic on the country star Jimmie Rogers, while the third instalment will explore his early days in Paris, including his vampire origins. Readers may have to wait awhile for their next hit of Nudie, however. Recently, McCormack has turned his passions into a growing side career as a non-fiction writer. His 2000 story on Halloween for *Saturday Night* magazine earned him a National Magazine Award nomination, and he recently signed a deal with House of Anansi to write a history of Christmas in Canada titled *Shopping Days*, slated for release in 2005. Also in the works: another Pas de chance collaboration, this time on the history of fake snow, due in time for Christmas, 2004. McCormack will have to clear his plate of these projects before the release of *The Haunted Hillbilly: Volume 2*, but rest assured—Nudie will return... ✪

*The Haunted Hillbilly* is currently available from ECW. Conan Tobias is *Taddle Creek's* editor-in-chief.

## BIG IN JAPAN

Rare is the author who has control of his own book design. Derek McCormack is one of the lucky ones. For the past five years, he has had the good fortune to have all of his solo efforts designed by Ian Phillips, a Toronto-based illustrator (whose work includes illustrating *Taddle Creek*) and the publisher of Pas de chance, a micro-press specializing in—and renowned for—small-run handmade books.

McCormack and Phillips met shortly after the publication of *Dark Rides*. They formed a partnership, resulting in the collaborative effort *Halloween Suite*, a forty-page hardcover of four holiday stories by McCormack, bound in flock and paper with a jack-o'-lantern branded on the cover, all designed by Phillips. "I remember going down to Canzine when *{Halloween Suite}* debuted, and I was so proud," says McCormack. "Ian can do all of that stuff in his sleep." Phillips has since become his exclusive book designer, having worked on *Wish Book* and *The Haunted Hillbilly*, as well as the 2001 *Hillbilly* teaser, *Western Suit*, a thin pamphlet bound in a suede-like flock containing four of the book's chapters, housed in an illustrated envelope along with a pattern and sewing instructions for a cowboy shirt. "I like his writing, and I think he and I see eye to eye on a lot," Phillips says. "I've always liked collaborating on things rather than doing it myself."

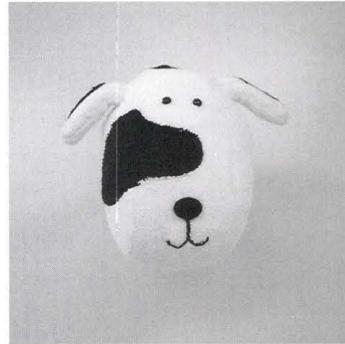
Phillips has collaborated on a number of books since founding Pas de chance in 1985, though many of his collaborators have been unaware of the partnership. Fascinated with found objects, Phillips has published collections of personal notes, letters, and other scribbles discovered on the subway or the ground, as well as collections of fruit-crate labels, candy wrappers, and, most famously, lost-pet posters. More than a decade ago, Phillips began collecting animal wanted flyers simply because he liked the artwork and the often-humorous copy written by distraught owners.

Eventually, he started placing ads in zines and magazines around the world in an attempt to get more. Anyone who sent Phillips a poster would receive in return a copy of *Snacks*, a handmade collection of lost-pet posters, containing their own contribution. "For a few years, I was getting a poster in the mail every day," Phillips says, "which meant making a new copy of the book every day." Phillips's pet-poster obsession eventually caught the eye of Princeton Architectural, a publisher of visual-culture books based in New York. In 2002, the press published *Lost*, a glossy-covered, boxy-looking book containing the best posters from *Snacks's* many configurations along with an illustrated flip-book adventure of cartoon animals drawn by Phillips. The book was an overnight success, landing Phillips on the pages of the *Globe and Mail* and the *New York Times*, as well as on CNN and European radio. "I think pets are a big part of a lot of peoples' lives," Phillips says.

"It's a story people can relate to on a personal level."

More recently, however, *Lost* has spawned a mini-merchandise industry in Japan, where it was just released. The animals Phillips illustrated to accompany the book's posters—especially its dog cover star—have been turned into everything from stuffed animals to key chains to cellphone cases to handbags. As well, Japanese Starbucks stores have been selling the book in conjunction with a related in-store lost-pets bulletin board and an on-line lost-pets registry. Phillips credits his recent Japanese fame to the country's tendency to latch on to cute marketing trends, but also feels there's something else driving *Lost's* worldwide acceptance. "It's sort of a distraction from a lot of things going on in the world right now. You look at the posters, and you start laughing at them. It's sad and funny at the same time." Fortunately for Phillips, there's nothing sad or funny about *Lost's* success.

—CONAN TOBIAS





# BREAK AND ENTER

FICTION BY DAVID WHITTON

Brownie and I were looking for a place to fuck. First, we tried the ground. But the ground was soaking from the rain and I didn't want mud on my skirt—a brand new tulip skirt with chiffon overlay. So we tried the tool shed, but every time we drew near it, the floodlight snapped on. A blue mist rose from the lawns. The leaves were fat and wet. We tried against the side of a house, but the brick rubbed like sandpaper. So we tried other places: the picnic table, the poolside. That's how we found the porch. The planks of which were wet, but not soggy, and pleasant to lie down on.

Brownie smiled. He was all fucked up on Vodka Blasters and E. When he smiled he looked like a skull. He looked happy and hopeless.

I was all fucked up solely on E.

From the porch you could hear the music from Magda's party. We were seven backyards away. The bass thud floated over fences and gardens and bird baths and lawn chairs. Some girl was squealing. She sounded like an eagle. I was glad to be here and not there. Whoever lived here wasn't here. It was peaceful and still. I hated Magda. Magda was a little twat, and I'm glad about what happened to her.

Brownie was pulling up my tulip skirt with the chiffon overlay. His head was skinny and shaved. He was anxious to get me undressed.

"Fuck off," I said. "Be careful."

"Apologies."

"I have to return this tomorrow. They won't take it back if there's rips."

"O.K., O.K."

He was kissing my neck and then kissing my mouth. His lips were sticky from the Vodka Blasters, and his breath was even hotter than the air, which was as hot as a . . . whatever. An oven.

"So, are you on the pill again?" he said.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" I said. But I didn't answer the question. I wasn't on the pill again. I'd forgotten to take it, twelve days running.

The world smelled like flowers and rain. The world smelled like bark and mud and grass. The world smelled like pine trees and maple leaves and soaking-wet sleeping bags. The world was exhaling and I had my whole life ahead of me, unformed and wavering. And who could guess what was going to happen?

"I just got an idea," Brownie said.

"Uh-oh." When Brownie got an idea it was usually good news for him and bad news for me.

"Don't say 'uh-oh.' This is a great idea. This is the best idea I've ever had."

"What is it?"

"Let's break into the house."

"What's wrong with doing it here?" I said. I raised myself up on my elbows. At my feet was the dark shape of a flow-

erpot. Dark shapes of flowers were spilling out. Dark shapes of things were scattered everywhere. This is how it felt to be alive.

"Just listen. It'll be an adventure."

"How will it be an adventure?"

"You'll remember it forever. When you're forty. You'll look back and you'll think about me. You'll always remember the time you got your brains screwed out in a strange house."

"No way," I said. "What if we get arrested? I don't want to go to jail on prom night." But Brownie didn't listen. Brownie was on his feet stuffing himself back into his tuxedo trousers.

"Let's see now," he said.

He was looking up at the windows, which were all darkened and desolate. It was an old house, like all of these houses, filled with unhappy rich people like Magda.

"Let's see now," he said, picking up a garden claw. "Let's just see now."

"Before you break a window," I said, "why not try the sliding door?"

"Because that's stupid," he said. He took the garden claw and chose a window—small and shoulder height, just beside the door—and broke the glass. There was a loud crack and a showering of glass like falling diamonds. Brownie pulled away, looking smug.

"O.K."

"I hope no one heard that."

"No one heard that," he said.

I got up and smoothed my skirt. I looked around, but everything stayed quiet and no lights came on. As an experiment, I tried the door, which slid open on its rails.

"You go in that way, I'll go in this way," I said.

"I got a better idea," he said. "Blow me."

We stepped inside. The air conditioning dried the slime in the crooks of my elbows and made my panties go clammy cold.

**B**ecause, what did I know back then? I was a different person; I was someone else. No way I could have seen all the things that were going to happen. Like the time Magda, the little twat, fell off the bridge. This was a year, a year and a half later. She was all fucked up on acid and E. A bunch of people were walking home from the Vortex. Friends I liked and friends I hated. I wasn't there. Brownie was there. I hated him by then. A train came along—a late-night freight train that made a sound like metallic death. It came along and caught them on the bridge and off they jumped, panicking, into the river. The river was full of shit. The river was full of beer from the beer plant, and poisonous ooze from some factory that turned to dust a hundred years ago. The river was slow death, but the train was instant. Everyone jumped into the river and swam to shore.

Unfortunately, Brownie swam to shore and lived. Fortunately, Magda fell on the concrete slab that held up the bridge and died from a fractured something. Lights out for Magda, who was a twat anyway. Lights out.

One minute you're alive—even if you're falling, mid-air, you're still alive, full of sensations—and then you hit and you're no longer alive. No longer seeing things, or laughing, or doubled-up in pain. You're floating, you're dreaming, you're safe from harm. I'm guessing.

Magda said all kinds of things about me in Grade 10, but none of them were true. The point of which is, whatever.

**T**he first thing we did inside the house was look for the booze. When we found it we went looking for the bedroom.

Everything was dark, except for

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lights here and there that were meant to scare off intruders like Brownie and me. We weren't scared, though. We were too young for that. I had a bottle of peach schnapps. Brownie had a bottle of something or other.

The bedroom was on the second floor—one of many bedrooms. Inside, what did we find but a bed. It was so big and so soft that when I sat down I thought it would swallow me whole.

I fired up a king-size ultra-light menthol and took a haul from my bottle of schnapps. Brownie was at the dresser—a huge old dresser that was covered in glass bottles. He was rifling through the drawers.

"Can I have one of those?" he said when he spied my smoke.

"What do you say?"

"Blow me."

"Only if you eat me out."

"Deal. I was going to do that anyway."

"Then you can have one." I placed a smoke between my big toe and my second-biggest toe and reached out my leg to him.

"Thanks."

We didn't dare turn on a lamp, so Brownie worked off the light in the hall, which cut a yellow slice across the carpet. He pulled out balls of socks and neatly folded bras and dumped them on the floor.

"What are you looking for," I said.

"I don't know," he said. "Money. Drugs."

"Why would there be drugs in

their socks?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you sit down beside me," I said. I patted the soft, sinky mattress.

"Just a sec," he said. He pulled something from the drawer—a card or a hunk of paper, something along those lines. He held it up to his face, squinting.

"I think we're on to something here," he said. He walked out into the hall so he could see better, and then I heard him crack up.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. We're definitely on to something."

I came up beside him and looked at what he was holding. It was a picture. A photo of a man in this very bedroom: a middle-aged man wearing a lacy black bra and matching panties. He was portly and he wore a long blond wig. He struck a sexy pose, like he was an underwear model.

"Wow," I said.

"Wow is right."

We both said "wow" because we were surprised and shocked. It wasn't something we'd expected to find. We both said "wow" because, it was true, the world was full of wondrous things.

It was only three months later that Brownie stopped taking my phone calls. I stood at the pay phone in the Mac's convenience and screamed and cried till my voice was sore and squelchy. There were people all around—customers, a cashier in a blue shirt—but I didn't care.

"You think you can fuck me and not return my phone calls?" I said.

"No."

"Then why are you avoiding me?"

"I'm not."

"What did I do to deserve this?" I said. Beside me was a rack of magazines, the front pages of which were shiny and covered with movie stars. "What did I do other than love you and fuck you and buy you CDs and cigarettes? What did I do?"

"Nothing."

His mother had call display. That's why I was using the payphone at the Mac's. I slammed down the phone, left the store, and ran down Baseline Road. I could barely see the street, there were so many tears in my eyes. The houses and cars were all warped and bleary. It was like looking at the world through a thick sheet of water.

Before I'd hung up, I'd really let him have it.

"Fuck you, then," I'd said. I was sobbing, sobbing. "I hate you. I never want to talk to you again."

Of course, I did talk to him again. And much more, too. I didn't really mean what I'd said. I meant it and I didn't mean it, at the same time.

After Brownie and I found the picture of the man in the underpants, we pretended like it was twenty years in the future. We pretended like we were old and married and the owners of that lovely house.

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# TEA WITH SATAN

I sat with Satan for a cup of tea  
(herbal tea, for in hell there is no caffeine)  
around a stooping, satin-covered atheist  
and I said,  
“Satan, why are you so mean? Why is there no sugar on the table?”

His hands clapped once, for twice would turn off the lights,  
and Jesus brought forth a bowl of sugar.  
(I was as surprised as you are. Apparently God doesn't like people pretending to be His son.)

My glasses straightened.  
“Satan, you can't fool me. That's not sugar. It's a sugar substitute filled with chemicals suspected of causing cancer.”

He apologized in one of those smarmy, “Oh, does it?” kind of ways  
and changed the subject immediately.

“So, how's God doing?”

“He's fine, staying quite busy with the poverty thingy. You know, trying to feed the world and all. He asked how you were.”  
The last part was a lie, but I thought it the polite thing to say.

The Devil smiled,  
by accident of course.

“Yes, I heard about that. People aren't getting enough to eat or something. I'm so bad at keeping up with current affairs.”

I smacked the Devil,  
only a light cuff to get his attention,  
and said,

“Enough.”  
Not loud, but in a forcefully calm tone.

“What do you want from me, Trevor?”  
he questioned, with a hint of sincerity.

“What I've always wanted—”  
The Devil held his breath with anticipation.  
“An ending to my story.”

—TREVOR DAVIS

I went through the stuff on the dresser—the cosmetics and perfumes. I smeared this horrible pink lipstick across my mouth and rubbed this bright blue eyeshadow on my eyelids so that I looked like a crazy old bat. Then I went to the closet and draped myself in furs and strings of fucking pearls. I chain-smoked my smokes and pretended like I was hooked on medications.

Meanwhile, Brownie donned a wide, shiny tie and a grey suit that was way

too big for him. He held his stomach and laughed like a jolly fat man.

“Tabitha,” he said. “Kiss me hard, Tabitha.”

“Who the fuck is Tabitha?” I said.

“Tabitha is you in your fur jacket,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, catching on. “Well, I would be charmed to kiss you hard, my good sir.”

And so I did. I kissed him hard, right there in that bedroom. And Brownie

took me in his arms and threw me on the bed, and we had a long, slow fuck.

Afterward, we lay on our backs, naked and steaming, and thought about things and didn't say very much. I was still wearing the string of pearls, but my lipstick had been wiped away long before.

“I can't believe how old we are,” I said. “And how nice our home is.”

“Time is fleeting,” Brownie said.

“Remember prom night?” I said. “I

can't believe we managed to graduate. I feel like there's been a mistake."

"I've got a signed certificate. They can't take it back now."

"I can't believe it's twenty years from now," I said.

"Whatever," Brownie said. "I have to take a piss."

I watched his shape get up in the dark and go out into the hallway, where he was suddenly lit up by the yellow light. I had to piss, too, but I didn't because I didn't want to spoil the mood. That was one of the differences between Brownie and me, and a good example of why it never would've worked out.

Brownie was right about one thing: time is fleeting. We're already gone. We're already smoke. We're already forty, even if we aren't really. Except for Magda, of course, who will never be forty.

Anyway. I don't believe I have told the story of jam night. It happened two years after high school. By this time, I was working at the gas station. Also by this time, I was making it with Tim Cheeseworth, who was

Magda's ex-boyfriend. They'd stopped going out when Magda fell off the bridge and smacked herself on the concrete slab.

What he saw in both Magda and me I will never, ever, ever figure out.

Cheesy was medium height and medium weight, with medium brown hair of medium length. He lived with his folks on the outskirts of Byron. For a hobby he would go out into the bush with his shotgun and shoot abandoned cars and small animals.

One day I went with him to the gun shop on Wharncliffe Road to get his shotgun fixed. He didn't have a proper bag for the gun, so instead he carried it around in a battered green guitar case.

We rode the bus to the gun shop and waited while the guy fixed it, then left and went to the Talbot Inn for a beer. The Talbot Inn was a scummy place, filled with smoke and toilet smell. Sad young people sat at the tables. In a few years they would be sad old people, sitting at the same tables.

We sat down and ordered a pitcher of beer from the friendly waiter, who was actually just a dick who pretended to be

friendly. Before long, several men with sideburns and ponytails got up onstage and picked up guitars and such. This was because it was jam night.

One of the guys onstage saw our green guitar case. "Hey guys," he said. "Come on up. We don't bite."

"No, no, no," we said.

"Don't be shy," he said. "The more the merrier."

"No, no, no," we said. "Really."

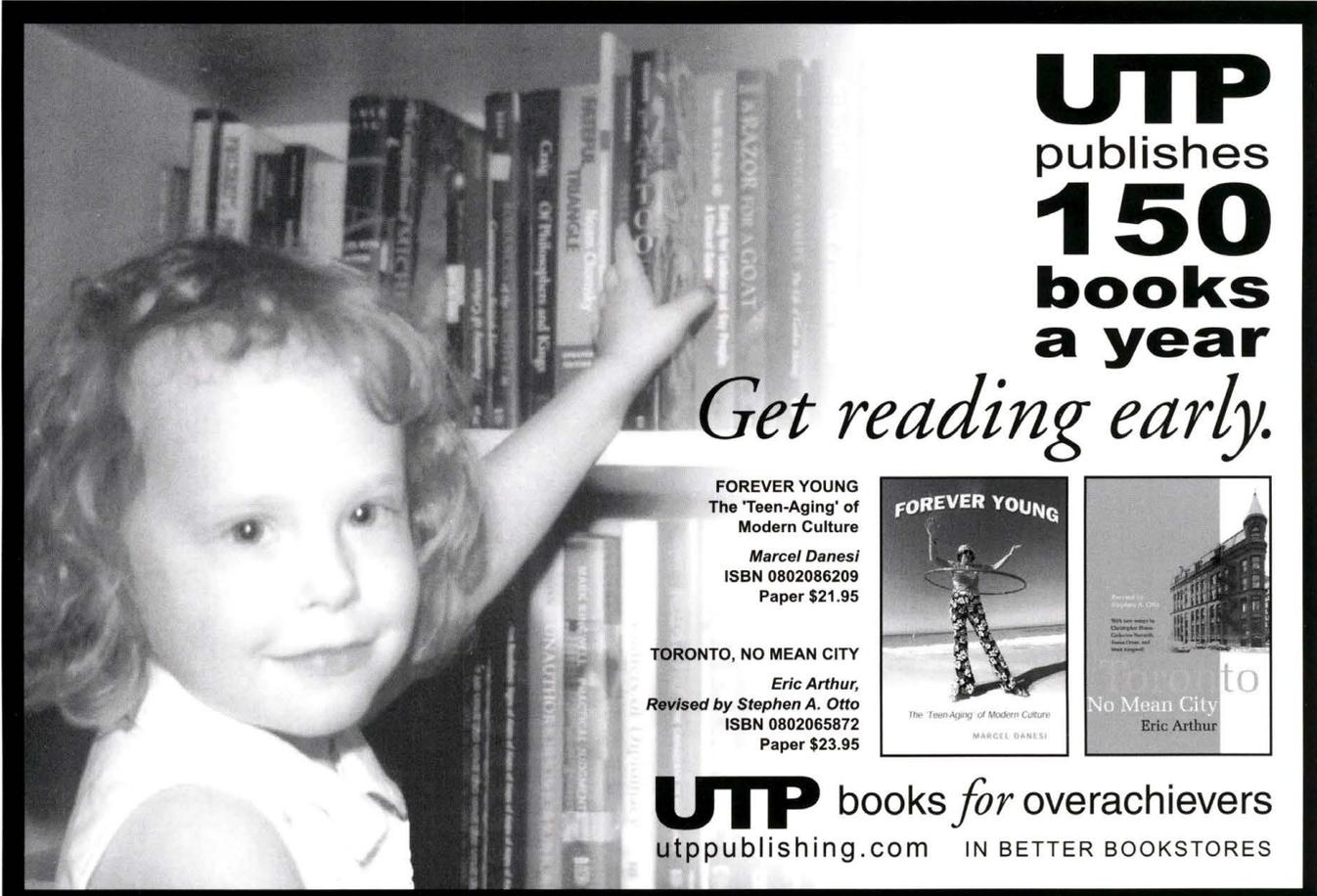
"They bring their guitar but they're too shy to play," he said.

Everyone in the bar was looking at us. So Cheesy smiled. When Cheesy smiled, birds began to sing. He said, "O.K. One song. Just let me get my nerve up with another beer." Then, when no one was looking, we grabbed the guitar case and fucked off.

I'm not sure what I am trying to say.

Earlier that night, the friendly waiter came up to our table and gave me a scalp massage, even though I didn't want one. Why he did this, I don't know, but I'll tell you what it was like. It was: a) annoying; b) embarrassing; and c) get your hands off my head.

Last thing I heard, Tim Cheeseworth

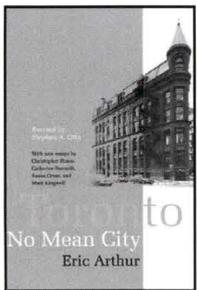
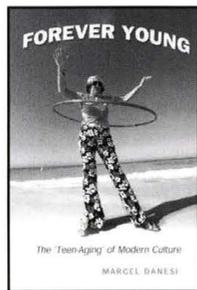


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# ORLANDO

Nothing is so exciting as intellect and volition in the wolf. —*Leo Spitzer*

1.

Blue moon, you saw me standing. Alone.  
Gender-bent in the bent light:  
    no dream, no star, no love, no room of my own.  
Merely the water's brief madness  
Reflected still in the still night.

Here is forced escape & friction of breath. Held.  
What becomes this measured distance  
That stamps a quasi-figure trapped between knuckle & elbow?  
How elide such dark poetic principle  
Meant to smash a novel voice into a net of bones?

2.

*If* myths are the genitals of the collective unconscious.  
What boots? Kicked against the pricks argues the point  
For no other felt cause save to crack heaven's glassy arch.  
As when soft ware bends to hard ware  
    & mouth harp bends to upright organ in the joint.

As when plump doves bend to chiselled hawks.  
As when round, fragrant flesh bends to coarse, musty fur.  
As when pear-shaped tones bend to growls in the dark.  
As when the old interior monologue  
Hunkers at the moon's feet & drowns in a babble of fears.

3.

How resolve a human intercourse  
That always changes, never lasts, never becomes affectionate?  
As loving a plant for its roots rather than its flowers  
Has a fiend dug deep into its own grave heart.  
Here is matter: the dead-rock moon & *woe man* hard upon it.

Virginia Woolf was no dwarf  
With stones in her mouth to confound the wind.  
Her medium was liquid & the utter  
Ring of silence  
Gave just cause for transformation.

—STAN ROGAL

married a German girl and moved to Germany. I have no idea what he is doing now, but I hope he's O.K. We had lots of good times. I hope he is happy, or if not happy, then at least comfortable.

Perhaps you are curious about what happened to Brownie and me after our strange prom-night adventure. Well, after we fucked, we climbed in

the shower and cleaned ourselves up. After our shower, Brownie splashed on some vomit-smelling cologne and stole a DVD player for a souvenir. Then we went back to Magda's party and left the underpants photo on the dresser in her parents' bedroom.

Later on, Brownie tried to sell the DVD player at a pawn shop. Unfortunately for him, the pawn-shop guy had a list of stolen goods. While he dis-

tracted Brownie with forms to sign, the other pawn-shop guy called the police.

Brownie spent a couple months in jail. While he was there, another prisoner, a drug dealer, got him reading motocross racing magazines. When he got out, he got a job and saved up and bought a dirt bike. At first he rode for fun. Then he got into an amateur league. After that, he started winning money here and there. Then he moved off dirt and raced on asphalt. That's when he had his accident. I heard this from friends. And that was it for Brownie.

Here's what happened to me:

Not much.

Some women, like the German girl, get a guy like Tim Cheeseworth. Some women, like Magda, get a concrete slab. Most are somewhere in-between.

Maybe I'm not happy, but at least I'm more or less not uncomfortable.

The point of which is sometimes love is not enough. Sometimes you love someone and it's just not enough. People are still dicks, no matter how much other people love them. Not that I loved Brownie.

I remember the first boy I loved. His name was Danny Fisk. We were fifteen. We went to Springbank Park at dusk. We laid on a blanket of warm, wet grass. I pressed my hands to his, and he touched his lips to mine, and moisture formed every time we came together.

"I love you," I said. "I love you so much." The sky was dark and grey and huge. The wind was whipping through our clothes. "I love you," I said. The leaves were clapping high overhead.

"I love you, too," he said. The world was new and life was long. And what was going to happen? I didn't care. Right now, I was with Danny, whose eyes were green.

"I love you," I said. "I love you, I love you, I love you." Where else could I have possibly wanted to be?

"I love you, too," he said.

And then, just like that, we disappeared. ♪

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*David Whitton lives in North Toronto. He is a writer and editor whose favourite N.F.L. team is the San Diego Chargers. His fiction has appeared in the Dalhousie Review. He is currently working on a book of short stories.*

# Heinous Scabus eaticus

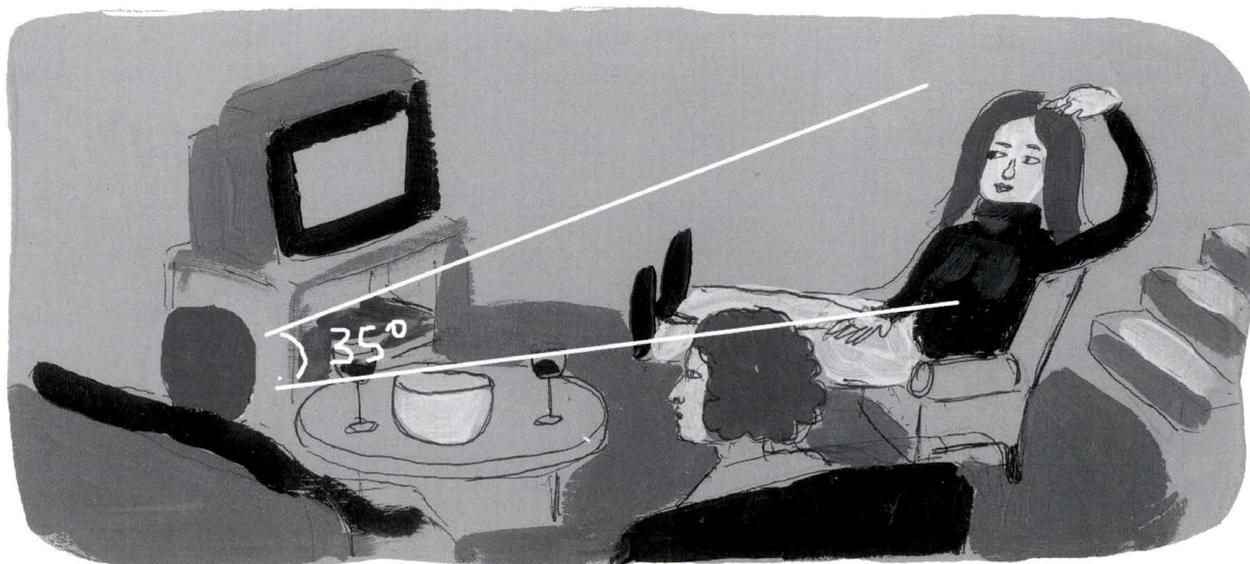
By Rachele Maynard



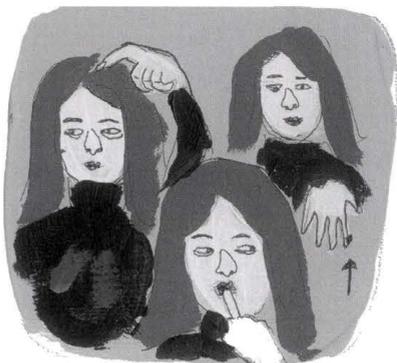
Scab eaters are rare, but they do exist and live among us. What is it about this heinous habit that makes me want to vomit and cry?



Let us observe this scab eater in her natural habitat. She is a tornado of fingernails and forearms.



This skilled scab eater has been picking and eating for years, but what she doesn't know is that we can see her. She thinks we don't know what she does. Maybe she doesn't understand the concept of peripheral vision.



Each scab eater is different in their approach. Some pick, look, lick, while others pick, look, flick.



Scab eaters are so skilled that they can even trick you into thinking they're just searching their head for stray bits of lint or feathers.



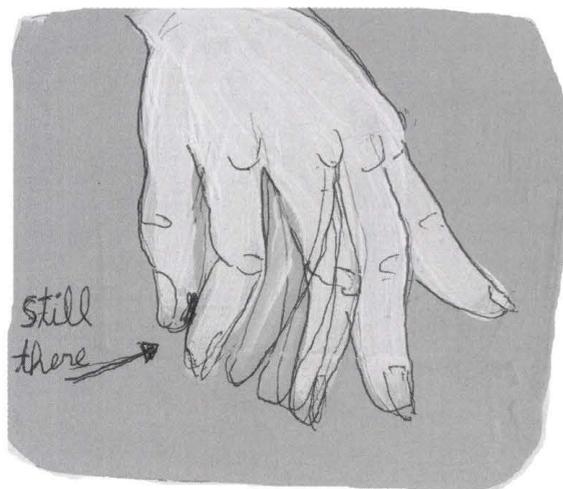
Things to know about the *Heinous scabus eaticus*: they have long nails, great for picking one's head. Do not confuse them with cocaine addicts; picking is far worse a habit.



They usually start by feeling their scalp with fingertips, stopping only to find nuggets of dried, clotted blood.



They commence picking until the scab has been detached from the scalp. Then, taking the index finger and thumb, they grab hold of the scab firmly, being careful not to break it, while in a slow, continuous motion, they slide the scab down the hair follicle until it has been released.



Now, the next stage is where you need to pay close attention. This scab eater tricks you into thinking that she does not eat them. The first trick is called the fake crumble. This is where she holds the scab in her index finger and thumb, while rapidly flicking her middle finger against her thumb, causing you to think she's gotten rid of the contents. She has not.



The next fakery is the lodge and bite. This is where she lodges the scab under her fingernail. She then casually starts trimming her nails with her teeth and, in turn, gets the goods.



And lastly, after a full two hours of picking, you get to see the less-graceful support and pick. This is where she gets tired from all that picking, but still cannot stop and must support her picking arm at the elbow. It's not a pretty sight.



This leads us to the most important question we all have to ask ourselves, one that I have yet to answer: how did she get all those scabs in the first place?

# I LOVE YOU, PRETTY PUPPY

FICTION BY EMILY SCHULTZ

I'm in love with you and the dog is licking herself.

That's my life.

We lay on the bed, our smell rising up in the steam heat of this dismal apartment, our ugly skin the best part of our lives together: your arm under my head, and my ugly face turned into the small perfect heartbeat that taps out of your sunken chest. Our naked legs tangle together in a spidery imitation of hair and skin. Our fluids dry all sweet and sour, yours in mine and mine on yours. And I love you. I love you from the only beautiful part of me, the part that neither of us can see.

On the floor next to the bed, the dog has stopped scratching, stopped shaking the room with the thwack of her leg and the jangle of tags. Instead, she's started licking the place between her legs. Making the room sound like rain. And it's gross, like us, this inappropriate lapping.

"O.K., get off," you say, squirming out from underneath me. Rolling up off the mattress, your body falls around you again, like a bird spreading its wings. Your ass is like a sponge that has sopped up something heavy. A sprinkle of acne scars your shoulders. These are the leftovers of adolescence as we pull up into our thirties. You drift away from me.

You walk out of the room slowly, and in the light of the bathroom doorway, you push your hair out of your eyes. In silhouette, you could be graceful, if I didn't know you the way that I do. If I didn't know.

I put my hand between my legs and feel the place where we meet. It's sticky.

In the other room, the pipes whistle. You run the water, and as you wait for it to warm—though I can't see you—I know you are standing over the toilet, pissing.

It's terrible really, to live this way. The first time I saw you, I fell in love with you. I knew at that exact moment that—for better or worse—we would be together forever. Until that day I had never seen anyone uglier than me. Or at least, no one who hadn't been deformed

by some birth defect or accident. No one who had been marred by a simple meeting of bad genetics coming to the forefront without any nameable disability. Do you know what it means to feel that way? You do, I know you do, but it still makes me self-consciously sick inside. My whole life, the only time I felt good about myself was when I saw someone less fortunate than I was.

I tried to be good. I was good. But then it would creep up, every once in a while, when I was lucky, when I was unlucky. It would be there, like the boy at the back of the bus who wore puppy dog sweaters when we were in the eighth grade, their blotchy blue yarn snouts and banana-shaped ears stitched onto the pockets.

He was my salvation. Him, and the rare—the few—others like him. He tried to speak to me, to make friends, but I never let him. We were alike, but not. After all, he wasn't really ugly, just faultlessly stupid. After a while, our silence became special. It stretched from front to back, over the seats, an invisible cloud of love and hate. I could feel him staring at the back of my head. The wind blew my hair all around, making a wild nest that I tried and tried to keep down. Sometimes I would gaze up into the large rectangle of the driver's rear-view. I would catch him staring; he was too dim to realize I could see him in the reflection. His mouth was slack, his eyes sad. I did love him. I did, in a way. I imagined that he drank milk at night, that his mother still brought it to him in bed and kissed him, that he dreamt Disney characters would come and help him capture all of the smart, beautiful, normal kids and send them away. That one day he and I would meet on the Island of Misfit Toys. But we shared only that—silence and a few angry glances—a secret attraction and aversion I controlled cruelly. Ignoring him was worse than anything the other kids could do to him.

Thankfully, by the time I met you, I was old enough to know better. Old enough to have developed self-interest, a strange, disjointed, macabre fascination

with myself. Not narcissism—they say that that word is always misused—but you know what I mean. I'm sure you know the word for it, even though I don't.

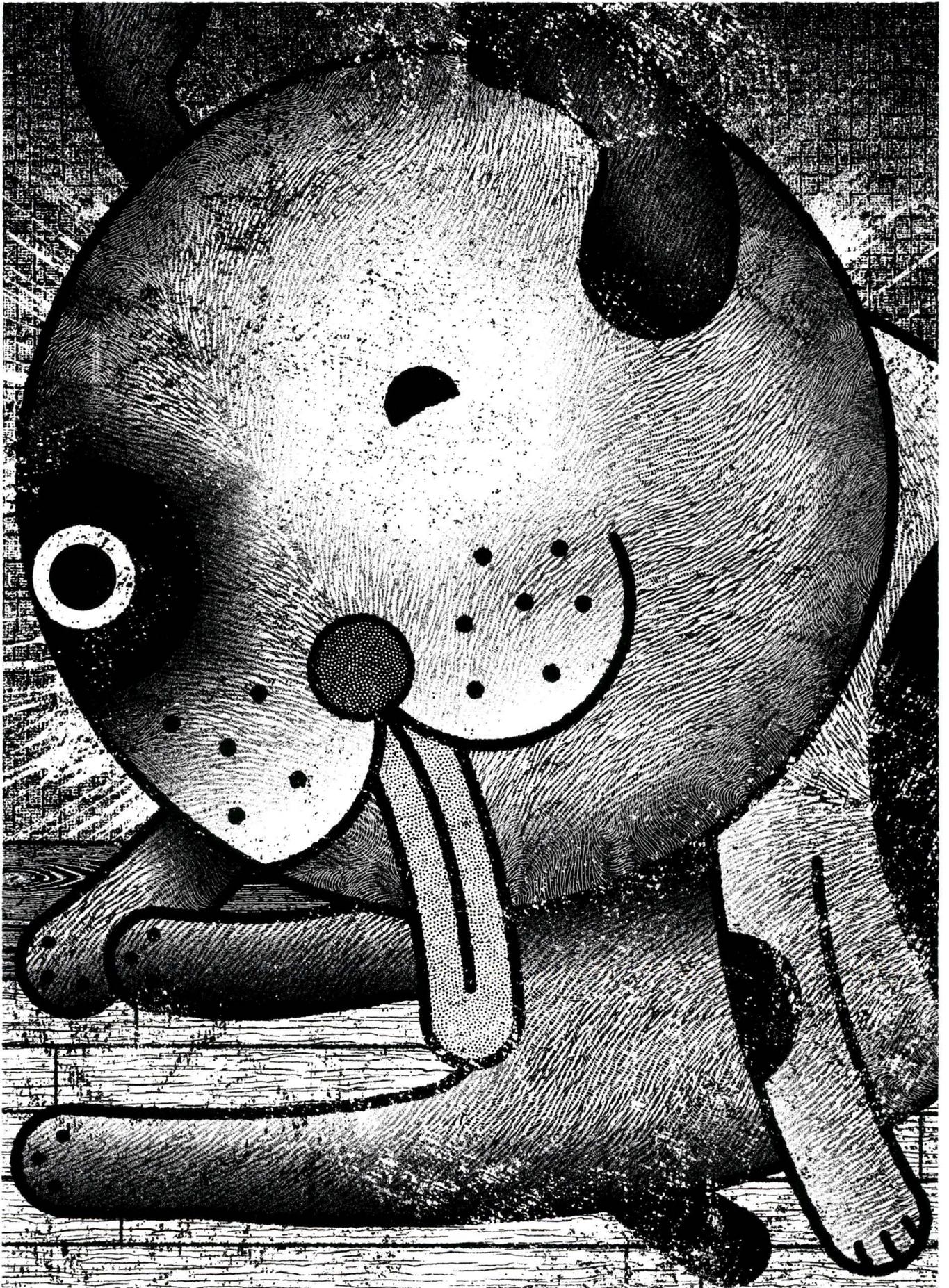
No, by then, ugliness had become a kind of light to me. I had grown used to it, had even learned to look for it.

In my last year of high school, I developed an enormous crush on the fat girl who brought her father as her date to the prom. She was stronger than I was. She had a satin fuchsia dress. She at least had someone to dance with. She didn't care what they thought. I had only the girl with the harelip who got straight As and talked to me about mathematics, as if that could be considered conversation. We huddled together, daring one another to down the spiked punch, poking one another in the ribs, saying no when one of the hockey guys ambled over and asked her—then me—to dance. We were wise and gutless. It was only a joke. And on the way home, we vomited up peach schnapps behind the Mac's convenience and confessed we each wished we'd said yes, even if we knew he would go back to his friends, the big man collecting bet money. To feel for just three minutes his taut body holding us tentatively, above our heads his bright skin, his velvet cheeks, his valentine lips, his eyes like plums. Why do I still remember?

The girl in the fuchsia dress became a journalist. The harelip girl became a professor of mathematics. The boy with the liquid eyes knocked up his girlfriend and then left her. He became manager at a McDonald's. He stopped playing hockey, balded early, got fat.

Scenarios like this helped me to survive. Kept me from locking myself in the bathroom, holding my father's razor like a crucifix.

When I was still an adolescent, they told me they could fix my face. Part of it, anyway. One night, after my parents had gone to sleep, I got up and, in the orange glow of the night light, I stood staring into the mirror—for over an hour. Looking in turn at the different features of my face. My eyes. My nose. My jaw. My



mouth. Coming back to my eyes again.

I said to myself, "This is my face." To change any one part of it would change the entire thing.

"This is my face," I said.

I met you in a crowded room, everyone talking, someone passing around a sweet-burning paper cone full of pot. People were dancing in the foot or two of space between the living room and kitchen of this little apartment. And then there was you, sitting in the corner, every gesture you made slow and deliberate, and everyone in the room (who wasn't dancing or stoned) looking at you, gathered around you, gradually moving chairs closer to you or sitting down on the patch of worn carpet in front of you, all of them looking and listening.

You struck me as a circus performer. You were fat-thin, your hair long-short, the fingers that held your cigarette swollen like those of a midget (though I know that's not what they like to be called). You gestured with this lit thing, gracefully, turning your head, your large round eyes, your mouth pulling open, pulling open, pulling open before the words would come out. You weren't handicapped. You weren't retarded. You weren't even ugly. You were beautiful, the only one there who wasn't uniform. They all wore jeans and brown loafers and iron-flat buttoned shirts. You wore an oversized T-shirt and jogging pants and a pair of old runners. I couldn't take my eyes off you. And when I got closer, I could see why they all stared too. The things that fell from your mouth were unbelievable. My walking trivia box. My living history boy. My gorgeous genius.

I broke into a sweat. I knew you could never love me. Right then, just like that, my mind was made up. I would love you for all I was worth, if only you would look at me, just look at me.

When we made love the first time, it was as if we were kids in a playroom, trying not to get caught shoving plastic toys down our shorts. Your cock was like a small mouse inside me. Furry and brown, ready to leave its leg behind in its rush to get away. We made love again and again until we got better at it. Until we were like two adults in a hotel room instead. We made love until we were dirty and gasping. We were ugly, we were the ugly people, and we

## FISH BONES

When Jesus died, Mary Magdalene went into a deep depression. She just sat staring at walls for indeterminate amounts of time, fingering the edge of her cloak, refusing to eat, sleep, or sponge bathe.

The Apostles (who never really liked her hanging around) were all, like, "What's her deal? It's not like they were *together* or anything."

Peter especially felt she needed to get over herself and consider *him* in all of this. After all, *he* was the special one and you didn't see *him* making a spectacle of *himself*. (Although Matthew had observed he was a little jumpy whenever he heard a cock crow.)

Still, there was no consoling Mary. Her friends urged her to buck up. "Girl, you have to get over it already," they said. "There're other fishes in the sea, and besides, he was a queer one anyway. All that time in the company of men. Who's single at thirty-three anyway?"

And Mary remembered all the times they ate fish together. How Jesus liked his just a little crispy on the outside and hated having to spit out bone like a common man. "You know, Mary," he said to her once, "I don't mind the whole human thing. Except for the fish bones. You can bet the next time I'll make

had no right to this. We did it again, just to be sure. Just to show them. The non-existent them we felt were more real than ourselves.

Months and months of this.

And then, one day, me pissing and moaning about the assholes at work, an asshole on the bus, an asshole on the radio saying some asshole thing, people moving around not wanting to sit next to me, some kid looking at me like I was more disgusting than a turd on a stick. Over an afternoon table, this conversation drifted above a plate of nachos, some non-descript band on the jukebox, and you said, "One day you'll look back, and think these were the best times of your life."

"I hope I would never think that *these*

are the best times of my life."

"Yes, you will," you said. "You think you're ugly now? You're only going to get uglier."

"Well, thanks," I said. I couldn't believe you could be so cruel. "Thanks a fucking lot."

You leaned back, all confidence, the smell from your armpits hitting me gently as you stuck your palms behind your head. That tangy one-time aphrodisiac, now greasy and gross as congealed cheese.

"The same goes for me," you said. "For everyone. You should see things as they are. It's never been as bad as you think."

And then you launched into some example, or string of examples. You were a double-major in history and religion. In spite of being an atheist. You have an

sure that I can get my fish  
crispy and boneless.”

Mary laughed, spitting bits of bone  
into the sand. “Sure, crispy, boneless  
fish. That’ll happen. I’m sure it’s top priority.”  
“Don’t underestimate the mutability of seafood,”  
Jesus warned, and she smiled, resting her  
head against his shoulder.

Standing now at the shore without him,  
Mary watches the tide and repeats  
what he told her after the cross and the tomb:  
“My return will be marked by the easy availability  
of boneless, crispy fish products, Mary. Go,  
tell the Apostles so that they might spread this  
good news.” But the Apostles only laughed.

“Of course, a woman sees salvation in only  
selfish terms,” they chided (secretly jealous that she  
should have seen him first). “Only a lazy woman would  
seek the return of the Messiah coupled with a  
time-saving, yet not unpractical, boneless fish product.”

It was Mark who deduced she must have  
misunderstood. “Perhaps she’d heard ‘crispy,’ but  
certainly ‘boneless’ was ‘soulless,’ and undoubtedly  
‘products’ was really ‘harlots.’ And ‘fish,’ well,  
that’s clearly ludicrous. Thus the real message had been:  
“My return will be marked by the availability  
of soulless, crispy *Miss Easy* harlots.”  
“Crispy *Miss Easy* harlots?” Luke questioned.  
“Whores in the fires of hell,” Mark explained,  
and they all nodded, looking intently at Mary.

—NANCY GOBATTO

example for everything.

But I wasn’t listening. I began think-  
ing about the differences between men  
and women—and how I would only  
grow older and uglier, but you would  
grow wiser—and how an unattractive  
man is never as undesirable as an unat-  
tractive woman, particularly if he is in-  
telligent or distinguished in some  
way—and how when we do go out you  
are the one that people want to make  
conversation with—and how I will sit  
to the side exchanging the most menial  
pleasantries—how people have always  
clustered around you, in spite of your  
looks—how you are the kind of person  
people wait to speak to—and I am the  
kind they walk away from. Sometimes  
mid-sentence.

A giant fear began to rumble through  
my stomach. I knew you would leave me,  
knew it as certainly as I had known six  
years before that we would always be to-  
gether. You would grow successful—you  
were already—and there would be wo-  
men—and there would be flirta-  
tions—and they would be beautiful—and  
they would be open to you for the first  
time—and then I would not be interest-  
ing. I would just be ugly. Uglier, even.

Were you with me because you loved  
me? Or because at the time I was all you  
could have? Did you keep me because  
you wanted me? Or because you just  
didn’t have the heart to get rid of me?

That night, for the first time since I  
was a teenager, I locked myself in the  
bathroom to cry. You tried to come in,

but I’d locked the door. The knob  
turned and stuck.

“Are you O.K., babe?” you called  
through the door, easy-like, the way you  
are.

“Go away,” I said, sniffing back mu-  
cous. “I’m taking a shit.”

“But you’re taking so long . . . ?”

“Must have been something I ate,” I  
lied. The only truth in it was that my guts  
felt like a needle had been put through  
them repeatedly, sewing them into a fist.

“The dog’s desperate to go out,” you  
said.

“Then you take her.”

At a certain point, hate goes past  
hate and, if not back to love again,  
then at least to liking. Truly attractive  
people had become that to me long ago.  
After I met you, their beauty stopped  
bothering me.

Until I met Norman.

It was the same as when I met you,  
only worse. I was completely repulsed.  
The idea that I would want to lay a body  
like mine next to a body like his sent me  
into cold sweats in my seat. He was flaw-  
less and beautiful, but only on one side.

He worked two cubicles over. I was  
grateful for the fuzzy grey half-walls be-  
tween us. It meant I didn’t have to look  
at him. His head was shocking, its short  
bright hair like an ad for a shampoo  
commercial. He had the body of a grey-  
hound. His shoulders were fists and his  
waist was abominably narrow. When he  
turned sideways, he was all muscle and  
rib cage. I had never seen anyone so con-  
ventionally perfect. But when he turned  
to the other side, his skin pulled away in  
white ridges, and he was half-skeleton,  
the long scars running in vertical wrin-  
kles across his gorgeous face. His pocked  
neck. His twisted shoulder flesh. His  
hard, hollow skin. He’d been burned.

I had never been attracted to anyone  
like him, had never seen the circum-  
stances of our lives being as hard as those  
of our birthrights. How golden his life  
must have been, and then to have it all  
yanked away, scalding . . . How far down  
his body did those bone-like scars go?  
Did they diverge across his chest? Or  
stretch all the way over his hip bones? I  
wanted to feel him tear at my skin, feel  
his anger at the injustice, feel it manifest  
in the blunt, mesmerizing beat of lust.

I kept an inventory of his habits. He  
was polite—and frugal with himself

and with others—and he was a drink-box bachelor, his lunches nothing but gym towels he hung to dry on the hook inside his cubicle—and he kept a bottle of salve inside his desk drawer—and it smelled like pine needles and eucalyptus—and, to make matters worse, a good thick novel he replaced every week with another—and he was a two-finger typist, though almost as fast as a professional—and the keys clicked underneath the clean crescent moons of his impeccable nails—and when he walked by, he moved like a cat—and he always smirked instead of fully smiling as though he was thinking something dirty—and the skin on his burned side was the colour one imagines an angel's wing would be—and around him I felt myself lift, my breasts become little pieces of lace, stitched on.

At night, you moved over me like a ghost, and I no longer felt you or smelled you. Afterward, I would walk the dog.

Out in the snow, she padded in circles, sniffing, pushing her nose down into the ground, long strings of saliva collecting ice.

"Why can't I have this?" I asked. I whispered it out loud into the cold empty night. "This," meaning Norman,

meaning something beautiful, or half-beautiful. "Just once," I thought, "why not me?"

The dog squatted and did her business.

When I came back in, you were uglier than ever.

I locked myself in the bathroom. I shaved my legs. I took a loofah and did my feet. I pulled hairs from my nipples with tweezers. You knew me. You knew I was ugly and you had stopped seeing my ugliness. To Norman, everything would be obvious. The hairs would jut from my body like curls of copper wire. My feet would be rough as concrete. My thighs would be soft and wrinkled as a lizard's underbelly.

Norman liked me. No one had ever liked me before. You had loved me, but I doubted now that you had ever liked me.

"You're very interesting," he said, letting the emphasis fall on the first part of the word. Norman said I was clever. Norman said I was hilarious. Norman said I was sweet. He did not say any of the things that other people had said. He did not say, "Do you ever think of getting your teeth straightened?" or

"Have you tried contact lenses?"

We went for coffee after work. It became a regular thing. We stayed out very late and never talked about work. He told me about his apartment (above a convenience store), his previous girlfriends (one shallow, another fickle), other places he had lived (the West), the places he had travelled (the East), and what he most desired (to accurately document the time we were living in). I desperately wanted to ask him how it had happened, how he had been burned, but I knew everyone else must have asked him that. For Norman it must have been the equivalent of, "Have you ever tried to do something else with your hair?"

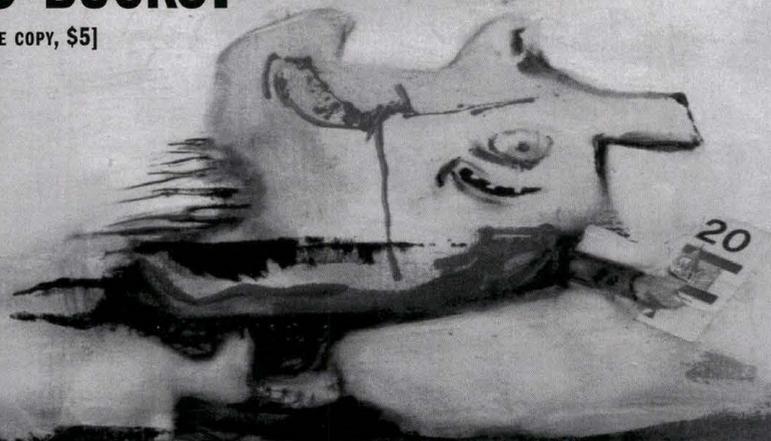
He smiled his half-smile. He smirked, and smirked, and smirked some more. His mouth was like a faint red comma pencilled on a piece of paper. It was obvious what he was thinking. We were going to have an affair. We were going to have a wonderful, awful affair. I glanced in the mirror across from our booth and I saw a man and a woman. In the dim lighting of the diner, I could not see our faults, only our profiles. "That is what she looks like," I thought to myself, "the woman who has an affair."

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# PLUM

Trees so pink  
they seem to hold no leaves,  
no green at all.

It is as if this May  
I became  
suddenly sympathetic to exuberance.

I call them plum because of their blush,  
consider my assessment of their beauty  
above reproach.  
Every time I see one I feel lyrical.

I watch for what will happen next,  
knowing there's a plot.  
When blossoms die, as they are bound to,  
trees go green.

My friend who knows her flowering trees  
told me they're actually crabapple.  
The fruit, therefore,  
will not be sweet.

—ELANA WOLFF

In the shadows of the parking garage, Norman's car smelled like leather and oil. I thought of you, just once, as I was getting in. Then Norman's bad side was to me, and he leaned in and kissed me on the mouth. His tongue was softer than the rest of him, and that made me nervous. I pulled to the side and wound up laying my lips against his scars before I realized it. He put his hands up my shirt without asking, and then, before I realized it, he had slid them down into my lap. He moved with the fast confidence of a beautiful man, even as my mouth was pressed against his ugly part.

Up close he didn't look ugly or beautiful. He just looked like a stranger.

"I can't," I said, "I can't." I pushed him away from me.

He smelled all wrong. Like mint leaves and pine incense.

"What do you mean?" he said, and when I started to cry, he slapped the dash hard, and not with the flat part of his hand. He got out of the car and made some adjustments to his clothes. When he got back in, he revved the engine and drove too fast.

I stared into the side-view mirror all the way home. I could see part of my

face in it—my mouth—my ugly mouth and the black side of this stranger's car. Even ugly people could be assholes.

When I entered the apartment I could tell something had happened. Things had been thrown here and there, newspapers and a couple of cardboard boxes. Your old pair of shoes tripped me in the doorway of the bedroom. A blanket hung over the arm of the chair. A strange stale smell lingered in the air.

Everything was much too still.

Panic threw a punch at my head and I gripped the door frame. Then I realized what exactly was so wrong: you were gone, but so was the dog.

At the emergency vet clinic, you slumped among a long row of plastic chairs. Above you, a television strapped to the wall played a late-night infomercial. As I came through the doors, I watched your face hanging there, blotchy, a clown's face, your expression fixed, permanent. You stood up but didn't move, and for the first time, I think, I really knew you needed me as much as I did you. I forgot what I had done an

hour before and I grabbed hold of you.

"Is she all right?" I asked. I could feel fear on your skin like an extra layer. You gripped my back with your hands, your fingers spread.

On the phone message at home, you had explained the oceans of puke, and how she had crawled half under our bed—you thought—to die. The vet didn't know what was wrong with her.

A wave of your perspiration hit my face as you pulled me into your shoulder. "I'm sorry," I said, even though she was my dog, technically. Even though I had been the one crying all the way over in the taxi. Even though I was the more wretched of the two of us and didn't deserve to be anywhere—even here—with you. Your body felt bumpy and right, warm and accepting through your old grey sweatshirt.

"I love you," I said. It was all I could think of to say.

They let me go into the back to see her. The room where they had her was about the size of a bathroom, bare except for this animal tethered to an I.V.

She sprawled on her side in the middle of the floor, and didn't move when I came in. I could tell by the smell that she had let her glands go earlier. The bitter stink still streaked the air. Her back end was dirty—dirty smeared clean—as though she might have defecated on herself at some point and some intern had made a half-hearted attempt to wipe her up. I said her name, but she still didn't move. She found me with her eyes, but showed no sign of caring. Her eyes had turned yellow with jaundice. Her dark pupils floated in two small pools of pus in her long face. I had never seen anything so pathetic. She was feeble, pitiful, and sad.

I fell to my knees and put my hands in her fur, stroking the top of her head and behind her ears. "Please don't die," I whispered. "Please stay with me. Please. Stay."

Behind me, I could hear you trying not to cry.

"I love you, pretty puppy," I whispered. "My beautiful doggy girl." I put my lips to the crest of her crusted nose and kissed her. ☽

---

*Emily Schultz lives in Parkdale. Her short story collection, *Black Coffee Night*, was published by *Insomniac* in 2002. She is the editor of both the *Pocket Canon* and *Broken Pencil*.*

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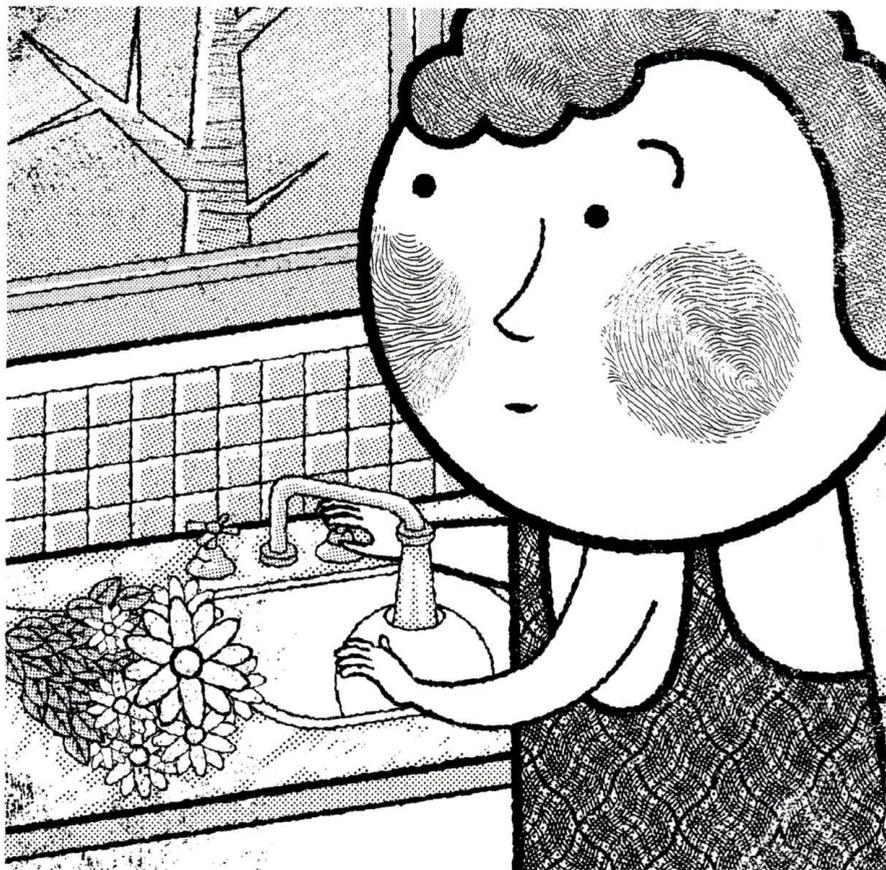
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# FLOWERS DON'T FRIGHTEN ME SO MUCH ANY MORE

FICTION BY KIM DAWN

Flowers don't frighten me so much any more.  
Logically, I now know they are not waiting for me.  
Big daisy mouth waiting to devour my face, my head.  
I do get a little anxious when I see groupings of them,  
hear them whispering my name,  
giggling their heads off.

I wanted not to feel, but to be taken  
away. I wanted to lie in the snow and suck  
and melt and fuck and not feel. (This  
actualizes itself in the lying-in-the-snow  
part eight years later, Laura saves me.)

I see images in letters.  
I climb into these images  
between words. It's the letters  
that seduce me, not the words.

Inside the letters within the words, there are words. If you look at words, find the open letters, blur the letters around the open letters, and climb in.

Strawberries along the dirt road, eels under the bridge.  
Tire tubes swirling downstream.  
Me and her.

I'm feeling a lot of lines  
echo and resonate deep within me,

some of the stuff just sends  
fascinated chills, and the relief of  
feeling understood.

I thought I saw her walking past  
my building around 9:30 A.M.,  
not looking at it, just walking  
ahead, straight ahead, walking  
by just as I was leaving.

I am dressed as a naughty,  
dirty, mouth in chocolate, clown-red  
lipstick, never sleeping, nightmare  
eight-year-old girl.

I am trying to force  
myself to stay awake.  
I hate sleeping through days,  
but it's unbearable. I need to  
lie down again, my head  
is all pins and needley.

S/he (impossible to tell) said,  
"What's this?" The gesture was of  
gnawing something in your palm.

Now, I don't know why, but  
I felt like my feet were  
coming out from under me.  
They turned to jelly,  
I felt nauseous, and like  
a secret had been exposed.  
(I don't know why or what  
I'm talking about with that secret)  
It still really disturbs me.

This whole week I've been off,  
irritable, exhausted, headaches all  
the time.

I really loved this one.  
I found the relationship  
between the victim and her  
perpetrator fascinating.

“shameless.”  
What a great name for a girls' magazine!

— Gloria Steinem

# { community BANDWIDTH }

Community Bandwidth is many things. It's a new idea. It's experimental and it's always in transition: exploring, growing and learning. But, in general, Community Bandwidth is one of following:

A practice that supports the not-for-profit, voluntary and cultural sectors in their exploration of technology in areas like campaigning, advocacy, capacity building and community engagement;

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*technology. simplified*

Working on the entire school in terms of mind control, and the poetry was so moving.

I'm right off, just trying to cope with everything, everything seems big, I've been eating O.K. stuff that doesn't usually bother me, and this past week my stomach's been awful.

I'm having intense dreams  
I can only sense, but not recall.

Then I get angry, worn out eventually,  
talking to them, and try to assert myself.

I need to try working  
my fragmented self into a structure,  
but my mind can't follow structure,  
I loose the thread  
and it becomes fragments.  
Would the fragments be of  
any use to anyone?

I am hungry for success.

I dreamt that I was  
in a prison, only  
it wasn't me, it was her.  
No, it was a morph of  
me and her together.  
Her dog was there, too.  
The boyfriend was  
in jail, too. We had  
committed some sort  
of murderous crime.  
I tried taking pills,  
or the boyfriend  
gave them to me.  
The dog turned  
evil and vicious.

I WANT TO LIVE IN JECKY'S FUR.  
I want my main activity to be  
sleep.

I move into my studio Monday.  
I can't wait to make a mess!!!  
I bought ten dollars in paper.

The room reflected her bodily process of forgetting and storing traumatic memories for so many years, and the ensuing gush of the return of feeling to her body, the suddenly not fully submerged state, the fragmented ice shards poking and protruding slowly and relentlessly.

She sleeps underground.  
 There is no light.  
 The tiny cracks of light  
 do not count.  
 Her hair is peach.  
 Likes cold things,  
 all warm things make  
 her nauseous, even her  
 blankets. She likes  
 her blankets cool  
 against her skin.  
 She likes to go out  
 for breakfast at  
 suppertime.  
 She sees no self,  
 only a shadow  
 of her self.  
 She misses autumn  
 and snow. She lives  
 in a tropical place now.

I also bought myself a sweater, I  
 love it, I wear it every single  
 second. It's beige, with a zipper and a  
 hood, way cozy. I can disappear, be  
 safe, be warm, under the hood.

I worry that I am being  
 quite paranoid with thinking  
 my legs were going out  
 from under me and I couldn't speak,  
 I was frozen as s/he told it to me.

I went to the hairdresser to get  
 all the red, my natural colour,  
 out of my hair, it's supposed to  
 be blond, but it's not and she  
 left red in it. I hate my red  
 hair, I look like I did in high  
 school when I have it, and I hate  
 that face.

Why can't I be special?

I dressed. I wandered. I withdrew \$1.12 from  
 one account, three dollars from another. I sold  
 clothes at a second-hand store, made  
 ten dollars there. I bought cigarettes and  
 chocolate. I smoked and I melted.  
 Wandered.  
 Snow.  
 I smoked hash, cigarettes sang.  
 I flew downtown.  
 I shone.  
 I collapsed.  
 I woke. I needed water. I was dizzy. My  
 throat was raw. I stood by the sink. I fell  
 backward. I hit my head.  
 I blacked out. ☞

## CONTRIBUTORS

John Degen ("In Manhattan One Evening with the Reverend Al Sharpton," p. 7) is a poet and playwright living in Dovercourt Village, and the author of *Killing Things* (Pedlar, 2002). His poem "Bicycles," from *Taddle Creek's* summer, 2002, issue, was recently nominated for a National Magazine Award.

Karyn Bonham ("If I Were Burt Reynolds," p. 9) lives in Dufferin Grove. She writes music reviews for *Broken Pencil*.

Trevor Davis ("Tea with Satan, p. 19) lives in Keswick, Ontario. He is a regular contributor to *Family Camping* magazine and is currently working on a collection of poetry and a screenplay.

Stan Rogal ("Orlando," p. 21) lives in Bloorcourt Village. He is the author of numerous books of poetry, novels, and short story collections. His latest book, *Sub Rosa*, was recently published by Wolsak and Wynn.

Rachelle Maynard ("*Heinous scabius eaticus*," p. 22) lives in Little Italy. She has good hair. Her illustrations have appeared in such publications as the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. Her work can be viewed at [www.rachellemaynard.com](http://www.rachellemaynard.com).

Nancy Gobatto ("Fish Bones," p. 26) lives in North York. Her work has appeared in *Zygote*, *Kiss Machine*, and the *Green Tricycle*. She is working on a Ph.D. in women's studies and is supposed to be writing about Anaïs Nin.

Elana Wolff ("Plum," p. 29) lives in Thornhill, Ontario. Her second collection of poetry, *Mask*, will soon be published by Guernica.

Kim Dawn ("Flowers Don't Frighten Me So Much Any More," p. 30) lives in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. She is an interdisciplinary artist, and a graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

R. M. Vaughan ("Palm Springs Stories No. 1," p. 37) lives in Little Portugal. His latest books are the novel *Spells* (ECW, 2003) and the play collection *The Monster Trilogy* (Coach House, 2003).

# ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL

FICTION BY SHANNON QUINN

Kitten stopped being called Kitten on December 6, 1989, when she was sentenced as a young offender. The judge called her then by the name she shared with her dead mother: Kathleen. Kathleen Maria Basneau, Québécoise mutt and almost-self-made orphan. Curiously lacking at the time was the sensationalism that usually accompanies trials like hers. The facts, with no names attached, had been parcelled into headlines, but the immediacy of the event had passed. Kitten's audience in the courtroom now consisted of her caseworker, a few stragglers seeking shelter from the outdoors, and her best friend, Jasmine. No one made eye contact. The justice system was playing a tired role, going through the motions. It was inevitable that fourteen-year-old Kitten would be sentenced to live in a detention centre until her eighteenth birthday. The sentence was received without any emotional reaction, and Jasmine once again experienced the peculiar feeling that she was dreaming while awake—that none of this was quite real.

Kitten and Jasmine had grown up in the Pointe, where almost everyone was Catholic, white, and poor. The Pointe was a hundred and eighty kilometres east of Montreal. The Pointe bragged nothing of distinction, but had a great deal in common with its neighbouring towns: pockmarked streets, picked-over depanneurs, well-stocked liquor stores, and stagnant beer parlours. The parlours of the Pointe and of the neighbouring towns were thickly muted rooms where a woman's presence was still considered an insult. Kitten's father liked to say that when feminism came to Quebec, she fucked a few people in Montreal but left everybody else alone. Jasmine's aunt used to say that, all things being equal, she'd just as soon have her sherry in her own home, thank you very much.

Kitten grew up with her father, a sullen man who took to trouble. Neighbourhood talk was that he hadn't always

been that way. He had taken to trouble only after Kitten's mother had died from cancer when Kitten was six. The type of trouble he took to was the beer-drinking-fighting variety. No one blamed him. He'd had a hard time when Kitten's mother had passed away. He proudly told the other wives in the Pointe that he could see his dead wife more and more clearly in Kitten's young face as it began to mature.

Jasmine came to the Pointe later, in a very roundabout way. Jasmine had arrived too soon for her teenage mother. And while her mother had been enchanted with the idea of a new little baby, it was a case of desire and practicality being in direct conflict. At three months old, Jasmine became a ward of children's services. She landed a few trial runs with would-be families that lasted two years each, then at the age of eight, she came to live in the Pointe with Penny and Edgar, a childless couple in their sixties. Jasmine never got the opportunity to know Edgar. She arrived in February; he had a massive heart attack in May. Jasmine and "Aunt" Penny then moved into the building where Kitten and her father lived.

The first meeting between Jasmine and Kitten began inauspiciously. Kitten almost fell over Jasmine on the second set of stairs of the squat three-unit building her father, Aunt Penny, and Old Man Delorme all called home. Kitten calmly commanded Jasmine to follow her. On that August afternoon, Jasmine followed Kitten out the front door of the apartment and two houses down to the home of Marguerite and Helene, sisters in their eighties who had spent their lives in eastern Quebec, and who would not give credence to the idea that anything worthwhile happened west of the Pointe.

If you lived in the Pointe and your cat went missing, it was probably in Marguerite and Helene's basement. Without knocking, and with no Marguerite or Helene in sight, Kitten made a bee-line down a well-worn path toward the

basement inhabitants. Amidst the smell of urine-soaked newspaper lived seventeen cats of various shapes and sizes. Startled by their new visitors, the cats lunged for secret corners. Kitten grabbed one slow on the getaway and, thrusting it toward Jasmine, said, "It's so cool that they all live here. See, it's not like Marguerite and Helene steal the cats, the cats *like* it here. They want to live here . . . but just so you know, no one's supposed to know they're down here . . . promise." Kitten pulled the struggling feline back to her chest and gave it a rough kiss before dropping it to the ground. Jasmine now shared her first secret ever with someone in her own age group. She decided she liked this secret bond of stolen cats, and that she liked the frantic girl in front of her who ploughed through space with no apologies for the room she took up.

Jasmine didn't know it, but she was falling in love. It was the beginning of that very special kind of love affair young girls have for one another before puberty teaches them to not trust their bodies and, especially, each other. The attraction was obvious. Kitten was an event. She made things happen. Jasmine would eventually graduate from audience to willing accomplice, and the neighbourhood would never be safe from the loud, sturdy, blond Kitten and the shadowy brunette who was always with her. They became inseparable.

Aunt Penny missed her Edgar terribly. She became prone to bouts of confusion and intoxication. Occasionally, Jasmine's caseworker pressed to have her removed from her care. Aunt Penny always petitioned, and eventually always got Jasmine back. When Jasmine would arrive home, regardless of the duration of her absence, Kitten would be waiting for her, ready to pick up in mid-sentence where they had left off.

The following spring, Kitten came up with a master plan. Jasmine had been away for three weeks. When the bus dropped her off, Kitten was there with all the pertinent details: mice.

They were going to collect mice. They were going to build mice condominiums out of old boxes, and all the mice would live happily together and they would feed and play with them.

There was no shortage of mice in the apartment. They had browns, greys, and white-browns. It was Jasmine's idea to build an integrated community. They were easy to catch. Jasmine was in charge of corralling and Kitten did the snatch job. They set up their makeshift housing units in Kitten's room. Each mouse started off with its own housing unit, but by the end of the second day,

stiff little mouse bodies frozen in various positions of desperation. Kitten was defeated.

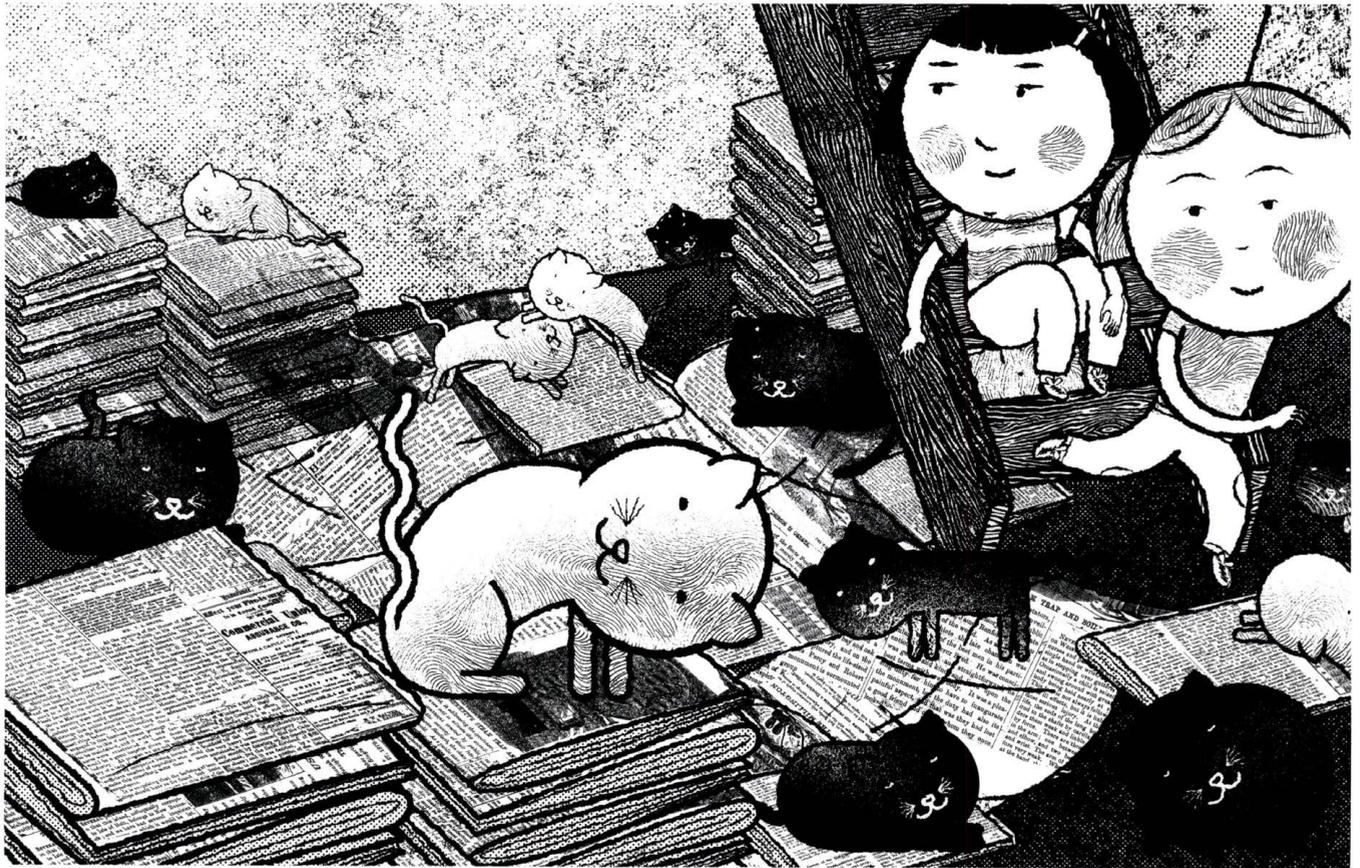
"Air holes . . . they couldn't breathe," she said. "They all suffocated, except I didn't hear them. How is it that I didn't hear them . . . scratching for their lives?"

Kitten switched from anger to confusion, mercilessly poking at each stiff mouse body, occasionally picking one up, staring into its glassy eyes, fingering its outstretched claws.

"How is it that I didn't hear them? That's what gets me. They're dying and I don't notice."

lain sink Jasmine was staring at, and not her. She told Jasmine to keep her retching down and went to find paper towels to clean up the mess. Jasmine could hear Kitten and her father yelling. Kitten came back to the bathroom with the paper towels. She looked embarrassed as she mumbled, "He's pretty drunk, I think you'd better leave."

Jasmine thought it was strange that Kitten seemed afraid of her father. Outside the apartment, Kitten was confident and loud. Jasmine didn't like Kitten's father, and since Kitten would never talk about him, she figured Kit-



there were some serious overcrowding issues. Kitten was responsible for daily maintenance. She liked to be boss. At the end of day two, Kitten's father was telling her to clean out the raunchy stink or there'd be hell to pay.

The next morning, Jasmine woke up with Kitten's face looming over hers. Kitten's voice was desperate and her eyes red. "We've got a problem on our hands."

Jasmine followed Kitten upstairs to her apartment. All of the boxes were laid out on Kitten's bed. Carnage. Kitten ripped off each box top, exposing

Kitten gathered herself. "Maybe we just need to try something stronger . . . rats? Delorme has a couple; I heard him say so."

She went back to the boxes, unable to tear herself away, "Look, this one had babies and ate half of one . . . it's still there."

Jasmine screamed and made it across the hall to the sink before throwing up. From Kitten's father's room they heard him bellow for them to keep it down, that he was trying to fall asleep. Kitten's mouth pursed and her eyes flinched. She was glad that it was the cracked porce-

ten mustn't like him much either.

Two days later, Kitten was ready for action. She'd used her savings to buy a proper cage and was confident that there would be no repeat atrocities. As Kitten banged on Delorme's door, Jasmine was having second thoughts about the enterprise.

Delorme listened quietly as Kitten explained the mission. He had no problem with them taking a rat off his hands. Kitten went into the kitchen, leaving Jasmine and Old Man Delorme standing in his living room. The room was filled with books. Books spilled off

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of shelves, onto the floor; they were even on his bed. They were the old kind: faded, dusty hardcovers. The place smelled of old man, but the books almost made you forget the stink. It was like they somehow made the place respectable.

Delorme and Jasmine eyeballed each other with nothing to say. The only sound came from Kitten as she battled it out in the bottom of a kitchen cupboard with what sounded like a battalion of rats. She came out of the kitchen in a very businesslike manner, a box tucked under her arm, and said, "Thanks, Old Man Delorme. Jasmine, let's move out."

Kitten brought the rat cage down to Jasmine's, as it was still early enough to get her father's back up with noise. Aunt Penny had started in on her morning sherry and was having a fierce dialogue with one of the local TV personalities on her tiny, battered television screen. In the quiet of Jasmine's room, Kitten crouched with the cover still on the box. "He was a hard one to get. I'm gonna call him Drano, cuz that's what I had to hit him on the head with to stun him for a second."

Jasmine worried about Drano's condition. Could rats withstand can attacks? Kitten lifted the lid and a fully intact, cognizant rat with a very pink tail looked up at Jasmine.

As elegant as a scamper can be, Drano was out of the box and across Kitten's lap in one quick motion. He was heading for the kitchen. The two girls arrived just in time to see him disappear behind the stove, which, of course, masked several holes in the wall. Drano was one graceful rat. But Kitten was irritated. "What's the point of having a cage if you've got nothing to put in it?"

Drano was never recovered. At night they thought they could hear him in the walls scratching out a little S.O.S. message, but their frantic, fruitless searches led Kitten to her ghost-rat theory. Some evenings Kitten would smuggle an Ouija board into Jasmine's room. Kitten claimed to receive extensive messages from Drano, usually telling her to pull Jasmine's hair or sit on her head until she cried for mercy. His favourite message was "can attack," causing Kitten to squeal with delight as she hurled her entire weight on top of Jasmine. Sometimes Kitten tried to get a mes-

# PALM SPRINGS STORIES NO. 1

This is probably a love poem. Few are not. You, or he himself (*the object*)  
will ply open this not especial meeting of thread and glue and, say, Irish rag (two pound weight)

? I do not decide my stock, *yet* this right angle where information and chewed tree and silk  
agree *the signature* and nod, smirk, cough, think you know everything

go to hell

I am not done lying and you, or he himself, never stopped

All autobiography is travelogue, map play some of us just get around more

our beds are plains, the prickly Transvaals dotted with hooped traffic beasts  
with nautilus horns, seven legs, recessed fangs (or wings) plus voles, racing  
headfirst in the underbrush humble as lint  
our beach towels are as telling as dirty cafeteria trays, where monsters pool & flick  
in the wet corners crusty and smelling of sour wheat  
our clothes, stained & obvious as newspapers, commingle & knot make waffled  
pyramids, cotton pagodas, damp lighthouses manned by dust mites

Whatever we own or caress or breathe on or slurp or pick at or bump against or visit or waste  
tells on us, spills the beans, makes with the goods, testifies so

I thrush to print, I publish and perish

In dynastic Egypt, words were procreative carve "snake" into a basalt block, a wall  
of crisped mud, or a palm trunk & expect hisses, blinding spit expect diamond heads and pulsing  
chevrons the carpet viper the spotted night adder the bandy-bandy the mulga the lispig  
krait the rinkhal any black and twitching scourge

we know so little magic now

—R. M. VAUGHAN

sage from her mother, but it never worked. Kitten told Jasmine that bone cancer had killed her mom. She said the cancer had eaten her bones. When her mother was sick, for the first few months Kitten would nap beside her in the afternoon, even after her mother went to live in the hospital. Then there was a day when the nurse told her she couldn't get into her mother's bed, because the slightest movement was excruciatingly painful. Kitten dreaded the visits that were required of her. Her mother had looked like a stranger. Kitten said all that she wanted now was to be able to talk to her mother just one last time. She wanted to say sorry—sorry that she was happy when the nurse had told her she couldn't get into her bed. She hadn't wanted to touch her mother anymore.

By mid-November, Aunt Penny was once again in the midst of her troubles.

Christ was speaking to her through a rose that she kept in her mouth. The fact that Penny was not a religious woman made this all the more alarming. Each night, either Marguerite or Helene would bring dinner to Jasmine and sit with Aunt Penny for a period of time. They invited Jasmine to come stay with them, but Jasmine liked it fine where she was. Nobody had been tipped off about this last incident until Aunt Penny started going outside with the Jesus transmitter rose and no panties. Calls poured in fast and furious to children's services.

Jasmine wasn't allowed to go back to Aunt Penny, Kitten, and the Pointe for almost two years. In twelve-year-old girl time, two years is forever. While away, Jasmine had discovered books—books, but no friends. She'd figured out how to demagnetize the books at the central Montreal Public Library, and

coming home, her backpack was loaded with six new prizes. She stumbled from the last step out of the bus and into the Indian summer day in the Pointe. Kitten was leaning against a bus station barrier. She looked Jasmine up and down critically before smiling at her with her drugstore-red lips. Kitten looked bonier. Her shoulders and parts of her face were pointier. Jasmine may have found books, but Kitten had found cigarettes; she ground an ember into the ground with her worn Keds. Flanked by two boys—a tall pimply boy and a squat one with a mullet (the eastern Quebec special)—it also looked like Kitten had discovered boys. Jasmine readjusted her cracked Adidas bag on her shoulder and fell in step with Kitten's new-found posse. Jasmine wanted to hug Kitten but her arms were stiff and awkward, and the time where it would have seemed natural had passed.



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Jasmine dipped her head and tucked her chin to her neck. This was her favourite position; it told her she didn't have to speak, and everybody else that she wasn't going to. Kitten and the boys were talking about a car. Tall and pimply had a cousin named Claude Aumais who had just got a car. Six blocks later, they were at the Pointe's old cemetery. The boys and their cigarettes kept moving, but Kitten had a plan for herself and Jasmine.

There'd been problems with the graveyard while Jasmine was away. A couple of stones had been taken, so someone came up with the money to install a really bright U.V. light at the gate. Kitten crouched down in front of the new light and uttered those queasy little words, "Trust me. Just do like me." Kitten focused her eyes on the centre of the light, all the while talking Jasmine through it.

"Keep staring till I say stop."

Jasmine's eyes were hurting when Kitten said, "O.K. Now look up! What do you see?"

Jasmine looked into the graveyard and saw that the sacrament candles burning by some of the graves had changed drastically. Their little flames were all glowing the most beautiful see-through purple she'd ever seen. Kitten rested her cheek against Jasmine's.

"Pretty cool, eh?"

Jasmine stayed very still in the middle of the almost invisible purple mist, with the smells of fresh-cut flowers dying slowly, baby powder, and Kitten's Player's Lights. The glow was slowly losing its iridescence. The purple leaked out into an inky black night. Kitten told Jasmine not to do it a lot—she was pretty sure it burned up some part of your eye. Kitten left for a party. She didn't invite Jasmine. Jasmine went home to Aunt Penny.

After a day with Aunt Penny and *Great Expectations*, Jasmine heard Kitten calling for her from the hallway. Kitten took her up to the roof and showed her how she'd learned to roll a joint using Tampax paper. She brought a king-size beer she'd stolen from her father, and giggled as Jasmine tried to keep the harsh smoke in her lungs. They sat in silence, which two years earlier would have been unheard of. Jasmine was disoriented, and Kitten had a lot on her mind. After a few minutes, Kitten mum-

bled, "Can attack," and jumped on Jasmine. As Jasmine struggled to get free, peels of laughter and Kitten's weight on her bladder made her pee her pants . . . just a little. Jasmine told Kitten this and they began to laugh even harder.

Old Man Delorme stuck his head out the downstairs window and yelled for them to behave. As he started to bellow, "C'mon, you girls, enough. It's only polite. I have an expectation of peace," Jasmine and Kitten sucked in their breath to a count of five before they lost all semblance of control. Kitten let go of the beer can, which narrowly missed Delorme's head. They ran squealing to the fire escape and down into a cool August night that had absolutely no expectation of peace.

Kitten had stashed cigarettes and a whole six-pack of beer on top of an electrical box at the end of the block. They sat on top of the box, vibrating from its gentle hum, and shared the beer and the entire pack of cigarettes. Kitten was in love with Claude Aumais. He was eighteen, had a car, and knew everything about alternative music. He was going to take her to see the Cure in Montreal. She explained how love between boys and girls worked, and Jasmine was fascinated, disgusted, and a little jealous. She'd known the detail stuff forever, but to hear solid Kitten talk about squishy feelings and warm body parts made it seem different. Kitten's face turned restless once the beers were gone. In her short sleeves, Jasmine could make out red diagonal lines running up and down Kitten's arm. Jasmine's fingers reached out to touch them. The lines were raised and thick. Her fingers pulled back, but she wasn't able to hide her revulsion fast enough.

"You like those?" Kitten slurred, and pulled a pocket knife from her hip pocket and very quickly, almost surgically, retraced one of the lines so it reopened and bled.

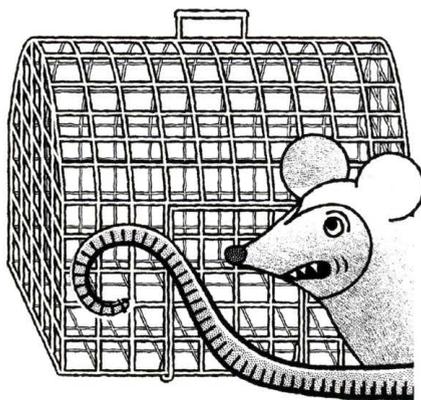
Jasmine gawked, "Why do you do it?" Kitten's eyes looked still and empty.

"Cuz I can . . ." Her face was dark and closed, and Jasmine sensed she wasn't allowed to ask any more questions. After a few minutes, they both went home.

On a much cooler night in September, the kind where you can't wear shorts any more, one distinct event rocked the Pointe. Sirens woke Jasmine up. Aunt Penny thought they were coming for her

and hid under the bed. It took a moment for Jasmine to realize the sirens were coming to their building. They stopped abruptly. Jasmine opened her front door. Blood-smeared handprints mapped their way along the wall, down the stairs to the front door. At that moment, the police charged in, yelling for Jasmine to get down. They pounded up the stairs into Kitten's apartment, where her father lay in a thick red pool of blood that was spilling out onto the linoleum. The paramedics with their stretcher bumped awkwardly up the stairs. A man with a badge asked Jasmine if she knew the girl who lived upstairs.

The night Kitten stabbed her father, she ran out into the night in shorts and a tank top. She walked along a gravel path until a police cruiser picked her



up. The knife was still in her hand. The wives in the Pointe tied up the phone lines; they rarely saw action like this. For months, her father's beer-parlour friends ruminated on the barbaric event, philosophizing on the ungrateful nature of children in general.

An investigation turned up pieces of paper that no one had paid attention to. There were hospital reports, one from when Kitten was twelve. The intern hadn't thought to ask why Kitten had internal bleeding from vaginal tears. A guidance counsellor's concerns about Kitten's home life had never left the notepad they were written on. There was a lot of gossip in the Pointe that fall. Claude Aumais said that Kitten's father had been messing with her for a long time. Old Man Delorme said some things were supposed to stay in families; that they weren't supposed to be talked about.

When Kitten's father was released from the hospital, two weeks later, he

admitted he'd been very drunk the night Kitten came at him, and he couldn't remember what had happened. Since the stabbing, Kitten had remained silent. At first doctors thought it was shock, then they said it was because she was stubborn. Jasmine knew that prolonged silence kept monsters at bay, kept you removed from reality just enough so you could survive.

The sirens from that night had finally broken Aunt Penny, and she was placed in a long-term-care facility. Jasmine now lived back in Montreal with a new family. She came back for the trial.

It was a different Jasmine who got off the bus. Jasmine's foster mother's constant lament was, "You're such a pretty girl, why do you do so much to hide it?" Jasmine had chopped her mouse-brown hair just as short as she could get it, and used Sun-In to give herself a big yellow skunk stripe down the middle of her head. When Jasmine walked into the courtroom, her boots scuffed the taxpayers' wood floors. Jasmine liked her boots. They were strong leather boots that made Jasmine feel like she could run or kick someone if she wanted too—kick someone and it would really hurt.

The day Kitten became Kathleen in the judge's courtroom, and was sentenced under the Young Offenders Act, her face remained empty. Jasmine watched as she was led away. Kitten ducked her head and tucked her chin to her neck as she sat back down. Would it have even made a difference if she had known what was going on?

Jasmine's thoughts turned to Aunt Penny and how the poor old woman had gotten it wrong—"all things being equal"—what a joke. There was no way around it. Some people got good stuff, lots got bad stuff, and the game was fixed. She stood up, her chin still pressed to her neck. Slowly she raised her head. Maybe the fix was in, but Jasmine needed to believe that if she looked hard enough, she'd be able to see it coming. She walked toward the exit. Her heavy boots thudded deliberately against the polished floor. She left black scuffs. Her mark to say that she was here. ♪

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*Shannon Quinn lives south of Cabbagetown. Her work has appeared in This magazine. She is a graduate of Ryerson University's radio and television program, and also holds a degree in theatre from the University of Alberta.*

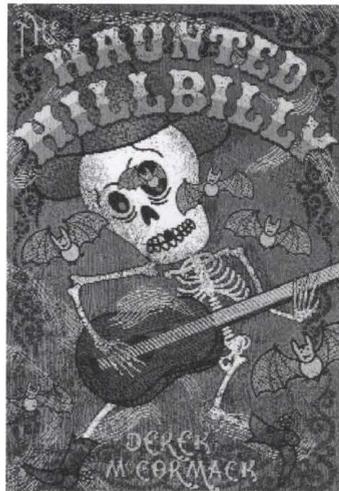


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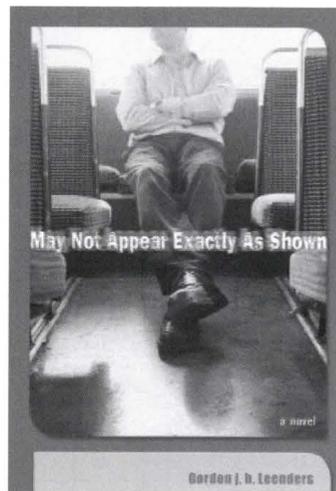


DEREK MCCORMACK is the author of *Dark Rides* and *Wish Book: A Catalogue of Stories* and co-author of *Wild Mouse*, nominated for the 1999 Toronto Book Award.

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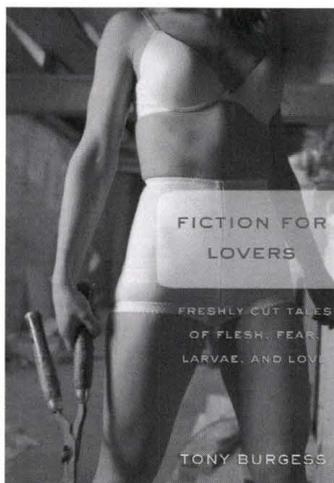


GORDON LEENDERS has been working as a cognitive rehabilitation therapist for people with acquired brain injuries for five years. *May Not Appear Exactly As Shown* is his first book.

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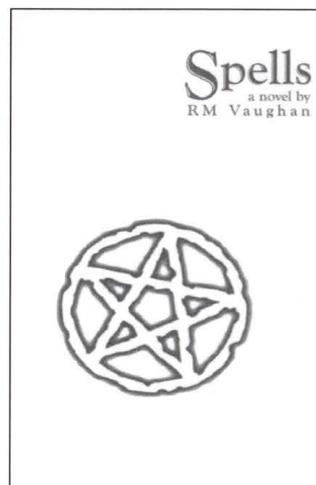


TONY BURGESS is the author of *Pontypool Changes Everything*, *The Hellmouths of Bewdley*, and *Caesarea*. *Pontypool* has been optioned for a film by Bruce McDonald.

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RM VAUGHAN is the author of *Invisible To Predators*, *A Selection of Dazzling Scarves*, *Camera*, *Woman*, and *A Quilted Heart*. His poems also appear in the anthology *Plush*.

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